

1

2024

Serial 153

# INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

国际战略研究



中国国际战略学会

China Institute for International Strategic Studies

# International Strategic Studies

No.1, March 2024

Serial No. 153

---

## **The Situation of International Security in 2023 and Its Outlook**

Ming Zhongyan

(1)

*The year 2023 witnessed a sluggish global economic recovery, a spillover of the protracted Russia-Ukraine conflict, a sudden outbreak of the Palestine-Israel conflict, a more complicated and intensified rivalry among major countries with increasing bloc confrontation, heated military competition in multiple domains, and frequent occurrence of “black swan” and “grey rhino” events that were transmitting and brewing, highlighting the trend characterized by grand shifts, divisions and turbulence against the background of a global transformation unseen in a century.*

## **Review of the International Counter-terrorism Situation in 2023 and Outlook**

Zhang Wei

(8)

*In 2023, facing a series of challenges in geopolitics, global economy and regional security, the international community made efforts to maintain relevant cooperation. While enduring the “throes” of violent and terrorist activities in multiple places and the rise of terrorist threats in some regions, it created a “highlight moment” of inflicting heavy losses on terrorist and extremist forces and making continuous progress in the fight against terrorism. The international counter-terrorism situation is stable and controllable on the whole. Looking ahead to 2024, the global counter-terrorism situation may face new challenges, such as indelible violent and terrorist activities in hot spots, rising terrorist threats in Europe and the United States, and evolving techniques and methods of violent and terrorist attacks. The international community still needs to attach great importance to counter-terrorism, continue to strengthen cooperation, and make every effort to deter the resurgence of terrorist and extremist forces.*

## **An Assessment of European Region’s Situation in 2023 and the Outlook**

You Ruochen

(21)

*In 2023, in the context of the protracted Russia-Ukraine conflict, the intensified contest among major countries, the tension in the periphery, and the sluggish global economy, Europe made efforts to promote reforms in order to solve its own difficulties, but it still had a weak economic growth, there was a significant political shift to the right, and its advancement of integration was hindered. In order to demonstrate its strategic independence and geopolitical influence, Europe actively got involved in international affairs, continued to support Ukraine against Russia, consolidated its alliance with the United States, drew in Global South countries, and stepped up its advance into the Asia-Pacific, but the overall results were not so good.*

## **Review of the Regional Situation in the Middle East in 2023 and Outlook**

Zhong Dong

(28)

*In 2023, the Middle East underwent the largest and deepest “historical change” since the “Arab Spring”, and a new situation that “reconciliation and integration” and “changes interwoven with chaos” rose simultaneously emerged. Profound changes took place in major regional contradictions, the dominant forces, the camp alignment and the trend of contest among major powers, and the outline of a new Middle East featuring multi-power coexistence and multi-polar check and balance was coming to the scene. In 2024, the adjustment and reshaping of relations between countries inside and outside the Middle East are expected to accelerate, driving the ups and downs of the regional situation, which may also trigger the “black swan” and “gray rhino” events.*

<b>Overview of the Security Situation in Central Asia in 2023 and the Outlook</b>	
Liu Yang	( 36 )
<b>Security Situation of Latin America in 2023 and Outlook</b>	
Hu Cheng	( 45 )
<b>Security Situation of Sub-Saharan Africa in 2023 and Outlook</b>	
Tong Fei	( 55 )
<b>Review of the Situation on the Korean Peninsula in 2023 and Outlook</b>	
Yu Sichao	( 64 )
<b>The Situation of the US Domestic Politics and Diplomacy in 2023 and Outlook</b>	
Wu Yizu	( 71 )
<b>Russia's Internal and External Situation in 2023 and Its Outlook</b>	
Ji Sheng	( 79 )
<b>India's Domestic and Foreign Affairs Situation in 2023 and Outlook</b>	
Geng Xue	( 88 )
<b>Review of Japan's Internal and Diplomatic Situation in 2023 and Outlook</b>	
Yu Shi	( 95 )
<b>New Posture in US Strategic Competition with China: Causes, Contents and Features</b>	
Xia Liping	( 103 )
<b>An Analysis of Biden Administration's Space Strategy</b>	
Sun Xun	( 113 )
<b>France's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Military Arrangements</b>	
Zhang Chi and Peng Tingfa	( 125 )

---

**Editor's note:** *International Strategic Studies* is an academic periodical of the China Institute for International Strategic Studies (CISS). It pursues the policy of letting a hundred schools of thought contend and advocates free discussion. The articles published in this periodical are the authors' own observations.

**Editor-in-Chief:** Du Nongyi

**Deputy Editor-in-Chief:** Mu Changlin

**Editors:** Mu Changlin, Chen Fangming, Zhen Zhongxing and Zhang Zunguo

**Editor in charge of this issue:** Mu Changlin

**Address:** 101 Weizikeng Road, Chaoyang District, Beijing 100025, China

**Webpage:** <http://www.ciiss.org.cn>

**P.O. Box:** 9812, Beijing, China 100025

**Telephone:** +86-10-62016943

**Fax:** +86-10-62021048

**E-mail:** [office@ciiss.org.cn](mailto:office@ciiss.org.cn)

# The Situation of International Security In 2023 and Its Outlook

Ming Zhongyan, Assistant Research Fellow, CIISS

**Abstract:** *The year 2023 witnessed a sluggish global economic recovery, a spillover of the protracted Russia-Ukraine conflict, a sudden outbreak of the Palestine-Israel conflict, a more complicated and intensified rivalry among major countries with increasing bloc confrontation, heated military competition in multiple domains, and frequent occurrence of “black swan” and “grey rhino” events that were transmitting and brewing, highlighting the trend characterized by grand shifts, divisions and turbulence against the background of a global transformation unseen in a century.*

**Key Words:** International Security; Rivalry among Major Countries; Geopolitical Conflicts

Three major themes, namely, post-COVID-19 economic recovery, major-country rivalry and geopolitical conflict, were the keynote of the international situation in 2023, featuring volatility in global economy, intensified contest among major countries, and restructuring of international relations. The growing geopolitical contradictions as well as multiple challenges covering various domains brought about more unstable and uncertain factors to affect international security.

## I. Profound Adjustment in the Global Development Trend and Accelerated Evolvement of the International Power Configuration

Influenced by the protracted Russia-Ukraine conflict, the global economic development turned from a “strong growth” to a “weak recovery”. Due to differentiated trends of development in major countries, there was an accelerated adjustment in the balance of power.

**A. The world economy showed signs of faltering.** Under the impact of multiple factors such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, surging inflation, debt deflation and climate change, the global economy faced weak growth momentum and was unstable in recovery in 2023. According to the estimation of the International Monetary Fund, the global economic growth rate in 2023 would be 3%, lower than the 3.5% growth in 2022,<sup>1</sup> which would be the lowest in the past 20 years except the period of economic crisis. To pull out of the economic slump, the United States kept raising interest rates and promoted the return of manufacturing industry by selling economic security anxiety, tending to create more exclusive blocs in regional cooperation. The United States, together with its allies and partners, accelerated the reverse reconstruction of supply chains of semiconductors, new energy and strategic minerals. It was also promoting the redistribution of global division of labour and cooperation by forming supply chain alliances such as Mineral Security Partnership, so that financial investment and

trade in goods would flow more within regional economic blocks.

**B. The power configuration of major countries kept teetering and flowing.** Despite the fact that the economic growth rate of the United States in 2023 reached 2.1%,<sup>2</sup> exceeding the general expectation, the interest rate hikes still brought tremendous negative impacts on its economy, which may lead to more potential risks. European countries like Germany and the UK were facing economic recession due to the influence brought by the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Russia's economy showed strong resilience with an economic growth rate of 3.5% in 2023.<sup>3</sup> Ranked the fifth in world's GDP rankings, India continued to develop its comprehensive strength with an expectation that its GDP ranking would reach the third soon.

**C. There was a clear trend of "rising East and declining West".** The growth of about 93% of the developed economies in the world slowed down in 2023, with an average economic increase of only 1.5%. In contrast, emerging and developing countries maintained steady growth, with a GDP increase of about 4%, which made them the central engine driving global economic growth.<sup>4</sup> The emerging and developing economies in Asia remained the most dynamic in global economic growth, whose economic growth rate was expected to reach 5.2% in 2023, further increasing their global GDP share to 25%. However, it should also be noted that, due to the successive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, aggressive interest rate hikes and geopolitical conflicts, some developing countries suffered increasingly from their distorted debt structure, and about 50% of the low-income countries were deeply mired in debt problems. In addition, with rising unemployment rate and lack of innovation, some developing countries were still confronted with multiple bottlenecks in their future development.

## **II. Major Countries Accelerated Their Strategic Adjustment, Leading to Intensified Realignment in International Relations**

The Russia-Ukraine conflict prompted various parties to readjust their strategic alignment, with the major countries, focused on their own interests, taking a more active approach in their strategies, while developing countries raised their sense of autonomy and refused to pick up sides, hence advancing the new normal in international relations featuring bloc confrontation as well as division and integration.

**A. China-US relations saw a phased easing.** Considering the external influence exerted by the Russia-Ukraine and the Palestine-Israel conflicts, the rising internal pressure resulted from the partisan competition, the increasing risk of an economic crisis, and the upcoming 2024 presidential election, the Biden administration of the United States gradually adjusted its China policy to avoid a showdown with China. Senior US officials like Blinken, Secretary of State and Yellen, Secretary of Treasury visited China in succession, and a summit meeting between the two heads of state was held in San Francisco, which smoothed the mechanisms for exchanges in economy and diplomacy, and brought stability to China-US relations out of falling-down. However, the China policy of the US is still likely to be affected by its domestic politics and unexpected incidents. Particularly, with the approach of the US presidential election, the development of China-US relations still faces uncertainties.<sup>5</sup>

**B. Major countries accelerated adjustment of their foreign policies.** The conflict

between Russia and Ukraine strengthened the policy coordination between the EU and the US, thus enhancing the influence and control of the United States on Europe. The United States and Europe established the US-EU Trade and Technology Council and other mechanisms, which aimed to build a supply chain exclusive of Chinese industries. The theory of “de-risking” from China has gradually gained much ground in the economic and trade field,<sup>6</sup> which may pose a great influence on China-EU economic and trade relations. The complete breakup between Russia and the West headed by the US drove Russia to seek a strategic initiative through strengthening its relations with DPRK and Iran and enhancing its involvement in the Middle East and Africa. Japan was taking an aggressive approach in its strategies. Domestically, it sought to remove the constraint on its armed forces and develop its military by seeking to amend its constitution, while in foreign affairs, it enhanced its dependence on the United States, and reached reconciliation with ROK. India tried to expand its influence by maintaining a balanced relationship with different major countries such as the United States and Russia, and consolidated its dominance in South Asia. Taking advantage of hosting the G20 summit, India increased its voice in the international community.

**C. The influence of developing countries rose steadily.** The trend of collective economic booming in developing countries brought them a growing international influence. Unwilling to act as “pawns” in the competition between major countries, developing countries chose to “huddle up together for warmth” in seeking peace and development. More Global South countries applied to become BRICS members, indicating their growing efforts to jointly counter the political and economic hegemony of the United States and the West. The African Union became more committed to its strategy of “seeking strength through unity and enhancing its own capacity for development”. Latin American countries accelerated their regional integration, and many countries in the Middle East put forward long-term plans for development. Southeast Asian countries continued to push forward the construction of ASEAN Community, and clearly refused to become “proxies of major countries”. Increasingly dissatisfied with the Western-centered international order, some countries became active in promoting the establishment of regional and global governance systems that are more in line with their own interests.

### **III. With Geopolitical Competition Surging at Multiple Points around the World, Challenges and Crises Intertwined with Each Other in Various Domains**

With the intensification of major-country competition, the resurgent traditional geopolitical thinking triggered a rising possibility that some countries would seek profits by resorting to force. Due to the deterioration of global geopolitical security, the world was confronted with regional crises that are more mutual-reinforcing and exert broader impacts.

**A. The Russia-Ukraine and the Israel-Palestine conflicts brought more spillover effects.** There appeared to be no end in sight to the increasingly complicated conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The United States and NATO, despite their gradual appearance of “war fatigue”, continued to provide economic and military assistance to Ukraine. Russia increasingly consolidated its achievements on the battlefield, and the confrontation between

the two sides turned into a seesaw fighting that showed no sign of ending in the short term.<sup>7</sup> The lingering Russia-Ukraine conflict exerted its impact on the whole world, stimulating various forces to “take advantage of the chaos to gain their own benefits”. By taking advantage of the period when Russia was too busy to take up other issues, Azerbaijan carried out a “counter-terrorism” military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh and restored its sovereignty over the region. However, it has not reached an agreement with Armenia on territorial demarcation, which may lead to the resumption of war in the future. The gradual improvement of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel put Hamas on alert. The Russia-Ukraine conflict attracted a lot of attention from the US on strategic level, which became an opportunity taken by Hamas who launched the Al-Aqsa Flood operation to make a dramatic change in the regional situation, triggering a massive Israeli counter-offensive in Gaza and an overall escalation of the Palestine-Israel conflict.<sup>8</sup>

**B. Some hotspot issues heated up in the Asia-Pacific region.** On the Korean Peninsula issue, there was a clear tendency for the United States, Japan and ROK to form a trilateral alliance, adding more pressure and deterrence on DPRK. DPRK, in turn, showed its tough stance by successive missile tests. The escalating tension between the two sides enhanced the risk of bloc confrontation. On the Taiwan question, the United States consistently desubstantiated and hollowed out the one-China principle by increasing arms sales to Taiwan and enhancing its diplomatic exchanges with Taiwan. There was a fierce competition around the election among all parties within the island, and the Tsai Ing-wen authorities colluded with the US in successive provocative actions, which aggravated the tension between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. On the South China Sea issue, the US conducted numerous “freedom of navigation and overflight” operations by repeatedly sending warships and aircraft to the South China Sea. The Philippines took a more radical policy on the South China Sea issue by frequently promoting the construction on the Ren'ai Reef, which has brought more uncertainties to the situation in the South China Sea. As to the Myanmar issue, domestic political contradictions in Myanmar are too complicated to be solved easily. The ethnic armed groups in northern Myanmar, such as the MNDAA in Kokang, launched attacks on the Myanmar armed forces in Kokang and other places in Shan State, which indicated intensifying contradictions between the two sides.

**C. The situation in Africa and Latin America showed a mix of both stability and turbulence.** The major-country competition spread its influence to the African continent. Summit meetings, like the US-Africa summit, the EU-AU summit, the Russia-Africa summit and the Japan-Africa summit, showed that major countries stepped up their inducement of African countries with promise of more benefits, in order to make them “pawns” whenever in need. Coups after coups in West Africa may result in a “broken window effect”, which would enhance the possibility of turbulence and enable extremist forces to gain more power. In Latin America, the left-wing forces in many Latin American countries became ruling parties, which indicated a new height of the left-wing resurgence. These left-wing administrations showed more resistance to and dissatisfaction with the American hegemony and a desire to pursue an independent foreign policy.<sup>9</sup> Since Lula da Silva assumed office as Brazil's president, China-Brazil relations maintained a sound development. Honduras, despite the pressure from the United States and Taiwan, chose to establish diplomatic ties with China, which proves that it has become a consensus of most Latin American countries that

it's quite important to develop good relations with China. In the meantime, the far-right politician Javier Milei was elected president of Argentina, which also reflects the possibility of left-right swing in the future political situation of Latin America.

#### **IV. Multiple Non-traditional Security Challenges Frequently Occurred and Global Governance Deficit Intensified**

Major-country rivalry and geopolitical conflicts posed more obstacles to global multilateral cooperation, weakening both international governance and multilateral coordination mechanisms. With the accumulation of global governance deficit, there would be more contradictions between the old and new rules.

**A. Non-traditional crises remained too complicated to be resolved easily.** The co-occurrence of the Russia-Ukraine and the Palestine-Israel conflicts exerted a serious impact on global energy security, food security and many other non-traditional securities. Energy security was shocked repeatedly. The Palestine-Israel conflict once caused short-term fluctuations in the international energy market, where the international crude oil price rose by about 5% and the European natural gas benchmark price rose by over 10%. Food crisis was no longer a rare thing. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization Report 2023, the world food insecurity was seriously aggravated by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, energy shortage and extreme weather. At present, about 258 million people in 58 countries and regions are deeply affected by the severe food crisis. In addition, various challenges like climate change and nuclear pollution emerged one after another, seriously affecting global development security.

**B. Dominance over international governance was fiercely contested.** The Russia-Ukraine conflict intensified the differences and contradictions among major countries, which became less willing to deal with common challenges by reaching consensus based on coordination. The United Nations repeatedly failed to reach any effective resolutions when addressing the “two conflicts”, which indicated an obvious trend of decentralization and fragmentation of global governance. There were not only rising calls for change from major countries based on their respective interests, but also increasingly fierce competition for the leadership around the reshaping of global governance platforms and mechanisms and the reset of standards and rules.<sup>10</sup> The United States, by strengthening its relations with its global allies and partners, kept promoting various “mini-multilateral” mechanisms, which, to some extent, undermined the authority of the United Nations, and will continue to impact the global economic and security cooperation. The adjustment of the global governance will continue under the background of dealing with the severe challenges, resistance to change as well as fierce competition.

**C. The Global South further became the new force in global governance.** The United States and the West stepped up the restructuring of the international order based on their own interests and initiated in violating the existing rules. However, there is a growing contradiction between the development demands of countries in the South and the current global economic governance system. With the expansion of its influence, the Global South is likely to become a key strategic force in resisting and checking the dominance of the West. It



may gradually become a new normal of global governance that a dual-track operates with both new and old orders coexisting in parallel. In addition, the policy stance of other emerging powers on the Global South is also noteworthy. For example, India is seeking to become the leader of the Global South, trying to enhance its international influence by hosting various summits, while Russia wishes to address its economic and diplomatic difficulties brought by the Russia-Ukraine conflict through actively seeking support from countries in the South.<sup>11</sup>

## **V. Outlook for the Situation in 2024**

In 2024, international security is expected to remain stable in general, but the Russia-Ukraine and the Palestine-Israel conflicts may continue to ferment and jointly produce more spillover effects. The elections in many countries may lead to the adjustment of their domestic and foreign policies, which highlights the trend that more elections may bring about more turbulence. The instability mingled with profound changes, frequent wars and chaos as well as accumulated risks will become the prominent feature of the international situation.

**A. The global economy will still limp along, and the evolution of the international strategic landscape will accelerate.** Under the impact of the protracted Russia-Ukraine conflict, the world economy will still face a series of complicated problems, including inflationary pressure and debt deflation. Therefore, global economic recovery will still be in lack of momentum and a consolidated foundation. The overall development of the whole world will show a trend of “one low and three highs”, namely, low growth rate, high inflation, high interest rate and high debt.<sup>12</sup> According to the forecast of the International Monetary Fund, the global economic growth rate will continue to slow down to 2.9% in 2024, far below the average level in history. Regional disparity in economic recovery will be widening. The emerging and developing countries in Asia will maintain a steady growth, while in the United States there may be a decline in growth rate. Persistent economic weakness will remain in Europe, and Latin America and the Middle East still face weak growth momentum for development. On the contrary, the influence and strength of the Global South countries will keep growing, which provides them with a more solid foundation for participating in global governance and designing new international rules. What's more, civil and business actors as well as non-governmental organizations may increase their influence on international affairs.

**B. As the world politics enters a cycle of elections, policies in many countries may be adjusted or slightly changed.** 2024 is dubbed a super election year, in which 76 countries, international organizations and regions such as the United States, Russia, the UK, the European Union, India, Indonesia, Egypt and South Africa will hold elections for choosing their national leaders or changing ruling parties. The election results of major countries will have a profound impact on the future development of relations between major powers and may even drive the development of hotspot issues such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Palestine-Israel conflict. There is a high probability that Biden and Trump will face each other again in the US presidential election. Who can come to power will directly determine the development trend of the Russia-Ukraine and the Palestine-Israel conflicts. There are also great uncertainties in the development direction of China-US relations and the US global alliance system.

**C. Rivalry between major countries will be increasingly intensified and the hotspot**

**issues around the world will see more twists and turns.** The intertwined spillover effects of the Russia-Ukraine and the Palestine-Israel conflicts will still impose profound impact on global security. The protraction of the geographical competition in Ukraine between Russia and the West headed by the United States has brought an increasingly widespread “war fatigue” to all parties. In addition, the turbulence in the Middle East will distract the US’ strategic attention from Ukraine, which may bring more strategic challenges to Ukraine. It is not easy to see an end to the Palestine-Israel conflict within a short period, as the two sides take a tit-for-tat stance without any possibility to compromise. Forces in and outside the Middle East have intervened in regional issues based on their different positions, leading to the intensification of the inherent ethnic and religious contradictions in the region, and putting the stability of the Middle East under serious test.<sup>13</sup> Since the major powers like the United States, Russia and the Europe Union are much preoccupied with the Russia-Ukraine and the Palestine-Israel conflicts, some regional countries (or forces) may take advantage of such opportunity to seek their own gains. Some geopolitical hotspots such as the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea and Myanmar may escalate again, and violent terrorist groups and separatist organizations will remain active, which may further impact regional stability.

---

**Notes:**

- 1 International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook*, released in October 2023.
- 2 Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, *Analysis and Forecast of World Economy in 2024*, Social Science Press, January 2024, p.6.
- 3 “Russian President Vladimir Putin talks about Russia’s domestic situation”, December 14, 2023, p. 7. <https://www.huanqiu.com>.
- 4 International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook*, released in October 2023.
- 5 Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, *Report on Global Politics and Security in 2024*, Social Science Literature Publishing House, December 2023.
- 6 Gu Su, “EU begins to tackle with Chinese electric vehicles, another step to de-risking from China?”, *World Affairs*, No.20, 2023, p.71.
- 7 China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, *International Strategic and Security Situation Review 2023/2024*, December 2023, p.52.
- 8 Niu Xinchun, “What will this round of Gaza conflict change?”, *World Affairs*, No.22, 2023, p.70.
- 9 Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, *Report on Global Politics and Security in 2024*. Social Science Literature Publishing House, December 2023, pp.16–17.
- 10 “Italian scholars: global governance faces challenges, and the China’s solution pragmatically practices multilateralism”, January 5, 2023. <https://www.gmw.cn/>.
- “Prospect for 2023: ‘Four deficits’ impact global governance order and China’s solution strives for win-win results”, January 1, 2023. <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/>.
- 11 Shen Chen, “Position and actions of emerging powers towards the Global South”, *World Affairs*, No.12, 2023, pp.19–21.
- 12 Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, *Analysis and Forecast of China’s Economic Situation in 2024*, Social Science Press, December 2023, p.2.
- 13 China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations: *International Strategic and Security Situation Review 2023/2024*, December 2023, p.330.

(Translated by Yin Donghao)

# Review of the International Counter-terrorism Situation in 2023 and Outlook

Zhang Wei, Senior Research Fellow, CIISS

**Abstract:** *In 2023, facing a series of challenges in geopolitics, global economy and regional security, the international community made efforts to maintain relevant cooperation. While enduring the “throes” of violent and terrorist activities in multiple places and the rise of terrorist threats in some regions, it created a “highlight moment” of inflicting heavy losses on terrorist and extremist forces and making continuous progress in the fight against terrorism. The international counter-terrorism situation is stable and controllable on the whole. Looking ahead to 2024, the global counter-terrorism situation may face new challenges, such as indelible violent and terrorist activities in hot spots, rising terrorist threats in Europe and the United States, and evolving techniques and methods of violent and terrorist attacks. The international community still needs to attach great importance to counter-terrorism, continue to strengthen cooperation, and make every effort to deter the resurgence of terrorist and extremist forces.*

**Key Words:** Year of 2003; Counter-terrorism Situation; Review; Outlook

In 2023, the international community experienced a special and complicated period in counter-terrorism. Against the backdrop of the lifting of the global pandemic control, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict and the outbreak of a new round of conflict between Palestine and Israel, the international community's cooperation and unrelenting counter-terrorism efforts coexist with the continuous development of terrorist forces and violent terrorist activities, indicating that the future of the international counter-terrorism campaign is promising, but there is still a long way to go. The international counter-terrorism situation is still complicated and worrisome in the future.

## I. Review of International Counter-terrorism Situation in 2023

In 2023, thanks to the concerted efforts of the international community, global terrorist and extremist forces suffered frequent blows, their space for activities was greatly restricted, and the international counter-terrorism situation maintained a stable and positive trend on the whole. At the same time, under the influence of multiple factors such as political disputes, religious contradictions, economic stagnation and wars and conflicts, terrorist and extremist forces were still ready to move and growing in some regions. Violent terrorist activities sometimes rebounded, and the terrorist threat cannot be underestimated.

**A. The international counter-terrorism situation was generally stable and controllable.** In 2023, the international community adhered to the consensus on counter-terrorism and, while strengthening its own counter-terrorism work, generally maintained the UN-led

global international counter-terrorism cooperation system. Among them, the UN Office of Counter-terrorism continued to promote counter-terrorism intelligence and information analysis and counter-terrorism capacity building projects with funds provided by member states. The Global Contingency Fund under the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, with the participation of more than 20 countries, raised more than \$ 75 million, providing alternatives to millions of people directly at risk of radicalization and creating a “counter-terrorism safety net” among them. The EU continued to provide funding to the G5 Sahel Joint Force for border security and counter-terrorism operations. Many countries participated in the screening and education of foreign violent terrorists and their families staying in Syria, and seven countries received more than 2,380 people in the second half of the year. The counter-terrorism mechanisms of East Asian countries and the SCO member states were functioning normally, making every effort to prevent the infiltration of terrorist and extremist organizations into the region, and violent and terrorist activities were significantly reduced.

In 2023, global violent terrorist attacks decreased from the previous year. With the exception of the Sahel region of Africa and South Asia, violent terrorist activities were generally decreasing in frequency and distribution. According to the Global Peace Index (GPI), terrorist attacks and death toll decreased by 28% and 9% respectively in the first half of 2023. In 84 of 163 countries around the world, data related to violent terrorist activity were improved.<sup>1</sup> The situation shows that the expansion of major international terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State and al Qaeda has been greatly restricted, with their senior leaders rarely appearing in public or speaking out on the online media, and their previous integrated organizational development capabilities, action coordination capabilities and “international propaganda capabilities” simultaneously weakening. While making every effort to stabilize political power, develop economy and actively resolve differences, Central Asian countries took measures to prevent terrorist forces from infiltrating into the region and developing organizations. They focused on strengthening intelligence exchanges and joint exercises and training under the SCO, CSTO and other frameworks, and intensified counter-terrorism efforts. Terrorist and extremist forces such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami were dealt a major blow. Countries in the European region generally attached importance to counter-terrorism and maintained bilateral (multi-lateral) cooperation within the EU to prevent the return of terrorist forces, and the number of violent terrorist attacks continued to decrease. Terrorist organizations in West Asia and North Africa were severely weakened or destroyed, and there were only a handful of ISIS and al-Qaida-linked terrorists left in countries such as Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia. The real threat of terrorism in South Asia was significantly reduced in countries except Pakistan. The governments of Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Nepal have vigorously cracked down on local religious extremism and terrorist forces, and there were few terrorist attacks in their territory. Focusing on the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and the al Qaeda's South Asian branch, Bangladesh took measures against the activities of the “Islamic State” among the Rohingya refugees, and made full efforts to combat terrorist forces and activities. Having mainly targeted at Lashkar-e-Taiba, the al Qaeda's South Asian branch and the Islamic State, India continued to carry out sweeping and crackdown operations, killed and captured a number of violent terrorists and severely dealt a blow to their organizational system. The anti-terrorism situation in Kashmir significantly improved, and domestic violent and terrorist

attacks decreased compared with the previous year.

**B. The attacks on Western countries were greatly reduced.** According to the 2023 Global Peace Index, Europe has a relatively low level of threat from terrorism, accounting for seven of the ten most peaceful countries in the world, making it the “most peaceful region” in the world.<sup>2</sup> According to information released by the European Commission, there were 16 terrorist attacks in Europe in 2022 (and 12 foiled terrorist plots), resulting in a total of four injuries. In 2023, the anti-terrorism situation in Europe continued to be stable, and the number of violent terrorist attacks decreased significantly, less than half of that in 2022. In particular, from January to September 2023, there were fewer violent terrorist activities and no major terrorist attacks in Europe.<sup>3</sup> The incidents of desecration of the Quran in Sweden and Denmark and the armed conflict between Hamas and Israel that broke out in early October impacted the security of the European region to a certain extent, and terrorist attacks occurred in France and Belgium successively. As a result, many countries have therefore raised the warning level of terrorist threats, but there was no increase in violent terrorist activities and major terrorist attacks in the region. The head of the International Counter-Terrorism Center (ICC) in the Netherlands said that compared with the period of rampant terrorism in 2015–2016, the terrorist attacks carried out by the Islamic State in Europe since the beginning of October, 2022 were much smaller and less coordinated. “In the heyday of the Islamic State, Europe faced an ‘attractive’ and internally well-run organization that attracted thousands of people from all over the world, but the current situation is very different.”<sup>4</sup> After the desecration of the Quran in Sweden, Denmark and other countries and the outbreak of a new round of conflict between Israel and Palestine, some government officials, counter-terrorism experts and think tanks believed that while the terrorist threat in Europe increased recently, the overall level was still relatively low, which is why the vast majority of European countries did not raise the terror threat level. There were signs that jihadists tried to launch attacks in countries like Sweden, but were eventually forced to give up due to the limits of strength, and European countries had the ability to thwart terrorist plots.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, violent terrorist activities in the United States show an overall decrease, with fewer major violent terrorist attacks, and this trend was still maintained in 2023. According to a report released by the Department of Homeland Security, there were three fatal terrorist attacks in the United States since 2022, resulting in 21 deaths. Among them, on May 1, 2023, eight people were killed in a shooting at a mall in Oren, Texas, the deadliest terrorist attack ever within the United States in two years. At the same time, US counter-terrorism agencies also thwarted six terrorist plots. Based on relevant intelligence information and assessments, the US government consistently identified the terror threat risk as “low” in 2023.<sup>6</sup>

**C. Violent and terrorist activities in hot spots continued to ferment.** In 2023, the Sahel region of southern Africa and South Asia continued to be the centers and “hot spots” of international violent and terrorist activities. According to the Global Counter-Terrorism Index, four of the ten countries where terrorist attacks have worsened globally are in the sub-Saharan region-Togo, Djibouti, the Central African Republic and Benin. During the year, the local terrorist forces in the Sahel region grew, the Islamic State and al Qaeda accelerated their development, and violent terrorist attacks continued. Violent terrorist incidents in the Sahel region increased by 22% compared to 2022, accounting for 48% of global deaths (43% in

2022), and terrorist attacks spread from the Sahel and the Horn of Africa to Central Africa and coastal West Africa. Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) expanded from Mali to the southwest, with an active area of more than 6,000 square kilometers, an increase of 18% from 2022. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) increased its active area in Burkina Faso to more than 6,900 square kilometers, a 46% increase from 2022. Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Boko Haram developed their respective territories around Lake Chad and controlled 23 districts in three states in northwestern Nigeria. Terrorist extremists in Burkina Faso and Mali were growing rapidly, leading to a surge of 35% in the number of terrorist attacks in both countries. Although South Asia lags behind Africa's Sahel region in the number of deaths from terrorist attacks, terrorist attacks continued to be numerous and deadly. Pakistan was the "hot spot of terrorism and violence" in South Asia in 2023, with 586 terrorist attacks, a sharp 56% increase from 2022. The death toll rose dramatically from 980 in 2022 to 1,524 (33% of whom were security agency personnel), an increase of 96%. The total number of terrorist attacks and death toll in Pakistan rose to the highest level since 2014, the deadliest year for Pakistani security forces in nearly a decade. Not only did the number of terrorist attacks and casualties increase sharply in Pakistan, the number of terrorist organizations involved in attacks also increased significantly and the scope of attacks expanded. Among them, a total of 101 terrorist attacks were carried out by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) and the Baluchistan Tigers based in Balochistan province. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP) claimed responsibility for 57 attacks. The Islamic State (IS) also claimed responsibility for five attacks. Terrorist attacks occurred in four provinces of Pakistan with a large increase, among which Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa increased by 57% and 55% respectively, and Punjab and Sindh increased by 96% and 26% respectively.<sup>7</sup> The Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan (JIP), whose establishment was only announced in February 2023, openly attacked the Manwali base of the Pakistani Air Force in November of that year, causing damage to 10 aircraft bunkers and several warplanes and many casualties, which shows the arrogance of terrorist organizations in Pakistan and the great threat of violent terrorist activities. In neighboring Afghanistan, although the total number of violent terrorist attacks decreased, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) still carried out a large number of attacks against the Taliban and ethnic minority sects and caused heavy casualties, and foreign embassies were also targeted. Afghanistan is still on the top of the "least peaceful countries in the world" and, along with Pakistan, is listed in the "top 10 countries most affected by terrorism."

**D. Major violent and terrorist attacks continued.** In 2023, the total number of terrorist attacks in the world decreased, but major violent terrorist attacks occurred frequently, the number of casualties increased and the scope of the impact was wider. The average number of deaths per terrorist attack in 2022 was 1.3, rising to 1.7 per attack in 2023. According to incomplete statistics, in 2023, there were more than 50 major terrorist attacks with more than 20 casualties, 9 major terrorist attacks with more than 50 casualties, and 2 major terrorist attacks with more than 100 casualties. Pakistan and Afghanistan accounted for the largest share, with four major terrorist attacks in January 2023 alone, resulting in more than 460 casualties. Other major and extreme terrorist incidents in 2023 include: On April 2, terrorists carried out a bomb attack on a cafe in St. Petersburg, Russia, killing 1 person and injuring

43; on June 8, the Islamic State carried out a suicide bombing attack on a mosque in Faizabad, Afghanistan, killing 20 people and wounding 38; on June 16, terrorists committed arson and slashing attacks on a high school in Mpongwe District, Uganda, causing 42 dead and 8 wounded; on July 30, the Islamic State carried out suicide bombings in Pakistan's tribal areas, killing more than 60 people and injuring more than 200; on September 29, the Balochistan Liberation Army carried out suicide bombings in Mastung District, Balochistan, Pakistan, killing 60 people and injuring nearly 70; on December 3, the Islamic State carried out a bombing attack at the National University of Marawi on the Mindanao, the Philippines, killing 4 people and injuring more than 50; and on 12 December, the Tehrik-i - Taliban Pakistan carried out a suicide bombing attack in Daraban District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, killing 24 people and wounding 34.<sup>8</sup>

**E. The strength development and means of attack were diversified.** In 2023, international terrorist forces such as the Islamic State and al Qaeda, while following the traditional organizational development model and means of terrorist attacks, attempted to expand their organizational strength and plan violent terrorist activities in more ways and means in response to the new situation of the changing geopolitical situation, the comprehensive lift of the epidemic control and the rapid development of network information and artificial intelligence technology.

In terms of strength development, terrorist and extremist forces either returned from areas under severe pressure (such as Iraq, Syria and other Middle East and North African countries) to other countries, or spilled over from areas with strong terrorist forces (such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and other countries in South Asia and Burkina Faso, Mali and other countries in Africa's Sahel region), or merged with other homegrown terrorist and extremist forces in order to establish new safe havens or bases. At the same time, terrorist and extremist forces made the most of the turmoil and popular discontent in some countries and regions, using network and social media to expand their audience and obtain funds, and seek expansion opportunities. Some of the Islamic State terrorists in Syria and Iraq began to flow back to Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. Islamic State and al Qaeda terrorists in Afghanistan have "migrated" to South Asia and Central Asia and joined forces with local terrorist and extremist forces such as the Tehrik-i - Taliban Pakistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh to consolidate and expand their respective branches in these areas, and the Islamic State alone developed more than 20 branches around the world. In 2023, a number of violent terrorist attacks in the Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan and India were planned and carried out by terrorist groups such as the South Asian branch of the Islamic State or returned terrorists. Terrorist and extremist groups in the Sahel region used military coups, political turmoil and livelihood difficulties to step up their propaganda, incite people to oppose the government and attract them to join their organizations. At the same time, terrorist and extremist forces took advantage of weak government control and took various means to obtain a large number of materials and funds. Somalia's al-Shabaab, for example, increased revenue from its traditional road traffic taxes by meddling in the charcoal trade and taxing livestock exports and new construction, and infiltrated state institutions and created a network of corruption that ensures access to financing. It is estimated that al-Shabaab alone raised about \$ 100 million in 2023, while the total tax revenue of the government that year was only \$ 250

million. Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) in the Sahel also diversified its financing through road taxation, kidnapping for ransom, collection of gold mine protection money, vehicle theft and smuggling of all kinds, and even directly taxing communities and people.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of terrorist attack means, international terrorist and extremist forces were seeking a combination of traditional and modern methods. While traditional guerrilla tactics and financing means still dominated the operations of terrorist groups, systems such as drones were being introduced and increasingly normalized by ISIS and al Qaeda, and attacks were more reliant on online platforms. On the one hand, terrorist and extremist forces have carried out a large number of violent terrorist activities such as stabbing, shooting, bombing and suicide attacks. Of the 19 terrorist attacks in Europe since 2022, terrorists used traditional means, mainly firearms, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), improvised incendiary devices (IIDs) and knives and axes.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the above methods, terrorist organizations in South Asia, the Middle East and southern Africa often used more destructive weapons and "human bombs" (including "women bombs") to achieve "optimal results." For example, terrorists in Pakistan carried out 31 suicide attacks during the year, resulting in 853 casualties.<sup>11</sup> Three suicide attacks conducted by the Islamic State in Afghanistan killed and wounded nearly 200 people. On the other hand, terrorist and extremist forces were constantly trying new ways of terrorist attacks. The Islamic State in Iraq weaponized commercial drones for attacks on targets in Iraq and Syria, repeatedly dropping explosives on local security forces and indicating targets or operating explosive devices for suicide attackers. The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) used drones to conduct reconnaissance on Nigerian security forces before coordinating attacks with terrorists on the ground. In 2023, the Somali military spotted small terrorist drones over military bases in the Shabelle region, Mozambican and Malian security forces shot down several Ahlu Sunnah wa Jamaah (ASWJ) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) attack drones, and the Mozambican military destroyed several ISIS drone formations.<sup>12</sup> Between May 12 and July 4, 2023, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) carried out seven drone attacks in Shabwa province in southern Yemen.<sup>13</sup> After the drone attack on the Indian Air Force base in Kashmir on July 2, 2022, terrorist groups in India sought to acquire more and bigger drones in an attempt to continue to launch new terrorist attacks.

Anti-terrorism experts from the United Nations, the European Union and the Australian Institute for Economics and Peace believe that a "post-organized violent extremism" driven by online social media has emerged in the current world, which has no unified command and control, and only clicking a mouse is needed to make the extremist propaganda reach the target population, which ultimately leads to the radicalization of the audience. From jihadist terrorism in Kashmir and Colombo to anti-Semitic attacks in Texas to mosque shootings in Christchurch, social media-inspired "lone wolf" violent extremist attacks were on the rise.<sup>14</sup>

## **II. Outlook on the Future International Counter-terrorism Situation**

With the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the spillover of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the changing geopolitical situation and the proliferation of terrorism in southern Africa and South Asia, the global counter-terrorism will face many new situations



and new problems, and the future direction of the counter-terrorism situation will remain a focus of attention of the international community.

**A. The future international counter-terrorism situation may be “stable but chaotic” on the whole.** On the one hand, the international community will continue to attach great importance to the threat of terrorism, and international counter-terrorism cooperation will advance in parallel with the efforts of all countries to combat terrorist activities. The situation of terrorist and extremist forces under heavy pressure will not change in the short term, and the general trend of international counter-terrorism will not be reversed. With the support of its member states, the UN will continue to strengthen access to and sharing of counter-terrorism information and capacity building, promote global counter-terrorism coordination and cooperation, and significantly improve its counter-terrorism effectiveness in Africa, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, West Asia and North Africa. The United Nations has launched a number of programs in Africa, the Americas and Asia to enhance resilience against terrorism. Some countries with high incidence of violent terrorist activities, including the Philippines, Indonesia and Pakistan, have also implemented many targeted programs, which have slowed down the vicious development of terrorist extremism to a certain extent. Counter-terrorism bodies within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the East Asia Cooperation Mechanism, the Organization of American States, the African Union, the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have maintained cooperation and made new progress in strengthening cooperation among member states and combating terrorism. While focusing on domestic terrorist threats and bilateral (and multi-lateral) counter-terrorism cooperation, many countries have taken comprehensive measures to effectively curb the development and rebound of terrorist and extremist forces. Overall, senior leaders of major terrorist and extremist forces such as the Islamic State and al Qaeda have been targeted and killed, and except for individual regions and a few countries, they still face difficulties in survival and development at the global level. The latest assessment of the UN Office of Counter-terrorism believes that under the joint efforts of the international community, the leaders of the Islamic State and al Qaeda have suffered a heavy blow, and the death toll caused by terrorist attacks has decreased significantly from the peak level in 2015, and the terrorist threat posed to non-conflict areas is less.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, hotbeds for terrorism and extremism exist widely, terrorist forces are trying to make a comeback and have begun to grow in some places, and there are still some outstanding problems in international counter-terrorism cooperation. In particular, certain countries have always adopted double standards on the issue of counter-terrorism, which makes the international counter-terrorism situation face certain worries and uncertainties in the future. Terrorist and extremist forces and their activities have been fought for a long time, and it is difficult to eradicate the “cancer” of terrorism. There are complex political, economic, ethnic, religious and external reasons. At present, these constraints still exist to varying degrees and have developed in areas where poverty, conflict and social and political problems are prominent, constantly impacting regional security and counter-terrorism situation. Pakistan and Afghanistan are facing different degrees of economic difficulties, ethnic and religious antagonism, political party power disputes and other problems. Terrorist and extremist forces have taken the opportunity to make trouble, and violent terrorist activities continue to rise or remain stubbornly high. Southern Africa, especially the Sahel region, has long been a

“paradise” for terrorist forces due to backward economy, poverty and prominent ethnic and religious contradictions. Armed conflicts and frequent military coups d’état in recent years have made the situation worse. Since the coups in Mali in May, 2021 and Burkina Faso in January, 2022, violent terrorist activities in both countries have increased by 35% , to 166 and 183 cases respectively. In Niger, where a coup d’état took place in July, 2023, violent terrorist attacks increased from 9 in the six months before the coup d’état to 38 in the year. At the same time, the jihadists have accelerated their expansion, launching nearly 20 armed incursions into neighboring Benin, Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo.<sup>16</sup> According to the assessment of the UN Office of Counter-terrorism, most terrorist acts continue to occur in conflict-affected regions, and the Sahel and sub-Saharan regions of Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan in Asia have become the centers of terrorist activities. The impact of terrorism is exacerbated by environmental crises, poverty, weak governance and human rights abuses, which allow terrorist groups to exploit grievances in these places. Even more worrying is the growing number of independent actors, including self-radicalized individuals, who carry out violent terrorist attacks without establishing direct links to terrorist organizations. Today, counter-terrorism is facing a transnational and unpredictable threat environment, and terrorism will become more diversified and fragmented, and the situation that violent and terrorist activities are prominent in hot spots is likely to continue.<sup>17</sup>

**B. The terrorist threat to the West is likely to rise.** International terrorist and extremist forces have always taken the United States and Western countries as the main targets of attacks, and the concept of “destroying the evil forces of the West” has not changed. At present, the spillover effect of the new round of conflict between Palestine and Israel is gradually emerging, and the resurgence of localized violent extremism in Europe and the United States has significantly increased violent and terrorist incidents in Western countries. As a result, violent terrorist incidents and terrorist threats in Western countries have increased significantly, and the counter-terrorism situation in the future is bound to become more complex and severe.

The latest assessment by the US Department of Homeland Security finds that despite repeated setbacks, the Islamic State and al Qaeda have not abandoned their plans to carry out terrorist attacks on the United States. Inspired by international terrorist organizations, violent extremists in the United States have from time to time used major social and political events to carry out violent terrorist attacks over the past year. In 2024, violent extremists will continue to be motivated by personal grievances, ethnic and religious contradictions, anti-government ideologies and conspiracy theories, and will share them online to attract more sympathizers and members. In 2024, violent extremists will still pose a great threat to the homeland security of the United States, and their violent terrorist activities will remain at a high level.<sup>18</sup> FBI Director Christopher Wray told a congressional hearing that he was “deeply concerned that al Qaeda and ISIS continue to attack the United States through homegrown violent extremists.” Testifying before the House Armed Services Committee, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff said: “al Qaeda is at war with the United States and remains so.” International counter-terrorism experts have repeatedly warned that Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State remain resilient and “unwavering” in their intent to strike the United States, despite repeated setbacks.<sup>19</sup> The outbreak of a new round of Palestinian-Israeli conflict in October 2023 has further deepened the socio-political rift in the United States, which could lead to a

new wave of extremism and violent terrorism. In this context, Jews and their facilities in the United States, and even Israeli diplomatic missions and personnel in the United States, could become targets of attacks, and American public officials could become targets of retaliatory assassinations.<sup>20</sup>

Since the outbreak of a new round of conflict between Palestine and Israel, ethnic and religious tensions in Europe have risen simultaneously. Extremist ideology is rampant, and violent terrorist activities are frequent, which suggests a possible resurgence of terrorist extremism in the future. There were more than 1,500 anti-Semitic incidents in France in the month following the new round of Palestinian-Israeli conflict, more than three times as many as in all of 2022. Britain experienced “the worst wave of Jewish hatred in modern times,” with more than 1,000 anti-Semitic incidents in a single month. Anti-semitic incidents in the Netherlands also increased eightfold in a month. These incidents range from micro-aggressions such as insults to death threats, attacks on buildings and other infrastructure, or physical assaults. At the same time, anti-Muslim incidents have increased significantly in Europe. There was a sevenfold increase in anti-Islamic hate crimes in the United Kingdom, an average of three anti-Muslim incidents a day in Germany (including physical assaults and attacks on mosques), several mosques in France were tagged with death threats, and anti-Muslim content on YouTube tripled in the week following the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. From October to December, 2023, three violent terrorist incidents occurred in France and Belgium successively, tens of thousands of Muslims rallied in solidarity with Palestine and faced off with white groups in many countries, and terrorist forces such as the Islamic State and al Qaeda began to use network and social media to incite “holy war” in Europe and the United States. As a result, nearly 600 people were arrested in France and 253 in Britain.<sup>21</sup> Ylva Johansson, the EU home affairs commissioner, said in December 2023 that with the war between Israel and Hamas and the polarization it has caused in European society, the EU faces a huge risk of rising terrorist attacks. This includes not only the risk of Islamist terrorism, but also the risk of far-right terrorism, and it is more serious than ever. Germany’s Domestic Intelligence Service (BfV) assessed that Germany faced an “unprecedented terrorist threat” as a result of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. British, French and Belgian intelligence agencies have also expressed concern that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has increased the threat of terrorism in their respective countries.<sup>22</sup>

### **C. The characteristics of complex development of terrorism will be more prominent.**

First, the ideologies are mixed. The boundaries between different types of terrorism, including right-wing, left-wing, anarchism, jihadism and other ideologies, are likely to become even more blurred in the future. In the ideological realm, there has been a trend of convergence between terrorism and violent extremists. While the ideologies and long-term goals of established groups remain the same, they use similar expressions on topics deemed to have a significant impact, choose the same targets and borrow from each other’s terrorist tactics. Violent extremists and jihadist terrorists of different ideologies and backgrounds may further converge on issues, goals, and strategies of common concern, which brings additional challenges to monitoring and prevention.

Second, the organizational system is localized. Terrorist and extremist forces no longer simply seek to build a wide-area vertical command organization, and the same is true of long-established and powerful terrorist groups like ISIS and al Qaeda. They established non-

affiliated branches in many parts of the world and began to integrate with local terrorist organizations, gradually evolving into localized terrorist and extremist organizations with international background. For example, the “Islamic State” has established branches in South Asia, West Asia and southern Africa, but they are not affiliated with each other. Instead, they are locally integrated with Tehrik-i - Taliban Pakistan, Boko Haram organization, and Somalia’s al-Shabaab respectively, or establish cooperative relations with them. Across national and geographical boundaries, al Qaeda has established more than 20 affiliates, including al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which have strengthened their political governance in recent years, recruited many members and established some “sanctuaries”. The Islamic Nusra Front is a collection of jihadist factions in the Sahel region, including al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and local Fulani and Tuareg religious extremist forces.

Third, the publicity and development are networked. While using the Internet to widely and continuously spread extremist ideas, teaching how to make explosives and inciting violent terrorist attacks, terrorist and extremist forces have begun to make more use of online platforms to recruit personnel and raise funds. The EU Interpol’s *Report on Terrorism and Trends in the European Union (2023)* stated that terrorists and violent extremists use the Internet for ideological propaganda, and that social media platforms, messaging apps, online forums and video game platforms play an extremely important role in the radicalization of individuals and the recruitment process of terrorist groups.<sup>23</sup> With the widespread application of emerging technologies in the financial services industry, terrorists are increasingly using mobile payment systems, virtual assets, privacy currency, and online transactions and wallets to obtain more funds.

Fourth, the means of terrorist attacks are modernized. With the help of the network, terrorists continue to learn various explosive techniques and new means of terrorist attacks, increasingly use new tools such as drones to carry out violent terrorist attacks, and begin to carry out cyber-attacks on poorly fortified civilian network terminals and medical and traffic control systems, and try to use offline technology and artificial intelligence means to carry out more attacks. The use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and other unmanned systems by terrorists for reconnaissance, criminal activities and efforts to “weaponize” them have posed a growing threat to critical infrastructure, civil aviation and society at large.<sup>24</sup> In recent years, al Qaeda has “called on” scientists, doctors and engineers to join, establishing a dedicated budget and department to develop “unconventional capabilities,” and terrorists are said to have made advances in chemical, biological and nuclear research and used them to modify or build attack drones. Terrorist organizations in the Middle East and Africa not only use drones to carry out violent terrorist attacks, but also use drone-shot images to make propaganda materials, in order to show their power and technical strength. The Islamic State West Africa Province and the al Qaeda affiliate Jama’a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin have repeatedly released propaganda videos shot by drones, achieving effects different from those in the past. According to the assessment of European Union Interpol, as decentralized technologies provide an additional layer of anonymity and data control, the widespread adoption of decentralized technologies by terrorist and violent extremist groups and their online supporters continues to undermine the effectiveness of existing efforts to identify and remove terrorist

content online. New technologies are being used more in terrorist attacks, and there are already precedents in Europe for terrorists using 3D printed weapons to carry out terrorist attacks.<sup>25</sup> Relevant intelligence shows that right-wing terrorists and jihadist extremists in Europe are increasingly willing to use new technological weapons to carry out violent terrorist activities.

**D. The “endogenous constraints” in international counter-terrorism are apparently increasing.** Political and partisan constraints on counter-terrorism cooperation remain. The counter-terrorism cooperation of the United Nations and some other international organizations and mechanisms faces organizational coordination and financial difficulties from time to time due to political and diplomatic reasons. Due to different values and policies, Western countries and many developing countries have numerous and increasingly prominent differences in the identification of terrorism and counter-terrorism measures. With China and Russia as its main adversaries, the United States has launched a “new anti-terrorism strategy beyond the horizon”, irresponsibly “walking away” or adopting double standards on counter-terrorism issues, which only adds to political and security troubles and “pours cold water” on international counter-terrorism efforts. Some countries openly or secretly condone and support the activities of terrorist and extremist organizations for their own selfish interests.

Socio-political instability and armed conflict persist. In December, 2023, the United Nations Rescue Committee released its *2024 Emergency Watch List*, which listed 20 countries (about 10% of the world’s population) with high socio-political and security risks, indicating that the global death toll from conflicts has reached its highest level since 2000, and believing that “there are many geopolitical rivalries, but efforts to defuse these deadly conflicts have weakened.”<sup>26</sup> Military coups and armed conflicts persist in some African countries, especially in the Sahel region, and “full-scale ethnic conflicts” are imminent. Armed conflicts in many countries, including Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Guatemala, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Israel, have either emerged or continued to develop and escalate, which is bound to trigger new waves of terror.

Major and emerging complex issues are beginning to have a profound impact. The intensifying impact of climate change, the worsening of poverty, the spread of humanitarian crises and the proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical threats and many other issues are accelerating, bringing “opportunities” to terrorist and extremist forces, which will interfere with and restrict the counter-terrorism efforts of the international community to varying degrees. The above problems are particularly acute in regions with unstable social and political situations and frequent violent and terrorist conflicts. As a result, though terrorist and extremist activities continue to be fought, they show no sign of ending, and the Sahel region and some other countries have become “fertile ground” for terrorist organizations and violent and terrorist activities. “Jihadist groups are increasingly involved in local conflicts and play a protector role in communities, making them more resilient and more popular than local governments.”<sup>27</sup> According to the assessment of a United Nations agency in October 2023, more than 114 million people have been displaced by war and conflict worldwide, and poverty has accelerated, with the Sahel region alone accounting for 70% of the world’s displaced population and 86% of global humanitarian needs. There are still more than 10,000 Islamic State fighters and 50,000 of their relatives and third-country terrorist suspects in the conflict zones of Iraq and Syria, and efforts to identify, deal with and transform them need to

be improved and accelerated. In addition, according to some international organizations and intelligence agencies, terrorist organizations have made great efforts to acquire relevant expertise and made certain progress in attempting to use chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials to carry out non-traditional terrorist attacks, while the international community generally has not paid enough attention to this issue and is not well prepared.

### **III . Conclusion**

At present, the international terrorist forces are under great constraints, and violent terrorist activities have declined to some extent. However, terrorist and extremist forces are not reconciled and are ready to stir up things in order to change the trend of decline. In addition, the international geopolitical game is intensifying and the security situation is complex and volatile, and the international counter-terrorism situation is facing unprecedented changes and turbulence. The international fight against terrorism has both rare opportunities and many challenges, and is at a critical juncture of either forging ahead or drifting downstream. The international community should face up to the major threat posed by terrorist and extremist forces and their activities, more actively carry out international counter-terrorism cooperation, give full play to the role of the United Nations and other international organizations and various counter-terrorism mechanisms, address both the symptoms and root causes, prevent the resurgence of international terrorist and extremist forces, and work together to make solid progress and achievements in international counter-terrorism efforts.

---

#### **Notes :**

- 1 *Global Terrorism Index 2023*, GTI-2023-Briefing-web.
- 2 *Global Terrorism Index 2023*, GTI-2023-Briefing-web.
- 3 *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report-2023*, Europol, EU Council.
- 4 *Terror risk in Europe: How big is it and from whom?* Ella Joyner in Brussels, December 21th 2023, [http: //p.dw.com/p/4aPwI](http://p.dw.com/p/4aPwI).
- 5 *Terrorism threat in Sweden now high*, Matthew Wells, 23rd August 2023, Geopolitical & Security Insights
- 6 *Homeland Threat Assessment 2024*, Homeland Security of the United States, September 14th 2023.
- 7 *Pakistan's Violent-Related Fatalities Mark a 6-Year High*, ANNUAL SECURITY REPORT-2023 from CRSS, 5thJanuary 2024.
- 8 *List of terrorist incidents in 2023*, From Wikipedia.
- 9 *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report-2023*, Europol, EU Council.
- 10 *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report-2023*, Europol, EU Council.
- 11 *Pakistan's Violent-Related Fatalities Mark a 6-Year High*, ANNUAL SECURITY REPORT-2023 from CRSS, 5thJanuary 2024.
- 12 *The evolving threat from terrorist drones in Africa*, Ruben Dass, May 1, 2023, published by the Lawfare Institute.
- 13 *Al-Aqaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's Drone Attacks Indicate a Strategic Shift*, Rueben Dass, August 20, 2023, Published by the Lawfare Institute.
- 14 *Terrorism Trends: 2023 and Beyond*, Nikhil Guvvadi, Counter-terrorism Center of Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, April 13th, 2023.
- 15 *2023 UNOCT Third Quaterly Briefing to Member States*, Raffi Gregorian Deputy to the Under-

Secretary-General and Director of UNOCT, 11th December 2023.

16 *West & Central Africa/Jihadists emboldened*, Matthew Wells, 27th September 2023, Geopolitical & Security Insights.

17 *2023 UNOCT Third Quaterly Briefing to Member States*, Raffi Gregorian, Deputy to the Under-Secretary-General and Director of UNOCT, 11th December 2023.

18 *Homeland Threat Assessment 2024*, Homeland Security of the United States, 14th September, 2023.

19 *Al-Qaeda's Looming Threat: Are We Looking over the Wrong Horizon?* Sara Harmouch, April 4, 2023, published by the Lawfare Institute.

20 *Homeland Threat Assessment 2024*, Homeland Security of the United States, 14th September 2023.

21 *Is the Israel-Hamas war spilling over into Europe?* Thomas Renard, Joana Cook, December 5, 2023, Published by the Lawfare Institute.

22 *Is the Israel-Hamas war spilling over into Europe?* Thomas Renard Joana Cook, December 5, 2023, Published by the Lawfare Institute.

23 *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report-2023*, Europol, EU Council.

24 *2023 UNOCT Third Quaterly Briefing to Member States*, Raffi Gregorian, Deputy to the Under-Secretary-General and Director of UNOCT, 11th December 2023.

25 *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report-2023*, Europol, EU Council.

26 *A New Set of Conflicts Could Erupt around the World*. Consumer News and Business Network, December 18, 2023.

27 *Armed Conflict Survey-2023*, IISS, 6th December, 2023.

(Translated by Liu Yaojun)

# An Assessment of European Region's Situation in 2023 and the Outlook

You Ruochen, Assistant Research Fellow, CIISS

**Abstract:** *In 2023, in the context of the protracted Russia-Ukraine conflict, the intensified contest among major countries, the tension in the periphery, and the sluggish global economy, Europe made efforts to promote reforms in order to solve its own difficulties, but it still had a weak economic growth, there was a significant political shift to the right, and its advancement of integration was hindered. In order to demonstrate its strategic independence and geopolitical influence, Europe actively got involved in international affairs, continued to support Ukraine against Russia, consolidated its alliance with the United States, drew in Global South countries, and stepped up its advance into the Asia-Pacific, but the overall results were not so good.*

**Key Words:** European Region; Situation; 2023; Retrospect

In 2023, Europe strove to deal with the overall impact from the Russia-Ukraine conflict and maintain its status and role as an important international strategic power. However, in the face of the evolution of global changes, the intensification of geopolitical contradictions, the divergence of major forces, and the weak economic recovery, Europe's process of adjustment to the changes became more difficult, its soft and hard power declined significantly, its external maneuver and international influence were constrained, and it would still struggle to find a way out in the future amid a crisis situation.

## I. Europe Was Deeply Mired in Contradictions and Crises in Its Own Development, and the Integration Process Was Struggling to Advance

Since the beginning of 2023, external problems such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the refugee issue and the energy crisis have interwoven and resonated with the internal economic, political and social problems, exacerbating Europe's development difficulties. Europe is struggling to advance its own construction and integration in response to challenges.

**A. Economic growth in Europe was weak, and the overall effect of bail-outs was limited.** In 2023, affected by uncertain prospects for global economic growth and trade, high commodity prices, and persistently low domestic demand, the growth momentum of the European economy was further weakened. GDP growth in the eurozone stalled in the first quarter, rose by 0.3 percent in the second, and contracted by 0.1 percent in the third. The European Central Bank (ECB) expected the EU and eurozone economies to grow by 0.8 percent and 0.9 percent respectively in 2023, down 0.4 percent year-on-year.<sup>1</sup> Europe's energy cost remained high, the trend of deindustrialization continued to develop, and there was a long-term risk of economic difficulties. The EU took multiple measures to boost the economy, but the actual effect remained relatively limited. The ECB raised interest rates 10



times in a row by a total of 450 basis points, and announced that the three key interest rates would remain unchanged, but there was a contradiction between tight fiscal policy and loose monetary policy, thus weakening the effect of economic stimulus. Eurozone inflation fell to a two-year low of 2.9 percent in October, but still short of its 2 percent target, with the ECB forecasting an inflation rate of around 5.4 percent in 2023.<sup>2</sup> Some European countries stepped up government subsidies to cope with the energy crunch, hence pushing up fiscal and debt pressures. According to the ECB's expectation, the debt ratio of eurozone countries would reach 89 percent in 2023, well above the 60 percent limit set in the EU's Stability and Growth Pact. Greece and Italy, with annual debt ratios of 171 percent and 144 percent respectively, saw their credit ratings downgraded. In order to improve industrial resilience and competitiveness, the EU launched the European Economic Security Package to strengthen trade protectionist tools such as foreign direct investment review and the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), which gave rise to doubts from some member states, fearing that this would harm the EU's free trade and weaken its open market competitiveness.

**B. European politics continued to shift to the right and social conflicts were intensifying.** In 2023, the sluggish European economy, high inflation, and the continuation of the refugee and immigration issues stimulated the rise of right-leaning conservative trends in Europe, and right-wing parties in many European countries gained more power, and the phenomenon of political right-leaning became outstanding. Greece, Finland, Estonia, Spain, Slovakia, Switzerland and Poland held their general elections, with the right-wing parties winning the elections and leading the formation of governments, except in Slovakia and Spain. The political contest in Europe intensified the social rift: the ruling Conservative Party in the UK was criticized for its economic and social policies, lost to the Labour Party in the local council elections and changed key cabinet members several times in 2023; the French Macron government was in a sad minority situation in parliament, and many of its policies such as the reform of the retirement system aroused obstruction from the opposition and public dissatisfaction; support for Germany's ruling coalition was falling, with the center-right CDU and the far-right AfD gaining more support than the ruling party, and holding firm onto the top two positions in approval rating. Social stability in Europe was challenged, with resentment against the government deepening, social conflicts intensified among classes, ethnic groups and communities, and factors of insecurity and instability increasing in many of the European countries. During the New Year's Day in 2023, there were large-scale attacks on police in many large German cities, such as Berlin and Hamburg, and the suspects were all young refugee immigrants. According to incomplete statistics, there were three serious terrorist attacks and several attempted terrorist attacks in Europe in 2023, most of which were "lone wolf" actions by local extremists. In June and July, riots broke out in many parts of France, affecting about 220 towns and cities, and causing economic losses of more than 1 billion euros. From the start of the new round of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in early October till mid-November, the French police received more than 590 reports of anti-Semitic incidents, and the number of such incidents in Germany increased by 240 percent year-on-year.

**C. A breakthrough was made in the enlargement of the EU, but the trend of internal differentiation became intensified.** In 2023, the EU made a progress in its eastward expansion, with Croatia officially joining the eurozone in January, which was the first enlargement of the eurozone since the European debt crisis, marking an important achieve-

ment in the EU's eastward expansion and integration. In November, the European Council adopted its 2023 enlargement package, proposing to start accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and granting candidate status to Georgia, which was confirmed at the EU Summit in December.<sup>3</sup> The EU also introduced a new 6 billion euros growth package for the Western Balkans to help the region achieve its EU integration goals. France and Germany continued to strengthen policy coordination, with the leaders of the two countries holding a ceremony to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the *Elysee Treaty*, and the two sides resuming the offline joint cabinet meeting after the COVID-19 pandemic, in an effort to eliminate differences and jointly seek the development of the EU. However, the two sides had different interest demands and differences on major issues such as the EU's eastward expansion, foreign relations, defense integration, and internal economic and energy policies. The "Franco-German axis" has become less attractive and its leading role in EU construction has weakened. Due to varied interests and concerns, countries in the eastern, western, southern and northern Europe, as well as member states and the EU institutions, have growing conflicts and disagreements on issues such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, refugees and immigrants, energy policy, and digital policy, which makes it difficult to achieve unison among themselves, resulting in a "multi-speed Europe". The development concept of "four-speed Europe" proposed by France and Germany, which divides the EU into four types of countries: core countries, general countries, candidate countries and political community countries, is consistent with the connotation of "multi-speed Europe", which has become the current development reality of the EU though not yet unanimously recognized by the member states.

**D. European military expenditure continued to rise, while common defense made small progress.** In order to respond to the Russia-Ukraine conflict and accelerate the military buildup, all member states committed, at the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius, to an annual defense spending of at least 2 percent of GDP in the future, of which at least 20 percent would be used for weapons and equipment investment. By 2023, 11 European NATO members had already met the target of spending 2 percent of GDP on military expenditure,<sup>4</sup> making defense spending continue to rise across Europe. In 2023, the EU made a breakthrough in defense integration. The EU issued the "Strategic Compass" report, pointing out that the goal of the EU's collective defense in the service of geopolitics was being achieved, and a number of measures with a clear timeline would be put in place; unveiled the *Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP)* and the *European Defense Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA)* to increase joint arms procurement efforts and promote the integration and reshaping of the European defense industry; increased the European Peace Fund to 12 billion euros, and planned to increase the budget of the European Defense Fund by 1.5 billion euros; launched the Action Plan on Military Mobility 2.0 to improve military transport infrastructure; published the EU Space Strategy for Security and Defense to accelerate the militarization of space; held the first Schumann Forum on Security and Defense to actively build up the momentum of the in-depth development of common defense; included Denmark for the first time into the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and launched 11 new projects, including the future short-range air-to-air missile program led by Germany, and the next generation helicopter program and the Joint Air Defense System led by France among others; and held large-scale EU joint military

exercises, introducing live-force exercise for the first time, to verify the EU rapid response force which was scheduled to be deployed by 2025, demonstrating the EU's determination and willingness to enhance defense autonomy.

## **II. Europe Actively Strengthened External Operation, but the Actual Results Were Generally Limited**

In order to get out of the dilemma and highlight its role as an "important pole", Europe increased its initiatives in managing international affairs, but the contradiction between its desire to act positively and the reality of its insufficient capacity was prominent, the space for its diplomatic operations and maneuver was further narrowed, and the effect of stabilizing and mediating peripheral and regional hotspots was relatively limited.

**A. The alliance between Europe and the United States became tightened, but the differences in practical interests did not diminish.** On the one hand, with the long-term trend of the Russia-Ukraine conflict becoming obvious, Europe's strategic dependence on the United States and the United States' demand for binding Europe were rising simultaneously, and the bond of trans-Atlantic partnership was constantly being tightened. The United States replaced Russia as Europe's major energy supplier, and continued to firmly control Europe in terms of security through NATO, arms sales, and the station of troops, and the pattern that "the United States dominates and Europe follows" continued to consolidate. The US and Europe had frequent high-level interactions through bilateral and multilateral meetings, as seen in the following: European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel visited the United States, and US President Joe Biden visited Europe twice in the year; and the US and European leaders used the "Bucharest Nine" summit, the NATO summit, the Nordic summit, the US-EU summit and the G7 platform to communicate and coordinate on military aid to Ukraine, supply chain and external sanctions. On the other hand, the divergence between the US and Europe also developed. The policy differences between the two sides on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, relations with China and other issues became increasingly obvious; disputes on steel and aluminum tariffs, the *US Inflation Reduction Act* subsidies and other issues were difficult to resolve; the strong appreciation of the US dollar aggravated stagflation in the eurozone; and the *US Inflation Reduction Act* and the *Chips and Science Act* further eroded the real economic foundation of Europe and weakened Europe's competitiveness against the United States. Within the EU, doubts about the United States were constantly growing, and French President Macron's remark that "Europe should not become a vassal of the United States" triggered widespread discussion in Europe, and the structural contradiction between the US hegemonic oppression and Europe's demand for strategic independence was far from being eased.

**B. Europe's position of "supporting Ukraine against Russia" did not change, but its aid to Ukraine was appearing weak.** Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, EU-Russia relations fell to the freezing point, with politics cooling, energy decoupling, economic chain breaking and security confrontation deepening between the two sides. As a result, supporting Ukraine against Russia has become "politically correct" in Europe, and the EU's position that "Russia cannot win" is hard to change. The EU has provided various types of assistance to Ukraine, amounting to 77 billion euros to date, and introduced the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> rounds of sanctions against Russia in 2023, focusing on combating various types of

sanction circumvention measures.<sup>5</sup> Finland officially joined NATO as the 31<sup>st</sup> member, Sweden's accession to NATO was basically completed, and NATO further strengthened its northeastern wing to squeeze Russia. The NATO summit in Vilnius approved the most comprehensive regional defense plan since the end of the Cold War, and the scale of NATO's high alert force expanded continuously, further enhancing its military deterrence capability against Russia. At the same time, however, with the ineffective counteroffensive of Ukraine on the battlefield and the sudden outbreak of a new round of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, European public opinion on the Russia-Ukraine conflict cooled off significantly. Poland and other countries threatened to reduce aid to Ukraine due to disputes with the latter over grain transit and other issues. The continued draining by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine on Europe prompted the European strategic community to think about the way out of the Ukraine crisis, and the voice calling for a negotiated solution to the conflict increased with European aid to Ukraine showing fatigue.

**C. Europe failed in drawing in the Global South, and troubles arose everywhere in its backyard and periphery.** After the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Europe's pressure on Global South countries to impose sanctions on Russia was frustrated, and Europe had to emphasize more the pragmatic and equal attitude in contact and cooperation with developing countries, in order to maintain peripheral security and win more raw materials and market shares. To this end, the EU actively mediated the conflicts in Kosovo and Nagorno-Karabakh, convened the EU-Latin America summit, and focused on Africa to promote its Global Gateway strategy, hoping to provide a "third way" approach beyond those proposed by the US and China, and get closer to "non-like-minded" countries in partnership. But at the same time, due to its own lack of strength and financial constraints, in addition to the difficulty to remove its value-oriented diplomacy, the EU has made limited gains and has to face continuous problems. The EU's effort to mediate the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was rejected by Azerbaijan, and its endeavor to broker the Kosovo issue met with repeated failures. Changes in the situation in Africa forced France to withdraw its troops from Burkina Faso and Niger, and the Tunisian government returned 60 million euros donated by the EU, which hindered the development of Europe-Africa relations. In particular, the EU was frustrated in mediating the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, while the contradiction between European Council President Michel and European Commission President von der Leyen turned public, and member states of the EU became divided for their pro-Israel and pro-Palestine positions, highlighting the dilemma of Europe's increasing impotence in handling regional affairs.

**D. Europe continued to deepen its Indo-Pacific deployment, and its economic, trade and security relations with the region got closer.** In order to highlight its geographical influence and promote the diversification of supply chains, the EU and major European countries continued to advance the Indo-Pacific Strategy in depth by focusing on security as well as economic and trade cooperation. The EU-ASEAN summit pledged to deepen cooperation in traditional and non-traditional security and defense fields, as well as safeguard the freedom of navigation and overflight in their respective regions and beyond, reaffirmed the maintenance and promotion of peace, security and stability in the South China Sea, and called on all parties to abide by the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* and relevant international laws. In the future, the EU will seek to join ASEAN summits, its

defense ministers' meetings, and other mechanisms. The EU set the conclusion of the EU-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement as a long-term goal, and committed to invest 10 billion euros in ASEAN before 2027 within the framework of the Global Gateway strategy to strengthen cooperation in the field of digital transformation. The EU-Japan summit launched the economic and security dialogue, and decided to strengthen supply chain resilience and stable supply of key raw materials. Michel called Japan the EU's closest partner in the Indo-Pacific region. British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak visited Japan; the UK and France held their respective "2+2" (foreign minister and defense minister) talks with Japan; and Japan, the UK and Italy held a defense ministers' meeting, nailing down a number of cooperation plans in emerging areas, such as supply chain and network as well as on maritime security, joint exercise and training, and equipment research and development. The EU and India convened their first meeting of the Council on Trade and Technology and strengthened cooperation on maritime security. The EU and the ROK held the first offline summit in six years to enhance their partnership in all aspects.

### **III. An Outlook for European Situation in 2024**

Looking ahead to 2024, in the context that major-country competition and geopolitical confrontation on a global scale are difficult to ease, the Russia-Ukraine conflict is much likely to continue, and the US and the EU are entering important election cycles, the development within and without Europe may face more uncertainties. As an important strategic force in the international arena, Europe will have to stand a major test as to how to respond to changes and overcome difficulties to build up its momentum and achieve prosperity.

**A. The European economy may be recovering modestly, but risks remain.** Benefiting from the global economic recovery, the EU expects the European economy to grow by 1.3 percent and the eurozone by 1.2 percent in 2024, with an inflation of 2.3 percent in the EU and 2.9 percent in the eurozone,<sup>6</sup> which may lead to a modest economic rebound. However, energy prices are still high, the momentum of industrial hollowing out is still present, the decline in core inflation is limited, and consumer demand remains weak. As the structural problems of the European economy have not been fundamentally addressed, it will be difficult to achieve a sound recovery.

**B. European Parliament election will drive the evolution of the EU's political ecology.** The coming European Parliament election in 2024 is the first of such elections after Britain's official exit, the COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and is regarded as a "bellwether" of EU politics. Whether the trend of fragmentation, rightward shift, populism and polarization in Europe's political ecology will continue or not will be tested in the election, which may affect the reshaping of the EU's internal political landscape. At the end of 2024, the leaders of EU institutions will also change guards, which may further affect the direction of the EU's internal and external policy adjustment.

**C. The US presidential election will be an important variable in US-Europe relations.** The US presidential election is scheduled to be held in 2024, and all walks of life in Europe are concerned about the "Trump doctrine" and generally worry that after the Republican Party takes the White House, it will change the current commitment to Europe. However, due to its limited strength, Europe will still strive to maintain the alliance framework with the United States. The adjustment of the US policy towards Europe before

and after the election will have a direct impact on US-Europe relations. Due to its security anxiety, Europe will still show solidarity with the US, further bind the US with NATO in defense, strengthen comprehensive cooperation with the US, while actively promoting internal integration and independent capacity building to gather weights to respond to possible changes in EU-US relations.

**D. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine will continue to solidify the confrontation stalemate between Europe and Russia.** In 2024, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has entered its third year, and it is difficult to see signs of ending the war in the short term. Europe is at the forefront of the conflict. Although it is unwilling to continue to bear the heavy financial and military burden, it has to maintain its momentum of assisting Ukraine against Russia, due to its limited security options and insufficient space for autonomic actions. As a result, the standoff of the EU-Russia geopolitical confrontation may exist for a long time to come.

---

**Notes:**

1 On December 19, 2023, according to data from Eurostat, the EU's year-on-year economic growth rates in the first three quarters of 2023 were 1.1% , 0.4% and 0.1% , while the eurozone's such growth rates were 1.2% , 0.5% and 0.1% , all showing a significant slowdown trend. At the same time, the quarter-on-quarter economic growth rate of the first three quarters of the EU was 0.1% , 0% and 0.1% , and the eurozone fell by 0.1% in the third quarter after experiencing the hovering of 0% and 0.3% in the first two quarters, turning negative for the first time since the fourth quarter of 2022. The contraction in the quarter-on-quarter growth rate is a further evidence that the European economy is losing momentum and the prospects for recovery are not optimistic.

2 On December 14, 2023, the European Central Bank held a monetary policy meeting and published the latest forecasts for inflation and economic growth in the eurozone, which expects the inflation to grow by 5.4% in 2023, 2.7% in 2024 and 2.1% in 2025.

3 On December 14, 2023, the European Council decided to officially launch the accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova. But the move is more symbolic, and the two countries will face difficult accession negotiations ahead. On December 15, Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said that the negotiations to join the EU are a difficult task, and Ukraine needs to complete 2,739 pieces of legislation in order to be in line with EU law. At the same time, it also faces specific issues such as transport, commodity access, and energy market integration, which require long-term negotiations.

4 According to official NATO data, among the 31 member states, 11 countries-Poland, the United States, Greece, Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, Romania, Hungary, Latvia, the United Kingdom and Slovakia-met or exceeded the 2% military spending target in 2023. In 2024, 19 member states are expected to spend more than 2% of their GDP in military expenditure.

5 According to data on the website of the European Council, the EU announced the tenth, eleventh and twelfth rounds of sanctions against Russia on February 25, June 23 and December 18, 2023, respectively, covering important areas such as energy, finance, trade, transport and a large number of individuals and entities, further strengthening existing EU sanctions and cracking down on sanctions evasion.

6 In mid-November, 2023, the European Commission's Autumn Outlook on the European economy predicted that the GDP growth rate of both the European Union and the eurozone would be 0.6% in 2023, down 0.2 percentage points from the summer forecast. At the same time, the report believes that with the future recovery of consumption, external demand and other factors, the European economy is expected to start a moderate rebound from 2024, and the GDP growth of the EU and the eurozone is expected to reach 1.3% and 1.2% , respectively.

(Translated by Zeng Qiang)

# **Review of the Regional Situation in the Middle East In 2023 and Outlook**

Zhong Dong, Assistant Research Fellow, CIISS

**Abstract:** *In 2023, the Middle East underwent the largest and deepest “historical change” since the “Arab Spring”, and a new situation that “reconciliation and integration” and “changes interwoven with chaos” rose simultaneously emerged. Profound changes took place in major regional contradictions, the dominant forces, the camp alignment and the trend of contest among major powers, and the outline of a new Middle East featuring multi-power coexistence and multi-polar check and balance was coming to the scene. In 2024, the adjustment and reshaping of relations between countries inside and outside the Middle East are expected to accelerate, driving the ups and downs of the regional situation, which may also trigger the “black swan” and “gray rhino” events.*

**Key Words:** 2023; Middle East; Regional Situation

Since the first half of 2023, strategic autonomy of major powers in the Middle East were on the rise, and their relations generally eased, while they were seeking to build a new situation of multi-power coexistence and complex checks and balances. However, the sudden outbreak of a new round of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in October became the world's largest “gray rhino” event since the beginning of military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, involving multiple parties in the region and increasing the difficulties of the United States in managing the Middle East. In 2024, hotspot issues in the Middle East may alternately heat up, some countries are under increasing internal and external pressures, and the risks of local conflicts and instability remain.

## **I. A New Trend Emerged in the Evolution of the Middle East Landscape, and Peace, Change and Chaos Were Interwoven and Resonated with Each Other in the Regional Situation**

Marked by the normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the camp alignment in the Middle East ushered in a new round of adjustment, giving rise to a tendency of reconciliation, cooperation and development.<sup>1</sup> However, the sudden outbreak of a new round of conflict between Palestine and Israel broke the relative calm, highlighting the long-term complexity and intractability of the traditional security dilemma in the Middle East, and the fact that the Middle East peace has always been shrouded in shadow.

On the one hand, the internal demands of regional countries for “peace and development” increased, driving the trend of “peace talks and reconciliation” in the Middle East to rise. Camp rivalry has long been a prominent feature of the Middle East geopolitics, with Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey as “leaders” of the Sunni Islam, Shia Islam and pro-Muslim

Brotherhood camps respectively, fiercely wrestling for regional dominance, which resulted in repeated unrest featuring “multi-party confrontation” in the Middle East. The major powers in the region have also paid a huge price for competing for dominance, shouldering high costs and even falling into strategic overdraft. Since 2022, affected by the COVID-19 pandemic unseen in a century and the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the Middle East countries became tired of the situation and were eager to change, and their common aspiration of “seeking peace and development” continued to rise. As a result, major powers in the region restrained confrontation, abandoned aggressive policies, and took the initiative to repair bilateral relations and promote cooperation, thus significantly boosting the internal demand for conciliation in the region. In the first half of 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran achieved historic reconciliation; Syria returned to the Arab League after 12 years; and Turkey and Egypt exchanged ambassadors for the first time in 10 years. Under such influence, the Middle East once ushered in a “wave of reconciliation”, and hotspot issues such as Syria, Yemen and Iraq significantly cooled off. At the same time, bilateral and multilateral exchanges between countries in the region became more active, cooperation in energy, economy, trade, science and technology resumed at an accelerated pace, and regional security and autonomy were on the rise.

On the other hand, a new round of conflict between Palestine and Israel broke out suddenly and escalated rapidly, pressing on the “backward button” on the “reconciliation tide in the Middle East”. In October 2023, a new round of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict broke out suddenly, with an intensity and scale rarely seen in recent years, causing a large number of casualties on both sides, and its spillover effect continuing to spread. The renewed conflict brought the Israeli-Palestinian issue back to the focus of international attention, leading to the stagnation of the reconciliation process between Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries and Israel, and the suspending of improving relations with Israel by Turkey. Islamic countries in the Middle East once again rallied under the banner of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and anti-Israel sentiment was running high. Iran took a high-profile in supporting Palestine against Israel; and regional anti-Israeli forces such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthi armed forces in Yemen and militia groups in Iraq increased their harassment to the US and Israel. At present, the Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip are still going on, and the continuous escalation of the conflict has a serious impact on regional security, fueling the mutually-reinforcing ethnic, religious and ideological conflicts. The new round of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has caused the momentum of reconciliation in the Middle East to go from high to low. It will not only profoundly change the internal political trend of Palestine and Israel, but also cast a shadow over the reconciliation process in the Middle East and deeply affect the regional landscape. Moreover, it will also provide a new leverage for major countries outside the region to play their card game in the Middle East.

## **II. New Changes Occurred in Regional Shaping Forces, with the Influence of Non-regional Powers Declining and the Strategic Autonomy of Regional Countries Rising**

Against the background of profound changes in the international and regional situation,



non-regional powers are less capable of intervening in the affairs of the Middle East and their influence is generally declining. The Middle East countries are becoming more strategically independent and better able to shape the regional agenda.

**A. The influence of non-regional powers was declining.** In 2023, the US tried to optimize the way to participate in Middle East affairs through multiple means, but its regional policy adjustment was always difficult to achieve the goal of “low cost for high return” and failed to attain the expected effect. The US was frustrated in dealing with the Iranian nuclear issue through political and diplomatic means, failing to resume negotiations on the Iranian nuclear deal as it wished; and its promotion of normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia also failed, forcing the US to send more troops to the Middle East in response to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. This new round of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict once again dealt a major blow to US diplomatic strategy in the Middle East, directly leading to the block-out of the process of establishing diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel, and the rise of anti-Israeli tendency in the Islamic world. In the next step, the Israeli-Palestinian issue will become an “insurmountable obstacle” of the US, and its Middle East strategy needs to strike a balance between “supporting Israel and drawing in Arab states”, walk a tightrope between “aiding Israel and controlling the situation”, and make difficult choices in regional negotiations. Russia firmly held its turf in Syria, mobilized relations with Iran and Turkey to serve its own security interests, and collaborated with Saudi Arabia and other oil-producing countries to keep international oil prices at a high level. However, trapped in the war against Ukraine, Russia had limited success in deepening relations with regional countries under concerted diplomatic containment by the United States and the West. France, Britain and other European powers were also subject to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, almost having no say on Middle East issues except on Libya, Lebanon and other few individual issues, and only serving as “support” for the US in Middle East affairs in general.

**B. Countries in the Middle East strengthened their strategic autonomy.** Countries in the region tended to be more independent and inward-looking, as well as huddle together. The powerful and rich countries in the Middle East, in particular, seized the rare opportunity to transform themselves from “passive recipients” to “active shapers” of the geopolitical landscape. On the issue of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, most of the Middle East countries refused to follow the US and the West in condemning and sanctioning Russia. Saudi Arabia resisted the pressure from the US in promoting the “Opec-plus” alliance to significantly reduce production, and paid attention to exerting influence through multilateral platforms such as the Gulf Cooperation Council to realize its own propositions. Qatar was deeply engaged with Russia on the gas issue. The UAE withdrew from the US-led Joint Maritime Force and jointly held the Abu Dhabi Summit with Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Oman and Qatar, emphasizing opposition to external interference. Turkey took advantage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, strengthened energy cooperation with Russia, promoted the “Middle Corridor” plan by taking advantage of its geographical location, and increased its presence and influence in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> Egypt sought to restore its influence in the Middle East and Africa by hosting a summit of Sudan’s neighbors and the first meeting of Arab ministerial contact on Syria. Saudi Arabia led the convening of the Joint Arab-Islamic Extraordinary Summit to coordinate regional countries to respond to the Israeli-Palestinian issue in concert. It is noteworthy that the Gulf Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia relied on the petrodollar to

accelerate their rise, significantly raising their role on the international stage and in regional affairs, and gradually becoming the new center of power in the Arab world and even in the Middle East.

**C. Countries in the Middle East generally strengthened their “look east” policy.** In recent years, the Middle East countries, driven by the desire to “seek peace and development”, have generally taken “looking east” as a foreign policy priority. They actively participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), supports the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative proposed by China, and gradually tilts toward China in anti-bullying, anti-sanctions and the international human right struggle.<sup>3</sup> Iran officially joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt joined the BRICS. The UAE promoted the RMB settlement of oil trade, and Qatar signed the longest liquefied natural gas agreement in history with China. Middle East sovereign wealth funds, represented by Saudi Arabia Public Investment Fund, have accelerated their eastward “gold rush”.

### **III. The US and Russia Made New Adjustment to Their Regional Strategies, and the Contest among Major Countries Affected Regional Development and Stability in the Middle East**

Due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the US increased its attention to the Middle East, strategically stepped up its efforts to stabilize and control the situation, and tried to maintain its regional influence to prevent China and Russia from “taking advantage of the opportunity to enter”. In order to ease the pressure on the battlefield between Russia and Ukraine, Russia increased its strategic adjustment in the Middle East and sought to breach the blockade by the US and its allies through external contest.

**A. The US stepped up phasal strategic investment in the Middle East to maintain its regional leadership.** The US made the fullest use of its stock advantages, military strength as well as allies and partners to create a situation in the Middle East in which various forces fight against each other and hold each other in check.<sup>4</sup> However, the outbreak of a new round of conflict between Palestine and Israel disrupted the geostrategic layout of the United States. In order to prevent the conflict from spilling over into regional instability that would constrain its hands and feet against China and Russia, the US had to take measures to strengthen its return to and consolidate its alliance in the Middle East. First, to build a overall regional security architecture. The Central Command of the US military put forward the concept of building a “regional security architecture” in the Middle East, aiming to use its own military and technological advantages to coordinate the military resources of regional partners in the four major areas of air defense, maritime security, special operations and cyber security, in a bid to strengthen its security control over allies. In order to demonstrate its determination and strength, the US sent an amphibious alert unit and 3,000 military personnel to the Middle East for the first time in nearly two years, and once deployed two aircraft carrier battle groups in the Middle East waters to strengthen military deterrence. Second, to build US-led “mini-multilateral” mechanisms. The US cobbled together military alliances such as the Middle East

Air Defense Alliance and the Gulf Escort Alliance by playing up the threat from Iran; worked hard to build a new Quad mechanism with Israel, the UAE and India, and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, to strengthen the linkage between the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East strategic blocks; and promoted the normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries on the basis of the *Abraham Accords*, seeking to weaken the impact of the reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Third, to strengthen allies' dependence on the US. The US reached a series of agreements with Israel, Saudi Arabia and other countries on energy, security and infrastructure cooperation, and attracted regional countries to participate in the projects under the G7 Global Infrastructure and Investment Partnership; frequently held joint exercises with regional allies to reaffirm its security commitment to allies; and strengthened containment, suppression and sanction against Iran, Syria and other anti-US forces in the region. Although the US' political dominance in the Middle East is no longer what it used to be, it still maintains a high stock of hard investment in the Middle East, being the main supplier of public security goods in the Middle East, and still having a strong ability to disturb and even subvert the Middle East.

**B. Russia boosted the external game against the US in the Middle East to ease the pressure on the battlefield between Russia and Ukraine.** In 2023, Russia and Iran further tightened their strategic ties, with frequent high-level military and political exchanges between the two sides, deepened pragmatic cooperation in diplomacy and military fields, and further converged their positions and attitudes on regional and international issues. Russia and Iran strengthened action coordination with Syria to weaken the influence of the US and the West, and distract the US attention from the Russia-Ukraine battlefield. Russia also strengthened contacts with friendly countries in the region such as Egypt and Algeria, vigorously promoted the landing of the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC) in the Middle East, and led the "Opec-plus" alliance with Saudi Arabia to resist the oil "pricing power" of the US and the West. After the outbreak of the new round of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Russia got in close contact with both sides, made its voice heard and action seen at the UN Security Council and other multilateral platforms, discussed conflict resolution measures with many countries in the Middle East, criticized Israel's war behavior and the US and the West's practice of "protecting Israel and suppressing Palestine", which improved Russia's image in the Middle East and the international arena, and was helpful for Russia to break the isolation and containment by the US and the West.

#### **IV. Regional Conflicts Remained Intertwined and Complex, and Uneven Development Continued to Be a Serious Problem**

The Russia-Ukraine military conflict triggered energy, food and inflation crises in the Middle East countries, exacerbating their inherent political and economic problems. Except the Gulf oil-producing countries that saw an improving internal situation, many countries in the Middle East were facing the interaction of political, economic and security difficulties, the protruding issues of political disorder, governance failure and other endogenous problems, the increasing pressure on the maintenance of stability and the control of situation, and the rising risk of regime stability.

**A. Traditional contradictions remained hard to resolve.** Sectarian and ethnic conflicts that have long plagued the Middle East are superimposed with disputes over territories, resources and history, forming a complex “chain of contradictions”. Saudi Arabia and Iran reached reconciliation, but it is difficult to completely resolve their sectarian disputes. Yemen’s Houthi armed forces and Saudi Arabia started peace talks, but the progress has been slow, and the two sides have been caught in a “no war and no peace” state. The civil war in Sudan dragged on, and the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Sudan Rapid Support Forces continued to wrestle, and the internal contradictions were difficult to reconcile. The outbreak of a new round of large-scale conflict between Palestine and Israel has once again brought the already marginalized Israeli-Palestinian issue to the forefront of international attention and further aggravated the inherent contradictions between the two sides, which will have an impact on the situation in the Middle East, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, international security and global development. The Kurdish issue has long been a heavy strategic burden for Iran, Turkey and Iraq and the pretext of major powers’ intervention, which may become a new hotspot affecting regional stability. Hotspots and sensitive issues such as Syria, Libya and the Iranian nuclear issue have been protracted, and there is a real possibility that these issues get heated up and deteriorated. Affected by multiple conflicts and entanglements, the Middle East still lacks deep-seated support for lasting peace and sustainable development.

**B. Polarization became deepened.** On the one hand, the Gulf Arab oil-producing countries represented by Saudi Arabia benefited from the rise in international oil prices, reaping huge economic interests and rapid improvement of comprehensive national strength, thus becoming the biggest “off-site winners” of the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab countries ensured an orderly succession of power and promoted reform and innovation domestically, and externally carried out dollar-diplomacy and pushed forward the great trend of regional conciliation, which effectively enhanced their regional influence and international standing. On the other hand, vulnerable countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Sudan and Yemen, which were mired deep in political crises or protracted civil wars and were in serious development difficulties, had to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or rich Gulf countries for help, and were forced to cede some economic sovereignty, hence becoming increasingly marginalized in the regional landscape.

**C. Social crises were fermenting.** Under the influence of multiple challenges such as the global economic downturn, energy crisis, food crisis and frequent natural disasters, the economic and livelihood problems of the Middle East countries became worsened, deepening the discontent and hatred of the people at bottom against the elites and the current political system. Egypt’s “food crisis” continued to brew, driving up its economic hardship and political instability. In Tunisia and Morocco, people in many places marched to protest against the rising prices, which intensified social tensions. Iranians resented the monopoly of the country’s wealth by entrenched groups of interests and periodically staged protests against the theocracy. These countries faced a complex situation of internal and external pressure with rising political and social risks.<sup>5</sup> Natural disasters occurred frequently in some regional countries, such as floods in Libya and strong earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, which made people’s lives more difficult and social instability rise.

## **V. The Outlook of the Situation in the Middle East in 2024**

In 2024, local instabilities in the Middle East are likely to continue. The Israeli-Palestinian issue and the rivalry between the US and Iran will remain the major “variables” affecting the evolution of the situation in the Middle East. The US hegemony in the Middle East has been shaken and regional countries have increased their strategic independence, which will become the “motivation” for the reconstruction of regional order. Political and economic problems are likely to intensify and hotspot issues keep flaring up, which will become a “normal situation” in the regional landscape.

**A. The ripple effects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will continue to spill over.** The future development direction of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict depends not only on the contest between the two sides, but also is closely related to the complex game of other relevant parties inside and outside the region. The effect of Hamas resistance, the will of the Israeli army to war, the strength of the US support, and the direction of international public opinion will affect the intensity and scale of the war. After the completion of the main operational mission to eliminate the threat of Hamas, the Israeli army is expected to gradually reduce the scale and intensity of military operations and shift to operations of “maintaining stability and curbing violence”, but there is no clear solution to the problems of how to establish a safe zone and reshape the governance of the Gaza Strip. Failure to properly resolve the issue of post-war arrangement in Gaza may lead to new security turbulence and spillover risks, and becomes a security black hole that will continue to consume the energy of regional countries and the international community. The reconciliation process in the Middle East may slow down due to the linkage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**B. The relations between the US and Middle East countries will undergo profound adjustment.** In order to realize its global strategic adjustment, the US is likely to continue the strategy of “overall contraction and partial strengthening” and maintain certain political and military presence in the Middle East. 2024 is the US general election year. In order to reduce the impact of the chaos in the Middle East on its internal affairs, the US will continue to consolidate its relations with traditional allies such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Qatar, control the spillover trend of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and join the EU and India to participate in the Middle East affairs, so that the US can continue its “offshore balance” policy in the Middle East. However, the Middle East countries will not easily change their pursuit for strategic autonomy and will continue to navigate among the major powers, and the struggle between control and anti-control as well as between pressure and anti-pressure will continue between the US and its Middle East allies.

**C. The regional security situation may be more volatile.** Internal tensions in some Middle East countries are heating up, and political and livelihood difficulties are worsening, making it more difficult to resolve hotspot issues. The new round of Israeli-Palestinian conflict has triggered the spread of anti-Semitism and other ideological trends and continuous protests, which may affect the regime stability of some Arab countries. The possibility of a new round of “Arab Spring” in the Middle East cannot be ruled out. Chaos is expected to continue in Iraq, Tunisia, Sudan, Libya and some other Middle East countries. Turkey, Egypt and Iran are likely to face challenges of economic weakness and political instability. At the same time, in order to shift the domestic political crisis, Iran, Turkey and some other

countries may increase their wrestling in the “gray zones” such as Iraq and Syria, which will seriously impact regional security. The new year is likely to be even more volatile for Middle East security.

**D. Fragmentation will go further in some regional countries.** The civil war in Sudan will continue to drag on, with the two sides competing fiercely and the domestic situation continuing to be volatile. Libya will continue to be divided between east and west, and the political process will be difficult. Due to external intervention, Syria will remain divided, with the Syrian authorities controlling the coastal areas and Damascus, Turkey and anti-Syrian groups controlling the northwestern parts including Idlib province, the Syrian Kurdish armed forces and the US controlling the northeastern parts including al-Hasakah and the southeastern parts including al-Tanf, and Iran and Shiite militias controlling the Syria-Iraq passage in Abu Kamal and some other areas.

---

**Notes:**

1 Niu Xinchun and Li Shaoxian, “Riding the momentum: China’s mediation of Saudi-Iran resuming diplomatic relations and its impact”, *International Studies*, No.3, 2023, p.38.

2 Tang Zhichao, “Spillover and breakout: The impact of the escalating crisis in Ukraine on the Middle East”, *Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies*, No.5, 2022, p.65.

3 Shen Qin and Zhang Junzhe, “An analysis of the current trade situation and its potentials between China and the Middle East countries”, *Modern Business*, No.14, 2023, p.78.

4 Wen Shaobiao and Wang Jialin, “The compound trend of the US’ proxy war in the Middle East”, *Global Review*, No.5, 2023, p.118.

5 Wang Lincong, “New development in the Middle East under the great transformation: Characteristics, challenges and prospects”, *Contemporary World*, No.10, 2023, p.98.

(Translated by Zeng Qiang)

# Overview of the Security Situation in Central Asia In 2023 and the Outlook

Liu Yang, Assistant Research Fellow, CISS

**Abstract:** *In 2023, the political situation in Central Asian countries remained stable on the whole, while the reform in such Central Asian countries as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan stepped into a new stage. In order to further isolate Russia, the United States and the West continued to infiltrate and pressure Central Asia, which intensified the competition between Russia and the United States and the West around Central Asia. Central Asian countries strengthened internal unity and coordination, actively pursued diversified and balanced diplomacy, expanded their strategic space, and maintained overall stability of the regional security situation.*

**Key Words:** Central Asia; Security Situation; 2023; Review

In 2023, the changes of the world unseen in a century and the Russia-Ukraine Conflict promoted the profound evolution in the strategic landscape of Central Asia, and the contest between major powers intensified in this region. Correspondingly, the Central Asian countries are facing more risks and challenges, and the regional security situation has been in a basic situation that “the in-depth contest has intensified and the risks and challenges have increased”. In this context, the Central Asian countries took multiple measures and actively responded, increased their willingness to huddle together for warmth, and significantly accelerated the construction of integration. The contest between major powers around Central Asia heated up, the United States has further increased its investment in Central Asia, and the regional strategic pattern is facing a new round of restructuring.

## **I. Central Asian Countries Maintained Political Stability and Their Security Situation Was Generally under Control**

In 2023, with the exception of Tajikistan, the four Central Asian countries completed the “succession of the new to the old” in political circles. They stepped up reforms in the political field and consolidated the ruling foundation. Central Asian countries are committed to internal development, with their economies basically pulling out of the downturn during the epidemic period. The countries maintained stable relations, worked together to manage differences on borders and water resources, and maintained overall stability in the region.

**A. Actively seizing and controlling power to secure ruling stability.** Central Asian countries have focused on the contradictions and problems accumulated in their early development, and actively promoted political reform and consolidated power. Kazakhstan held presidential elections, partial general elections for the upper house of parliament, and the first elections for the lower house of parliament and local assemblies after the reform of the

electoral system, re-forming the government, and revoking the national leader status and all privileges of the former President Nursultan Äbishuly Nazarbayev. At this point, the large-scale political reform promoted by President Tokayev after the “January incident” basically ended, and the construction of new power structure with him as the core was completed, laying a better political and legal and public opinion foundation for the next administration. Tokayev’s future reforms will focus on the economic and social fields, and strive to build a “new Kazakhstan” within seven years of his term. Uzbekistan completed a constitutional referendum in April and held a snap presidential election in July, in which President Shavkat Mirziyoyev was re-elected with 87% of the vote.<sup>1</sup> Mirziyoyev took advantage of the situation to accelerate the reform process, carried out large-scale personnel adjustments, appointed his eldest daughter Saida Mirziyoyev as assistant to the president, and officially opened a new era of governance. He continued to make efforts in six areas such as government reform, expanding human rights and freedoms, and establishing market mechanisms proposed in the State of the Union address.<sup>2</sup> Kyrgyz President Zaparov was concerned about domestic stability, and repeatedly accused and warned external forces and non-governmental organizations in Kyrgyzstan not to interfere in Kyrgyzstan’s internal affairs, while strictly prohibiting domestic political forces to interfere in local elections, so as to avoid “unfair elections causing political instability in Kyrgyzstan.” Turkmenistan President Serdar Berdimuhamedov replaced the deputy prime minister, energy minister and other senior government officials, severely punished local leaders involved in corruption and dereliction of duty, and increasingly consolidated the position of power. Meanwhile, the old president Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov continued to escort him and attended important international conferences on behalf of Turkmenistan on many occasions. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon was firmly in power, and the political arrangement of “transferring the leadership from father to son” was carried out in an orderly manner. By and large, in 2023, the high-level power was running smoothly and the governance was effective in Central Asian countries, while the overall social situation remained stable.

**B. Being committed to internal development and the economic growth was obvious.** In 2023, Central Asian countries gradually stepped out of the epidemic period in terms of economy. In particular, in the context of intensifying competition between major countries, the outside world increased its involvement in Central Asia, foreign investment increased and the foreign trade environment further improved. The connectivity and logistics infrastructure were upgraded, and the economies of Central Asian countries performed strongly despite the general downturn in the world economy. After the completion of the political reshaping, the employment and investment gradually stabilized and Kazakhstan actively filled the market left by Western companies after the withdrawal of Russia, which opened up new trade channels. In 2023, the GDP grew by 4.7% , reaching a total of \$ 259.3 billion, with per capita GDP of \$ 13,300, and the inflation rate dropped from 20.3% at the beginning of the year to 10.3%.<sup>3</sup> Uzbekistan continuously improved the quality of its economic development, taking attracting foreign investment, increasing the proportion of localized production and building a sound business environment as important steps. Uzbekistan established the Council of Foreign Investors under the president to provide “one-stop” services. It also vigorously promoted economic diplomacy, established and innovated economic and trade cooperation mechanisms with economies such as the United States, Europe, ASEAN, the Gulf States, China and



Russia, sped up the WTO accession negotiations, and attracted investment from foreign countries or international financial institutions. In the first three quarters of 2023, Uzbekistan's foreign trade volume increased by 22.1% year on year, and its GDP grew by 5.7%. The annual growth rate was expected to be 6.5%.<sup>4</sup> Kyrgyzstan introduced a series of economic reform measures to attract domestic and foreign investment, improve the business environment, create more jobs, and continue to raise the salaries of personnel in government institutions, the enforcement sector, and the health and education systems, and the social security level of the whole people. All economic and livelihood indicators have improved significantly. The GDP grew by 4.2% in the first three quarters of 2023, and the annual economic growth rate was expected to reach 4.5%.<sup>5</sup> The indicators of Tajikistan's national economy were generally good, and the government took various measures to boost social and economic development and achieved certain results. From January to September 2023, Tajikistan's foreign trade increased by 33% year-on-year, while exports increased by 29%. Since the second half of the year, the Asian Development Bank raised its economic forecast for Tajikistan twice, and the annual GDP growth rate was expected to be 7.3%. Thanks to strong natural gas exports, the promotion of diversified energy export strategies, and more open and convenient foreign trade channels after the epidemic situation, Turkmenistan's economy continued to maintain a strong momentum of recovery for two consecutive years. From January to September 2023, the growth rate of the Turkmenistan's economy reached 6.3%, the state budget revenue completed 111.7%, the foreign trade increased by 2.6%, and the annual economic growth rate was estimated to reach 6.5%.

**C. Working hard to resolve internal discord and disputes and maintaining overall stability in the region.** In terms of joint counter-terrorism, the Central Asian countries have all noted signs that international terrorist organizations have increased the spread, infiltration and recruitment of extremist ideas to Central Asian countries, and have strengthened intelligence exchanges and joint exercises and training under the SCO and CSTO frameworks. Bilateral joint military exercises were also held between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to strengthen anti-terrorism capabilities. In terms of inter-state relations, although small border conflicts between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan occurred, both sides were willing to prevent the situation from escalating and took measures to resolve the conflicts in a timely manner. In May 2023, the two countries agreed to withdraw drones and heavy military equipment from the border area. Up to now, all the troops deployed along the border lines have been withdrawn, and the meeting mechanism will be activated as soon as possible if circumstances arise, so as to minimize the risk of conflict. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan opened a new round of border talks and made new progress in resolving the border dispute. The two sides reached an agreement on the 120 km border, with the total length of the border demarcated by the two sides reaching 90%.<sup>6</sup> In addition, countries jointly explored ways to solve problems in the ecological governance of the Aral Sea and energy supply security.

## **II. Countries Are More Willing to Unite for Warmth, and the Integration Process Has Significantly Accelerated**

Stimulated by major events such as the changes in Afghanistan and the Russia-Ukraine

conflict, Central Asian countries have increased their sense of solidarity, accelerated the opening up of an independent path of regional integration, and made new progress in regional integration. In terms of internal relations, a positive trend of easing tension appeared. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan took the lead in resolving the border issue and signed the alliance treaty, which promoted the sound development of regional relations. In the first half of the year, there were more than 50 mutual visits between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan at various levels. Bilateral relations were elevated to the level of comprehensive strategic partnership and 25 cooperation agreements were signed. Kazakhstan and Tajikistan signed 20 new cooperation agreements covering customs, industry, economy and trade.<sup>7</sup> Countries also introduced measures for simplifying procedures for citizens to travel across borders, not only helping to consolidate regional peace and stability, but also creating conditions for the flow of people and materials. With the exception of the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, all other border issues have been resolved. On connectivity, important cooperation consensus was reached. Previously, due to the constraints of national policies, funds and construction capacity, the construction of cross-border channels in Central Asia has been implemented more on paper than in practice. Against the backdrop of profound changes in international security and order, countries have further enhanced their consensus on internal connectivity and the construction of cross-border corridors connecting Europe and Asia. During the summit of the five Central Asian countries in September, they signed the *Agreement on Strengthening Land Transport Connectivity in Central Asia*, marking a new step in the construction of regional connectivity.<sup>8</sup> Countries have also actively developed transport routes between the region and other countries, jointly built the “Silk Road Economic Belt” with China, the “Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor” with the European Union, and promoted the construction of the “International North-South Transport Corridor” with India, seeking to build Central Asia into a transport and logistics hub connecting the three major plates of the Asia-Pacific, the Middle East and the EU. In terms of foreign cooperation, they have frequently carried out foreign exchanges in a collective capacity. The Central Asian countries have all emphasized that the common interests of the Central Asian region are the starting point for foreign relations, and the color of integrity is becoming more and more prominent. During the year, the five Central Asian states held multilateral meetings with Europe, the United States, Russia, China, the Gulf States, Germany, the ROK and Japan respectively in the form of “C5+”, and reached new cooperation with all parties on major issues such as security, development, ecology and people-to-people exchanges in the region. At the same time, the constraints facing regional integration in Central Asia are still very obvious: the development is uneven and the policy objectives are different among countries; the major powers do not want Central Asia to function as an independent geopolitical plate; and the overall strength of all countries is limited, and it is difficult to get rid of their external dependence in internal development, infrastructure construction, water resources, and ecological issues and so on.

### **III. A New Round of Major Power Game Is Intensifying, and the Regional Security Pattern Is under Pressure from Multiple Dimensions**

The Russia-Ukraine conflict exacerbates the centrifugal tendency in Central Asia, making it difficult for Russia to maintain the “quasi-unipolar” pattern in Central Asia. The

influence of the United States in Central Asia is spiraling up, and major strategic forces are competing to involve in the game. In this context, Central Asia is facing more complex multi-directional inducement and pressure and geopolitical competition.

**A. The United States has been ambitious to have a hand in Central Asia and strived to expand its influence by both inducing and pressing.** With the intensification of the major power game, the United States has paid more attention to the use of Central Asia to contain China and Russia, support relevant parties involving the Russia-Ukraine crisis through coordinated action, and serve the purpose of outcompeting China. To lure Central Asian countries, the United States has continuously deepened its cooperation with Central Asia under the “C5+1” mechanism, hosted two ministerial meetings and the first heads of state meeting in the United States; expanded military exchanges and cooperation, and held bilateral and multilateral joint military exercises such as “Regional Cooperation-2023”; no longer emphasized the “transformation of democratic values”, increased the inclusiveness for the constitutional amendment, presidential election, suppression of opposition and so on in regional countries during the year, and defaulted or supported political reform and power restructuring in various countries; intensified the efforts to win over and influence the next generation in the name of supporting an independent civil society and a free media, and catered to the economic development aspirations of all countries, increased investment and supported them in opening up new trade and transport routes. At the same time, in view of the substantial growth of Central Asian countries’ trade with Russia, the Russian army was found in the Ukrainian battlefield to use electrical parts imported from Europe by Central Asian countries for maintenance of military equipment, and the United States and Europe continued to increase pressure on Central Asian countries, urging Central Asian countries to strictly abide by sanctions against Russia, threatening to immediately impose secondary sanctions on them if they were found to assist Russia in circumventing sanctions.<sup>9</sup> At the “C5+1” foreign ministers’ meeting in February 2023, the United States once again threatened to impose secondary sanctions on various countries. The United States also manipulated the water resources conflict between Afghanistan and Central Asian countries in an attempt to create instability, aggravate the security concerns of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and other countries to bring them closer to the United States and the West.<sup>10</sup>

**B. Russia has made every effort to maintain and stabilize the overall situation and still retained its influence on the regional situation.** Politically, Russia stressed the traditional ties and common spiritual ties between Russia and Central Asia, inviting all leaders of Central Asian countries to participate in the Victory Day parade. Meetings at various levels were held within the framework of the CIS and the Eurasian Economic Union to discuss and resolve issues in the fields of economy, trade, humanity, logistics, energy and regional security. Russia opened more Russian language schools in Central Asia and increased the number of free places to study in Russia for Central Asian students. In terms of military security, Russia strengthened the construction of military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and promoted the construction of a joint air defense system in Central Asia. The “Unbreakable Brotherhood 2023” joint exercise of the Collective Security Treaty Organization was held, and Russia and Tajikistan held joint military exercises in the border area between Tajikistan and Afghanistan to help enhance the border defense capability of Tajikistan.<sup>11</sup> Economically, Russia steadily operated the Eurasian Economic Union, tightened

economic ties, and made use of the internal convenience of the union to carry out transit trade through Central Asian countries. From January to July, 2023, the volume of trade between Russia and Uzbekistan increased by 14.5%, that between Russia and Tajikistan by 9.8%, and that between Russia and Kazakhstan by 9%. In October, Russia initially established a “natural gas alliance” with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to further strengthen energy control in Central Asia.

**C. Turkey has aggressively intervened in Central Asia and spared no effort to build a “Turkic Corridor”.** Turkey, which presents itself as the leader of the “Turkic world,” has aggressively intervened in Central Asia and the outer Caucasus and pieced together an organization of Turkic-speaking states. In 2023, the organization held two summits, attended by all leaders of Central Asian countries except Tajikistan, and decided to formulate a unified flag and logo of the Organization of Turkic Speaking States, and set up permanent representatives of countries to the Organization of Turkic Speaking States, further highlighting the trend of the organization’s alliance.<sup>12</sup> Turkey has intensified the efforts to promote movies and TV series to Central Asia to propagate Turkish culture and language to the public, and indoctrinated Central Asian youth with “pan-Turkism” and Islamic rules through religious schools and other educational institutions.

#### **IV. Regional Destabilizing Factors Continue to Increase and Non-traditional Security Threats Remain Grave**

After the Russia-Ukraine conflict broke out, the economy and people’s livelihood of the Central Asian countries were affected, and the factors of social instability increased. Opposition, terrorist and extremist forces within countries have taken the opportunity to collude with one another and get stronger, further increasing the vulnerability of the regional situation.

**A. The counter-terrorism pressure around Afghanistan continues to be high.** The current situation in Afghanistan is complicated. The Taliban regime faces prominent internal and external conflicts. Terrorist groups in northern Afghanistan are poised to move, and the anti-terrorism pressure in Central Asian countries continues to rise. In 2023, the Afghan Taliban continued to suppress and restrict the rights of ethnic minorities in the country and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) took the opportunity to increase its activities in Kunduz, Jowzjan, Takhar, Badakhshan and other neighboring provinces, focusing on attracting and recruiting Central Asian members from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, as well as members of terrorist organizations such as the “Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan” to improve their ability to move across borders to Central Asia. The “success rate” of cross-border activities to Uzbekistan and other countries by recruited people under the cover of peddlers, taxi drivers and herdsmen is getting higher and higher by taking advantage of their ethnic identity, and there are even cases of “above-board” cross-border activities through border crossings such as Hairatan in Afghanistan.

**B. Extremist and terrorist forces’ under currents are surging in Central Asia.** Violent terrorist forces in Central Asia focused on women and minors and other groups to spread extremist ideas, and their techniques are constantly updated. In 2023, Kyrgyzstan and

Kazakhstan closed down two and eight illegal underground religious schools, housing more than 70 and 110 women and children, respectively, to indoctrinate them with religious extremist ideas. Regional terrorist organizations paid more attention to the use of Internet to spread extremist ideas in response to government crackdowns, and it is more difficult to track their movements. A number of extremist organizations in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and other countries have increased incitement and infiltration in the ideological field through Telegram and other online social platforms, while actively recruiting people by attracting them to travel to Arab countries to study, perform hajj or work abroad.

**C. The activities of international and regional terrorist organizations are resurging.** The economic growth in Central Asia slowed down, and extremist terrorist forces in the region took the opportunity to promote extremist ideas, recruit people and raise funds widely among the socially disadvantaged groups. Organizations such as “Hizb ut-Tahrir” and “Heaven Loving” have become active again, and local terrorist and extremist activities have risen. At the same time, the Central Asian fighters in the Islamic State and other international terrorist organizations continued to return, activating the “sleeping cells” in the region, and international terrorist and extremist forces have become more active in Central Asia.<sup>13</sup> In Tajikistan, the “Jundallah” actively recruited and encouraged its members in Tajikistan to carry out “jihad” on the spot. In September, 2023, Tajikistan detected that the “Jundallah” planned to carry out attacks in the territory against the “Independence Day” celebrations on September 9, and then killed three terrorists in the Darvaz district of Gorno-Badakhshan, and seized a large number of weapons, ammunition, explosives and communication equipment. In Kazakhstan, the Islamic fundamentalist al-Wahhabiyyah fought in at least five states for control of local small and micro businesses, especially the village fairs with large personnel and cash flow, in an effort to expand its influence and achieve political goals. In Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami carried out covert activities in many places, showing the growth trend. Since 2023, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan arrested dozens of members of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami, some of whom were closely linked to the Islamic State, who attempted to organize a coup d’état and mass protests in Uzbekistan. In addition, international terrorist organizations regard Central Asia as an important source of recruitment and strive to expand their recruitment and influence there. According to statistics, there are currently more than 4,200 Central Asian terrorists operating in Syria, Iraq and other places, of whom about 1,500 are Uzbek nationals, accounting for 35.7% ; about 1,300 Tajik nationals, accounting for 31% ; about 500 Kazakh and Kyrgyz nationals each, accounting for 11.9% respectively; about 400 Turkmen nationals, accounting for 9.5% .

## **V. Prospects of Security Situation in Central Asia in 2024**

Looking ahead to 2024, Central Asian countries are expected to maintain overall political stability, further focus on economic development, promote connectivity, and continue to maintain diversified, balanced and pragmatic diplomacy. However, with the acceleration of the evolution of the world pattern and the intensification of the contest between major powers, some countries in Central Asia may still see “black swan” events such as sudden instability and armed conflicts.

**A. The political situation of various countries has entered a period of relative**

**stability.** After the tumultuous adjustment from 2020 to 2022, the political situation of Central Asian countries has entered a stage of relative stability, and a vertical power system with the president as the core has been gradually established. The core of the new generation of leadership in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and other countries has been basically established, and the loyalty and administrative capacity of the ruling teams have been continuously improved. In 2024, countries will take the maintenance of regime security as the top priority, and will continue to maintain the situation of high-pressure control at home. While closely guarding against the infiltration of the United States and the West, they will continue to fine-tune the power structure and partially adjust personnel. It is worth noting that Tajik President Emomali Rahmon will be in power for 30 years in 2024, and he will continue to make arrangements for the transfer of supreme power, and an early presidential election is not ruled out.

**B. The economies of all countries are expected to maintain a sound momentum.** The Russia-Ukraine conflict has further enhanced the geostrategic status of Central Asia, coupled with the “dividend” brought by the withdrawal of the United States and the West from the Russian market and the Eurasian energy and food crisis, and the demand for external forces to develop cooperation with Central Asian countries in energy, minerals, agriculture and logistics has significantly increased. In 2024, Central Asian countries are expected to continue to drive economic development by attracting external investment. According to the forecast of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, the economic growth rate of Central Asian countries will maintain 3.9% in 2024, and it is expected to exceed 7% in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.<sup>14</sup>

**C. The regional situation of contest between major powers will become increasingly competitive.** With the protracted conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the heated contest between major powers, the competition between major powers in Central Asia will not be weakened. Russia is gradually withdrawing from the Ukraine crisis and reshaping the situation in Central Asia, using CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) to tighten its relations with Central Asia in multiple dimensions such as security, economy and culture. The United States intends to strengthen value shaping by targeting the new generation of leaders while advancing the military layout in Central Asia, and seeks to strengthen cooperation with Central Asian countries in the supply chain of critical minerals. The EU values the economic worth of Central Asia, promotes the construction of connectivity with Central Asia, and expands energy cooperation in order to fill the energy shortage due to the sanctions against Russia. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida plans to visit Central Asia in the first half of 2024 and hold a “Japan+Central Asia” summit with the heads of state of Central Asia.<sup>15</sup> In the face of the winning-over and infiltration of various forces, the Central Asian countries will continue to pursue a pluralistic and balanced foreign policy and seek profits from major countries.

**D. The risk of “black swan” events cannot be ignored.** Central Asian countries have prominent territorial, cross-border ethnic, water resources and other issues, which often lead to contradictions and even conflicts. Especially with the global climate change, water resources issue has increasingly become a new source of chaos affecting the relations between regional countries. At present, the Afghan Taliban is accelerating the construction of the Qosh Tepa irrigation canal project in the Amu Darya River basin, which will reduce the water

volume of Turkey, Uzbekistan and other downstream countries by more than 15% , seriously affecting regional ecological and economic development. In the next step, the contradiction between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan on this issue will be further intensified, and the possibility of conflict cannot be ruled out.<sup>16</sup> In addition, terrorist and extremist forces continue to grow in northern Afghanistan. The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) has linked up with terrorist organizations such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Jundallah, and the East Islamic Movement. The target of infiltration and backflow to Central Asia is clearly pointed, which has caused serious radiation and spillover effects on Central Asian countries, and the possibility of large-scale terrorist attacks in Central Asian countries cannot be completely ruled out.

---

**Notes :**

- 1 Xinhuanet, “*Shavkat Mirziyoyev Was Elected President of Uzbekistan*”. July 10, 2023.
- 2 New Uzbekistan, “*The Eldest Daughter of Uzbekistan’s President Is to Take up A Key Government Post*”. August 20, 2023.
- 3 Kazakh International News Agency, “*New Year’s Message from President Tokayev of Kazakhstan*”. January 1, 2024.
- 4 Uzbekistan Review, “*The Uzbek Economy Grew by 5.8% from January to September, 2023*”. December 4, 2023.
- 5 Kabar News Agency, “*Kyrgyzstan’s Economy Is Growing Steadily*”. October 23, 2023.
- 6 24. KG News Agency, Kyrgyzstan, “*Ninety Percent of the Border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Has Been Demarcated*”. December 12, 2023.
- 7 World Affairs, “*Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan Established An Alliance*”. February 7, 2023.
- 8 Wenhui, “*The fifth Central Asia Summit Was Held in Tajikistan*”. September 16, 2023.
- 9 Sputnik, “*Senior US officials are due to visit two Central Asian countries, which is in connection with sanctions against Russia*”. April 17, 2023.
- 10 Podrobn.uz News Networks, “*China and the US Compete for Transport Corridors: Can the Belt and Road Beat the New Initiative of the Collective West?*” September 16, 2023.
- 11 Kyrgyzstan vesti.kg, “*The CSTO’s Unbreakable Brotherhood 2023 “Joint Exercise Kicked off*”. October 9, 2023.
- 12 Qazaqparat, “*The 10th Summit of the Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic Speaking States Signed 12 Important Documents*”. November 3, 2023.
- 13 ASIA-Plus, “*Who Threatens Central Asia?*” October 21, 2023.
- 14 World Bank, “*Global Economic Outlook*”. January 9, 2024.
- 15 Sputnik, “*Fumio Kishida Himself Will Visit Central Asia*”. December 31, 2023.
- 16 National News Agency of Uzbekistan, “*Has the Qosh Tepa Canal Burst Its Banks?*” December 19, 2023.

(Translated by Liu Yaojun)

# Security Situation of Latin America In 2023 and Outlook

Hu Cheng, Associate Research Fellow, CIISS

**Abstract:** *In 2023, the political landscape of Latin America underwent profound adjustments, with the trends of “the left advancing and the right retreating” and “the left on offense and the right on defense” becoming prominent. However, due to the impact of the intensification of major-power contest, the prolongation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the global economic downturn, coupled with unfavorable factors such as constraints from the right wing, political polarization, social divisions and sluggish development, Latin America’s left-wing forces were still facing arduous challenges in growing their strength and making reforms. The US, in order to consolidate its “backyard” and prevent Latin American countries from “forming a close-knit group” to alienate the US, comprehensively used various policy tools and intervention methods to classify and control as well as divide and disintegrate regional countries, hence bringing more uncertainty to the direction of the regional structure.*

**Key Words:** Latin America; New Left-wing Wave; Integration; China-US Contest

## I. In the Political Field, the Situation Driven by the Left Moved “from Chaos to Stability” amid Twists and Turns

In 2023, the Latin American political arena was roiled with overt and covert currents, and dark horse reversals became a regular election script; political polarization intensified, and the regional pink political landscape began to fade; social networks broke the linear communication model of traditional media, and public resentment accumulated and tore apart democracy.

**A. The new left-wing wave was “big but not strong”.<sup>1</sup>** In 2023, the political landscape in Latin America underwent profound changes. Lula da Silva returned to power in Brazil at the beginning of the year, while the Argentine left lost the election at the end of the year. Left-wing forces held power in five of the top six Latin American economies and in at least 11 countries, accounting for approximately 80% of the region’s total area, total population, and total GDP. However, judging from the effects of governance, this round of left-wing governance in Latin America showed “moderate” characteristics different from the past, featuring weakened combativeness and highlighted limitations. On the one hand, there was insufficient leadership. This round of “left-wing resurgence” failed to produce a political leader with international influence comparable to Hugo Chavez. Brazilian President Lula intended to become a regional leader again, but there were still differences and frictions within the left-wing group in terms of political stance and economic interests, etc., which



made it difficult to forge a synergy, thus significantly reducing its ability to lead reforms, progress and mass movements. On the other hand, there was a “deviation” in left-wing philosophies.<sup>2</sup> At present, most of the leaders of the left-wing regimes were elected based on pragmatism, deliberately downplaying ideology and showing “inclusiveness” towards the right wing, and there were “gray zones” in policy measures. The current situation in countries like Chile, Peru, and Argentina reflected a considerable degree of incompleteness and compromise in the current left-wing struggles to reform in the region, making it difficult to replicate the revolutionary and progressive situation of the first “pink tide” at the beginning of the century.

**B. Various countries witnessed chaotic political struggles.**<sup>3</sup> In 2023, political divisions in Latin American countries intensified, where weak governments between strong oppositions as well as confrontation between governments and legislatures were common. Governments, distracted by vicious political struggles, were unable to focus on governance, making it difficult to form a long-term stable and solid foundation for governance. Some even faced the risks of government disintegration and regime change. Peru witnessed an abnormal change in its political situation, with the left-wing President Pedro Castillo removed from office and sent to prison and his successor Dina Boluarte “indicating left while turning right”, leading to continuous street politics and civil unrest. Soon after Lula’s inauguration, Brazil experienced large-scale violent incidents including storming and smashing the presidential palace, Congress and other government institutions, being the “most serious political turmoil” Brazil ever witnessed in recent decades. The fight between Lula and Bolsonaro continued throughout the whole year. The conflict between Bolivian President Luis Arce and ruling party Chairman Evo Morales became public, and the infighting within the ruling force intensified, affecting Bolivia’s political stability. Argentine vice president was judicially tried and dismissed, the opposition parties accelerated their integration, and the incumbent President Alberto Fernandez withdrew from the 2023 presidential election. In Colombia, negotiations between the government and armed rebels such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) were blocked, and peace plans were frustrated. Chile’s tax reform plan failed, leaving President Gabriel Boric with no other option but to reshuffle the cabinet and tilt part of policies to the right. Ecuador’s President Guillermo Lasso “came to an end together” with the National Assembly, launching a “cross death” for the first time in history that triggered early election. “Operation Squid” was launched in Dominica, arresting many senior officials of the former government involved in corruption.

**C. Regional right-wing forces regained momentum.** Against the backdrop of stagnant social-economic development of Latin American countries in recent years, “seeking change” was the main reason that Latin American politics “abandoned the right and embraced the left”. However, after the return of the left, realistic problems in various countries have not been effectively addressed, public dissatisfaction has not been substantially alleviated, and fatigue with traditional “establishment” politics has increased. Polarization, xenophobia, and populism have spread in some countries, providing “fertile soil” for the development of the right and far-right parties. First, the right wing regained its “fulcrum”. Argentina’s far-right anti-establishment presidential candidate Javier Milei was elected, which would set off a “far-right whirlwind” again in Latin America; Paraguay’s right-wing Colorado Party won a resounding victory in presidential and local elections; Ecuador’s center-right presidential

candidate Daniel Noboa won the election, and his winning model provided “new ideas” for the return of the regional right. Second, the left-right confrontation intensified in some countries. Bernardo Arevalo, the candidate of the left-wing Seed Movement in Guatemala, won the election, but the right-wing conservative forces set up obstacles for him all the time; the Bolivian government raided and arrested the far-right governor of Santa Cruz, Luis Fernando Camacho, triggering a collaboration of right-wing forces in many provinces to compete with the central government. Parliaments in countries such as Brazil, Chile and Colombia were controlled by the right, leaving left-wing governments facing many constraints in advancing their policy agenda. Third, the right wing gained external support. The far-right forces in the US were actively expanding into Latin America. The Conservative Political Action Conference in the US, as the oldest far-right grassroots organization in the US, has in recent years successively set up strongholds in Brazil and Mexico, prompting Latin American far-right forces to accelerate their “unification”, exerting influence on the public through social media, and organizing anti-leftist movements with extreme measures.

## **II. In the Economic Field, Persistent and Deep-Rooted Problems Hindered Reform and Recovery**

**A. Economic growth was slow and unbalanced.** As Latin America stuck in the “middle-income trap” for a long time, the regional economic growth was anemic due to serious structural flaws.<sup>4</sup> Problems, such as limited fiscal revenues constraining public investment, a huge gap between the rich and the poor hindering social development and backward technological levels compressing choice space, still existed. Those problems, coupled with the global economic downturn, international turmoil, frequent natural disasters and other factors, made the economic situation of Latin America in 2023 very difficult. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the average annual economic growth rate in the region from 2014 to 2024 was only 0.8% , which was even lower than the 2% economic growth rate in the region during the “lost decade” caused by the debt crisis in the 1980s. The International Monetary Fund predicted that Latin American and Caribbean economy would grow at a low rate of around 2.3% in 2023 and 2024. From sub-regional perspective, the growth rate of the South American continent might be only 1.6% , Central America might achieve a growth of 3.8% , and the Caribbean region might have the strongest growth of 9% . From the country perspective, the performances of Brazil and Mexico were relatively optimistic, with a growth rate of about 3% . Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay could only achieve a small positive growth of about 2% , while the economies of Argentina, Chile, Haiti and some other countries would be expected to have negative growth.

**B. The left wing strived to promote changes in development models.** In response to long-term regional prominent problems such as high inflation, high debt, unfair distribution and worsening poverty, left-wing forces, after coming to power, had a strong desire to take advantage of their own resource advantages to change traditional development models, especially to break the myth of neoliberal economics. On the one hand, they strengthened their countries’ “intelligence” and attached great importance to the application of science and

technology to solve development problems. The Argentine government significantly increased its investment in the knowledge economy, hoping to reverse the passive situation of economic development relying on the boom cycle of bulk commodities; Brazilian President Lula made it clear that he hopes to break the resource-dependent development model and completely change Brazil's status as a supplier of primary raw materials. On the other hand, with the emphasis on nationalization, resource nationalism tended to rise. Each left-wing government formulated policies to tighten state control of key energy resources and reduce the degree of privatization. Mexico was vigorously pushing for the "fourth change" and the nationalization reform of the power industry; the Lula government clearly restricted the privatization of key industries such as oil; the Chilean government advocated the strengthening of national regulation, increased the royalties of mining companies, and promulgated the "Mining Royalty Bill"; Bolivia, Chile and Argentina, the "Lithium Triangle" of South America, intended to form an "Organization of Lithium Exporting Countries" to tighten their control of the lithium industry chain.<sup>5</sup>

**C. Comprehensive recovery still faced severe challenges.** From the perspective of external environment, factors such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the US Federal Reserve's interest rate hikes had a serious impact on the international financial market and the global supply chains. As the world's raw material producer, Latin America has a high degree of economic dependence on foreign countries, and the depression in international trade affected the region's commodity exports and triggered a series of problems such as rising prices, capital outflows and currency depreciation, which hampered regional economic recovery. From the perspective of internal environment, Latin American countries had prominent financial problems and debt levels remained "high". Excessive social welfare and high urbanization levels were seriously out of line with economic development capabilities, with public expenditure demands and fiscal deficits continuing to rise, thus limiting governments' ability to play their roles. The average economic growth rate in Latin America in 2023 was 3.7%, significantly lower than before. Inflation rates in Latin American countries rose sharply. Some countries, such as Argentina, witnessed a plummet in stocks, bonds and exchange rates, with their sovereign credit ratings and growth expectations downgraded repeatedly. Inflation rates in Venezuela, Jamaica, Suriname and some other countries also continued to rise.

### **III. In the Diplomatic Field, the Strategic Importance of the Region Increased**

**A. Regional integration was fully restarted, and the trend of "seeking strength through solidarity" was consolidated.** The "left-wing resurgence" led to a significant increase in regional countries' awareness of independence and unity for strength, creating favorable conditions for regional integration development. At the CELAC summit in January, 2023, all 33 member states attended, and Brazil stated that it would be committed to building a "regional community with a shared future"; Argentina and Brazil successively returned to the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and actively promoted the creation of a common currency called "sur" for use in South America; mechanisms such as the South

American Common Market (Mercosur), Central American Integration System, the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas, the Puebla Group, the Ibero-American summit and the Association of Caribbean Nations International Cooperation Conference were all “activated”, and various regional and inter-state organizations became more active. However, judging from historical experience, among the variety of inter-state organizations in Latin America, more focus has been put on the form rather than the substance. As regional countries have similar economic structures and low complementarity, endogenous motivation for integrated development in the region is insufficient. Major regional countries such as Brazil and Argentina have limited development capabilities of their own, hence an absence of powerful “bellwethers” in the regional cooperation. Moreover, ideological differences among Latin American countries are still difficult to bridge, preventing an efficient integration of regional forces and depriving the region of a solid foundation for integration development.

**B. Regional cooperation heated up, and opportunities and contradictions coexisted.**

Argentina and Brazil, two major regional countries, carried out frequent interactions. The president of Argentina visited Brazil to celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries. The two sides agreed to step up coordination in infrastructure, transportation, energy and mining, financing, the Mercosur and other fields. Relations between traditional left-wing countries in the region continued to improve, and Colombia and Venezuela restored diplomatic relations and strengthened cooperation; Brazil led relevant countries to reach a consensus at the South American Nations Summit to proactively resume normal dialogue with Venezuela and other countries sanctioned by the US and the West and help Venezuela restore its legitimate status in the Mercosur; the prime minister of Barbados visited Venezuela and signed a joint statement; the president of Bolivia visited Cuba to promote the implementation of cooperation between the two countries; Honduras and Nicaragua signed a military cooperation agreement, and Honduras joined the Latin American Development Bank. But at the same time, conflicts and disputes between regional countries still broke out from time to time. The presidents of Chile and Nicaragua traded barbs; Dominica and Haiti closed their borders due to the use of the boundary river; the territorial disputes between Venezuela and Guyana became increasingly fierce; diplomatic disputes occurred between Mexico and Peru, and between Ecuador and Argentina; Colombia and Nicaragua were constantly fighting over the ownership of the extended continental shelf in the Caribbean Sea.

**C. Foreign cooperation were carried out in a diverse and frequent way, and major countries from outside the region were making efforts to “join in the game”.** Given that Latin America has a big number of countries, a vast territory and rich resources, whether it is due to international political struggles or economic development needs, the region is the target of major powers vying to win over. Since November, 2022, the Russian foreign minister respectively visited Brazil, Cuba, Venezuela and other countries. The first “Russia-Latin America” international parliamentary conference was held in Moscow at the end of September, 2023, which Russian President Putin and more than 300 parliamentary representatives and experts from Latin American countries attended; heads of state or government of Brazil, Colombia, Cuba and Barbados visited Europe while attending the Summit for a New Global Financing Pact; European Commission President Von der Leyen made her first visit in 2023 to Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Mexico; the second EU-CELAC

summit was held, during which the leaders of the 33 CELAC and 25 EU countries “reunited” again after 8 years, and the EU announced the adoption of the “EU-LAC Global Gateway Investment Agreement”, which proposed an investment of 45 billion euros in Latin America by 2027, and signed the “Joint Declaration on a Digital Alliance” with 20 countries in the region; the German chancellor, the French foreign minister, the Indian foreign minister, the ROK prime minister and the Japanese foreign minister visited Latin America one after another with the intention of promoting and deepening relations with regional countries.

#### **IV. In Terms of Relations with the US, Competition and Cooperation Heated Up at the Same Time**

**A. The Latin American left’s centrifugal tendency towards the US was relatively enhanced.**<sup>6</sup> As the left-wing ruling power expanded and anti-interference claims were further strengthened, the US’ control over Latin America was relatively weakened. Some countries in the region had the courage to “speak against” the US on issues such as the Ukraine crisis and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and even openly drew closer to countries hostile to the US, such as Russia and Iran. The international environment for “anti-American” countries, such as Cuba and Venezuela, was further improved. At the EU-CELAC summit, CELAC countries flatly rejected the EU’s request to “support Ukraine”, while Brazil, Argentina, Colombia and other major regional countries stated clearly that they would not support or be involved in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and refuse to provide weapons and equipment assistance to Ukraine. Mexico criticized the US for using the immigration and fentanyl issues to interfere in its internal affairs, and condemned the US for supporting anti-government civil organizations in Mexico to undermine its national security and stability; Brazil refused to sign the joint declaration of the second Summit for Democracy and did not agree with its condemnation of Russia for the Russia-Ukraine conflict; and Bolivia, Colombia and Brazil publicly condemned Israel’s “massacre” of Palestinians, and even expressed their positions by cutting off diplomatic relations and calling back ambassadors, etc.

**B. The US stepped up its interference and regulation in Latin America.**<sup>7,8</sup> On the one hand, it intensified efforts to lure and win over regional countries in the name of promoting economy, safeguarding democracy and maintaining security. Such efforts included: increasing the attraction and traction of Latin American countries by convening multilateral events such as the North American Leaders’ Summit, the second Summit for Democracy, the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity Leaders’ Summit, and the US-Caribbean Leaders’ Meeting; strengthening its management of relations with small Central American countries by implementing the “Central America Forward”; launching the Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation with Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Costa Rica, Dominica and other countries; signing a treaty to avoid double taxation with Chile; and limitedly relaxing sanctions on Venezuela and using it as a bargaining chip to interfere in the coming Venezuelan election. On the other hand, it intensified control of and deterrence against Latin America in terms of military and regional security. In 2023, the US military, with its Southern Command as the main body, held a number of joint exercises with regional countries, including the “Unitas” large-scale maritime joint exercise and the “Assault Force” competition in Colombia to

improve the joint combat capabilities of special forces, the “Panamax” joint exercise focusing on Panama Canal defense, the “Resolute Sentinel” exercise held in Peru focusing on cyber attack and defense as well as electronic warfare, the “Trade-winds” joint exercise held in Guyana to strengthen the defense of the Caribbean region, the “CENTAM Guardian” joint exercise with countries including Honduras and Dominica, etc. At the same time, it tightened security interest bundling with regional countries by dispatching military forces to Uruguay, Peru and other countries, and signing military cooperation agreements with Ecuador, Peru and so on.

## **V. In Terms of Relations with China, Efforts Were Made Once Again to Meet China Halfway despite Pressure and Interference**

**A. As the rise of the left has given rise to regional changes, Latin America has become an important base in China’s foreign cooperation.** Currently, Latin America is at the peak of a new wave of left-wing power returning. Latin American left-wing countries, with an obvious trend of diversifying their foreign relations, are getting closer to China. Politically, growing ties with China become a consensus among most Latin American countries that transcended political and ideological issues. On March 26, 2023, the Central American country Honduras, resisting the pressure from the US and Taiwan, established diplomatic relations with China, becoming the 26<sup>th</sup> country in Latin America that China has established diplomatic ties with; in September, Venezuela became China’s third all-weather strategic partner in the world and the first in the Western Hemisphere; on October 25, Colombia became China’s 13<sup>th</sup> strategic partner in Latin America; and on November 22, Uruguay became China’s 8<sup>th</sup> comprehensive strategic partner in Latin America. At the same time, concepts such as a community with a shared future for mankind and Chinese-style modernization aroused heated discussions in Latin America, providing strong impetus for China-Latin American cooperation. Economically, China served as the engine for Latin American countries to get out of difficulty and realize sustainable development, becoming the largest trading partner and main source of investment for many Latin American countries.<sup>9</sup> China signed Belt and Road cooperation documents with 22 regional countries and free trade agreements with 4 of them.<sup>10</sup> China has maintained its status as Latin America’s second largest trading partner since 2012. In 2022, bilateral trade volume reached US \$ 485.79 billion, and direct investment stock exceeded US \$ 690 billion.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, as China’s fourth largest trading partner, the second largest overseas investment destination and third largest overseas contracting project market, Latin America has also become an important guarantee for China to consolidate the base of fellow developing countries and maintain energy and food security.

**B. The US adjusts its policy toward Latin America in view of the major-power contest, which becomes the biggest obstacle to the development of China-Latin America relations.**<sup>12</sup> The US is Latin America’s largest trading partner, largest source of investment, and the most important security and defense cooperation partner for most regional countries. The Monroe Doctrine is the cornerstone of the US policy toward Latin America, and the US has long regarded Latin America as its “backyard” and “private property”. In the context of

the increasingly fierce strategic contest between China and the US, the US has launched all-round competition against China in Latin America, and spared no effort to squeeze out China's influence. Politically, the US, under the guidance of values, reinforced ideological barriers.<sup>13</sup> The Biden administration, taking advantage of the similarity between Latin America's new left-wing ideology and the US Democratic Party's, insisted on talking about "democracy and human rights" in bilateral and multilateral interactions, strongly emphasized the common values of the US and Latin America, and hyped up the narrative of "democracy versus authoritarianism". In June, 2022, the US hosted the 9<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Americas with an eye to teasing out and consolidating relations with Latin American countries, stabilizing the backyard, and excluding Russia and containing China. The US continued to play up the China threat, slandering and hyping up China's illegal fishing, cross-border law enforcement and malicious surveillance, in an attempt to drive a wedge between China and Latin America in their political mutual trust. Economically, the US took the bundling of interests as the guide to strengthen economic and trade relations between the US and Latin America. The US launched targeted initiatives such as the "Growth in the Americas" to compete with China, built exclusive and confrontational "economic and trade small circles", promoted the "resource plunder theory" and "debt trap theory", and continued to disrupt and undercut China's Belt and Road Initiative projects in Latin America. In 2023, the US administration planned to provide US \$ 2.4 billion in aid to Latin America, the largest US aid to the region in a single year over the past decade. In terms of security, the US, oriented toward major-power competition, tried to exclude "hostile countries outside the region". In its *National Security Strategy* report, the US clearly defined China as a strategic competitor, regarded the interests and influence of China and Russia in Latin America as "evil acts", and declared that the US and Latin America should jointly guard against "external threats". The US also reinforced the functions of the US military's Southern Command, tightened its control over Latin American militaries, and repeatedly undermined China-Latin America cooperation in defense equipment and technology. Although diplomatic independence of most Latin American countries increased, the US still used its influence in the region to step up its employment of political, legal, public opinion and financial means in trying to undermine some of China's Belt and Road and Confucius Institute projects.

## **VI. Outlook for Latin American Situation in 2024**

The intensity of the left-right contest in Latin America will remain unabated, and extreme political forces are likely to rise further. Affected by the spillover of the negative impacts of frequent global conflicts, the economy and people's livelihood in Latin America will face severe tests. The US, oriented towards major-power competition, will step up intervention and involvement through economic and security means, which will make the situation in Latin America more complicated.

**A. The election year will trigger another round of adjustment in the geopolitical landscape of Latin America.** Latin America will usher in another major election year in 2024.<sup>14</sup> Many countries, including Mexico, Venezuela, Panama, Uruguay, Dominica and El Salvador, will hold presidential, parliamentary, local county and city mayoral elections, the results of which will have a profound impact on the evolution of the regional political

ecology, the balance of power between the left and the right, and the trend of regional political structure. Among them, the elections in Mexico and Venezuela attract relatively more attention. In Mexico, the ruling National Regeneration Movement is facing a split. Due to dissatisfaction with the results of the intra-party election, the former Foreign Affairs Secretary Marcelo Ebrard may “start anew” to form a party to run in the election. He might pose a strong challenge to Claudia Sheinbaum, who is supported by the ruling coalition, resulting in a situation from which the center-right opposition parties may profit. In Venezuela, as the opposition still lacks effective integration, the Maduro government currently enjoys a relatively stable ruling advantage, but may once again face pressure from external interference. The ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) has further grown, but disputes within the Venezuelan left-wing alliance over “line” and “philosophy” have intensified.

**B. Frequent and protracted armed conflicts around the world are dragging down Latin America’s economic recovery, but they have also highlighted the role and status of Latin America in food and energy.** The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts has increased the willingness of the US and Europe to adjust the sources of food and energy supply. They may expand investment and cooperation in Latin America in related fields, and trade environment in Latin America may thereby improve. However, most Latin American countries are in the lower reaches of the global value chain, and their export-oriented economies are greatly vulnerable to the negative impact of external factors such as armed conflicts in many regions around the world and the US Federal Reserve’s aggressive interest rate hikes. Therefore, the risk of a regional economic recession remains high. The World Bank predicts that prices for international bulk commodities and some raw materials will continue to decline in 2024, and Latin American economic growth may continue to remain low, lower than the world average. As a result, Latin American countries will face another test for their ability to adjust economic policies.

**C. The US is aiming at the major-power contest, and its willingness to intervene in Latin America will increase and its methods will become more diversified and covert.** With the consolidation of the left-wing ruling territory, anti-interference claims have been strengthened, and the US regional control, leadership and moral credibility will be weakened. However, Latin America still has its politics controlled by the US, its economy highly dependent on American capital, and its military and security severely restricted by the United States. Although left-wing countries in the region “speak against” the US on some issues, handling relations with the US is still a priority for their governance. Hence the basic “principal-subordinate” pattern between the US and Latin America remains unchanged. The US will continue to strengthen its “values diplomacy” and use dichotomies such as “good governance/evil governance” and “democracy/non-democracy” to create contradictions within the left-wing regimes in the region so that they may disintegrate and collapse. At the same time, the US will continue to employ various covert means, such as inciting public opinion to build momentum, launching corruption investigations, intensifying disputes between governments and legislatures, and reinforcing infiltration through non-governmental organizations, to interfere in elections of regional countries, disrupt and undermine domestic affairs of relevant countries and their cooperation with major countries outside the region, engineer “color revolutions” in anti-US countries, and squeeze China’s influence in key



countries of the region.

---

**Notes :**

1 Xu Shicheng, Institute of Latin American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, “Similarities and Differences between the Return of the New Left Wave in Latin America and the First Left Wave”, *Issues of Contemporary World Socialism*, No.3, 2022, pp.88–93.

2 Yang Jianmin, Institute of Latin American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, “Policy Trends and Changing Trends of the New Left Wave in Latin America”, *World Socialism Studies*, No.3, 2023, pp.76–84.

3 Jorge Sahd K., Daniel Zovatto, Diego Rojas, Center for International Studies, University of Chile, *Political Risk Latin America 2024*, January 2024, pp.20–22.

4 Chen Weihua and Zhao Yan, “Imported Inflation Troubles the Latin American Economy”, *Contemporary County Economy*, No.10, 2022, p.6.

5 Jiang Yuyan, Latin American Research Center, School of History, Nankai University, “Opportunities and Challenges in Lithium Mine Cooperation between China and Latin America during the Energy Transition Period”, *Natural Resource Economy of China*, No.5, 2023, pp.22–31.

6 CounterPunch.org, “Summit of the Americas Could Be Biden’s Next Foreign Policy Dilemma”, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2022/05/16/the-summit-of-the-americas-could-be-bidens-next-foreign-policy-embarrassment/>.

7 Yang Jing, Institute of Area and Country Studies, Peking University, “The Summit of the Americas Ended Disappointingly: The Reality of Division in the Name of Unity”, *The Paper*, June 20, 2022.

8 He Shuangrong and Stegci, Institute of Latin American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, “The Evolution of the Monroe Doctrine and the US Latin America Strategy”, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, No.1, 2023, pp.50–73.

9 Ministry of Commerce News, “China Replaces Spain as Latin America’s Second Largest Trading Partner”, January 4, 2024.

10 China Belt and Road Network Database, <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/datachart>.

11 Yue Yunxia, Institute of Latin American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, “China’s Investment in Latin America Has Reached Maturity”, *Business Management Review*, May, 2023.

12 Wang Fei and Chen Lan, Institute of Latin American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, “US Intervention in Economic Cooperation between China and Latin America: Motivations, Methods and Impact”, *Journal of International Economic Cooperation*, No.4, 2023, pp.78–90.

13 The Hill, “Summit of the Americas: Biden’s Opportunity to Challenge China”, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/595011-summit-of-the-americas-bidens-chance-to-challenge-China/>.

14 Nan Boyi, “Seven Latin American Countries Will Usher in Presidential Elections This Year. A Wave of Change Is Emerging”, *The Paper*, January 5, 2024.

(Translated By Zha Jie)

# Security Situation of Sub-Saharan Africa In 2023 and Outlook

Tong Fei, Associate Research Fellow, CIISS

**Abstract:** *In 2023, the international situation changed rapidly and the changes in a century accelerated. Sub-Saharan African countries took more proactive actions aimed at political stability and economic recovery to ensure overall stability. But at the same time, chaos arose and conflicts escalated in some countries as deteriorating party strife, military coups, armed conflicts, economic pressure, frequent terrorist attacks, and humanitarian disasters became the “six difficulties” that most African countries could not overcome, seriously impacting national security and stability of regional countries. In 2024, with the internal and external situation unlikely to fundamentally change, sub-Saharan African countries will still face severe challenges in stabilizing expectations, pursuing development, controlling conflicts, and preventing drastic changes.*

**Key Words:** 2023; Sub-Saharan Africa; Regional Situation

In 2023, against the backdrop of the profound evolution of the international and regional strategic landscapes, the increasingly fierce contest between major powers in Africa and the continued spreading of external influences to Africa, sub-Saharan African countries took efforts based on their own national realities to focus on national development and actively respond to various risks and challenges, and maintained an overall stable security situation, albeit with worrying situations at the local level. However, under the combined influence of endogenous contradictions and external factors, with traditional and non-traditional security threats intertwined with each other, Africa faced a significant increase in development risks and security challenges, remaining one of the regions with the most prominent and severe peace and security problems in the world. In 2024, the deterioration of the political ecology, economic difficulties and people's livelihood hardship, the resurgence of terrorism and the intensification of major-power contest will still be the key variables affecting the situation in sub-Saharan African countries.

## **I. The Regional Situation Was Generally Stable with Worrying Factors, and Inherent Contradictions and Hotspot Issues Remained Complex and Difficult to Resolve**

In 2023, more than 10 African countries, including Nigeria and Mozambique, held presidential, parliamentary or municipal elections, and countries such as South Africa and Kenya reshuffled the cabinets. Although there were twists and turns in the process, generally stable situation was maintained, showing strong political resilience. At the same time, some countries witnessed a deterioration of the situation with a rapid development of anti-

hegemony, anti-interference, and anti-authoritarian thoughts, as the economic downturn and inflation made life impossible for the people, poor governance and widespread corruption led to widespread public resentment, and greed for power and abuse of power intensified infighting for power within the ruling groups.

**A. Military coups occurred one after another, and abnormal regime changes were increasingly becoming normal in Africa.** Under the combination of internal and external pressures, intensified political conflicts and the “pioneering” demonstration effect, military coups in Africa took place again and again, and the possibility of continuing to spread to other “vulnerable” countries in the region could not be ruled out. Following the two coups in Burkina Faso in 2022, coups occurred in Niger and Gabon successively from July to August, 2023. The coup in Niger triggered a fierce contest among various parties, and external military intervention was once imminent, with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) exerting strong pressure and France adding fuel to the flames. The Nigerian coup soldiers responded forcefully by signing mutual defense treaties with friendly countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso to form an “anti-intervention” military alliance, which forced France to accept a phased withdrawal of troops from Niger. Conflicts within Gabon’s ruling group intensified, as powerful figures in the military took advantage of the dispute over the election results to decisively “take action” and successfully seized power. The political situation in some coup countries continued to be turbulent. There was an attempted coup in Burkina Faso in September, and in November Guinea witnessed some armed personnel who assisted the jailed former President Moussa Dadis Camara to escape from prison. As continuous coups aggravated the sense of insecurity of the ruling authorities in many African countries, countries such as Cameroon and Rwanda quickly and significantly adjusted the military leadership in order to nip problems in the bud.

**B. Armed conflicts occurred frequently at multiple points, and internal turmoil in some countries became protracted and complicated.** Hotspot security issues in the region continued to remain unresolved, and frequent armed conflicts became the norm. Civil conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), Central African Republic and other countries were still lingering on. Various parties actively intervened in mediation, yet with no notable results. The internal conflict in Sudan displaced more than 7.4 million people,<sup>1</sup> and its spillover effects intensified ethnic conflicts and tribal disputes in neighboring countries. The conflict in Ethiopia’s Tigray state came to an end, but the implementation of the peace agreement was progressing slowly. The conflict between the Oromo and Amhara communities within the federal government over the distribution of power deepened. Extreme forces such as the Amhara “Fano” militia and the ethnic Oromo Liberation Army continued to launch attacks on government forces, and it might be difficult to rebuild domestic peace overnight. The security situation in the eastern part of the DR Congo deteriorated, as the anti-government armed group “March 23 Movement” (M23) re-emerged, and the Congolese government, neighboring countries, UN peacekeeping forces and the East African Community task force each had their own “agendas” and were constantly at odds over the issue of suppression. The chaotic situation in the Central African Republic continued, where armed conflicts broke out between the 3R anti-government organization and government troops, Wagner mercenaries and the Rwandan army. With the intervention of external forces, the clouds of large-scale civil war were gathering.

**C. As elections intensified conflicts between the governments and the oppositions, important elections became the biggest variable affecting social stability.** The law remained the same in sub-Saharan African countries that “chaos arises whenever there is an election”. For important elections, the time prior to and after would become important node for various parties to compete and create turmoil, which shows that the problem of immaturity and incompatibility in African electoral politics is still serious. In 2023, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Liberia and others held presidential elections, Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau, Gambia and others held parliamentary elections, and Mozambique held regional elections. During this period, violent conflicts and protests occurred from time to time as the opposition parties protested against unfair elections, the defeated refused to concede, and the public questioned the electoral process, etc. Various political forces in South Africa, intended at early arrangements for the 2024 general election, were constantly attacking each other. The resulting political struggles and violent incidents were not uncommon. Negotiations between Kenya’s ruling party and the opposition broke down, and the opposition organized weekly demonstrations for months to protest against electoral fraud and people’s hardship.

**D. Conflicts and differences among regional countries broke out from time to time, and small local issues affected the larger unity of Africa.** The relationship between Rwanda and the DR Congo almost broke down, with each accusing the other of supporting anti-government forces. While the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) launched failed mediation, the two sides repeatedly clashed with each other and continued to quarrel at the UN and sub-regional organizations. The diplomatic crisis between Mali and Côte d’Ivoire was full of twists and turns. The 46 Ivorian peacekeeping soldiers detained by Mali were finally released through the mediation of the leaders of the UN, the African Union and the ECOWAS. The contention surrounding the Renaissance Dam once again became the focus. After multiple rounds of negotiations between the Ethiopian and Egyptian governments failed since the resumption of the dialogue in July, Ethiopia announced in September that it had completed the fourth phase of filling the dam, which once again triggered strong dissatisfaction and public accusations from Egypt, casting a shadow on the peace negotiations. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed repeatedly mentioned promoting peace negotiations with neighboring countries to obtain access to the Red Sea. He recently announced a private lease agreement with Somaliland, triggering strong concern and dissatisfaction from Somalia and other neighboring countries. Eritrea mobilized troops to strengthen border military deployment, Djibouti once raised its troops’ combat readiness level, and Somalia emphasized resolutely safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Neighboring countries’ trust in Ethiopia dropped to a new low.

## **II. The Economic Recovery Momentum Slowed Down, and the Risks and Challenges Could Not Be Underestimated**

In 2023, most sub-Saharan African countries continued their economic recovery and continued to make progress in their economic integration process. The African Union launched the theme year of “Acceleration of the African Continental Free Trade Area Implementation”, adopted the *African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Protocols on*

*Investment, Competition and Intellectual Property*, promoted the use of the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System and the Free Trade Area Adjustment Fund, identified 7 countries in the AfCFTA pilot phase, and carried out basic tests on internal trade environment, laws and policies, achieving positive progress in trade connectivity. At the same time, multiple negative impacts added up, including the prolongation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the frequent occurrence of natural disasters, the global market turmoil and others, severely hampering the pace of Africa's post-pandemic recovery. Some countries were facing multiple pressures such as increased debts, rising inflation, currency depreciation, increasing uncertainty in economic development.

**A. Economic development slowed down.** Africa's economic growth rate declined significantly, and the performance of "regional leaders", such as South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya and Angola, was unsatisfactory. As South Africa was affected by the energy crisis and transportation bottlenecks, the World Bank maintained its economic growth forecast at 0.5%. Major institutions made unanimous judgments on the decline in Africa's overall economic growth. In September, the World Bank lowered its 2023 growth forecast for sub-Saharan Africa to 3.1%, a decrease of 0.6 percentage points from April.<sup>2</sup> The International Monetary Fund lowered its growth forecast for Africa to 3.3% in October, down from the 3.6% forecast in April.<sup>3</sup>

**B. Inflation was high.** The inflation rate in sub-Saharan Africa was expected to be about 7.3% this year, down from 9.3% in 2022, but still hovering at a high level. Thanks to the austerity policies adopted by some countries, inflationary pressure in West Africa eased, but inflation rates in Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria still reached 45%, 27% and 26%, respectively, which were much higher than the average level. Affected by inflation and currency devaluation, Nigeria might lose its status as Africa's largest economy.

**C. The debt crisis was fermenting.** The IMF report showed that the ratio of debt to GDP in sub-Saharan Africa doubled in the past 10 years, reaching 60%; the debt ratios of 6 countries in ECOWAS exceeded the red line of 70%, and the ratio of Cape Verde was as high as 113%. Debt interest payments in sub-Saharan Africa accounted for about 10.5% of government revenues and more than doubled in the past 10 years. Countries such as Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria were forced to raise taxes and remove fuel subsidies, but backlash and violent protests ensued. The African Development Bank report showed that the SADC's external debt ratio rose to 48% in 2023, and the difficulty in external financing increased significantly.

**D. Food security deteriorated.** The Russia-Ukraine conflict and natural disasters exacerbated the food crisis in West Africa. The number of people facing the threat of hunger in Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso reached 45 million for the first time. Nigeria declared a national emergency due to the food crisis. About 73 million people in East and Southern Africa experienced severe food shortages. Among them, the Horn of Africa suffered the worst drought in 40 years, and about 22 million people were at risk of starvation. Floods that broke out in November affected more than 1 million Somalis. The area of Lake Chad and its associated wetlands shrunk by 95% compared to the 1970s, and the UN estimated that at least 3 million people had lost their homes. The food crisis, which triggered a survival crisis, further aggravated the humanitarian disaster in some parts of Africa and became a new source of chaos for the breeding and development of terrorism.

### **III. Rising Security Challenges Tested Response Capabilities, and Non-Traditional Security Issues Became the Biggest Concern**

In 2023, the international and African regional security situations underwent complex and profound changes. The “Islamic State” and “al Qaeda” organizations accelerated their transfer to Africa, expanding aggressively by taking advantage of the political instability and people’s livelihood difficulties in many African countries. Constrained by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, as well as adjustments of their own counterterrorism strategies, outside countries including the US and France fell short of supporting regional countries in their fight against terrorism, further increasing the risk of a deterioration of the counterterrorism situation in Africa.

**A. Terrorist and extremist organizations took advantage of the situation to expand with growing menace linked up from single points into larger surfaces.** Poverty, unemployment, injustice and marginalization encouraged young people to support violent ideologies. Radical Islamic organizations in Africa have been on the rise for 10 consecutive years and continued to spread to surrounding areas. The Sahel region, Lake Chad Basin and Somalia became the three major centers of terrorism in Africa. In the Sahel region, the “Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims” (JNIM) expanded from central Mali to the west and south, with an active area covering 6,150 square kilometers, an increase of 18% from 2022; The “Islamic State in the Greater Sahara” (ISGS) penetrated from eastern Burkina Faso to the borders of Niger, Benin and Togo. Its active area in Burkina Faso alone reached 6,975 square kilometers, which was 46% larger than that before the coup in January, 2022. In the Lake Chad Basin, “Boko Haram” resurrected and launched frequent attacks in northwestern Nigeria, Chad and southeastern Niger, and expanded to northern and western Cameroon. The “Islamic State West Africa Province” (ISWAP) and “Boko Haram” fought for territory around Lake Chad. At least 23 administrative districts in northern Nigeria, especially the three northwestern states, were controlled by violent terrorists. In East Africa, the “Somali Al-Shabaab”, which advocated for a “Taliban-style victory”, recruited thousands of new members in 2023 alone, and infiltrated into Kenya and Ethiopia, launching multiple attacks and causing casualties.

**B. Violent terrorist activities increased and escalated, intensifying the turmoil in the “arc of terror zone” running from east to west of the African continent.** Violent terrorist incidents remained at high level in East and West Africa, and most of them were related to major terrorist and extremist organizations in the region. Among them, the violent terrorist activities launched by the JNIM and the ISGS accounted for 40% of the total on the African continent, the “Boko Haram” and the ISWAP accounted for 20%, and the “Somalia Al-Shabaab” accounted for 37%. According to statistics from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, as of the end of October, a total of 1,787 violent incidents had occurred in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and other countries in the Sahel region, killing 3,654 people. More than 2,000 violent incidents occurred in the Lake Chad Basin, resulting in nearly 3,000 deaths. More than 1,100 violent terrorist incidents occurred in Somali and Kenya in East Africa, resulting in more than 1,500 deaths.<sup>4</sup>

**C. Maritime security was a mixed bag, with piracy activities in the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Guinea continuing despite repeated suppression.** The anti-piracy situation

in Africa, especially the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Guinea, was generally stable, but the Gulf of Guinea was still the sea area with the most active piracy activities. According to statistics from the International Maritime Bureau, as of the end of September, 2023, a total of 21 pirate attacks had occurred in the Gulf of Guinea, with 14 crew members kidnapped and 2 injured. In particular, there were 9 and 7 cases in the second and third quarters respectively. Piracy activities showed signs of rapid recovery, forcing countries inside and outside the region to tighten maritime control.<sup>5</sup> Although the total number of pirate attacks continued to remain at a low level in recent years, the possibility of resurgence in the future was still high given that the vitality of pirate organizations had not been damaged and the hotbed for breeding piracy in the region still existed, and the game surrounding the piracy issue would continue. Recent piracy activities showed the following characteristics: From the perspective of active areas, piracy incidents in the waters of Nigeria, Benin and Togo dropped significantly. In 2023, there was only one attempted attack in the waters of Nigeria. Piracy activities extended to both sides of the Gulf such as Angola and Ghana. Judging from the locations where the crimes were committed, the areas where pirates attacked at sea shifted from open sea areas about 200 nautical miles offshore to coastal waters and ports. A large number of cases occurred within 30 nautical miles offshore, even in ports and anchorages, highlighting the pirates' strengthened capabilities in near-shore operations and risk-taking. In terms of attack targets, pirates mainly took aim at oil tankers and dry and bulk carriers. In the first half of the year, pirates attacked oil tankers 5 times and dry and bulk carriers 6 times, which showed that pirates paid more attention to the values of their targets.

**D. The UN peacekeeping operations were experiencing a crisis of confidence, and the “toolbox” for maintaining regional security was shrinking.** Distrust and dissatisfaction in UN peacekeeping operations from the governments of Mali and the DR Congo continued to grow, who criticized peacekeeping operations for failing to help them solve their security dilemmas and instead becoming tools for foreign powers to interfere in their internal affairs. They strongly demanded the withdrawal of UN peacekeeping forces. In June, 2023, the Security Council passed a resolution, starting the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which would be basically completed by the end of the year; the withdrawal of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) was launched and would be implemented as soon as April, 2024. UN peacekeeping operations encountered setbacks in Africa, exposing deep-seated common problems in existing peacekeeping models. Against the background of intensified armed conflicts, terrorist threats, security instability and other problems in Africa, the UN faced a mismatch between its capabilities and mission requirements, as it was stretched thin in terms of peacekeeping supplies, unable to meet the demands of African countries to eliminate root causes of conflicts in terms of peacekeeping goals, and came under criticism for its peacekeeping efficiency. UN peacekeeping operations in sub-Saharan Africa might have entered a development bottleneck period that calls for urgent adjustment and reform.

#### **IV. External Disputes Undermined Africa's Unity, and Competition among Major Powers Further Heated up and Accelerated**

African leaders organized a delegation to visit Russia and Ukraine in June to mediate the

conflict, and the African Union was invited to join the G20 in September, marking Africa's rising geopolitical status and participation in international affairs. However, in the multilateral diplomatic area, various African countries, due to political, economic, security, historical and other reasons, adopted prominent pragmatism and different diplomatic stances. Such differentiation, which became more obvious as the competition among major powers intensified, was capitalized on by countries outside the region.

**A. There were serious differences in Africa on hotspot issues, making it difficult to speak with one voice and Africa's influence diluted.** On the issue of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Kenya, Zambia and some others voted in support of Ukraine at the UN General Assembly many times; countries like South Africa maintained a neutral stance and opposed the US-led West's isolation of Russia; anti-American countries such as Eritrea firmly supported Russia. On the issue of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Kenya and Ghana, etc. declared their solidarity with Israel, while South Africa and Sudan, etc. sympathized with and supported Palestine. Regarding the coup in Niger, ECOWAS, led by Nigeria, threatened to send the military for intervention, while southern and central African countries expressed opposition. Mali and Burkina Faso in ECOWAS even formed a military alliance with Niger. Regarding the election in Zimbabwe, leaders of South Africa, Mozambique, the DR Congo and other SADC countries attended President Emmerson Mnangagwa's inauguration for his consecutive presidency term. However, the SADC report stated that Zimbabwe's election did not meet international standards and questioned the legitimacy of Mnangagwa's re-election. In response, Zimbabwe strongly protested and "criticized" Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema for appointing Nevers Mumba, who had a criminal record, as the head of SADC electoral observation mission in Zimbabwe in a violation of the SADC agreement.<sup>6</sup> The year 2023 marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Organization of African Unity (the predecessor of the African Union). The African Union actively organized a series of celebrations and called for the return of the Pan-African spirit. However, in the international diplomatic arena, African countries often "voiced differing opinions" out of their own interests weakening Africa's capacity to speak as a whole.

**B. Major countries launched a new round of fierce contest in Africa, focusing on high-level exchanges, economic assistance and military security, etc.** Major powers have increasingly deepened their understanding of Africa's status and role as a "ballot box", regarding Africa as the main driving force for promoting major-power competition and expanding their own interests. The US adopted a more pragmatic attitude with intensified actions in an "all-round" diplomacy towards Africa. The Biden administration focused on partnerships to promote the implementation of the new Africa strategy, ramping up its inducement to Africa in various fields such as politics, economy and the military. Following the US-Africa summit in December, 2022, the US-Africa Business Summit was held in Botswana in July, 2023, and the President's Advisory Council on African Diaspora Engagement in the US was established in September to supervise and promote the implementation of the summit outcomes. The US proactively catered to Africa's demands, openly endorsing African countries' bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and supporting the African Union in joining the G20. US politicians visited African countries one after another to discuss issues of economy, trade, investment and people-to-people exchanges, and promised to provide huge amounts of assistance. The US military dominated



and organized a number of annual multinational joint military exercises, held multilateral military conferences such as the African Defense Ministers' Conference, the African Land Forces Summit, the Directors of Military Intelligence Conference, the Annual General Assembly of the African Airlines Association and the first African Maritime Forces Summit, and provided military assistance, including equipment, technology, training and finance, to Somalia, Zambia, Kenya and other countries. Russia used its own advantages to support fulcrum countries in an attempt to consolidate and expand its influence in Africa in an "asymmetrical" manner. On the one hand, it continued to use "Wagner" mercenaries to support government forces in counterterrorism and stability maintenance in Mali, Central Africa and other countries to maintain its status as an important participant in African security affairs; on the other hand, it held the second Russia-Africa summit to echo Africa's appeals in food security, international status, security support and industrialization, etc., and tried to win support for Russia from regional countries through such effort as fertilizer donations and food aid, etc. in an attempt to break the blockade, sanctions and diplomatic isolation imposed by the US-led West. Outside forces such as Europe, Japan and India vied to include African countries in their global geopolitical plans, focusing on "promoting cooperation". The EU was firmly committed to developing relations with Africa, implementing a 150-billion-euro investment package, and supporting Africa to play a greater role in the multilateral system. It expressed its willingness to learn from historical lessons and treat Africa with a fair and cooperative attitude. France launched a "new strategy for Africa" to calm anti-French sentiments on the African continent by developing an "equal, mutually beneficial and responsible cooperative partnership" with Africa and strengthening security cooperation according to the needs of African partners. Japan pledged to provide approximately US \$ 500 million in financial support to Africa within three years, emphasizing the provision of transparent and fair development financing. India strove to create an image as a leader in the Global South, intensified its efforts to win over African countries, and actively promoted military cooperation with African countries focusing on maritime security.

## **V. Outlook for Sub-Saharan African Situation in 2024**

In 2024, the political situation in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa will continue to remain stable, and economic growth is expected to rise steadily. However, as it is difficult to substantially address the inherent contradictions and hotspot issues in Africa, and the competitive and cooperative contest between major powers in Africa will further aggravate uncertainty of the regional situation, the regional situation might embrace more complex and severe tests.

**A. The political fragility of some countries will remain severe.** In 2024, major countries in the region including South Africa and Senegal will usher in presidential elections. The risks of instability associated with elections and power transfers will have a profound impact on the stability of neighboring countries as well as themselves. With its rich mineral resources, the DR Congo has become the focus of foreign countries' inducement and manipulation. In the context of internal and external troubles and unstable security, the domestic political situation is highly likely to be disrupted by elections. The approval rate of South Africa's ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), hit record lows, and anti-Ramaphosa forces within the ruling coalition still have considerable mobility. Scandals such as "Farmgate" may ferment again as the general election

approaches. Once the ANC's electoral vote share falls below half mark, it may give rise to a huge impact on future situation development as well as domestic and foreign policies. Mali and other coup countries will enter a critical period of transition, and whether they will return to civilian rule as scheduled will attract attention from various parties. In view of the fragility of domestic security situations in relevant countries, "grey rhino" incidents such as social riots and political assassinations before and after elections are likely to occur one after another, posing considerable challenges to social stability.

**B. Economic growth and downward pressure will coexist.** The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund predicted that the economic development of sub-Saharan African countries will rebound in 2024, with the overall growth expected to be 4.0%, and the outlook is relatively optimistic.<sup>7</sup> The downward pressure mainly comes from the tightening monetary policies, unsustainable fiscal policies and high-risk debt policies adopted by various countries in response to high inflation, as well as factors such as the deterioration of the business environment, financing difficulties and even capital flight caused by political instability.

**C. Challenges in the regional security situation will still exist.** The footprints of coups in West African counties spread along the Sahel corridor to Central Africa and other regions. The political situation of Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso and other countries that underwent coups is subject to multiple factors, and the process of returning to normal may be fraught with twists and turns. There is no hope for political reconciliation in the short term in the armed conflicts in countries like Sudan and Ethiopia. Local conflicts may break out in Nigeria, the DR Congo, Cameroon and other countries due to religious, linguistic, tribal and economic reasons, etc.

**D. The trend of "the more efforts to combat terrorism, the more terrorism there is" will become more prominent.** Regional countries' counterterrorism capabilities may be greatly weakened, as the Ukraine crisis and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are constraining the energy and resources of the US and the West, France has reduced its anti-terrorist assistance to regional countries along with its troop withdrawal, and the UN and African Union peacekeeping forces are accelerating their withdrawal from the DR Congo, Mali and Somalia. Terrorist organizations, while accelerating differentiation and reorganization, are striving to enhance their capabilities to integrate into and control local societies, and form joint collaboration and mutually beneficial symbiotic relationships with organized transnational criminal organizations, making it more difficult to fight terrorism.

---

**Notes:**

1 "Statement of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs", Xinhua News Agency, January 15, 2024.

2 "Pulse of Africa", World Bank, September, 2023.

3 "Regional Economic Outlook", International Monetary Fund, October, 2023.

4 Armed Conflict Location and Event Database website, <https://acleddata.com>.

5 International Maritime Bureau website, [www.icc-ccs.org](http://www.icc-ccs.org).

6 "Zimbabwe President Threatens to Withdraw from SADC", Xinhuanet, July 5, 2023.

7 "African Economic Growth Prospects Cautiously Optimistic", Economic Daily, January 13, 2024.

(Translated by Zha Jie)

# Review of the Situation on the Korean Peninsula In 2023 and Outlook

Yu Sichao, Associate Research Fellow, CIISS

**Abstract:** *In 2023, the accelerated evolution of the international landscape and increased rivalry between major powers has prompted stakeholders in the Korean Peninsula to make strategy adjustments and strategic alignment. North Korea on one side, and the US& South Korea on the other, have exchanged moves as one tried to boost nuclear, the other pressured for denuclearization and got countered. The chronic North Korean nuclear issue and inter-Korean relations have become more complicated and difficult to resolve. Although the overall security situation on the Peninsula remained below the threshold of explosion despite increased tensions and thanks to the occasional interludes between emergencies, uncertainty and instability are becoming more prominent.*

**Key Words:** Situation of Korean Peninsula; 2023; Outlook

In 2023, DPRK carried on with its struggle with the US and ROK; inter-Korean relations deteriorated further; and the tendency towards camp-based confrontation on the Korean Peninsula increased. The situation of uncertainty and instability grew more prominent, showing the following overall characteristics.

## **I. DPRK and the US and ROK Insisted on “To Counter the Nuclear with the Nuclear”, Adding Complexity to the Already Complex Korean Peninsula Nuclear Issue**

In 2023, DPRK accelerated its systematic development of nuclear force, and the US and ROK substantially strengthened their cooperation on extended deterrence, leading to heated tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

**A. DPRK accelerated its nuclear missile R&D to upgrade its capabilities in confrontation.** On the one hand, DPRK took an increasingly firm stand on its policy of possessing and enhancing nuclear capabilities. At the beginning of the year, Kim Jong-un proposed the tough line of head-on confrontation in the struggle against the US and ROK, calling for mass production of tactical nuclear weapons, exponentially increasing the number of nuclear warheads, accelerating the R&D of new intercontinental ballistic missile systems, and launching the first military reconnaissance satellite as soon as possible within the year. In June, 2023, the 8th plenary session of the eighth central committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea once again stressed adhering to the “action for action” principle and demanded “timely and forceful employment of overwhelming offensive countermeasures” in response to the deterrence and pressure from the US and ROK.<sup>1</sup> At the end of September, the 9th session of

the 10th Supreme People's Assembly of DPRK included the policy on nuclear weapons into the Constitution. On this point, Kim Jong-un emphasized that "the Republic's nuclear weapon policy has thus permanently become the basic law of the country that brooks no violation from anyone or any force."<sup>2</sup> Domestically and internationally, DPRK demonstrated its determination to "fight to the end" with the US and ROK, and its will of "never abandoning nuclear capabilities and keeping enhancing them". On the other hand, DPRK's nuclear missile R&D increased its speed and efficiency. In early 2023, Kim Jong-un made a field visit, gave guidance to DPRK's nuclear weaponization efforts and disclosed for the first time photos of DPRK's first tactical nuclear warhead "Polgan-31". Later on, DPRK successfully test-fired the solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile "Hwasong-18", unveiled its first operational tactical nuclear attack submarine "Hero Kim Kun Ok", publicly deployed its "Tsunami-1/2" unmanned amphibious nuclear attack submarine and "Arrow-1/2" IIstrategic cruise missile for the first time, and three times put the "Malligyong-1" military reconnaissance satellites into the orbit. DPRK also repeatedly disclosed in detail the firing training of its killer weapons with pictures and texts, trying to showcase to domestic and international audiences that its growing nuclear capabilities, with an increasingly complete spectrum of nuclear missile equipment, are not to be underestimated.

**B. The US and ROK continued to deepen cooperation on extended deterrence.** On the one hand, the US and ROK advanced the establishment of a Korean version of the "nuclear sharing" model. In April, 2023, President Biden of the US met with President Yoon of ROK and released the *Washington Declaration*. In September the same year, the US and ROK held the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group meeting, where the two sides had an in-depth consultation on the principles and plans for jointly responding to DPRK's nuclear threat, and agreed upon the almost-regular activity of US strategic assets in ROK, ROK's participation in US nuclear force action planning, and expansion of information sharing on nuclear and conventional weapons between the two sides, etc. The two sides also set up a vice-ministerial-level "Nuclear Consultation Group (NCG)" that follows the model of NATO's "Nuclear Planning Group (NPG)". The NCG is supposed to hold regular meetings every quarter and submit the results to the presidents of the two countries and continuously enhance the ability of both sides to develop, share, and jointly use conventional and nuclear equipment.<sup>3</sup> At the first meeting of the NCG held in July, the two sides agreed on basic elements such as the operating mechanism, consultation model, goals and tasks, and reached a five-point consensus on jointly responding to DPRK's nuclear threat and building an integrated extended deterrence system. At their second meeting in December, the US and ROK decided to complete the building of an upgraded version of extended deterrence system by June, 2024 and to include nuclear combat scenario and exercise for the first time in the US-ROK "Ulchi Freedom Shield" joint exercise in August, 2024. On the other hand, the US and ROK strengthened their strategic forward deterrence against DPRK. In response to DPRK's accelerated development of nuclear weapons, missiles and satellites, the US and ROK significantly increased the frequency and intensity of joint drills while shoring up guard and surveillance of DPRK. In 2023, the US and ROK took DPRK's nuclear missile threat for the first time as the background for their "Ulchi Freedom Shield" joint exercise, during which they held multiple joint anti-missile, anti-submarine and maritime interception exercises between the US, Japan and ROK. The three countries also conducted their first

trilateral joint air combat exercise. Based on the consensus reached upon with ROK, the US also frequently sent strategic bombers, nuclear submarines and other strategic assets to the country. These include the strategic nuclear submarine that hadn't visited ROK for 42 years, and the B-52H strategic bombers that landed in ROK for the first time, demonstrating unprecedented military deterrence against DPRK.

## **II. The Confrontation between DPRK and ROK Obviously Heated up, and the Trend of Camp-based Confrontation on the Korean Peninsula Was Further Highlighted**

In 2023, the competition between DPRK and ROK further intensified. The Yoon Suk Yeol administration stepped up its across-the-board containment of DPRK, and was met with decisive and forceful response. Neither side showed any intention of giving in, leading to continuous high tensions on the Peninsula.

**A. ROK made comprehensive adjustments to its policy toward the north.** The Yoon Suk Yeol administration, which adheres to conservative ideas, no longer regards DPRK as a compatriot and dialogue partner, but instead as the “most urgent threat”, and it declared to “end the regime of DPRK”.<sup>4</sup> The drive to promote south-north military confrontation, system opposition and institutional competition got heated up. First is the re-positioning of DPRK by ROK as an “enemy”. For the first time in 6 years, ROK explicitly called DPRK a “main enemy” in its *National Defense White Paper*. It also stepped up anti-DPRK propaganda in national education, and required the military to have a clear understanding of facing the enemy DPRK, to resolutely guard against the enemy and to respond to its military provocation with immediate, forceful and thorough countermeasures. Second is to increase military deterrence against and pressure on DPRK. ROK, with unwavering commitment to the idea of “maintaining peace with strength”, accelerated its national defense reform, strengthened the “ROK-style three-axis combat system”, closely monitored the movements of the DPRK military, and expanded the scale of its annual military exercise. For the first time in 5 years, ROK fully rebooted its large-scale field maneuver exercises; for the first time in 6 years, it reenacted the exercise of the Incheon landing operation scenario, with a record-breaking scale; and for the first time in 10 years, it held a large-scale military parade in downtown Seoul, the capital of ROK, and displayed cutting-edge equipment such as high-power ballistic missiles for the first time. On November 21, in response to DPRK's successful launch of its first military reconnaissance satellite, ROK announced immediately that its army would not be bound by the *September 19 North-South Military Agreement* and that aerial reconnaissance and surveillance along the demarcation line would be restored. It declared that it would fight back DPRK's military provocation forcefully. Third is to strengthen sanctions on and condemnation of DPRK. ROK emphasized that by advancing its nuclear and missile R&D, DPRK blatantly violated multiple UN Security Council resolutions and seriously undermined regional peace and stability. It called on the international community to impose additional sanctions on DPRK. ROK also worked with the US and Japan on cracking down on DPRK's “illegal cyber activities” and imposed unilateral sanctions on hacker organizations and individuals of the country. It appointed its first special envoy on DPRK human rights

issues, released the *Report on Human Rights Abuses in DPRK* for the first time, and sponsored a draft resolution on DPRK human rights at the UN Human Rights Council meeting after it had not done so in 5 years.

**B. DPRK resumed its hard line policy of “confronting the tough with super toughness”.** Firstly, it adopted tit-for-tat military countermeasures. In 2023, Kim Jong-un demanded “proactive and overwhelming” countermeasures in response to the military pressure from the US and ROK. In August, during the “Ulchi Freedom Shield” joint exercise between the US and ROK, DPRK also held a whole-military command exercise. Kim Jong-un demanded a comprehensive update of the operational command systems and methods, emphasizing the utmost importance of dealing a heavy blow to the enemy’s potential combat power and command center, paralyzing its command and communication systems, and destroying their will to fight at early stages of the war. He also stressed the importance to grab the strategic initiative by going after key military targets such as the enemy’s central command strongholds, military ports and airports, and launching ultra-high-intensity strikes at core targets that can trigger political and economic chaos. On November 23, after DPRK scrapped the *September 19 North-South Military Agreement*, it gradually restored 10 previously abandoned forward posts and ordered heightened alertness against ROK. Secondly, DPRK cut off all communication channels with ROK. Since the beginning of April, DPRK stopped responding to the inter-Korean calls via the liaison office and the military channels. In July, DPRK started to handle ROK-related affairs in accordance with the state-to-state relations model. In its public statements, DPRK reduced the usage of the term “South Korea” and increased wordings such as “Republic of Korea” and “puppet regime” instead. Thirdly, DPRK adopted stronger public messaging and used multiple channels to strike back in response to the public opinion offensive launched by the US. Since 2023, DPRK has made more than 50 tough statements directed at the US and ROK in the form of remarks by senior officials and spokespersons. Among them, Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un’s younger sister and Vice Director of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, topped the order with a total of 12 appearances.

### **III. The Accelerated Formation of the US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Coalition Prompted Closer Ties between DPRK and Russia, and the Trend of Camp-based Confrontation on the Korean Peninsula Became Increasingly Prominent**

The US deepened its ties with Japan and ROK. Taking Japan and ROK as its core allies in advancing the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the US stepped up efforts to promote trilateral cooperation. Firstly, close high-level interactions were maintained. The US worked to strengthen policy coordination among the three countries through trilateral foreign ministers’ meetings, defense ministers’ meetings and summits, and vigorously pushed Japan and ROK to improve their relations, emphasizing that trilateral cooperation is crucial to maintaining regional and even global security and prosperity. Since 2023, senior military and political officials from the three countries carried out a flurry of communications and consultations on issues such as responding to the DPRK threat and consolidating military alliances, aligning

their policies on DPRK and regional security. Secondly, military and security cooperation among the three was brought to a higher level. The US, Japan and ROK rebooted their joint anti-submarine and ballistic missile defense exercises against DPRK for the first time in 5 years, demonstrating their ability to counter DPRK's nuclear missile threats through intelligence information sharing and equipment interoperability training. The three parties confirmed the integration of US-Japan and US-ROK extended deterrence, initiated a warning information sharing mechanism on DPRK missiles, and strengthened their military integration as well as forward deployment of military power, significantly accelerating their military cooperation. Thirdly, ideological confrontation was highlighted. After the US released its 2022 version of *National Security Strategy*, Japan and ROK successively released 3 strategic documents on security and defense as well as the ROK version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy report, imitating the US, drawing lines based on values, and preaching the so-called universal values such as freedom, democracy and human rights, and emphasizing upholding the "rules-based international order". Fourthly, economic and trade cooperation was strengthened. Japan and ROK actively participated in the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and "Chip 4 Alliance", and the three agreed to establish a trilateral economic and security dialogue mechanism to strengthen cooperation in key emerging technologies, semiconductor industry diversification and other fields, and to build an ecosystem of industrial chain and supply chain that benefits all of them.

In 2023, DPRK and Russia, due to their similarity in strategic positions, complementarity in military needs and convergence in tactical maneuvers, came closer in an accelerated pace for upgrading strategic cooperation. DPRK reached out to Russia in response to the deterrence and pressure from the US and ROK. After giving Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu a high-standard reception in July, Kim Jong-un made his first visit to Russia in September after the pandemic eased. He met with Putin again after four and a half years, and stated for the first time that the "DPRK gives top priority to its relations with Russia". Kim also voiced unconditional support for any decision made by Putin, demonstrating a strong pro-Russia stance and willingness to cooperate. From the short-term perspective, as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has entered a stalemate stage, Russia is consuming huge amounts of weapons and ammunition on the battlefield. DPRK's arsenal is mostly compatible with that of Russia and has sufficient reserves of conventional ammunition, which can serve as a quick supplementary channel for Russia in addition to its own increased production capacity. From the long-term perspective, with the Russia-US confrontation intensified, Russia stays committed to "looking eastward" in its strategy and hopes to use the Korean Peninsula to achieve a "strategic breakthrough" to shore up its influence in the Asia-Pacific and Korean Peninsula affairs. In 2023, Russia actively spoke on behalf of DPRK in preventing the US, ROK and others from imposing sanctions on the country; President Putin publicly stated that Russia would help DPRK to develop satellites. Overall, five out of the six parties to the Korean Peninsula issue are heading towards camp-based confrontation, with Russia and DPRK on one side and the US, Japan and ROK on the other, exerting pressure on and antagonizing each other.

#### **IV. DPRK Continued to Focus on Maintaining Internal Stability and Improving People's Livelihood to Ensure Sustained Political Stability**

In 2023, DPRK advanced all tasks in an orderly manner and maintained overall internal stability. At the same time as Kim Jong-un rolled out strong responses to the deterrence and pressure of the US and ROK and strengthened diplomatic maneuvering, continuing to attach great importance to maintaining internal stability and improving people's livelihood, while taking multiple measures to ensure the overall stability of his ruling position.

**A. Strengthening the party's ruling.** In 2023, DPRK held the 7th and 8th Plenary Sessions of the Eighth Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea to give timely guidance to and strengthen agricultural production and other efforts. The country also held 4 enlarged sessions of the Party Central Military Commission to make arrangements for the development of national defense forces and the army's support for agriculture. DPRK continued to adjust high-level personnel arrangements within the party, government and military, reshuffling the cabinet to allow new people to replace the old, thus stimulating internal vitality.

**B. Focusing on improving people's livelihood.** Under the instruction of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, the cabinet strengthened overall economic management, including the government guidance on economic development, and identified 12 important industrial and agricultural sectors as "priority areas for economic development" that must be guaranteed, among which food production was identified as the highest priority.<sup>5</sup> The DPRK government increased policy support and investment in food production, and alleviated food shortages to a certain extent. Competent authorities for power, metallurgy, coal and chemical industry all stepped up support for rectification, and projects to improve people's livelihood, such as the 50,000-home project in Pyongyang, the new street in Sopho District and new rural area projects were vigorously advanced with significant progress.

**C. Enhancing publicity and propaganda.** In 2023, DPRK celebrated the 75th anniversary of the founding of the army, the 70th anniversary of the victory in the Korean War and the 75th National Day with 3 grand military parades, all to showcase strength to the outside, and to boost public morale domestically. DPRK also strengthened domestic propaganda to inspire people's sense of loyalty, patriotic enthusiasm, discipline and fighting spirit.

**D. Relaxing pandemic control.** In 2023, DPRK gradually downgraded its pandemic control measures, removed the mandatory mask order, resumed people-to-people exchanges with the outside, organized those who had been stranded abroad to return to the country in an orderly manner, and worked hard to reduce the negative impact of closed borders and pandemic control measures on the economy and people's livelihood. As the pandemic eased and imports increased, material supply in the market also increased, and prices generally remained stable.

In 2024, given the policy characteristics as well as interests and concerns of relevant parties, the contest between DPRK and the US-ROK coalition over nuclear and missile issues is unlikely to die down, and the tension and instability on the Korean Peninsula can hardly be fundamentally alleviated. The 9th Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the



Workers' Party of Korea held at the end of December, 2023 made clear arrangements for DPRK's domestic work in 2024, especially, the meeting proposed a comprehensive adjustment of its relations with ROK and reunification policy, announcing that ROK will no longer be regarded as an object of peaceful reunification, and calling for reorganization of the agency that handles inter-Korean relations,<sup>6</sup> which represents a fundamental and hostile shift in the principles and direction of the struggle against ROK. At the beginning of 2024, the Yoon Suk Yeol administration also made it clear that it will complete the development of an upgraded version of the ROK-US extended deterrence system in the first half of the year, and include "nuclear warfare" into its joint exercises with the US to be held in August, which is expected to provoke a tough response from DPRK. With extremely complicated and unprecedentedly hostile relations between DPRK and the US and ROK, the continued increase in the production of nuclear weapons, the frequent launch of missiles, and the three additional reconnaissance satellites launched by DPRK could all have intensified the fierce contest between the two sides around pressure and counter. The risk of friction and conflict between them may increase due to either intentional provocation or misjudgment. In addition, the Russian presidential election in March 2024, the ROK parliamentary election in April, the Liberal Democratic Party presidential election in Japan in September, and the US presidential election in November may also affect the policy adjustments and maneuvers of relevant parties, which will become important variables that could shape the trend of situation on the Korean Peninsula.

---

**Notes:**

1 "Regarding the 8<sup>th</sup> Enlarged Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea", Korean Central News Agency, June19,2023.

2 "Respected Comrade Kim Jong-un Delivered a Profound Speech at the 9th Session of the Fourteenth Supreme People's Assembly of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea", Korean Central News Agency, September28,2023.

3 "Joint Communiqué of the First Meeting of the US-ROK Nuclear Consultation Group", Official Website of the US White House, July18,2023.

4 "South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol Presided over the 75th Anniversary Ceremony of the Founding of the South Korean Army and Delivered a Speech", Newsis (Korean), September26, 2023.

5 "Report on the 7<sup>th</sup> Enlarged Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea", Korean Central News Agency, March2,2023.

6 "Report on the 9<sup>th</sup> Enlarged Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea", Korean Central News Agency, December31, 2023.

(Translated by Liu Chang)

# The Situation of the US Domestic Politics and Diplomacy in 2023 and Outlook

Wu Yizu, Assistant Research Fellow, CIISS

**Abstract:** *In 2023, the Biden administration, with an eye on the 2024 presidential election, made adjustments to both its domestic and foreign policies in preparation for his re-election campaign. Internally, Biden stepped up the governing resources to create re-election advantages while the partisan conflicts and Republican infighting were intensifying simultaneously. The US economy showed a certain degree of resilience, but social tensions continued to ferment. Externally, the US, taking major country competition as the main line, ramped up its Indo-Pacific Strategy to optimize the global containment plan against China. Now that the presidential election becomes the main driving force for its internal and external policies, 2024 for the US will be a year of proliferating internal conflicts, greater challenges facing its foreign policy, and increasing uncertainty in its relations with China.*

**Key Words:** US Diplomacy; Indo-Pacific Strategy; Major Country Competition

In 2023, the Biden administration adjusted internal and external policies with an eye on the 2024 presidential election. Internally, it worked for the “soft landing” to the normalcy from the “state of pandemic crisis”. Externally, it focused on responding to the Russian-Ukrainian and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts while comprehensively pursuing the “out-competing” China strategy.

## I. Increasing Potential Problems about Economic and Social Development amid Fierce Partisan Battle between the Democrats and Republicans in Preparation for the Presidential Election

In 2023, the Democratic and Republican parties, ramping up their campaign for the 2024 presidential election, fought fiercely over various issues; some progress was made in the US economic policy of “lowering inflation and sustaining growth”, but the potential problems about inflation were not eliminated, leading to continuously fermenting social tensions.

**A. The Biden administration leveraged its governing resources to create an advantage in the re-election campaign.** After making up his mind for re-election, the US President Joe Biden actively enunciated his policies and achievements while increasingly attacking Trump and other major rivals with a view to comprehensively storing up strength for the 2024 election. First, actively promoting “Biden Economics”. The Democratic administration rolled out the New Washington Consensus, characterized by packaging the Democratic Party’s economic policy with theories, prioritizing the reduction of economic dependence on rivals, and advocating a return to government-led “industrial policy”, i.e., promoting the strategic

industries such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence and so on with public investment, and strengthening the effective control of the economy by implementing “de-risking” instead of “precise decoupling”, so as to build a resilient US-led production and supply chain system. Second, utilizing “inherent problems” of Donald Trump and the Republican Party to escalate the political attack. The US Department of Justice and the judiciaries of New York and Georgia, among others, filed 91 criminal charges against Trump in connection with sex scandal hush money, mishandling of classified documents, and obstruction of federal and state elections, making him the first US former president to be criminally indicted.<sup>1</sup> Colorado and Maine disqualified Trump from the primary election ballot, setting a precedent for disqualifying candidates from running for office. Trump filed his response appealing his immunity ruling in the federal election interference case, and prosecuted an appeal to the Supreme Court and the district court for the state of Maine that had barred him from primary ballot in Colorado and Maine. In addition, Democrats made abortion rights a key issue to advance attacks against the Republican Party in the 2023 local elections. As a result, the Democrats won Kentucky gubernatorial election, expanded majority on Pennsylvania Supreme Court, and got full control of the New Jersey and Virginia State Houses of Representatives and Senators, hence creating a certain psychological advantage over the Republican Party. Third, the Biden administration consolidated its advantage in the party’s primary election. Biden has got unanimous support for his reelection from the Democratic Party. To make Biden stand out, the Democratic Party broke with tradition in attempt to arrange 2024 primary first stop in South Carolina, where Biden has obvious advantage, so as to create a favorable situation with success from the very start.<sup>2</sup> The two democratic candidates, namely Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Marianne Williamson, lack political experience. Dissatisfied with the Democratic Party changing the primary schedule, Kennedy announced to run in election as an independent candidate. It is now generally believed by the US media that Biden winning the Democratic Party nomination has become a foregone conclusion.

**B. The Republican Party’s infighting and its battle with the Democratic Party were both intensifying.** The far-right wing and the Establishment among the Republicans were vying for the presidential candidates and the Speaker of the House, and continued to interfere with the Democratic Party’s governance on spending and other issues. First, primary races heating up within the party. There were once 12 Republican candidates on the primary ballot. However, Donald Trump used the “gathering flag effect” to rouse support in the wake of his indictment. By the end of 2023, 8 candidates had dropped out<sup>3</sup> and Donald Trump was nearly 50 points ahead of the second most popular candidate Ron DeSantis, showing a significant advantage;<sup>4</sup> Second, rare infighting on display over the control of the House of Representatives. In early 2023, the ultra-conservative wing and the Establishment of the Republican Party were scrambling intensely for House Speaker, the Establishment representative Kevin McCarthy went through 15 rounds of voting before finally winning the speakership. Unhappy about McCarthy’s compromise with the Biden administration around the issue of government spending, the far-right Republicans pushed the House of Representatives to remove McCarthy on October 4, marking the first time in history that a speaker was ousted this way. Since then, the two factions of the Republican Party were on a speaker’s race for 22 days, and ultimately voted Trump’s staunch supporter, the “centrist right wing” conservative David Johnson as Speaker of the House. Third, stepping up efforts to hold back the Biden administration. The Republicans

opened an impeachment inquiry into Biden by capitalizing on their control of the House, impeachment and financial power, in order to shape the negative image of Biden; they challenged the Biden administration to further cut government spending and slash Social Security and other benefits by means of debt ceiling and spending bill, in order to undermine Biden's resources for "buying votes with favors" from the middle and lower classes of voters; they also demanded to cut back or even end Ukraine aid, in order to tank Biden's diplomacy.

**C. The US economy displayed some resilience but risks and concerns remained.** In the first three quarters of 2023, the US economy grew respectively by 2.1%, 2.2%, and 4.9%<sup>5</sup> with the annual growth rate being around 2%<sup>6</sup> and the unemployment rate falling to 3.6%<sup>7</sup>. Inflation continued to decline, and employment and growth remained stable despite aggressive interest rate hikes, showing a certain degree of resilience, but the economic outlook still faced a variety of uncertainties. First, facing risk of inflation coming back. In 2023, the Federal Reserve raised rates by 100 basis points, lifting its benchmark rate to a range of 5.25%–5.5%. Although the inflation rate decreased from 9.1% to about 3%, it still did not reach the target of 2% as the core inflation rate excluding food and energy prices was still at about 4%.<sup>8</sup> According to the Federal Reserve, the US inflation had generally slowed down, but upside risks to commodity prices still remained. Second, continued risks of banking crisis. The sharp increase in bank interest rates led to difficulties in corporate financing, lower bond prices, increased stock market volatility, and rising financial risks, culminating in the successive collapses of Silicon Valley Bank, Signature Bank, and First Republic Bank, among other medium-sized banks, which further triggered violent fluctuation of the US financial markets. Due to the spillover effect of the US financial market, Credit Suisse went bankrupt and was purchased by Swiss UBS. According to Deutsche Bank assessment, the declining bond prices in the third quarter caused US banking losses of more than \$ 700 billion, and high interest rates also resulted in increased risk of defaults on commercial real estate loans, both of which significantly scaled up the pressure on the US banking system.<sup>9</sup> Third, more risk of economic turmoil because of partisan fight. In late May, the US two parties didn't reach a compromise on raising the debt ceiling until the last minute, but the total US debt exceeded \$ 34 trillion on December 29, 2023, making the debt burden increasingly heavier.<sup>10</sup> The two parties were still deeply divided on the budget issue, and twice extended the risk of government shutdown to 2024 through the stopgap appropriations bill since the beginning of the new fiscal year in October 2023. As federal government spending became one of the main drivers of US economic growth in 2023, once the two parties fail to reach agreement on the appropriations bill, the resultant government "shutdown" will drag down the US economic growth.

**D. The domestic security environment was deteriorating and social tensions continued to fester.** Unbalanced political and economic development has intensified US social tensions from time to time, which triggered mass shootings, large-scale mass strikes and other incidents, undermining the internal security and stability. First, frequent incidents of gun violence. The crimes of gun violence have become an acute problem in American society due to the proliferation of guns and social inequality. As of the end of December, gun violence in the US had caused 34,000 deaths in 2023, including more than 650 mass shootings.<sup>11</sup> Second, nationwide demonstrations instigated by police's violent enforcement. In early 2023, a video was released showing a black man beaten to death by five police officers

in Memphis, Tennessee, which triggered large-scale demonstrations in major cities such as New York, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Los Angeles to condemn police violence in law enforcement and call for police reform. US President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris had to issue statements condemning and promising to address the persistent problem of police misconduct and excessive use of force. Third, high-frequency of strikes. Confronted with such factors as high inflation and uneven distribution, the US ordinary workers earned slightly more or even less in real terms than before, which sparked strikes in a number of industries causing tens of billions of dollars in losses to the US economy. Mass strikes were organized by various trade unions in the US, such as the Screenwriters Guild in May, the Screen Actors Guild in July, and the United Auto Workers in September. In October, the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions staged the largest strike in the history of the US healthcare system by rallying more than 75,000 healthcare workers.<sup>12</sup>

## **II. “Modernizing” the Alliance System to Maintain Global Hegemony in an Era of Major Country Competition**

Taking global alliance relations as a “strategic asset” and using the major-country competition with China and Russia as the starting point, the Biden administration accelerated the upgrading and expansion of the alliance network, improved the global strategic planning, and made every effort to enhance the global leadership and influence of the United States.

**A. Strengthening the system of Indo-Pacific alliances while deepening ties with key countries.** Viewing the year 2023 as “a decisive year for the implementation of the *National Defense Strategy* in Asia”, the US Department of Defense continued to implement the Indo-Pacific Strategy in terms of strengthening the fulcrum, expanding the network, and broadening the framework so as to consolidate its dominant control over regional affairs. First, solidifying the fulcrum of the “Indo-Pacific” alliances including Japan, ROK, the Philippines and Australia. In 2023, the leaders of Japan, ROK, the Philippines and Australia respectively visited the United States to increase the traction of summit diplomacy; the US and Japan announced plans to permanently station the Marine Littoral Regiment in Japan to enhance the offensive forward deployment; the US and the ROK unveiled the “Washington Declaration” to strengthen the “extended deterrence” in order to reinforce the strong strategic fulcrum in Northeast Asia; the US, taking the Philippine presidential election as an opportunity, gained access to four new military bases in the Philippines and the two sides signed the first-ever “bilateral defense guidelines”, claiming that the *US-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty* covers the South China Sea,<sup>13</sup> in an attempt to strengthen the strategic fulcrum in the South China Sea; and the US increased rotational military presence in Australia and upgraded military bases in the northern part of Australia in order to consolidate the strategic fulcrum in the South Pacific. Second, enhancing small multilateral cooperation with allies and partners. The United States built minilateral cooperation mechanisms called “diplomatic variable geometry” such as the trilateral US-Japan-ROK and US-UK-Australia, the quadrilateral US-Japan-India-Australia and US-Japan-Australia-Philippines as well as the “Five Eyes” in order to weave a “big network” with “minilateral coalitions”. The United States, Japan, India and Australia held a “Quad” summit to reaffirm the “opposition to any attempt to change the status quo in the region by

force”; the US hosted the US-Japan-ROK summit at Camp David to institutionalize trilateral cooperation; it also held the US-Japan-Philippines High-Level Security Dialogue, and drew in allies to increase support for the Philippines. The US also took active steps to extend the Group of Seven (G7) and NATO to the Indo-Pacific for the integration of the two major alliance networks, namely the Transatlantic and the Indo-Pacific. Third, upgrading the relations with key partners. The United States has in particular expanded relations with India, Vietnam, Indonesia and other non-allied countries in the Indo-Pacific. Between the US and India, leaders paid reciprocal visits and reached a number of agreements in strategic, defense, technology and other areas, opening a “Major Defense Partner 2.0 Era”. In Southeast Asia, after Biden’s visit to Vietnam and Indonesian President Joko Widodo’s visit to the US, the US relations with the two countries were upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership with a view to building a strong partnership around the South China Sea. Fourth, consolidating its advantages in the South Pacific. In 2023, the United States made some progress by expanding investment in the South Pacific. The US sent Secretary of State Antony Blinken on behalf of Joe Biden to visit Papua New Guinea and meet with island leaders, and convened the US-Pacific Islands Summit for the second consecutive year, proposing to boost cooperation in political, economic, cultural, law enforcement and other areas, demonstrating that the US attaches great importance to the region; the United States reopened its embassy in the Solomon Islands, announcing that it will open embassies in Tonga and Kiribati, and establish diplomatic relations with the Cook Islands and Niue to step up its diplomatic presence; it renewed the *Compact of Free Association* with Palau, Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia to strengthen the fulcrum in the northern part of the South Pacific; and it signed a military-economic cooperation agreement with Papua New Guinea to deepen bilateral relations with key regional countries.

**B. Providing assistance to Ukraine in attempt to weaken and deplete Russia, but seeking to avoid a head-on conflict.** The US continued uninterrupted “blood transfusion” to Ukraine through the NATO and kept enlisting its European allies to contain and consume Russia on the battlefield with “sanctions+proxy war”. First, consolidating the anti-Russian front. In 2023, during his visit to Europe and Canada as well as receiving the visiting leaders of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany and other countries, Joe Biden talked with his counterparts about how to address the Russia threat; by leveraging G7 Hiroshima Summit in Japan, U.S.-Nordic Leaders’ Summit and other platforms, the US further unified the anti-Russian stance, coordinated the efforts for Finland and Sweden to join the NATO in order to expand the anti-Russian front. During the year, the US continued to impose a great number of sanctions on Russia, and urged the G7 group to create an enforcement coordination mechanism in order to bolster the enforcement of sanctions against Russia. Second, continuing support for Ukraine in its fight against Russia. The United States and its allies continued to provide Ukraine with military security and training assistance, real-time battlefield intelligence, operational planning and guidance, and in particular, the increasingly more advanced weapons and offensive capability. In February, Biden made a surprise visit to Kiev in show of support for Volodymyr Zelensky. For the whole year of 2023, the United States provided a total of more than \$ 24 billion in military assistance to Ukraine, worked with its NATO allies to incrementally upgrade military equipment to Ukraine, and approved the transfer to Ukraine of F-16 fighter jets from Denmark and the Netherlands.<sup>14</sup> Third, trying to avoid direct conflict with Russia. Against the backdrop of full-spectrum competition with

China, the US is unwilling to engage in a direct conflict with Russia to avoid loss of strategic focus. To this end, the US demanded all US-provided weapons should not be used to strike Russian homeland; after the US drone was intercepted by the Russian fight jet before being crashed into the Black Sea, the US immediately communicated with Russia to control the situation; and in the wake of the “Wagner insurrection”, the US quickly made clear that it was not involved in the incident in order to avoid escalation of confrontation with Russia.

**C. Consolidating traditional spheres of influence and expanding the deployment of strategic resources.** While continuing to solidify ties with allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific, the United States has stepped up its efforts in managing Middle East, Africa and Latin America to strengthen its competitive advantage. First, seeking to revitalize its influence over the Middle East. Since 2023, the Middle East has gained back its position in US foreign policy, which was manifested by the extensive visits paid by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, CIA Director William Burns and others; the US held a number of meetings with Palestine, Israel, Egypt, Jordan and other countries in an attempt to ease Palestinian-Israeli tensions, and to build the “India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor”, seeking to revitalize its influence in the Middle East. However, with the resurgence of a new round of Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Biden administration had to fully support Israel in the diplomatic, military and other aspects, which interrupted the efforts of promoting détente in the Middle East. Second, expanding engagement in Africa. In 2023, the United States activated a diplomatic offensive on Africa with high-profile visits in succession by Vice President Kamala Harris, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and others. In competition with China, the United States announced the Lobito plan to contribute 250 million US dollars to build a railroad corridor connecting Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to strengthen cooperation with African countries in the field of infrastructure and other areas of cooperation. Third, actively getting on board Latin American countries. In January, 2023, Biden visited Mexico for the 10<sup>th</sup> North American Leaders’ Summit, where he further strengthened the “US-Mexico-Canada Agreement” or USMCA so as to promote the transfer of supply chains to North America. In 2023, Canada and Mexico surpassed China to become the top two trading partners of the United States. The United States planned to launch the US-dominated “Global Infrastructure Investment and Partnership” program in the Western Hemisphere, and negotiate with Brazil and other countries on economic and trade cooperation, so as to beef up the Latin American “backyard”. In addition, the United States also actively developed relations with the five Central Asian countries and held the first summit of the US and five Central Asian countries in September in an attempt to counter China and Russia “front and rear”.

**D. Pushing for the reshaping of the international order based on the need to maintain hegemony.** The Biden administration believes that some international rules need to be modified in no time starting from 2023 due to their restrictions on the US so as to shape the international order in a way that serves American interest. On the one hand, it strengthened its influence on international organizations by returning to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), seeking to lead standard-setting in the fields of artificial intelligence and education, and promoting the reform of international economic and financial institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank and

the International Monetary Fund (IMF), so as to enhance the institutional power of the United States in international organizations. On the other hand, it sought to lead the response to global challenges. The Biden administration promoted the US-led global agenda through various platforms such as the United Nations and G20, called for global action to address climate change, and set up a Global Biofuels Alliance along with India and other stakeholders at G20 summit, occupying the commanding height of the green economy industry. At the same time, the US urged China and other developing countries to assume greater responsibility for emission reductions. By the above-mentioned efforts, the US aims to shape the international order in a way that serves American interest and squeezes other countries' development space.

### **III. Outlook for the US Domestic Politics and Diplomacy in 2024**

In 2024, the United States will enter the “election mode”. As election becomes the most important factor affecting the internal and external policies, it will only further intensify partisan struggles and social tensions and the foreign policy will become more conservative and cautious.

**A. The domestic contradictions will be worsening.** As the 2024 presidential race is well underway, the Democrats and the Republicans are going to fight more intensely. In January 2024, both parties kicked off their primaries and in August, the presidential, congressional and gubernatorial candidates of both parties will be chosen, when the two parties will officially enter the face-off stage. During the election year, the intensified “veto politics” in the US Congress will further constrain the implementation of the administration's economic and social policies, making immigration, ethnicity and social governance and other issues more prominent. As Donald Trump's criminal cases go to trial one by one, political rifts will be deepened within the US. If Trump is convicted, it may trigger a strong backlash and even riots among his diehard supporters. If Trump loses again, he is bound to repeat the narrative that the election is stolen by the Democratic Party, and Trump's hardcore supporters may again take to the streets and even resort to violence.

**B. US foreign policy faces more challenges.** As the Biden Administration continues to pursue the strategy of major country competition against the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict and Palestinian-Israeli conflict, this leaves the US very little room to adjust its foreign policy. As a result, it will face more pronounced contradictions between major country competition and maintaining the global order, and possibly multiple geopolitical dilemmas. On the one hand, currently the US has to concentrate its strength in Ukraine and the Asia-Pacific to navigate major country competition given the relative decline of its soft and hard power. The US may continue “blood transfusion” to Ukraine and hype up hot spots in East Asia, aggravate the tensions between the DPRK and the ROK, incite the Philippines, Vietnam and other countries to take tough stance with China, and, by exacerbating regional tensions, increasingly attrite China and Russia within the “guardrail”. On the other hand, the US strategic contraction in other regions of the world leads to a power vacuum in the relevant region. Some regional powers may take this opportunity to reshape the regional order, which will distract the US attention from the major country competition. In addition, considering the possibility of Trump winning the 2024 election, the US allies are now holding more of a



wait-and-see attitude, and the extent to which they are submissive to the Biden administration will decline, which will further impact the US pursuit of its foreign policy in 2024.

**C. The China-US relations face more uncertainty.** The China-US San Francisco summit has injected new dynamics into their bilateral relations, indicating that the US will strengthen practical cooperation with China in such areas as climate change and combating narcotics. At the same time, the Biden administration will vigorously pursue its given strategy, namely “out-compete” China, whereas the Republican Party may hype up the “tough-on-China” rhetoric throughout the campaign to condense the room of Biden administration’s China policy, thus more complexities facing China-US relations.

---

**Notes:**

1 “Trump Indicted for Attempting to Overturn the Election, Facing a Total of 91 Criminal Counts”, Huanqiu, August 16, 2023, <http://m.huanqiu.com/article/4E8txV6FI4>.

2 “Moving the Start of the 2024 Democratic Primary to South Carolina”, Ta Kung Pao, February 6, 2023, <http://takungpao.com/news/232111/2023/0206/815325.html>.

3 “Presidential Candidates, 2024”, BALLOTPEDIA, 2024 Jan 3rd, [https://ballotpedia.org/Presidential\\_candidates,\\_2024](https://ballotpedia.org/Presidential_candidates,_2024).

4 According to polling averages from FiveThirtyEight, as of December 30, 2023, Trump’s support rate in the party surged to 61.2%, much higher than 11.7% of DeSantis and 11.0% of Haley, [https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-primary-r/2024/national/?en\\_cid=abcpromo](https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-primary-r/2024/national/?en_cid=abcpromo).

5 According to the US Department of Commerce’s final data, the US economic growth rate in the first, second and third quarters of 2023 is respectively 2%, 2.1%, 4.9%. It is expected that on January 25, 2024, the US Department of Commerce will estimate the economic growth in the fourth quarter and the whole year of 2023.

6 As shown by the World Economic Outlook released by the International Monetary Fund in October, 2023, the US GDP growth rate in 2023 registered at 2.1%.

7 According to the US Department of Labor, the US unemployment rate hovered at 3.6% throughout 2023, the figure of January through December being respectively 3.4, 3.6, 3.5, 3.4, 3.7, 3.6, 3.5, 3.8, 3.8, 3.9, 3.7, and 3.7.

8 According to the US Department of Labor, US inflation was as high as 9.1% in June, 2022, and fell back to around 3% after June, 2023, with inflation rates of June through December being 3.0%, 3.3%, 3.7%, 3.7%, 3.2%, 3.1%, and 3.4% respectively.

9 Zhou Xiaowen, “‘Losses’ are approaching \$700 billion! With the surge in US bond yields, is another US Banking Crisis looming?” WallStreetNews.com, October 5, 2023, <https://wallstreetcn.com/articles/3699032>.

10 “US National Debt Keeps Increasing to Break \$34 Trillion”, Xinhua News Agency, January 6, 2024, <https://news.cn/world/20240106/09cdbc09859c4ab9a3cae374fde463e5/c.html>.

11 According to the data released by the US non-profit organization “Gun Violence Archive” on December 26, gun violence caused more than 42,000 deaths and more than 650 mass shootings in 2023.

12 Wang Fan, “US 2023: ‘Strikegate’ Reflects Economic Woes,” China News Network, December 23, 2023, <https://chinanews.com.cn/gj/2023/12-23/10133900.shtml>.

13 Lola, “Philippines Announces Four More Military Bases US Troops can Use”, Radio France Internationale, April 3, 2023, <https://rfi.fr/cn/中国/20230403-菲律宾宣布向美国增开4个军事基地>.

14 Zelensky publicly stated that the US would provide more than \$24 billion in military assistance to Ukraine in 2023, see for details in Xiao Xinxin and Feng Yaren, “US urgently puts together \$250 million to appease Ukraine”, Global Times, December 29, 2023, <https://mail.huanqiu.com/article/4FwrxhEK4Nc>.

(Translated by Tan Shenglan)

# Russia's Internal and External Situation In 2023 and Its Outlook

Ji Sheng, Associate Research Fellow, CIISS

**Abstract:** *In 2023, Russia faced severe situations of external military operation, major-country competition, interruption of the process of rejuvenation, and aggravation of internal contradictions, putting it under unprecedented pressures since independence. Russia comprehensively adjusted its governance strategy, development framework and control intensity, strengthened its control ability and strategic initiative, and eased the embarrassment of game confrontation with the United States and the West to a certain extent. However, Russia's internal and external pressures remain evolving and changing, and a strategic breakthrough is still a long way with heavy burdens.*

**Key Words:** 2023; Russia; Internal Affairs; Diplomacy; Outlook

2023 is a year for Russia to adjust and adapt to internal and external pressures, and turn the situation from crisis to stability. During the year, the Russia-Ukraine conflict dragged on, the US and the West stepped up their “hybrid strangulation”, Russia's partial internal contradictions got intensified unexpectedly, the centrifugal trend in its periphery became outstanding, and the presidential election was approaching. The Russian ruling authorities focused on victory on the battlefield and in the presidential election, concentrated resources on strengthening internal control and making an overall layout for the election, and fostered long-term counter pressure potentials. In general, Russia's national operation has adapted to the wartime state, been basically able to withstand internal and external pressures as well as defend its traditional geopolitical interests, with its strategic initiative strengthened and economy rebounding beyond expectations, but the dilemma has not been fundamentally removed and hidden risks still exist.

## I. Focusing on Both Battlefield and Election, Strengthening Internal Control and Making a Careful Layout

In 2023, the Russia-Ukraine conflict entered its second year and the presidential election was drawing near. Although the internal and external situations facing Russia improved, they remained complex and severe, and the ruling authorities concentrated resources on military and political priorities, made an overall layout, and actively prepared for the presidential election.

**A. Striving to keep stability and control amid great pressures.** On the one hand, Russia put down the internal rebellion. Russian President Vladimir Putin, with the support of the government, parliament, armed forces and enforcement departments, put down the armed rebellion of the Wagner group within 24 hours. Withstanding pressures, Putin insisted on

keeping Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff of the armed forces Valery Gerasimov, and only replaced one senior general Sergei Surovikin, without going for a so-called “political purge” hyped by the outside world, hence achieving a good effect of controlling the situation, deterring opponents and consolidating the regime. On the other hand, Russia remained resistant to infiltration and subversion. The Russian government recommended that the State Duma amend the law to combat “deliberate attempts to challenge the territorial integrity of the country”. The Russian Presidential Office has determined the priorities for news and propaganda, shaped positive public opinion, further cracked down on “foreign media agents”, strictly controlled ideological division, and prevented the public from being misled by the stigmatization of the United States and the West. Putin approved a law that makes life imprisonment for those who pose a particularly serious threat to constitutional order and state security. Since the outbreak of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there have been signs of violent anti-Semitism in Russia and accusations against the positions of the government. Putin personally presided over the national security meetings, characterized protests and airport riots in the Dagestan Republic as the conspiracy of the US attempting to split Russia, and launched a strong suppression as well as arrested a large number of key elements involved in the incident.

**B. Boosting the war and supporting the military operation against Ukraine.** With the conflict between Russia and Ukraine prolonging and the situation of attrition war intensifying, Russia took multiple measures to ensure sufficient troops. First, increase capital input. The Russian government significantly increased defense and security spending and comprehensively strengthened the resource guarantee for the “special military operation”. Russia’s defense spending in 2023 rose by 16 percent year on year,<sup>1</sup> estimated by the media at 9.7 trillion rubles, or one-third of total government spending. Since October, Russia universally raised the salaries of military and police personnel, with the starting point of salary for contract military personnel being over 230,000 rubles, extended the tax, insurance, rent and loan repayment period for operators of the enlisted enterprises, and established a special fund to support veterans and military families involved in the “special military operation”.<sup>2</sup> Second, ensure troops to be well replenished. In order to enhance the sense of honor of military personnel, Russian President Putin personally commanded the “heroes of Russia” and disabled soldiers, while Defense Minister Shoigu and other generals repeatedly awarded meritorious soldiers, and the government actively implemented preferential policies and allowances for military personnel and their families. With the high-level promotion, the Russian society has significantly strengthened its respect for soldiers, especially those who have participated in the military operation. In order to ensure the source of troops, Russia amended the conscription law to allow conscripts and non-service citizens to sign military service contracts effective within one year during mobilization and wartime, and determined that the upper age limit for conscription was raised from 27 years old to 30 years of age from 2024 on to ensure the overall stability of the base of conscription objects. To receive volunteers on a regular basis, Russia adopted a recruitment method of “diverse in forms and accumulative in numbers”, institutionally restructured the volunteer units of federal subjects or mercenaries of private military companies, and encouraged “retiring military personnel to renew their contract with the Ministry of Defense”. In order to increase the punishment for refusing military service, the Russian authorities increased the fine of citizens who evade

military service to 10 times the original amount, and rejected the bill to expand the scope of people who may delay military service, stressing that the defense of the fatherland is the constitutional duty and responsibility of all Russian citizens. During the year, Russia achieved remarkable results in “recruitment”, receiving about 500,000 volunteers and contract soldiers, laying a reliable manpower foundation for the military operation in Ukraine.

**C. Promoting integration and intensifying control of the four regions in eastern Ukraine.** First, assert the federal authority. In 2023, Russian President Putin signed a decree to set September 30 as the anniversary of the entry of Ukraine’s “four regions” (Lugansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia and Kherson) into Russia, requiring the Ukrainian army to withdraw from Russia’s “legitimate territories” within a time limit. In November, representatives of the “four regions” formally joined the Public Chamber of Russian Federation and were received by Putin, and Russia also granted the “four regions” the right to participate in the State Duma by-election. Second, enhance the legitimacy of the local governments. Within the framework of local elections of Russia, the “four regions” produced oblast (republic) and municipal leaders, parliaments, and restructured governments to promote judicial construction. The “four regions” replaced their provisional administrative bodies with regularized organs of power, and exercised jurisdiction according to law, which has consolidated the unified political order and control power of the Russian Federation. Third, improve social security for people’s livelihood. Despite financial constraints, Russia insisted on investing sufficient funds for the reconstruction of eastern Ukraine, providing local people with new homes, schools and hospitals for free. In particular, Russia built the 200km Rostov-Donetsk water pipeline to fill the Northern Donets-Donbas Canal, which had been cut off by Ukraine, to solve the “urgent needs” for water supply to the city of Donetsk and its surrounding areas. President Putin personally visited Sevastopol and Mariupol to inspect the reconstruction of urban areas and ports, and supported the construction of an aviation hub in Melitopol of the Zaporizhia Oblast. At the same time, Russia stepped up the implementation of special taxation, education, social insurance, cultural heritage registration, medical and housing security, and supportive policies for disability, maternity, childcare and old-age. The political rights and living security of the people in the “four regions” were generally improved compared with those before the war, and, coupled with the large proportion of local ethnic Russians, their identity with Russia is easy to improve. Since the beginning of 2023, anti-Russia activities in the “four regions” decreased significantly and the sense of belonging to Russia increased.

**D. Cementing the general layout and planning for the presidential election.** First, consolidate the governing foundation of the United Russia Party. In the elections of local governors and parliaments held in September, the ruling party “United Russia” secured 19 of the 21 leaders of federal subjects and more than two-thirds of the parliament seats in 35 of the 36 federal subjects and regions, while the second-ranked Russian Communist Party only won the leadership in two federal subjects and the majority legislative seats in one of them, with the rest of opposition parties winning no more than 16 percent of the votes.<sup>3</sup> The United Russia Party achieved the best local election “record” in recent years and strongly consolidated its position as the largest party, which would play a prominent role in strengthening the vertical federal administrative system and preparing for the general election. Second, step up the readiness for war and preparation for the election. On the one hand,

efforts were made to improve legislation and enhance advantages. The Russian State Duma passed an amendment to the President Election Law, which determined that the Russian Central Election Committee has the right to postpone elections in wartime, prepare and hold elections in the “four regions” of eastern Ukraine, and allow local budgets to prepare for elections. Given the fact that the United Russia Party is in power in most of the federal subjects, the above provisions will enable it to control and deploy resources, thus further consolidating its advantages. On the other hand, the incumbent authorities acted with tolerance and confidence. As Putin’s administration has been approved by the majority of the public, and his approval rating remains around 80 percent, “no one can compete with him if he runs”. However, the election faced an unprecedented complexity, so that Putin adopted a cautious strategy, allowing leaders of small parties to take the lead in voicing their candidacy, and he himself did not announce his participation in the next presidential election until early December 2022 through the appeal of “Russian heroes”. Putin also met with Grigory Yavlinsky, leader of the hardline anti-war Yabloko Group, and discussed with him in detail the ceasefire of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, showing his compatibility and openness to accept advice, in order to accumulate momentum to control the situation and gain more support.

In general, the Russian government has taken stabilizing and controlling the situation as well as avoiding risks as the top priority. In the future, while taking into account the military operation in Ukraine, it will invest more energy and resources to ensure a smooth presidential election. Nonetheless, in the context of the protracted Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russia’s internal contradictions and external threats of infiltration and subversion may still be mutually reinforcing, which will be a major test for the effectiveness of Russia’s governance system.

## **II. Focusing on Long-term Resistance to Pressure, and Enhancing Production Transformation and Social Cohesion**

In 2023, the United States and its allies imposed about 6,000 additional sanctions on Russia, totaling more than 17,000 sanctions against Russia, which diminished in marginal effect but showed a growing accumulative effect. Russia took multiple measures to adapt and adjust to the situation, promote economic recovery, consolidate the middle and upper classes of society, and enhance social stability.

**A. Boosting economy and strengthening resistance to pressure.** First, give full play to advantages to increase exports. With energy and food prices hovering high in 2023, Russia was vigorously promoting exports to “friendly countries” such as China and India. As of November 2023, Russia’s oil and gas earnings reached 8.2 trillion rubles (22.8 percent lower year on year), while the non-oil and gas sectors’ budget revenues reached 17.74 trillion rubles (25.6 percent higher year on year), and the budget revenues increased by 4.8 percent compared with the same period of 2022. In 2023, Russia’s overall crop production increased by 14.4 percent, with an estimated annual grain output of 145 million tons and wheat exports of 65 million tons, an increase of more than 15 percent.<sup>4</sup> Second, take a flexible approach to expand military production. The Russian government doubled its investment in the military-industrial complex, while accelerating the implementation of projects, updating equipment,

strengthening import substitution and parallel import to circumvent sanctions by various means. In order to make up for the lack of production capacity, Russia also arranged livelihood light industry enterprises such as bread factories and umbrella factories to take into account the production of “dual-use” products such as drones. Third, consolidate financial sovereignty. Russia raised its key interest rate from 7.5 percent to 15 percent, ordered grain exports to be settled in rubles and sold large amounts of foreign currency to stabilize the exchange rate. The Russian government supported private investment and encouraged private funds to enter the capital market. In October, Russia released the digital ruble plan, which was intended to be used in the real economy and international settlement in 2024. Fourth, boost science-technology and service sectors. Russia planned to allocate 10 trillion rubles before 2030, extend investment incentives for small and medium-sized enterprises, provide more subsidies for digitization, technology research and development, improve the efficiency of the real and service industries, and enhance the application of big data and artificial intelligence in transportation, communication and other industries. In 2023–2024, Russia also plans to allocate billions of rubles to support the construction of modular hotels and service facilities to boost tourism consumption. The Russian economy achieved positive growth since the second quarter, with GDP growth expected to increase from about 1 percent in May to 3.5 percent in December. From January to October, Russia’s budget revenue reached 23.106 trillion rubles, budget expenditure reached 24.341 trillion rubles,<sup>5</sup> and deficit reached 1.235 trillion rubles, accounting for about 0.7 percent of GDP, much lower than the expected 2 percent. Russia’s conservative budget and wealth accumulation played an important role in overcoming the “worst risks of recession and crisis”, with higher-than-expected economic growth, a sound fiscal position, and enhanced resilience. According to the outlook of the Central Bank of Russia and other institutions, in the next few years, the Russian economy will maintain low growth with receding vitality.

**B. Integrating resources and improving social structure.** The sanctions imposed by the US and its allies have impacted Russia’s energy, food as well as upstream and downstream industries, resulting in the operational difficulties for some enterprises. Russia promoted nationalization at a low cost, while Russia’s foreign trade banks, railway companies, oil transportation companies, national technology groups all achieved expansion, hence strengthening its control over resources, heavy industry and other strategic industries, consolidating the economic foundation, and enhancing the pro-government social forces. For the elite class, the most important result of the expansion of state capital is the strengthening of society at the top, benefiting the ruling elite as well as directors and officials of large corporations with close ties to state power. With the expansion of state capital, the number of such beneficiaries is increasing. For the middle class, non-strategic assets such as retails are redistributed among the middle and upper classes, thus curtailing the shrinking trend of Russia’s middle class. In the process of allocating economic resources, entrepreneurs who focus on the domestic market due to sanctions, persist in business, and support the government have obtained high-quality assets, becoming the new pillar of the Russian regime. According to Russian statistics, since the beginning of 2023, half of the middle class and technical elites who previously fled the country for asylum or to evade military service have returned home, bringing about a situation of expanding middle class, evolving social structure toward a stable “trapezoid”, and the regime foundation is consolidated due to

redistribution of resources led by state-owned capital.

**C. Caring for people's livelihood and appeasing the expectations of the underclass.** Russian President Putin ordered the government to make an indexation adjustment of the minimum wage, pensions and various allowances, further expanding the beneficiary groups, and studied the increase of scholarships and grants. First, raise the level of minimum wage. Russia stepped up the implementation of the "doubling the minimum wage before 2030" plan, and raised the standard by 18 percent during the year 2023 to make it rise faster than inflation and average wage growth, which benefited nearly 5 million low-income people. Second, strengthen old-age security. In 2023, Russia's state pension increased by nearly 19 percent.<sup>6</sup> The "voluntary pension" insurance savings ceiling was increased from 1.4 million rubles to 2.8 million rubles, and a legislation was made to allow the withdrawal of pension account funds before retirement as well as inheritance and exemption payments to third parties, in order to strengthen the "reinsurance mechanism" for the old-aged people, provide more reliable protection for retirees, and weaken the impact of war and sanctions on the pension system. Third, enhance social security. The government of Russian Federation invested in the renewal of urban electric transportation infrastructure, invested heavily in social security, and renovated and reconstructed hospitals, schools, etc. on a large scale. The Russian government also strengthened support for families with many children or disabled children, more than one-third of families got a monthly income of 45,000 rubles or more, and the gap between the rich and the poor dropped to the lowest level in nearly 20 years since Putin took office.<sup>7</sup> The gap between the rich and the poor in Russia is expected to narrow further, driven by a sharp increase in social spending, minimum wage and pensions.

Overall, as the external sanction pressure remains prolonged, Russia will make every effort to build a "doomsday bunker" - like stable economic system, continue to strengthen the binding of interests between the government and all social strata, and consolidate social security. According to the calculation of relevant institutions, the proportion of people who directly or indirectly rely on state capital or government subsidies to survive and develop has been increasing, and social stability has been constantly enhanced. However, at the same time, the feature of closed domestic circulation of the Russian economy has intensified, and the gap between its scientific and technological development and high-tech industries and the world's leading level will gradually widen. In particular, as the proportion of Russia's defense expenditure in the national financial budget has increased significantly, it will directly squeeze the funds in medical, transportation, people's livelihood and other fields, which may exacerbate the risk of inflation and obstacles to future rescue.

### **III. Combating the Isolation and Repression by the United States and Its Allies, and Comprehensively Promoting Diplomatic Breakthroughs and Geopolitical Reshaping**

In 2023, the strategic contest between Russia and the United States was once again on the rise. In order to counter the strong enemy and stabilize the periphery, Russia actively carried out pragmatic diplomacy, and partially improved the passive situation and maintained the stability of the surrounding areas by promoting its strengths and avoiding its weaknesses

as well as combining offense with defense.

**A. Safeguarding its traditional sphere of influence.** Russia regards maintaining close ties with the “post-Soviet space” as the top priority of its diplomacy, and believes that the stabilization of good-neighborly relations is of vital importance to Russia’s security, stability and national development. First, cement the Russia-Belarus alliance. Russia provided Belarus with more than preferential energy and security guarantees, and promoted the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. Russian President Putin maintains close relations with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who played a key role in quashing the “Wagner” armed rebellion, maintaining Putin’s authority and Russia’s domestic stability, as well as in resolving the aftermath. On the basis of the Russia-Belarus alliance, the political, economic and security cooperation between the two sides has been deepened, and Belarus has become a strong strategic fulcrum and buffer for Russia against the US and NATO. Second, stabilize regions of core interests. Influenced by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russia has reduced its strategic energy on Central Asia and Transcaucasia. Under passive pressure, Russia has become more respectful of the choice of Central Asian countries to develop relations with the United States and Europe, and does not directly intervene in regional conflict. At the same time, Russia strengthens its traditional and interest ties with its neighbors in Transcaucasia and Central Asia, so as to enhance the fulcrum, expand its presence, and maintain its influence and the old pattern from subversive changes. But Russia is powerless to block the interference and infiltration of external forces. Since the beginning of 2023, Putin visited Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, met with the heads of state of these two countries Zaporov and Tokayev respectively, and held talks with Uzbek President Mirziyoyev in Beijing to seal multilateral energy cooperation. In early November, the four countries signed a 15-year gas supply and transit contract to improve the gas system between Russia and Central Asia and strengthen Russia’s energy dominance in Central Asia. Moreover, Russia also led the ceasefire talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia to resume the implementation of the agreement, and the two sides finally confirmed the border between them and reached a historic peace accord.

**B. Focusing on China and India in advancing “Eastward” strategy.** Towards China: In addition to President Xi Jinping’s visit to Russia in March, President Putin paid a visit to China in October, not only attending the Belt and Road summit but also holding talks with President Xi, during which the two sides stressed support for each other’s core interests and deepened practical bilateral cooperation in multiple fields. Putin emphasized that China-Russia cooperation is very important to maintaining world peace and stability, spoke highly of the benefits brought by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to countries along the route, and reaffirmed his willingness to further the cooperation.<sup>8</sup> Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin paid a visit to China in December to promote the alignment between the Eurasian Economic Union and the BRI.<sup>9</sup> According to customs statistics, the trade volume between Russia and China in 2023 exceeded 240 billion US dollars. Towards India: Russia effectively promoted its relations with India by way of energy and arms sales incentives. Russian and Indian officials at or above the ministerial level exchanged visits and had in-depth exchanges on topics such as military industry, energy, and free trade cooperation. Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar said that despite the instability of the world situation, Russia-India cooperation has a strong stability, Russia supports India’s territorial demand on Kashmir, the



Indian people have good feelings for Russia, and India's weapons are still mainly dependent on Russia. In 2023, more than 25 percent of Russian oil exports went to India. The G20 Summit hosted by India adopted a more neutral communiqué, and India would remain the most important support for Russia in South Asia in the future. Russia has also included Siberia and the Arctic into the "Greater Far East" in a hope to use the rise of its Far East to reconstruct Russia's development framework, to give full play to its role in "connecting the east with the west", strengthen the linkage with the non-Western world, and further "open Russia's window towards Asia" so as to deeply integrate into the Asia-Pacific. Russia regards the "greater Eurasia space" as an important diplomatic support, actively promotes the establishment of a trilateral cooperation mechanism among China, Russia and India, advances the alignment of the Eurasian Economic Union with the BRI, and strives for a "greater Eurasian partnership network" based on platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and ASEAN.

**C. Cracking the US' hegemonic alliance system in a practical way.** Russia's new foreign policy vision has made it clear to "strengthen Russia's position as one of the responsible, influential and independent centers of the world", and taken "maintaining the global balance of power and establishing a multipolar international system" as its mission, believing that Russia should give full play to its role as a world power that bears a "special responsibility" for maintaining global peace and security. Russia deems that the hegemonic system of the United States is unsustainable, and it is the general trend to jump out of the Western model and commit to cooperation in the interests of all mankind. Russia was on the defensive under the siege of the US alliance. But on the one hand, Russia promoted its strengths and avoided its weaknesses to actively contain the momentum as well as mobilize its military hard power and nuclear deterrence to fight back, basically stabilizing the overall situation. On the other hand, Russia regarded the use of troops against Ukraine as a lever to prompt the United States and NATO to return to security negotiations, highlighting a clear attitude of "fighting while waiting for changes" and "seeking progress in stability". Russia suspended its obligations under the *Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty*, revoked its ratification of the *Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty*, and withdrew from the *Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe*.<sup>10</sup> Russia determined in the legal form that it will no longer provide the Secretary-General of the European Commission with information on the implementation or cancellation of the state of war and the state of emergency, and only retain the mechanism of informing the Secretary-General of the United Nations to strengthen deterrence against the US and enhance its freedom of action.<sup>11</sup> Russian strategic bombers frequently cruised around Japan and Russia refused to hold talks with Japan to sign a peace treaty, stressing that it will respond harshly to Japan's confrontation and attack. At the same time, Russia accepted the invitation of the United States and sent representatives to the APEC summit, indicating that it does not exclude the gesture of "contact and detente". Russia's new diplomatic layout shows that Russia has decided to adjust its "integration into Europe" strategy and promote the multipolarization of the world; it is difficult for Russia and the United States and the West to get out of the trough in the short term; and the future adjustment and evolution will mainly depend on the process and outcome of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

**D. Continuing to expand cooperation with countries from the South.** In the Middle East: Russia supported Turkey's status as a major power in the Middle East, strengthened

strategic communication with it on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as on Syria and the Black Sea issues, enhanced the bond of interests through energy cooperation, and developed Turkey into an important geopolitical as well as economic and trade partner of Russia; developed relations with Iran with military cooperation as the main line, while driving all-round strategic cooperation to achieve positive results; and continued to provide strong political and military security support to the Assad regime in Syria. After the escalation of the new round of conflict between Palestine and Israel, Russia actively intervened and mediated. In December 2023, Putin personally visited the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, and met with visiting Iranian President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi in Moscow to further promote cooperation between the two countries in economy, trade, energy and on regional hotspot issues. In Africa: In the context of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Russia attached greater importance to the strategic value of Africa, and put forward a series of proposals for cooperation with Africa centering on food and security cooperation as the starting point; successfully held the second Russia-Africa summit, and intensified cooperation with Algeria, Sudan, Central Africa and other African countries. In Latin America: Russia hosted the first “Russia-Latin America” international parliament meeting attended by representatives from more than 10 Latin American countries, and Latin American countries on the whole highly recognized Russia’s efforts to build a new international order and a multipolar world.

#### **IV. An Outlook for the Situation in 2024**

In 2024, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine will be most likely to continue. As Russia’s strategic initiative continues to increase, under the influence of variables such as the US election, the possibility of de-escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict cannot be ruled out, and there even will be a “window” that is conducive to Russia’s reshaping of its status as a great power and boosting Russia’s strategic situation to bottom out, but the US alliance will not stop the hybrid strangulation of Russia, so that Russia’s political stability, economic development and peripheral security will continue to be under pressure. Russia will aim to steadily build its strategic momentum and break the stalemate, keep the situation of war against Ukraine under control, continue to promote the trend to victory, and seek talks or a forced surrender of Ukraine with fighting so as to achieve the strategic goal of the “special military operation”. Internally, Russia will spare no efforts to ensure the steady continuation of the regime and overall social stability, and explore a new path to sustainable development. Russia will continuously fight against the United States and its allies, and cooperate with friendly countries to improve its external environment and promote the reshaping of the international order.

---

#### **Notes:**

- 1 <https://www.rt.com.10:00pm> news 26.12.2023.
- 2 <https://www.kommersant.ru/defence/815442> 25.06.2023.
- 3 <https://www.rt.com.10:00am> news 14.09.2023; Global Times, “Russia’s ruling party claims victory in new regional elections”, September 12, 2023; Xinhua News Agency Moscow news: “United Russia Party local election results announced: United Russia Party candidates won a big victory”, September 14, 2023.

(Continued on Page 102) 

# India's Domestic and Foreign Affairs Situation In 2023 and Outlook

Geng Xue, Assistant Research Fellow, CIISS

**Abstract:** *In 2023, with the goal of re-election in 2024, the Modi government, driven by Hindu nationalism, strongly consolidated the ruling coalition and waged a spirited election campaign with multiple measures internally, demonstrating strong ability to control situation. Externally, Modi actively carried out the host diplomatic activities to develop international space and enhance the status of as a major power, continued to seek to become “one pole of the world”, and strove to mold Modi’s image as a “global politician” and “advocate for India’s rise”.*

**Key Words:** India; Politics; Diplomacy

In 2023, with the goal of re-election in 2024, the Modi government took multiple measures to expand its electoral advantage and strongly consolidate its ruling status internally. Externally, making use of the advantage of holding the “dual chairmanship” of the G20 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Modi actively carried out host diplomacy, developed international space, elevated the status of as a major country, and continued to seek to become “one pole of the world”.

## I. The Bharatiya Janata Party Strongly Consolidated Its Ruling Position and the Fight over the General Election between the Ruling and Opposition Parties Intensified

**A. The Bharatiya Janata Party stepped up its layout and took multiple measures to kick off the election campaign.** First, it strengthened the centralization of power. In 2023, promoted by Modi aggressively, India passed a blockbuster reform measure-the *Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill 2023*.<sup>1</sup> The core of the bill is to give “real power” to the deputy governor, who was appointed by the central government and originally only a “decoration”, so as to effectively replace the ruling party of Delhi as the chief executive of Delhi. The successful “trial” of the bill may encourage the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to use similar means to restrict the state chief minister with the deputy governor or governor, effectively strengthen the centralization of power, and help promote the implementation of the BJP’s policies, thus expanding the opportunity of winning the election. Second, it optimized the campaign team and clarified the campaign strategy. Targeting the districts where the support was weak in the last election, the BJP intensively adjusted the personnel arrangement of party chairmen in Telangana, Punjab, Chhattisgarh and other states. The BJP held separate meetings of state and district leaders and determined to strengthen the construction of state and district committees and solve the problem of organizational slack in

the eastern region; to ensure the stability of the organization and prevent the phenomenon of “voting for other party” in the southern region; and to make every effort to increase the percentage of votes obtained by relying on the polling stations in the northern region. Third, it reorganized the electoral alliance. The BJP united 38 political parties (12 of which have seats in the Lok Sabha, or about 30% of the parties in the Lok Sabha) to convene the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) meeting. The participating alliance parties said that they are willing to run and win the general election with the BJP under the leadership of Modi. Fourth, it cracked down hard on election opponents. The BJP launched a new offensive against opposition parties, using law enforcement agencies to crack down on key leaders of opposition parties, drove a wedge into opponents and interfered with their local governance. Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the Indian National Congress (Congress Party), and the ruling parties in Bihar, Tamil Nadu and other states were subjected to varying degrees of political repression. Fifth, it attempted to win over women voters. On September 18, the Modi government introduced the *Women’s Reservation Bill*,<sup>2</sup> aimed at wooing women’s votes by ensuring that women, who make up half of India’s 950 million registered voters, get a third of seats in Lok Sabha and state assemblies.

**B. The opposition parties strengthened their own integration and organized electoral alliance against the BJP.** India’s main opposition parties held four cross-party meetings in a bid to join forces to defeat the BJP in the 2024 general election. First, the clustering effect began to appear. In the 2019 general election, the main opposition parties failed to form a broad alliance to counter the BJP, and the Modi government was able to win a strong re-election and suppress the opposition through anti-corruption investigations. In preparation for the 2024 general election, 16 opposition parties, including several states’ ruling parties, attended the first joint meeting to discuss alliance matters, and since then many left-wing parties and small regional parties followed up one after another, and the number of parties participating in the alliance increased to 26. Second, the alliance took initial shape. The participating parties decided to form the “Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA)” and reached a preliminary consensus on the organizational structure of the alliance.<sup>3</sup> It was planned that the core leadership would be composed of Nitish Kumar, leader of the Janata Dal (United), Rahul Gandhi, leader of the Indian National Congress and Mamata Banerjee, leader of the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC). At the same time, the Election Management Commission was set up to take charge of the construction and operation of the alliance, and the secretariat and other committees were established to take charge of specific election affairs. The parties also discussed drafting a common program, allocating seats for parliamentarians, determining election issues, and nominating candidates for prime minister.

**C. Domestic conflicts continued to swirl and impacted the government’s ruling and situation control to a certain extent.** On January 17, 2023, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) released a documentary titled “*India: The Modi Question*”, accusing Modi, the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, of condoning the atrocities of Hindus against Muslims. On January 24, the US short-selling company “Hindenburg Report” exposed that, the Indian Adani Group was accused of manipulating stock prices, accounting fraud and excessive leverage. At least 18 opposition parties jointly called on parliament to discuss the Adani Group issue, and asked the joint parliamentary committee to thoroughly investigate the Adani Group’s business activities and its relationship with Modi.<sup>4</sup> In May, riots and ethnic

violence broke out in Manipur, killing and injuring hundreds of people and causing months of tension. Since August, Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the Congress Party, frequently challenged Modi on the China-India border issue, claiming that China “occupied” a “large part of the Indian land” in the western section of the China-India border, and Modi’s statement that “not one inch of land has been taken away” is “absolutely wrong”, and asked Modi to speak out on China’s release of a new map.

## **II. India Made Every Effort to Build a Multilateral Diplomatic Arena and Further Highlighted the “Major Power Consciousness”**

**A. Shaping the image as the leader of developing countries by hosting G20 meetings.** India, which prides itself on being the representative of developing countries, stressed its key role in shaping the narrative of the South during its G20 presidency, “we regard the economic problems of other developing countries as our own problems, and are committed to bringing about changes in some areas”, and strove to seek more benefits for itself and other developing countries. The summit admitted the African Union as a full member of the G20, which Modi said was evidence of India’s “excellent leadership”. He believed that this move strategically promoted the interests and concerns of developing countries and indicated that India is increasingly confident in its current diplomatic influence and international status, and India is increasingly accustomed to playing a “proactive role in leading and making a difference.”

**B. Expanding regional influence through the SCO and BRICS mechanisms.** India believes that the SCO takes Central Asia as its geographical and strategic center, which provides a broader platform for India to participate deeply in Eurasian affairs. India hosted the SCO summit online in July. With the theme of “*Security, Economic Development, Connectivity, Unity, Respect for Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity, and Environmental Protection (SECURE)*”,<sup>5</sup> it led the agenda design and regional cooperation for the summit, vigorously promoted the construction of the International North-South Transport Corridor, and tried to seize the lead in regional connectivity construction. India actively promoted economic and trade cooperation and personnel exchanges with member states, especially increasing assistance to member states in the fields of entrepreneurship and innovation, science and technology and traditional medicine, so as to enhance its economic and cultural influence. India actively participated in the BRICS summit held in South Africa, strengthened coordination and cooperation with BRICS countries on global issues such as counter-terrorism, climate change, cyber security and multiculturalism, focused on key areas such as health, digital economy, green economy and people-to-people exchanges, and expanded contacts and engagement with other emerging and developing countries, to enhance its influence and legitimacy as the representative of the Global South and help realize its diplomatic vision of becoming a leading force shaping the global agenda.

**C. Enhancing the international say by using the Quad platform.** In March, Indian Foreign Minister Sushjaishankar Jaishankar chaired the Quad foreign ministers’ meeting of the US, Japan, India and Australia to discuss strengthening cooperation among the four countries on climate change, critical and emerging technologies, infrastructure and connectivity, and

cyber security. The joint statement issued after the meeting included remarks on the Russia-Ukraine conflict for the first time. In May, Modi went to Japan to attend the G7 Hiroshima summit and the Quad leaders' summit. India and the United States, Japan and Australia discussed issues such as increasing military deterrence against China, promoting cooperation in logistics supply, bases access and interoperability "from bilateral to quadrilateral", and turning the cooperation progress of the Quad from "architecture construction and agenda setting" to "improving the framework and accelerating implementation".

### **III. India Intensified Its Multi-dimensional Diplomacy and Strengthened Its Neighbourhood and Global Layout**

**A. Focusing on the Indo-Pacific major power diplomacy.** On the one hand, India comprehensively deepened its strategic cooperation with the US. During the year, India and the United States exchanged frequent visits with senior officials. In June, Modi made his first state visit to the United States and received a high-level reception, which the United States described the visit as a "turning point" in US-India relations. During the meetings, the two leaders reaffirmed their commitment to deepen the "comprehensive global strategic partnership" based on shared "democratic values," strengthen diplomatic coordination, and jointly address "regional challenges." In a joint statement,<sup>6</sup> the two sides reached 58 agreements in the areas of strategy, defense and technology, pledging to promote "close coordination in all areas" between the two militaries, including personnel exchanges, intelligence sharing, logistical support and simplified implementation of basic agreements, and strengthen cooperation on maritime security, including underwater situational awareness, to push the two sides into the Major Defense Partnership 2.0 Era. The United States proposed to support strengthening cooperation with India in space, chip manufacturing, communications technology, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, atomic energy, clean energy and other fields, accelerate the implementation of the *US-India Key and Emerging Technologies Initiative*, and promote India to play a greater role in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and global supply chain cooperation. During the G20 summit, India and the US announced the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) plan, which seeks to compete with the Belt and Road Initiative. On the other hand, India continued to strengthen cooperation with the US allies in various fields. In February, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited India for the first time to discuss the agenda concerning deepening cooperation in the fields of commerce and defense between the two countries and promoting the EU-India Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA). In March, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida visited India and attended the India-Japan annual summit, expressing that India-Japan relations are the top priority in the Indo-Pacific region, and he hoped India would support Japan's new initiative for a "free and open Indo-Pacific region." Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese visited India and the two countries agreed to speed up promoting the India-Australia Economic Partnership. In July, Modi paid a state visit to France and attended the Republic Day parade as guest of honor, during which the two sides praised the visit for setting a "new benchmark" and opening a "new phase" in the development of India-France strategic partnership.

**B. Consolidating and operating the South Asian “backyard”.** First, India deepened the traditional friendship with Nepal. After Nepal’s new government came to power, India tried to tighten relations with Nepal. During Nepalese Prime Minister Prachanda’s visit to India from May, 31 to June, 1, the two sides focused on practical cooperation to deepen traditional friendship and downplay differences and disputes. Prachanda agreed to give priority to cooperation with India in hydropower, energy and road transportation construction. Second, it increased support and assistance to Sri Lanka. In January, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar visited Sri Lanka and promised to Sri Lanka on its debt restructuring that India would provide about \$ 4 billion in financial support to Sri Lanka in the form of a credit line for imported necessities. In September, the fishery dispute between India and Sri Lanka intensified, and Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry stressed that “India and Sri Lanka have always sat down to negotiate when confronted with problems”, Sri Lanka’s achievements today “largely depend on India”, and Sri Lanka is seeking to “establish closer relations with India”. Third, India strengthened the special partnership with Bhutan. In April, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the Fifth King of Bhutan, paid a visit to India. Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar stressed that this visit would further strengthen the special partnership between India and Bhutan. In July, Bhutanese Foreign Secretary Pema Choden visited India and co-chaired the India-Bhutan Development Cooperation Talks with his Indian counterpart Vinay Kwatra. India reaffirmed its commitment to building and advancing partnership with Bhutan in line with the priorities of the Bhutanese government and people. In August, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said the two governments were negotiating a railway connectivity project between India and Bhutan. The project, with a total value of Rs 10 billion, is fully funded by the Indian government and is expected to be completed by 2026.

**C. Continuing to tighten containment and pressure on China.** Politically, India stubbornly tied the China-India border issue to bilateral relations to put pressure on China. Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar repeatedly stated that “bilateral relations depend on the border situation” and “India will not compromise on core issues”, insisting on restoring the China-India border to the so-called “managed and controlled status before April 2020”. Indian President Droupadi Murmu, Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and other senior military and political officials frequently visited the border area, saying that “the Indian army is capable of facing any challenge along the border and is ready to deal with any situation.” Indian media simultaneously hyped that if the border issue was not to be resolved, “India-China relations would not be normal”. Economically, India promoted the “decoupling” from China and competed with China for the status of “the workshop of the world”. During the year, the Indian government introduced policies to further restrict economic and trade cooperation with China, boycott Chinese goods, restrict Chinese investment, ban Chinese APPs, strengthen trade barriers, and crack down on and discriminate against Chinese enterprises. The Indian government vigorously promoted “Independent India” and “Made in India”. By allocating land and providing subsidies, it encouraged the US and Western enterprises in China to relocate to India. It joined hands with the US, Japan and Australia to build “resilient supply chains” in an attempt to replace “Made in China” with “Made in India”. Militarily, India accelerated border constructions and actual combat exercises and training to highlight deterrence against China. In 2023, the Indian army accelerated the

introduction and fielding of new quality equipment, increased the construction of roads, airports and villages in the China-India border areas, continued to organize combat exercises and training in the border areas against China, strengthened emergency operational preparedness, and tested operational plans against China.

#### **IV. Outlook of Situation in India in 2024**

Looking ahead to 2024, the parliamentary elections will be a big event in India's political life and the outcome will determine India's domestic and foreign policies for years to come. The Modi government will continue to strengthen the foundation of governance, intensify the crackdown on opposition parties, integrate internal and external resources to boost public support, and it is more likely to win re-election, but its advantage over opposition parties may narrow. At the same time, India will continue to take advantage of the good external environment of "appealing both ways", leverage the United States and the West to enhance its counterbalance to China, consolidate the position of "hegemon in South Asia", and enhance its international influence.

**A. Consolidating the ruling position and trying to win the general election.** The Modi government will continue to strengthen the centralization of power in the central government and continue to promote the three major processes of national reconstruction, social integration and economic transformation. The BJP will strengthen the operation and layout, carefully plan the election strategy, and comprehensively use politics and diplomacy, economy and finance, legislation and justice, public opinion propaganda and even military means to campaign. In the aggregate, Modi is still the "trump card" of the BJP, with strong personal prestige and influence, and the BJP led by him has advantages in terms of the number of party members, ruling states, financial strength and popular support. The main opposition parties can only form a real challenge to the BJP by building an election alliance, selecting a single candidate in all constituencies and avoiding internal friction, but at present, there are still many contradictions within the opposition alliance, and the integration situation is not optimistic. It is worth noting that in the past nine years since the Modi government took office, key livelihood issues such as high prices, high inflation and high unemployment have caused dissatisfaction among ordinary people in India, especially young people, and the traditional "anti-incumbent" and "anti-status quo" sentiments of Indian voters are getting stronger. The BJP may see a certain decline in its vote in the 2024 general election, making it more difficult to win an absolute majority in a repeat of the previous election, and it may have to form a coalition government with other parties.

**B. Improving the diplomatic layout and striving to be a "leading power".** India, taking advantage of the increasingly complex and intense contest between China and the United States, will accelerate the pace of keeping forging ahead, and continue to promote the foreign strategy from "non-alignment" to "issue alignment" and "multi-alignment", and identity positioning from "balancing force" to "leading force". In 2024, India will continue to implement the "new strategic autonomy" based on pragmatism, further consolidate the "quasi-ally" relationship with the US, maintain the traditional friendly relations with Russia, deepen and expand strategic cooperation with Europe, Japan, ASEAN and other countries, and strive to play the role of "mediator" between the Eastern and Western blocks. India will



regard itself as the “world’s largest developing country”, strive to be the spokesperson of developing countries, seize the dominance and narrative rights of the Global South, and pursue the maximization of its own interests. India will continue to pursue the policy of “neighbors first”, increase infiltration of and control over Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and other countries, and strengthen its dominance in South Asia.

**C. Continuing to show strength to China for profit and intensifying competitive pressure on China.** As the battle between the Indian ruling and opposition parties over the general election is heating up, the opposition parties may use the China-India border dispute to vigorously attack the Modi government for being “weak to China” and “ineffective in safeguarding territorial sovereignty”, which may force the Indian government and military to take a tougher stance toward China and reduce flexibility in dealing with border issues. The Indian government and opposition parties may hype up China-related issues such as the “China threat”, use nationalist sentiment to grab votes, and interfere with the China-India border negotiations and the turnaround process of bilateral relations. At the same time, based on the speculative mentality of “relying on the US to curb China”, India may intensify competition with China in all areas, increase cooperation with the US to make petty moves on Taiwan, Tibet, economy, trade and security issues, and even “oppose China on whatever issues” in multilateral organizations and international affairs, so that China and India will face more interference on issues such as strategic security, economic and trade, science and technology, and multilateral cooperation.

---

**Notes:**

1 <https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-government-of-national-capital-territory-of-delhi-amendment-bill-2023>, August 1, 2023.

2 <https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-constitution-one-hundred-twenty-eighth-amendment-bill-2023>, September 18, 2023.

3 The Hindu: *Opposition coalition to be called INDIA-Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance*, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/opposition-coalition-may-be-called-india-indian-national-developmental-inclusive-alliance/article67093768.ece>, July 18, 2023.

4 Hindenburg Report, <https://hindenburesearch.com/adani>, January 24, 2023.

5 Xinhuanet, *New Delhi Declaration of the Council of Heads of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, [http://www.news.cn/world/2023-07/05/c\\_1129732703.htm](http://www.news.cn/world/2023-07/05/c_1129732703.htm), July 4, 2023.

6 The White House, *Fact Sheet: Republic of India Official State Visit to the United States*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/06/22fact-sheet-republic-of-india-official-state-visit-to-the-united-states>, June 22, 2023.

(Translated by Liu Yaojun)

# Review of Japan's Internal and Diplomatic Situation In 2023 and Outlook

Yu Shi, Assistant Research Fellow, CIISS

**Abstract:** *The Kishida administration of Japan has gone through a bumpy year of 2023, with worrisome developments amid stability. In terms of domestic affairs, the internal contradictions in its ruling coalition manifested while the economic recovery was weak and the approval ratings for the Kishida Cabinet kept falling after a short rise. With regard to foreign affairs, Japan has been following the United States more closely and devoted to strengthening the construction of the alliance network, focusing on developing relations with other countries through the G7 (Group of Seven), the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and the Global South in a high-profile gesture of ambition.*

**Key Words:** Japan; Fumio Kishida; Internal Affairs; Diplomacy

In 2023, the Kishida government of Japan underwent ups and downs throughout the year, with worrisome developments amid stability. Domestically, it worked to control and stabilize the situation, but contradictions within the ruling coalition manifested while the economic recovery was weak and the approval ratings for the Kishida Cabinet kept falling after a short rise. Externally, it relied on the Japan-US alliance as the lynchpin and reached out to expand multilateral relations to fully boost its international influence.

## I. Japan's Internal Affairs

With an eye to long-term governance, Fumio Kishida took multiple measures to drum up support, but with little effect in general, barely managing to maintain a weak leadership position. At the same time, Japan struggled with weak economic recovery and increasingly prominent trend of social pro-conservatism.

**A. Experiencing a bumpy year, the Kishida government displayed fatigue in ruling.** As the LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) president, Fumio Kishida won the unified local elections and introduced an economic stimulus package, which showed some results by slightly boosting the approval ratings on a temporary basis. Nonetheless, poor follow-up policies and scant achievements sent the ruling administration into a nosedive. First, the administration scored no remarkable achievements in improving people's well-being. The advocated economic policy of a "New Form of Capitalism" amounted to almost nothing. Prices and tax burden went up. The gap between the rich and the poor was widening. And a series of errors, including frequent leakage of personal information, were discovered in the work to abolish the health insurance cards and integrate them into the "My Number" identification cards as was advocated by the government. All of these led to a big loss of trust

in the government and constituted obstacles to Japan's digital transformation. Second, the LDP, as well as the Cabinet, was losing its lead. The approval ratings for both hit record lows as a result of scandals and policy failures. Appointments and reappointments of high-level party and government officials in September 2023 and urgent replacement of some Cabinet ministers in December failed to rectify the situation. Divide deepened between the LDP and Komeito over policy, election cooperation and personnel arrangement, widening the chasm within the ruling coalition and increasing the likelihood of both sides disrupting cooperation. Although the LDP remains by far Japan's "largest party", it faces competition from the "homogeneous" conservative opposition parties like the Japan Innovation Party, which poses a challenge to its base of election. Third, the controversy centering on the "tax hike plan for defense spending" persisted. Since 2023, Kishida repeatedly expressed his determination to secure revenue sources to finance defense spending through the tax increase plan, but about 80% of Japanese opposed it. The opposition CDP (Constitutional Democratic Party) accordingly submitted a no-confidence motion against the Kishida government in the lower house in June. During the extraordinary Diet session in fall, Kishida changed tack to curry favor with the public and proposed the "uniform tax reduction" initiative. The government's policy wavering aroused intense skepticism that "the economic measures serve as election ploys". A number of polls showed that the approval ratings for Kishida's Cabinet dipped below 30% and the government was in "dangerous waters", while the support rating for the LDP sank to 26.2% simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> The support rate for Kishida ranked only 5th among the contenders for the next LDP presidential election. As a result, he is faced with great challenges to retain the LDP presidency and remain in power for a longer term.

**B. With sluggish economic recovery, Japan's development lacked momentum.** In the first half of 2023, driven by the lifting of pandemic restrictions globally, the recovery of international trade, and the boosted investing confidence, the Japanese stock market bounced back, and its macro-economy experienced a short-term growth. However, its economy sent out mixed indications of strength and weakness, and the prominent structural contradictions still hindered long-term recovery. First, the economic downturn and rising prices contradicted each other. Japan's economy was stuck in difficulties with high inflation and floundering manufacturing. More than 6,000 enterprises closed down in the first half of 2023, and the national average wage declined year-on-year for 17 consecutive months while the rate of price inflation was expected to be as high as 3% in the year.<sup>2</sup> Price hikes and income shrinks seriously dampened consumer spending, plunging its economy into a vicious circle. In September, the Cabinet Office revised down its economic growth forecast for 2023 from 6% to 4.8%. Second, Japan's economy was under the twofold impact of monetary easing and yen depreciation. Against the background of the Federal Reserve's continuous interest rate hikes, the Bank of Japan adhered to the plan of stimulating economy through monetary easing and exchange rate cuts, which to a certain extent pushed up exports. However, a trade deficit was lingering for two and a half years, the volume of which in the first half of the year reached 6.96 trillion yen. The International Monetary Fund predicted that Japan's nominal GDP would slip from the third to the fourth place in the world, overtaken by Germany in 2023 due to the depreciation of the yen.<sup>3</sup> Third, its "cash handouts policy" misaligned with its fiscal deficit. As of December 2023, Japan's government debt amounted to 1,241.3 trillion yen, equivalent to 2.4 times of its GDP, with the per-capita debt standing at 9.9 million yen. At the same

time, the government had to continuously fund for increased spending on social security and subsidies in view of the declining birthrate and aging population, and the damage done to industries in the wake of the discharge of radioactive water into the sea, hence struggling with fiscal imbalance.

**C. Japanese politics was drifting to the right and the society grew increasingly conservative.** At present, Japanese politics is continuously leaning to the right, and the domestic think tanks and media demonstrate radical tendencies, while the mainstream public opinion becomes increasingly conservative. The whole society has entered a new stage of rightward swing. First, the inward-looking trends in the country were intensifying. Influenced by politicians' eloquence, publicity, weak economy and other factors, the Japanese society became less open and inclusive, and the tendency of xenophobia was ticking up. Japan's mainstream media, the "five major media conglomerates", also tended to be conservative in publicizing policies. The approval ratings among the public exceeded the disapproval ratings by 10 to 20 percentage points on issues such as constitutional amendment and sending troops overseas.<sup>4</sup> Over 90% of the Japanese people disliked China, and over 70% regarded the country as a threat. Second, the right-wing forces were gaining strength. The right-wing conservative parties have taken up more than 80% of the seats in the two houses of the Diet. Right-wing politicians such as Sanae Takaichi, the economic security minister, and Keiji Furuya, Chairperson of the "Japan-ROC Diet Members' Consultative Council", made repeated moves to win approval from conservative supporters, and gained political capital by paying visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and Taiwan. The Conservative Party of Japan, newly founded by right-winger Naoki Hyakuta in October, was gaining impetus, and the number of its members climbed to 52,000 within a month, with the number of social media account followers reaching 320,000. Third, extreme events occurred frequently. The institutional woes, such as the close ties between government and business and between politics and religion, have led to the sharp intensification of social contradictions in Japan, as shown by people's accumulated dissatisfaction and frequent acts of violence over political issues. Kishida was attacked during his speech, the parliament received warning of a terrorist attack, a policeman on guard duty at the Prime Minister's residence committed suicide, and a recruit of the Ground Self-Defense Force shot and wounded his colleagues. Such vicious incidents indicate that Japanese social governance faces a grim situation.

## **II. Japan's Diplomatic Situation**

Under the guidance of the Kishida's "new realism" diplomatic strategy, the Japanese government conducted its diplomatic activities "on a global scale", centering on the US network of alliances while expanding its diplomatic relations with emerging countries, and strove to build a diversified and multi-level diplomatic network.

**A. Continuously consolidating its network of alliances.** Relying on the Japan-US Alliance, Kishida's government took advantage of major host diplomatic events to continuously consolidate its relations with US allies. First, Japan enhanced strategic alignment with the United States. In 2023, Japan and the United States held three face-to-face summit meetings and convened the annual Security Consultative Committee "2+2" meeting, to coordinate each other's stance on rallying support for Ukraine while opposing Russia, dealing

with DPRK's nuclear threat, policy toward China, Japan's three new security documents, etc. Second, Japan emphasized a united voice within the G7. In May, Japan hosted the G7 leaders' summit in Hiroshima, in which the proportion of "enlarged meetings" was greatly increased. It worked to add a session on economic security and to include Taiwan-related issues in the multilateral agenda. Altogether six joint statements were issued, expressing enduring support for Ukraine while seeking to impose cost on Russia. Western values were highlighted in the fields of climate change, economic security, fair trade, nuclear disarmament, etc. In November, Japan held the G7 foreign ministers' meeting in its capital with a joint statement issued on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the situation in the Indo-Pacific, which unequivocally condemned the terror attacks by Hama and called for humanitarian support for Gaza. Third, Japan promoted the deep implementation of the Quad. In May, the leaders of the United States, Japan, India and Australia held the third in-person Quad leaders' summit in Japan and issued a joint statement, set to lead the formulation of standards and regulations in fields of key and emerging technologies, and agreed on strengthening cooperation in maritime security, joint exercises, intelligence sharing, etc.

**B. Maintaining the "two-sided" policy toward China.** Japan's stance towards China became conservative and tough, with notable increase in negative measures against China. First, it frequently interfered in the Taiwan question. It unprecedentedly invited Taiwan to participate in its wargaming of the "Taiwan Strait Crisis" with the United States, held the first in-person foreign and defense ministerial consultations "2+2" meeting between the ruling parties of Japan and Taiwan, dispatched civilian officials from the Ministry of Defense to be posted at the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association, and connived at many visits to Taiwan by dignitaries and parliamentarians at all levels. Second, Japan continued to hype "China threat". Japan's annual reports such as *Diplomatic Bluebook* and *Defense of Japan* white papers stuck with a negative tone about China. For example, its 2023 *Diplomatic Bluebook* positioned China as "the unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge", while the 2023 white paper on defense continued to accuse China of lacking transparency in its military construction.<sup>5</sup> Third, Japan emphasized consistently to strengthen its economic security against China. It sought to work jointly with other countries to "de-risk" from China in fields of trade, science and technology by issuing relevant statements on various bilateral and multilateral occasions. In January 2023, Japan reached an agreement with the United States and the Netherlands on imposing restrictions on the export of chip manufacturing tools to China. In June, it arrested a Chinese researcher and prepared to establish a security clearance system for confidentiality. In July, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry announced the amendment to the Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Act, adding 23 categories including advanced chip manufacturing equipment to the list of controlled export items to China. Japan also actively coordinated with and deeply engaged itself in the US-led "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework" and the "Chip 4 Alliance" that include the United States, ROK, Japan, and Taiwan. On the other hand, Fumio Kishida and President Xi Jinping held talks in November, reaffirming the positioning of comprehensively advancing a mutually beneficial bilateral relationship based on common strategic interests, and jointly building a constructive and stable China-Japan relationship that meets the demands of the new era.<sup>6</sup>

**C. Putting in more efforts in diplomacy with neighboring countries.** In close coor-

dination with the US diplomatic strategy, Japan stepped up its plan in the Asia-Pacific and promoted the preliminary establishment of new bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the region. First, relations between Japan and ROK thawed. Mediated by the United States, Japan and ROK reached an agreement on the Japanese forced labor compensation issue, reinstated ROK to its “white list” of favored trade partners, restarted the exchange of visits between heads of state after a 12-year hiatus, resumed security dialogue, re-embraced commitments to the GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement), and held the first round of Japan-ROK Economic Security Consultations. The strategic interaction between the two sides in deterrence against the DPRK and cooperation with the United States was enhanced. Second, Japan stepped up its relations with the Philippines. Japan worked to upgrade the diplomatic and defense cooperation with the Philippines by holding summits and “2+2” talks. In November, 2023, during his first visit to the Philippines, Kishida declared that Japan-Philippines relations were “stronger than ever” and at the “golden age”, and inked an aid agreement worth about 600 million yen with the Philippines under the newly established Overseas Security Assistance (OSA) framework, promising to provide coastal surveillance radar system and large patrol boats to the country. The two sides also agreed on speeding up the launch of the “Reciprocal Access Agreement” (RAA) negotiations to upgrade their bilateral relationship to a “quasi-alliance” status. Third, Japan set to expand small-scale “Japan-US+” multilateral mechanisms. It actively brokered new quadrilateral and trilateral Asia-Pacific cooperation mechanisms for the United States. A defense ministers’ meeting between Japan, the United States, Australia and the Philippines, a trilateral meeting of the Japanese, Philippine, and U.S. national security advisers, and a summit of Japanese, US and ROK leaders were held for the first time respectively, discussing such matters as Indo-Pacific security cooperation, enhancing deterrence through joint air and space exercise, and anti-missile intelligence sharing.

**D. Strengthening engagement with Global South countries.** Japan introduced the geographical concept of Global South for the first time into its diplomatic strategy, and mounted a precise diplomatic offensive on emerging countries. First, it redoubled efforts to reach out to ASEAN. Taking advantage of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with ASEAN, Japan accelerated advances toward a shared vision and upgraded the bilateral relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In October, the Japanese foreign minister paid visits to Brunei, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, reaching consensus on continuing to strengthen cooperation in trade, investment and tourism, and emphasizing joint commitment to cooperation in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, and maintaining a “free and open Indo-Pacific”. In December, Japan held the Japan-ASEAN Special Summit in Tokyo, reaffirming commitments to strengthening bilateral cooperation in security, economy, and people-to-people exchanges. Second, it reinforced engagement with Africa. Japanese prime minister, foreign minister, minister of economy, trade and industry visited 12 African countries during the year including Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and successively launched “currency diplomacy” and “resource diplomacy” offensives with a focus on issues of concern for African countries such as infrastructure and food, and promised to assist Egypt in developing Suez Canal Special Zone, to provide Ghana with 500 million US dollars to tackle terrorism, and to strengthen trade, investment and joint development in energy and mineral industries with

Africa. Third, it continued to woo India. In March, during his visit to India, Kishida promised to provide training for the Indian Navy from 2024 on and deepen bilateral defense and high-tech cooperation, and put forward the New Plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, announcing an investment of over 75 billion US dollars by 2030 for developing countries in the Indo-Pacific to develop their infrastructure and industry.

**E. Strengthening ties with European countries.** Japan got increasingly closer to European countries, constituting a robust driving force in the process of “NATO’s Indo-Pacificization”, and actively engaged countries out of the region, including Britain, France, and Italy, in Indo-Pacific affairs. First, it expanded cooperation with NATO in various fields. In 2023, Kishida was invited to the NATO summit for the second time and signed the “Individually Tailored Partnership Program” to enhance cooperation in 16 fields including cyber and space security. With Japan’s encouragement, NATO planned to open its first Asian liaison office in Tokyo to improve the liaison mechanism between the two sides. Second, it deepened defense cooperation with Britain, Italy and other countries. In January, 2023, the Japan-UK Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), which streamlines the procedures for reciprocal military access, was concluded. In November, Japan and the UK held the Foreign and Defense Ministers’ Meeting ( “2+2”), reaffirming their commitment to delivering all aspects of the “Hiroshima Accord” and further enhancing the Japan-UK global strategic partnership. Besides, Japan promoted the joint development of a new generation fighter jet with Italy and the UK, held a first-ever joint training exercise with Italian fighters in Japan, and advanced discussion with Italy on creating a permanent “2+2” consultation mechanism to further strengthen defense ties.

### **III. Outlook for Japan’s Situation in 2024**

Looking into 2024, Kishida’s administration will display increasing signs of weariness, probably short of exciting prospects. His government will face multiple tests at home and abroad. Internally, it will “boost the economy and ensure public well-being”, and focus on preparing for political elections. Externally, it will “expand diplomatic relations and strengthen national defense”, and strive to explore diplomatic space.

**A. Internally, the Kishida government will focus on garnering public support and creating conditions for long-term governance.** According to Kishida’s pronouncements in his policy speech at the beginning of the year and on other occasions, he will next focus on the following issues. First, responding to people’s livelihood concerns. Kishida gives top priority to the economy, regarding the next three years as the key “transformation period” for Japanese economy, and tries to foster a transformation from a “cost-cutting economy characterized by low prices, low wages and low growth” to a “growth-oriented economy driven by sustainable wage increases and active investment.” He also works to strengthen “supply capacity” and “distribution”, accelerate the development of emerging industries like “decarbonization”, and eliminate backward production capacity, while at the same time alleviating the burden on the people by cutting tax and returning a proportion of tax revenue, and curbing price hikes so as to win back public support. Second, firmly reining in opponents from within the party. With an eye to the LDP presidential election in 2024, Kishida will continue to win over the support from major factions within the party, such as Abe and Aso

factions, and forestall strong contenders in the party, such as Taro Kono and Sanae Takaichi, through reshuffling the Cabinet, so as to win re-election as the LDP president. Third, maintaining and enhancing the LDP's competitive advantage. Currently, Japanese voters are disappointed with the LDP, with some voters drifting away in support of the right-wing opposition parties such as the Japan Innovation Party and the Conservative Party of Japan. Kishida will focus on quelling the influence of the political slush fund scandal on the LDP, and adopt an active posture to promote "political reform" within the party. He will carefully pick the moment to dissolve the Parliament in an effort to maintain his ruling status.

**B. Externally, the Kishida government will continue to rely on the pivotal Japan-US alliance and strengthen bilateral and multilateral diplomatic initiatives.** As China-U.S. competition continues to deepen, the Russia-Ukraine conflict drags on and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict revives, the Kishida government will devote more efforts to proactive planning in diplomacy to expand strategic space. In terms of Japan-US relations, Kishida plans to pay an official visit to the United States in early 2024 to strengthen the Japan-US alliance with "summit diplomacy". Japan will also closely monitor US political changes and maintain adequate coordination with the latter in international and regional affairs. In terms of multilateral diplomacy, Japan will continue to strengthen its network of alliances with a focus on the Quad and the G7, focus its strategic moves on Global South countries, push forward to transform its vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" into reality, and seek to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council while promoting the implementation of the UN reform through the Summit of the Future in 2024. In terms of its relations with China, Japan will keep a close eye on developments in US policy toward China, while at the same time remaining active in communicating with China so as to urge China to lift as soon as possible its import ban on aquatic products originating in Japan.

**C. The Kishida government will continue to accelerate the process of amending the Constitution and expanding the military, and promote the transformation of its security strategy.** In 2024, the Kishida government will continue to implement the new National Security Strategy, accelerating its break from the "exclusively defense-oriented" policy, strengthening combat readiness of the Self-Defense Forces, and realizing the goal of "fundamentally reinforcing its defense capabilities". Domestically, Japan will continue to accelerate Diet discussion on constitutional amendments, relax its strict regulations on the transfer of defense equipment and technology, speed up the process of "offensive-oriented military" buildup, secure enough funds for defense construction by various means, strengthen defense in its southwest region, and constantly elevate its own offensive combat capabilities. Diplomatically, Japan will continue to cooperate with the United States to build a strong U.S. alliance system, increase the scale and frequency of multi-domain joint exercises with the United States and its allies, and deepen bilateral military integration with the United States.

---

**Notes:**

1 NHK, "Kishida's approval rating sank to 29%, which was the first time it was below 30% since the prime minister took office. NHK Public Opinion Poll". <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20231113/k10014256141000.html>, November 13, 2023.



2 Bank of Japan, “The Outlook for Economy and Prices (October 2023)”. <https://www.boj.or.jp/mopo/outlook/gor2310a.pdf>, December 23, 2023.

3 NHK, “Important to Japan’s economic growth: GDP negative growth for the first time in three quarters”. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20231115/k10014258731000.html>, November 16, 2023.

4 NHK, “Constitutional Amendment: ‘Necessary’ 35% and ‘Unnecessary’ 19%. NHK PublicOpinionPoll”. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20230503/k10014056681000.html>, December 14, 2023.

5 Japanese Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2023*(white paper). <https://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/wp/wp2023/pdf/index.html>, December 8, 2023.

6 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “President Xi Jinping meets with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida”. [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt\\_674879/gjldrhd\\_674881/202311/t20231117\\_11182335.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/gjldrhd_674881/202311/t20231117_11182335.shtml), December 17, 2023.

(Translated by Hua Aiping)



**( From Page 87 )**

4 <https://www.bricsgo.com/reports/item/28021552> 08.12. 2023.

5 <https://www.bricsgo.com/reports/item/30621778> 25.11. 2023.

6 [https://www.rt.com/putin’s live connection; annual russian press conference](https://www.rt.com/putin's%20live%20connection;annual%20russian%20press%20conference) 15.12. 2023.

7 [https://www.rt.com/putin’s live connection; annual russian press conference](https://www.rt.com/putin's%20live%20connection;annual%20russian%20press%20conference) 15.12. 2023.

8 Xinhua News Agency, “Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation”, October 18, 2023.

9 “Russian Prime Minister Mishustin attended the 28th Regular Meeting in China”, [https:// www.gov.cn/](https://www.gov.cn/).

10 Reference News, “Russia withdrew from the *Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe*”, July 11, 2023; Phoenix TV: “Putin suspends US-Russia nuclear deal”, September 3, 2023; GMW.cn.: “Russia suspends the implementation of the *New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty*”, February 22, 2023.

11 Reference News, “Russia will no longer inform the European Commission of changes in wartime status”, November 30, 2023.

(Translated by Zeng Qiang)

# New Posture in US Strategic Competition with China: Causes, Contents and Features

Xia Liping, Vice President,  
Tongji Institute for China & World Studies

**Abstract:** *In the context of strategic competition with China, the Biden administration, in accordance with the needs of the US national security strategy, is advancing a new posture for strategic competition with China from three perspectives: great power politics, international order and civilization. This new posture is aimed at winning the strategic competition with China in the 21st century through a model of “domestic investment+allies and partners  $\geq$  competition with China.” It is increasingly characterized by clearer objectives, an increasingly unfolding pattern, and a more defined path.*

**Key Words:** Biden Administration; Strategic Competition; China-US Relations

With China's rapid rise and its increasing proximity to the center of world stage in the 21st century, there have been more China-related issues in US national security strategy. As the US perceives China's development as a “threat” to its global dominance, both the Trump and Biden administrations have categorized China as a primary “strategic competitor” in their national security strategies, rooted in the concept of “great power strategic competition”. In the context of China-US relations entering the era of comprehensive strategic competition, advancing and winning strategic competition with China remains a central theme and long-term planning in US national security strategy. This paper intends to make a comprehensive analysis and in-depth assessment of the new posture in US strategic competition with China since the Biden administration took office.

## I. Major Causes behind the New Posture in US Advancing Strategic Competition with China

After taking office in January 2021, the Biden administration released the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* on March 3, 2021 and the *National Security Strategy* on October 12, 2022. As a crucial document that best reflects its national security and foreign policy strategies, the *National Security Strategy* offers an elaboration of the Biden administration's characterization of China not only as the “most consequential geopolitical challenge” and “pacing challenge” but also as the only competitor with both the capability and intent to reshape the international order. The report also outlines the strategic goal of “out-competing” China.<sup>1</sup> In light of the policy framework of “investment, alliance, competition” towards China proposed by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in May, 2022 and the diplomatic practice of the United States, one can see that the Biden administration, while maintaining the main tone of strategic competition with China set by the

Trump administration, has initiated new posture in its strategic competition with China. Against the backdrop that “US-China relations will never return to its former footing” and the ongoing intensification of strategic competition with China, advancing and winning strategic competition with China has become a core issue and long-term planning in US national security strategy, whether it is “extreme competition” or “out-competing China” proposed by the Biden administration. The Biden administration has renewed its efforts to advance strategic competition with China out of considerations from the following three perspectives.

**A. Maintaining the position of strength for US hegemony from the perspective of great power politics.** In the international social structure under which “the fundamental nature of international relations has not changed over the millennia. International relations have been a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy”<sup>2</sup>, hegemonic great power politics, also known as power politics, often involves major powers which formulate foreign policies based on the realist principle of prioritizing national self-interests. In some cases, these powers may even infringe on sovereignty and intervene in other nations’ internal affairs in violation of the principles of international law to seek global or regional dominance.<sup>3</sup> When reviewing the historical evolution of US hegemony, one can observe that the superpower’s formidable national strength has always been a fundamental factor in its acquiring and maintaining hegemony.<sup>4</sup> In other words, in a system of sovereign nations without a world government, as long as the United States maintains its hegemonic position of strength, it can maintain, expand and realize its national interests. A review of over seven decades of contemporary US diplomatic strategy and foreign policy practices reveals that attaining and maintaining a position of strength have always been a prerequisite for the successful implementation of US foreign policy. It is also one of the core concepts underlying the post-war US policy towards Europe.<sup>5</sup> Because the position of strength underpinning US hegemony not only enables the US to act on its own will but also bend its allies and adversaries to its will. This is precisely what is emphasized in the realism theory in international relations: “the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.” As a global power in the 21st century, the US derives its hegemonic position of strength not only from the comprehensive planning and exercise of its composite national strength but also from the support of the globe-wide alliance system.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, maintaining US hegemony in great power politics and on a global scale has always been a strategic goal of “Pax Americana” since the end of World War II. It is also due to the hegemonic inertia of the United States in shaping a uni-polar order in the post-Cold War era.

In the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008, the relative decline of US power and the rapid rise of China’s strength led to significant changes in the international balance of power and regional dominance. In particular, ever since China unveiled its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the US has regarded China as a major rival challenging or even threatening its global hegemony and the most powerful one in its capacity as a state actor since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. As President Biden stated, the US aims to engage in “steep competition” with China “from a position of strength”.<sup>7</sup>

**B. Strengthening the US-led liberal international order from the perspective of the international order.** While a state of anarchy exists in the international community, it does not imply the absence of a certain degree of international order. As long as there is

international interaction, there is inevitably a form of international order. “By international order I mean a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states, or international society.”<sup>8</sup>

From a historical perspective, the evolution of the international order is in a state of dynamic change, which is closely related to the rise and fall of major powers in the international community. To some extent, it can be said that the international order is a form of international public goods provided by various major actors, particularly major powers, reflecting and giving rise to both cooperation and conflict among them. In terms of the changes and external manifestations of the current international order, it can be described as a “hybrid” order of “two types” of orders: one is the international order built on the principles of sovereign states in accordance with the Westphalia system, with the UN Charter as the basis of international law; the other is the “Western camp-style” international order that originated during the Cold War, with the US alliance system at its core. The United States is the creator of and dominant power in both of these “two types” of international orders. Since the “Western camp-style” international order is centered around liberal ideas such as collective security of the US and European countries, economic interdependence, and international institutions and rules, it is perceived by the US and Europe as a “US-led liberal international order” with “universal values”. As stated by John Ikenberry, although originated in a few Western democratic countries, the liberal international order expanded from an “internal order” in Western democracies to an “external order” applicable on a global scale after the end of the Cold War.<sup>9</sup>

The “withdrawal” diplomacy during the Trump administration caused some degree of disruption to this order. For example, the United States withdrew from arms control treaties such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and from international organizations such as UNESCO and the UN Human Rights Council. However, the Biden administration, upon taking office, has sought to repair the liberal international order to some extent by returning to relevant UN agencies.

In an era when the international political and economic center is experiencing a significant shift with the trend of “rising East and declining West,” both the Trump and Biden administrations regard China as a “revisionist” power challenging the US-led liberal international order. The *National Security Strategy* released by the Trump administration in 2017 openly stated that China’s creation of the AIIB is an example of “revisionist behavior”. In March, 2021, the Biden administration’s *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* also asserted that “China is the only country which can use various capabilities to challenge the liberal international order.”<sup>10</sup>

**C. Shaping a US-led democratic alliance from the perspective of civilization.** We live in a civilized modern world system comprised of over 200 countries and regions, as well as more than 2,500 ethnic groups. The diversity of world cultures determines the pluralism of world civilizations. Democracy, as a significant achievement of human civilization, is an inherent part of the diversity of human civilization and one of the common values for all humanity. Therefore, the diversity of human civilization itself signifies that democracy is a sovereign right and a rule of law right that all countries and peoples across the world are entitled to. It is not a monopoly of a few nations, nor is it limited to a single way of realization. It is still less a “values-based weapon” for major Western powers to interfere in

other countries' internal affairs or conduct great power rivalry. By tracing the origins of Western modern democratic theories and the root causes of current chaos in Western democracy, it can be inferred that the essence of democratic theories such as freedom, democracy, equality, and human rights is to oppose all forms of privilege, not only feudal despotism and religious privileges but also bourgeois privileges.<sup>11</sup> In a post-Cold War world characterized by diverse civilizations, and with the coexistence of socialist countries represented by China and capitalist countries led by the United States, democracy, particularly the democratization of international relations, should be the direction and future vision for human civilization. However, the United States, self-proclaimed as the "world's beacon of democracy", has once again "privatized", "weaponized" and "ideologized" the shared democratic values for humanity based on its tradition of "exporting democracy" and its Cold War experience. The U.S. is employing these values to advance its competition and rivalry with China. As then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated, the US aims to form a "new alliance of democracies" to remodel China.<sup>12</sup> As the President from the Democratic Party, Biden places great emphasis on "values-based diplomacy". He not only seeks to revitalize democratic values in the United States but also considers these values as a principle and core agenda of foreign policy. In December 2021, he hosted the Summit for Democracy for the first time. The Biden administration aims to build a US-led coalition of democracies into a "united front" to contain China and engage in the so-called "clash of civilizations" through the "values-based alliance".

## **II . The Contents of the New Posture in US Advancing Strategic Competition with China**

Since the Biden administration came into power, a new posture has emerged in the formulation and implementation of its China policy concerning its strategic competition with China, with "investment, alliance, competition" as its main components. This new posture is more strategic, logical, and operational. The Biden administration aims to win the strategic competition with China in the 21st century through a model of "domestic investment+allies and partners  $\geq$  competition with China".

**A. Investing more in the domestic economy, technology, and innovation to boost US national strength.** The Biden administration stated in the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* that "our role in the world depends on our domestic strength and vitality". Faced with China, the most dynamic and powerful competitor in modern US history, the US should strengthen its own capabilities as well as those of its allies and partners, with a priority on domestic affairs, since without strength, the US would face numerous security challenges both at home and abroad. After taking office, President Biden swiftly introduced a series of "long-term investment" bills aimed at enhancing the United States' position of strength and revitalizing the domestic economy such as the *American Rescue Plan*, *American Jobs Plan* and *American Families Plan*. In response to the reality that the United States lags behind China in infrastructure development, the Biden administration proposed the ambitious "21st Century Infrastructure" initiative which is worth over \$ 2 trillion. In order to enhance the advantages of the United States in the new round of technological revolution and in innovation fields such as artificial intelligence, quantum technology, semiconductor industry, space technology,

clean energy and biotechnology, President Biden signed the *CHIPS and Science Act* on August 9, 2022 after the legislative process was completed in the Congress. Overstretching the concept of security by claiming “economic security is national security”, the Biden administration has maintained the trade tariffs imposed on China during the Trump administration, and significantly increased investments in economy, technology, and innovation at home, including in infrastructure, in order to boost US strength and gain an upper hand in its strategic competition with China.

**B. Forging alliances and partnerships to shape a “free and open Indo-Pacific region” led by the US.** Since the occurrence of conflicts and wars in human societies, forging alliances with allies and partners has been one of the most common and effective means for countries or any other political entities to win wars and maintain security. For the United States, forging allies and partners is not only a means to address conventional issues and challenges but also a crucial tool and strategic foundation to advance the US-led regional and international order. Since the end of World War II, the United States has maintained significant strategic interests and played a crucial role in the Asia-Pacific region. It is both a “major power with a dominant position in the Asia-Pacific region” and the “only major power with a strong alliance system in the region”. Under the international order of “Pax Americana”, many Asian countries hope for continuous security guarantee from the US in the Asia-Pacific region. However, they also seek to strengthen economic ties with China. Thus, they are unwilling to be compelled to take sides between the United States and China. The United States, in its efforts to curb China’s rise and maintain its dominance in the Asia-Pacific region, introduced its Indo-Pacific strategy by integrating the major South Asian power, India, into the region. With the continued upgrading of its Indo-Pacific strategy and the implementation of relevant measures, the US has not only strengthened military alliances with its traditional allies such as Japan, ROK, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand but also forged new security partnerships such as the AUKUS with Australia and the UK. The US has also launched the Quad mechanism with Japan, India and Australia, and further enhanced partnerships with Pacific island nations under the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). Fiji joined the IPEF on May 26, 2022, becoming the 14th founding member and the first Pacific island nation to join the framework.

**C. Increasing strategic competition and seeking to establish a crisis management mechanism with China.** Strategic competition, as an advanced form of interstate competition, involves not only the contest for power and status but also disputes over systems, values and order arrangements. It even extends beyond bilateral dimensions, exerting direct or indirect impact on the behavior of other countries, regional dynamics, and the global landscape. This is particularly true for US-China strategic competition in the 21st century.<sup>14</sup>

Since the Biden administration took office, the United States has been intensifying its strategic competition with China. However, it stated on multiple occasions that it does not seek direct conflict or a new Cold War with China. While increasing strategic competition, the administration also prioritizes avoiding risks of conflict and crisis management in handling US-China relationship. In fact, as US-China strategic competition gradually becomes the new normal, the relationship has shifted from addressing strategic differences to strategic disputes, and from identifying common goals to crisis management. In recent years, in the field of

bilateral relations, the US has frequently utilized domestic laws and regulations to interfere in China's internal affairs and trample on the One China principle. During the Trump administration, the Congress successively enacted various bills, including *the Taiwan Assurance Act of 2019*, *the Taipei Act of 2019*, *the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2019*, *the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019*, and *the Uighur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020*, among others. After Biden came to power, the Senate introduced the *Taiwan Policy Act* in September 2022. If it is passed and takes effect, the bill will be seen as the most comprehensive and substantive adjustment of US policy towards Taiwan since the passage of the *Taiwan Relations Act* in 1979. Of particular concern is the bill's requirement that Taiwan be granted the status of an "important non-NATO ally", which would strengthen US security commitment to Taiwan and potentially have significant impact for the development of US-China relations.

Against the backdrop of unfolding and prolonged US strategic competition with China, the structural changes in US-China relations have led to a sharp increase in the potential risk of a crisis between the two countries, although not seeking conflict and avoiding a new cold war constitute an important part of the new posture in US strategic competition with China. At present, there is a lack of effective crisis management mechanism between China and the United States. Therefore, strengthening genuine crisis management and establishing effective crisis management mechanism are essential for both countries. However, one can see from historical experiences that the US has been accustomed to using crisis management as a means of competition to restrict its rivals in the name of crisis management in order to maintain its competitive edge.

### **III. Major Features of the New Posture in US Advancing Strategic Competition with China**

Although facing numerous challenges at home since Biden took office, such as polarization of party politics, erosion of democratic system, societal and racial divisions and high inflation rates, the US has been unaffected in its intensity and resolve to advance strategic competition with China. The efforts have increasingly demonstrated several major features, including:

**A. Clearer goals in strategic competition with China.** As a builder of the post-World War II global order and the superpower in the 21st century, the US has played a crucial role in rebuilding the contemporary international system. Faced with the structural challenges posed by China's rise and its significant implications on the evolution of the world order, the Biden administration has undoubtedly focused on "reasserting US global leadership" and "maintaining a tough policy stance towards China" in its foreign policy focus and China policy.<sup>15</sup>

The US strategy of engagement with China has been replaced by a competition strategy of comprehensively suppressing and containing China. Therefore, curbing China's rise has become an inevitable choice in its policy towards China, which in terms of political system is primarily manifested in seeking to remodel China's socialist system. The principle of sovereign equality grants countries the right of international law to choose and implement

their respective national systems based on their specific conditions, and a country's internal affairs brook no interference. The Trump administration labeled China as an "authoritarian system" and categorized competition with China as "political contests between those who favor repressive systems and those who favor free societies".<sup>16</sup> The Biden administration has gone even further by categorizing China as an "authoritarian and assertive" challenger to the international system.

In terms of economic and trade development, the US has striven to break free from "economic dependence on China". In disregard of the fact that a stable trade and economic relationship between the world's top two economies is in the interest of the global economy, the US has chosen to "politicize", "overstretch the security concept", and "weaponize" its economic ties with China. It seeks to "decouple" and "de-risk" from the Chinese economy to extricate itself from the so-called "economic dependence on China". In terms of research and development of technology, the US has implemented a strategy of "small yard, high fence" for technological competition. As a natural outcome of the development of productive forces, science and technology are not only "the dominant ideas of our era"<sup>17</sup> but also inherent attributes of socialism with Chinese characteristics. In the era of globalization, science and technology constitute the primary productive forces. With the overlay of a new round of technological revolution and the US-China strategic competition, preventing and suppressing China's rapid development in the field of high-tech becomes an inevitable choice as the Biden administration implements the strategy of "small yard, high fence" for technological competition. This strategy emphasizes precision targeting, government support, priority on security and reliance on allies, which has, to some extent, altered the international landscape of technological competition and presented new challenges to China's technological development.

**B. An increasingly unfolding pattern in strategic competition with China.** "The so-called grand strategy (or sophisticated strategy) is devised to coordinate and direct all the forces of a country (or a group of countries) to achieve the political objective of war. This objective is determined by basic policies."<sup>18</sup> In the increasingly fierce strategic competition with China, the Biden administration has laid out its policy towards China based on specific circumstances and practical needs of different regions, increasingly showing signs of extending from the sub-regional level to the regional and global levels.

Firstly, at the sub-regional level, the United States actively intervenes in territorial sovereignty and maritime rights disputes related to China, deliberately deteriorating the security environment surrounding China. On the Diaoyu Islands issue, Biden has repeatedly stated that Article 5 of the Japan-US Security Treaty applies to the Diaoyu Islands. On the fifth anniversary of the arbitral tribunal ruling on the South China Sea involving the Philippines, US Secretary of State Blinken issued a statement claiming that China's expansionary maritime claims in the South China Sea have no basis in international law.<sup>19</sup> Particularly on the Taiwan question, which involves China's core interests, the US has placed the Taiwan Relations Act and the "Six Assurances" above the three China-US joint communiqués in an attempt to hollow out the One China principle. This poses not only a grave threat to the political foundation of China-US relations but also severe challenges to China's sovereignty, development and security interests.

Secondly, at the regional level, the United States seeks to shape the surrounding



environment of China's rise by leveraging its Indo-Pacific strategy. Brzezinski once pointed out that in the 21st century, as China evolves from a "regional power" to a "global power", the United States should consider China as one of the five "geostrategic players" with the capacity and national will to exercise power or influence beyond its borders in order to alter to a degree that affects America's interests-the existing geopolitical state of affairs. The Trump administration introduced the Indo-Pacific strategy to maintain a regional strategic balance favorable to the United States. The Biden administration has further expanded the regional coverage of the Indo-Pacific strategy, not only strengthening strategic cooperation with India and Southeast Asian countries but also expanding into Pacific island nations that have not received much attention before. In July 2022, Vice President Harris stated at the Pacific Islands Forum, "We recognize that in recent years, the Pacific Islands may not have received the diplomatic attention and support that you deserve. So today I am here to tell you directly: We are going to change that."<sup>20</sup>

Lastly, at the global level, the United States aims to narrow the space for China's development interests by providing economic aid to and strengthening cooperation with Africa and Latin America. The US perceives strategic competition with China in Africa and Latin America as crucial for maintaining and consolidating its global dominance. The Biden administration, while continuing the Trump administration's policy towards Africa and highlighting "great power competition", relies more on multilateral organizations and its allies to step up strategic competition with China in Africa, maintaining aid to Africa with political strings attached.<sup>21</sup> In Latin America, known as the "backyard" of the United States, the Biden administration trumpeted "America is back", following the anti-China approach of the Trump administration. It has increased strategic attention and resource allocation to Latin America, focusing on promoting agendas on "democracy and good governance", immigration issues and assistance for recovery in an effort to repair relationships with Latin American countries.

**C. An increasingly defined path in strategic competition with China.** One can observe an increasingly defined path in US competition with China from Biden administration's governing philosophy and the adjustment of its policy towards China with the following specific features:

Firstly, it has identified key areas of strategic competition based on its economic and technological strength. Renowned historian Paul Kennedy, in his book *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, points out that state-to-state competition, especially competition that features a pattern of the rise and fall of great powers, is fundamentally about comprehensive national power, encompassing technology, economy, and military strength. According to Kennedy, winning the great power competition requires enhancing one's own comprehensive capabilities.<sup>22</sup> The Biden administration has formulated its policy towards China focusing on high-tech industries of significant strategic importance, such as 5G communication, chips, semiconductors, electric vehicles, and renewable energy technologies, and implemented "across the board" containment of China in attempt to maintain and widen the gap with China in comprehensive strength.

Secondly, it is striving to gain control over international rules-making pertaining to strategic competition with China, with "values-based diplomacy" as its principle. Values are the inherent principles guiding rules-making while rules-making is the external manifestation

of values. “Values-based diplomacy” is not only a political tradition of the Democratic Party but also a preference for the Biden administration in advancing strategic competition with China. The Biden administration, under the pretext of human rights, democracy and freedom, has hyped up issues related to China’s internal affairs such as Xinjiang and vilified China over these issues. It has signed the *Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act* into law, prohibiting imports of Xinjiang products, and led European “values-based allies” in passing acts or bills to jointly sanction Chinese government officials.

Thirdly, it is advancing minilateralism to exclude China in the provision of global public goods. As an inevitable outcome of the development of global productivity and economic globalization, providing global public goods is an international obligation and a responsibility for both the United States and China as major countries. However, with the changing power dynamics between the two, the US regards the international public goods provided by China, such as the AIIB, the BRI and the Silk Road Fund, as “revisionist” behaviors challenging US hegemony. It has striven to step up its suppression and containment of China through a “minilateral” clique with its allies and partners. The Biden administration continues to push the Blue Dot Network initiated by the Trump administration, aiming to promote US infrastructure standards and create obstacles for the implementation and progress of China’s BRI. The Biden administration has recently been advancing the IPEF, also with the goal of reasserting dominance over the economic order in the Asia-Pacific region through geo-economic competition with China. The formation of a “minilateral” club is clearly targeting China in its strategic intent.

---

**Notes:**

1 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>, accessed on April 12, 2023.

2 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005), p.7.

3 Political Science, *Encyclopedia of China* (Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 1992), p.6.

4 Shen Yamei, “The Historical Causes and Current Problems of American Hegemony”, *Pacific Journal*, Issue 12, 2014, pp.59–68.

5 Wang Tao and Xia Yafeng, “Power and Diplomacy: Dean Acheson and the Formulation of Postwar American Policy toward Europe”, *Journal of Historical Studies*, Issue 5, 2020, pp.57–68.

6 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, translated by China Institute of International Studies (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House), 1998, p.36.

7 The White House, “Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference”, East Room, March 25, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/03/25/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference/>, accessed on April 12, 2023.

8 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (4th Ed.), translated by Zhang Xiaoming (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2015), p.18.

9 John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, translated by Zhao Minghao (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2013), p.202.

10 “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/>, accessed on April 12, 2023.

11 Zhou Minkai, “The Root Causes and Future Trends of the Current Chaos in Western Democracy—

A Theoretical Reflection Based on the Anglo-American ‘Black Swan Events’”, *People’s Forum · Academic Frontier*, Issue 13, 2017, pp.32–40.

12 Matthew Lee, “At Nixon library, Pompeo Declares China Engagement a Failure”, *The Associated Press*, July 24, 2020.

13 Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.97, No.2, March/April 2018, pp.60–70.

14 Wu Xinbo, “On China-US Strategic Competition”, *World Economy and Politics*, Issue 5, 2020, pp.96–130.

15 Ni Feng, Fu Mengzi, Tang Yongsheng and Wang Yong, “The Prospect of China-US Relations in the Biden Era”, *International Economic Review*, Issue 1, 2021, pp.102–115.

16 “National Security Strategy of the United States of America”, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>, accessed on April 16, 2023.

17 Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, translated by Hu Liping et al.(Beijing: Citic Press, 2015), p.432.

18 Liddell Hart, *Strategy: the Indirect Approach* (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2010), p.277.

19 Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, “Fifth Anniversary of the Arbitral Tribunal Ruling on the South China Sea”, July 11, 2021, available at <https://www.state.gov/fifth-anniversary-of-the-arbitral-tribunal-ruling-on-the-south-China-sea/>, accessed on April 16, 2023.

20 “The United States unveiled a new diplomatic strategy that prioritizes Pacific nations”, <https://www.zaobao.com/realtime/world/story20220713-1292353>, accessed on April 16, 2023.

21 Li Nan, “Characteristics and Trends of US Africa Policy amid Great Power Competition”, *American Studies*, Issue 3, 2022, pp.9–24.

22 Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, translated by Jiang Baoying et al.(Beijing: China Economic Press, 1989), pp.646–652.

(Translated by Peng Lu)

# An Analysis of Biden Administration's Space Strategy

Sun Xun, National University of Defense Technology

**Abstract:** *The Biden administration issued the first official space policy document and promoted the implementation of corresponding measures in space during its four-year tenure. The space policy document and the measures taken show that the Biden administration's space strategy aims to maintain US leadership in space, address space threats, advance space governance, and enhance nonmilitary utility in space. The implementation of the space strategy is promoted from four paths: advancing space weaponization and battlefield construction, strengthening geoscience research, promoting commercial space development, and carrying out space diplomacy. Due to the lack of funds and other reasons, the Biden administration still faces some challenges in the moon landing, satellite development and space force building.*

**Key Words:** US; Biden Administration; Space Strategy

Since the Second World War, successive US administrations have sought “absolute superiority” in space. The Biden administration continues the conventional thinking of this strategy, stressing that the United States will maintain its world leadership in space. The Biden administration regards space as an important strategic field related to national security and development. It not only maintains the leading position of the United States in the field of space military and technology through corresponding measures, but also is committed to playing a leading role in the making of space norms and rules. In December 2021, the Biden administration published its first official space policy document, titled *United States Space Priorities Framework* (hereinafter referred to as the Framework). The document outlines the broad plans for the United States to advance its space activities. Although it does not involve specific details and steps, it has important guiding significance for the formulation and implementation of the US space policy, and has even been called the “new strategy” of the US space by some media. In addition, the US Department of Defense issued in September 2022 a new version of “DOD Directive 3100.10 Space Policy”.

## I. Strategic Goals of the Biden Administration's Space Strategy

Through the analysis of the national security strategy, space policy documents and budget programs of the Biden administration, it can be seen that although the goals of the Biden administration's space strategy have certain continuity with the overall goals of the US space strategy since the 1970s, there are new developments in some areas.

**A. Maintaining and expanding advantages, and ensuring the “dominance” of the United States in space.** After World War II, the United States government has been

committed to pursuing the “absolute superiority” in space. Continuing the decades-long thinking inertia of US strategy, the goal of the Biden administration’s space strategy and policy has been to maintain and expand the advantages of the United States in space, ensure and strengthen the leadership of the United States in space. The Biden administration argues that America’s achievements in space reflect its global leadership and that it should continue to lead the development of space-related fields to show American leadership. In the National Security Strategy, the Biden administration says the United States is best positioned to lead the world with power and purpose, and that “the United States will maintain its position as the world’s leader in space.”<sup>1</sup> The Biden administration considers that the advanced scientific and technological strength of the US ensures that it will remain a “leader” in space now and for some time to come.<sup>2</sup> But the United States is also aware that its technological edge in space is declining. Pentagon assessments show that China is rapidly overtaking the United States in space technology development, predicting that the United States could lose its strategic and technological edge by 2032. Therefore, the Biden administration has emphasized maintaining the advantages of the United States in space research and technology, and always being a global leader in the fields of science, technology, and engineering.

**B. Responding to space threats and safeguarding the national security of the US.** The Biden administration believes that the growing strategic competition in space poses serious challenges to US national security interests. In particular, some countries (referring to China and Russia) are developing space forces at an astonishing speed, intensifying the confrontation with the US in space, making the US face imminent threats, and increasing the defense burden of the US from space and in space. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said during his nomination hearing that China and Russia “pose a serious and growing threat to US national security interests from their space activities.”<sup>3</sup> In the *Annual Threat Assessment 2022* released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the United States continued its consistent tone, accusing China and Russia of posing a serious threat to US security in space. China is “deploying new destructive and non-destructive land-based and space-based anti-satellite weapons” that will militarize space, the report said, and Russia is also developing, testing and deploying related anti-satellite and space countermeasure weapons to undermine US space capabilities.<sup>4</sup> In this situation, the US military facilities in space and critical infrastructure on the ground are exposed to risk, and the security and stability of the US in space have decreased. Therefore, the US should actively shape its strategic environment, strengthen its deterrence and strike capabilities in space, and curb the encroachment on its interests.

**C. Advancing space governance and promoting the security and sustainability of the space environment.** The Biden administration is focused on the security, stability and sustainability of the space environment. The Framework sets out two space policy priorities, the second of which is entitled “Preserving Space for Current and Future Generations”, mainly focusing on space sustainability. As countries continue to improve satellite launch capabilities, satellite orbits are becoming increasingly congested, and space debris is steadily growing, and the risk of a space collision has increased significantly. The United States has the largest number of satellites in orbit in the world, and relatively bears the largest space risk, so the protection of space assets is particularly important for the United States. According to the May 2022 data of the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) satellite

database, there are 5,465 satellites in orbit around the world, of which the United States has 3,434.<sup>5</sup> The United States has repeatedly accused China and Russia of conducting anti-satellite weapons tests in recent years, which have created a large amount of space debris, posing a threat to space operating vehicles and manned space flights. Therefore, the Biden administration has proposed to prioritize space sustainability and planetary protection, strengthen the ability of the United States in areas such as space junk recycling, space debris removal, and space traffic coordination, and minimize the impact of space activities on the outer space environment.

**D. Enhancing the non-military utility of space and developing the US civil and commercial space.** The Trump administration's space strategy emphasizes the role of space as a field of war, while the Biden administration focuses relatively on the non-military utility of space and emphasizes the role of space as a comprehensive means. The Biden administration sees space as one of the most important means of achieving the security, economic, social and international influence of the US. In addition to recognizing the role of space in supporting national security, it also attaches importance to the utility of space in promoting economic and social development, and proposes to better use civil and commercial space capabilities to serve the United States. Economically, the data and products generated in space can provide tangible economic benefits and opportunities for the United States. Breakthroughs in space technology and applications can spur the innovation and development of American enterprises and create many job opportunities. In society, satellite data has improved people's lives, such as global navigation, remote communication and monitoring, and management of natural resources, which has made great changes in human life and production mode. The Biden administration has focused on resolving domestic issues. Among the six priorities of the Biden administration, five of which are domestic issues. How to effectively use space resources and use space to serve the domestic politics of the United States is an important concern of the Biden administration.

## **II. Implementation Path of the Biden Administration's Space Strategy**

Despite the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation and restoring America's international influence, they have not stopped the Biden administration from making frequent moves in space. The implementation path of the Biden administration's space strategy mainly includes the following four dimensions.

**A. Hying up the atmosphere of strategic competition in space and promoting the space weaponization and battlefield construction.** The development of space military forces is the hard power support for maintaining US space hegemony. Under the Trump administration, the US accelerated the "militarization of space", established the US Space Force and strengthened its space warfare capabilities. The Biden administration has continued the previous administration's measures on the militarization of space, prioritized military space activities, and further accelerated space weaponization and battlefield construction, and promoted the pace of actual combat of the Space Force. At the beginning of his presidency, Biden vowed to "fully support" the work of the Space Force and continue to develop space military forces. In the new *Space Policy*, the United States considers space to be a "priority area of national military power" to defend against "hostile acts", reflecting the trend of

further intensification of space weaponization and battlefield. In its fiscal year 2022 defense budget proposal, the Biden administration requested \$ 17.4 billion for the Space Force, an increase of \$ 2.2 billion from fiscal year 2021.<sup>6</sup> The FY 2023 defense budget allotted \$ 24.5 billion for the Space Force, an increase of nearly 40.8% from FY 2022.<sup>7</sup>

a. Playing up space threat to justify the US militarization of space. In the context of great power strategic competition, the United States regards space as a new field and new frontier of great power competition. The US has repeatedly exaggerated and played up the idea that China and Russia are turning space into an “operational domain” by developing cutting-edge technologies, constantly developing, testing and deploying relevant anti-satellite weapons and space countermeasure weapons, and have strong “space warfare” capabilities. In the Framework, the Biden administration alludes to China’s efforts to make space an operational domain. The *Combined Space Operations (CSpO) Vision 2031*, released by the United States and its western allies, declares that space has evolved into a competitive operational domain. On September 13, 2022, B. Chance Saltzman, the nominee for the Chief of Space Operations for the US Space Force, said at his Senate nomination hearing that China has become the primary challenger to the US in space. China has the ability to interfere with, damage and destroy US satellites, and thereby destroy US ground military infrastructure. US interests are at risk. The primary task of building the US Space Force is to counter strategic competitors in space.<sup>8</sup> By playing up serious external challenges, the Biden administration is affirming the positive significance of US military space capabilities as an important means of defending national security. Frank Kendall, the Secretary of the US Air Force, said that, the anti-satellite capabilities of adversaries such as Russia and China require the DOD to invest in advanced space systems, which are driven by threats.<sup>9</sup>

b. Improving the capacity building of the US Space Force. As a newly established service, the Space Force is gradually integrating its capabilities and resources in missile warning and surveillance, satellite communications, equipment procurement, and intelligence networks by adjusting and optimizing its organizational structure and taking over other relevant military departments. Based on the establishment of the Space Operations Command (SPOC), the Space Force in August, 2021 successively established the Space Systems Command (SSC), which is responsible for the research and development, procurement, deployment and maintenance of space offensive and defensive systems, and the Space Training and Readiness Command (STARCOM), which is responsible for the education and training of the Space Force warfighters. The Space Systems Command took over the entire Space and Missile Systems Center (SMC) as well as the Air Force Strategic Warning and Surveillance Systems Division. For space communications, 11 Army and 4 Navy satellite communications units were transferred to the Space Force. The transfer of the Army and Navy satellite communications mission marks that the Space Force has officially taken over all US military satellite communications and assumed military satellite communications functions, which is the first time that US military communications satellites have been under the control of a single service. In terms of equipment procurement, the Space Development Agency (SDA), formerly part of the Department of Defense, and several space equipment procurement departments of the Air Force were transferred to the Space Systems Command. In terms of intelligence, in order to enhance its intelligence capabilities, the Space Force has not only added intelligence contingent to its satellite operations units, but also established the

National Space Intelligence Center to provide key intelligence on threats, foreign intentions and activities in the space domain and to strengthen cooperation with other national intelligence agencies. In terms of cyber, the Space Operations Command has added several squadrons of cyber specialists to support military units using communications, surveillance and navigation satellites.

c. Reinforcing the operational capabilities of the Space Force. In the face of the rapidly changing strategic environment and the rapid development of Chinese and Russian space forces, the Biden administration focuses on the development of asymmetric advantages in space to promote the operational capabilities of the US Space Force in, from, and to space, and improve the efficiency of operational decision-making and response. First, it improves the establishment of space-related departments within the Department of Defense under the guidance of “facilitating the quick action of the Space Force”. The new *Space Policy* defines, for the first time in an official document, the division of responsibilities among the Department of Defense’s space divisions in policy, technology, procurement, research, personnel, intelligence and training to better meet the requirements of a rapidly changing strategic environment. Second, it promotes the digital modernization of the Space Force. In May 2021, the Space Force released the *U.S. Space Force: Vision for a Digital Service*, which proposes three transformation tenets (Interconnected, Innovative, Digitally Dominant) and four key focus areas (Digital Engineering, Digital Workforce, Digital Headquarters, and Digital Operations),<sup>10</sup> and plans to establish the world’s first fully digital service. Third, it focuses on improving space operational support capabilities such as missile warning and tracking. The development of hypersonic weapons in China and Russia has brought new challenges to the US space reconnaissance system. The Biden administration has made strengthening space surveillance, warning, and tracking the “top priority” and has given it significant funding. In September 2022, Colin H. Kahl, the undersecretary of defense for policy, stressed at a Pentagon conference that the United States must continue to invest in its space-based missile warning and tracking systems, and that “the Space Force expects to spend \$ 24.5 billion over the next five years to improve these capabilities.”<sup>11</sup> In the defense budget for fiscal year 2023, the budget for space reconnaissance systems increased by \$ 7 billion compared with fiscal year 2022, mainly for space-based missile warning and tracking system, global positioning system and multi-orbit architecture construction of communications satellites.

**B. Turning the focus to the earth, and strengthening the US geoscience research.** Different from the Trump administration, the Biden administration’s space strategy turns the focus of attention to the earth, trying to revive the US scientific research, which bears a thick civil color. Much of the Framework focuses on civilian and broader space applications.

a. Returning to climate change research. The Trump administration has seriously diminished its focus on climate change, withdrawing from the Paris Agreement at the beginning of its presidency. The Trump administration not only slashed budgets for climate change-related research at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Energy (DOE), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), but also cut funding for geoscience research at NASA, with a focus on funding NASA’s space exploration programs. The Biden administration’s space strategy returns to climate change research, refocusing and using space research to solve the climate crisis, and giving more



attention to geoscience work. The Biden administration made climate change as the central issue of the government and promoted the implementation of the new climate deal. It affirms the positive role of space in addressing climate change, and believes that the massive data collected from space would help the government take timely preventive measures against extreme weather, natural disasters and climate change. It strengthens the promotion of space applications related to climate change, and provides greater economic support for geoscience and earth observation projects. The Biden administration's budget for fiscal year 2022 to fight climate change increased by \$ 14 billion over fiscal year 2021 and nearly \$ 16.7 billion more for fiscal year 2023, for a total of \$ 45 billion.<sup>12</sup> To further demonstrate the importance of space climate research, the Biden administration raised the status of ministers in related fields and added the President's National Climate Adviser to the National Space Council, in addition to the heads of the Departments of Education, Labor, Agriculture and Interior.<sup>13</sup>

b. Investing in science, technology, engineering and mathematics education. Expanding science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education was one of the three priorities outlined by the Biden administration at the inaugural National Space Council. The Biden administration believes that "investing in STEM education is critical to continuing America's leadership for future generations, developing the nation's STEM workforce, and driving the future economy."<sup>14</sup> It called on public and private space system stakeholders to actively engage in collaborative efforts to enhance US innovation capabilities. In September 2022, the Biden Administration released the *Interagency Roadmap to Support Space-Related STEM Education and Workforce*, outlining a series of executive action plans to bolster the US capacity to inspire, prepare, and employ a diverse and inclusive space workforce.<sup>15</sup> In October 2022, with support from the Aerospace Industries Association and the American Institute of Aeronautics and Space, a new consortium of 10 private sector companies was formed to launch regional pilot projects at three strategic locations to provide new training and employment routes.

c. Advancing the space exploration program. The Biden administration, like the Trump administration, has maintained a keen interest in space exploration. In 2017, the Trump administration modified the Obama administration's plan to land on asteroid and officially approved the restart of the Artemis program to land on the moon, making the moon a relay station for the Mars landing. The Biden administration inherited the Trump administration's development direction of space exploration, saying that "we are committed to continuing the Artemis program in the coming years to send humans to the moon."<sup>16</sup> The Biden administration's push for space exploration is focused on landing the first woman and first person of color on the moon and building a robust lunar ecosystem to prepare for future missions to Mars and beyond. In order to increase support for the Artemis program, the Biden administration allocated \$ 7.5 billion for the Artemis moon mission in NASA's \$ 26 billion budget for fiscal year 2023, a 9 percent increase over the previous fiscal year.

**C. Promoting integration and advancing the frontier development of US in commercial space.** The Biden administration actively promotes the in-depth cooperation between the government, the military and commercial space enterprises, and uses commercial space capabilities to make up for the deficiency of official capabilities, so as to reduce the burden on government funds, improve the competitiveness of commercial space enterprises, and promote the cutting-edge development of commercial space activities in the field of space

technology, space applications and space services.

a. Defining the division of functions between government and commercial space companies. Strengthening the cooperation between the government and commercial space companies is one of the important ways for the United States to promote the development of space science and technology. Like the Trump administration, the Biden administration has encouraged private sectors to participate in space exploration projects and actively promoted government partnerships with the commercial space industry and operators to improve the resilience of the space industry supply chain. Under the Artemis program, NASA is working to develop a lander for astronauts using commercial spaceflight capabilities. Some of the development modules for the Gateway lunar space station have also been assigned to commercial companies such as Maxar Technologies and Northrop Grumman. In the areas of space situational awareness (SDA), such as space environment monitoring and space traffic management, the US government has demonstrated a need for commercial space capabilities. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has partnered with commercial environmental monitoring companies through the Commercial Weather Data Pilot (CWDP) programs, with the intention of engaging commercial companies as the suppliers in space weather. In terms of space traffic management, the NOAA issued a *Request for Information*(RFI) in February, 2022 to find commercial data sources that can fill gaps in existing government data to enhance space traffic management capabilities.

b. Promoting the military use of commercial space services. The Biden administration and the Space Force actively integrate commercial space strengths and seek to leverage commercial space capabilities and services to meet national security needs. Improving space situational awareness is a top priority for commercial integration of the Space Force. Space situational awareness (SSA) involves detecting, tracking and identifying threats to space targets and relies on space reconnaissance, surveillance, data processing and transmission. The Space Force hopes to use data from commercial companies to fill its own intelligence gaps and better help satellite units identify potential threats in orbit. In April 2022, the Space Command released a new classified version of the *Commercial Integration Strategy*, which proposes three route frameworks to better strengthen partnerships with commercial space companies and help fill gaps in their capabilities. The strategy identifies space situational awareness as the primary capability that commercial space can provide, prioritizing cooperation in command and control, big data management, modeling and simulation, space control, and satellite communications and terminals, while also pursuing commercial service channels in remote sensing, satellite communications bandwidth, and quantum computing.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the Space Force is seeking commercial services to help clean up space junk and develop a commercial orbital debris removal system to allow the Space Command to focus more on “fighting wars”. The Space Force has become somewhat dependent on commercial space companies for satellite communications and space launches. Currently, commercial satellite communications networks provide most of the communications for the global military operators of the US military. The Space Systems Command conducted eight National Security Space Launch (NSSL) missions in fiscal years 2022 and 2023, five of which were undertaken by United Launch Alliance and three by SpaceX.

**D. Attaching importance to multilateral cooperation and actively carrying out US space diplomacy.** The Trump administration’s space strategy is based on the fundamental

principle of “America first”, and the *2018 National Space Strategy* clearly proposed to “ensure international agreements to prioritize the interests of the American people, workers and businesses”, and cooperate with international partners only when it is beneficial to the United States.<sup>18</sup> The space strategy of the Biden administration attaches importance to multilateral cooperation, emphasizing that the network of allies and partners of the United States is a strategic advantage of the United States, and the intention of countries to explore space brings opportunities for the United States to expand its global partnership network, and the development of space-related agendas opens up new ways for the United States to carry out international cooperation. The Biden administration’s space diplomacy is mainly reflected in the following three aspects.

a. Space exploration. The Biden administration is engaged in cooperative research with allies and partner countries in space exploration, mainly to share the high cost of space-related missions of the United States. After taking office, the Biden administration said it would “continue to advance decades-long cooperation with established space powers and forge new partnerships with emerging space countries.”<sup>19</sup> The Biden administration extended the use of the International Space Station, which was scheduled to close in 2024, to 2030 and continued to work with the international partners of the station (Russia, Europe, Japan, Canada, etc. ). For the exploration of the moon, Mars and beyond, the United States is primarily engaged in international cooperation through the Artemis program, and participating countries will provide funding and development of some equipment. For example, in the development of the Gateway lunar space station, the European Space Agency (ESA) will provide radiation monitors and space meteorological instrument modules, Japan will provide life support systems, Canada will produce robotic arms, and Italian companies will provide pressurization modules and so on.<sup>20</sup>

b. The space military. The Biden administration adopted the policy of “using alliance to suppress the enemy”, strengthened multi-level cooperation in the field of space military, and jointly promoted the militarization of space with allies, in order to share the cost of defending space and at the same time reduce the international community’s criticism of the United States’ space militarization. General John Raymond, the former head of USSPACECOM, said that America’s allies help the US maintain its superiority in space, providing a more solid foundation for the combat effectiveness of the US army.<sup>21</sup> Based on its alliance network, the Biden administration has actively built a space alliance with allies as the core and carried out alliance space military activities. Specifically, military cooperation in space between the United States and its allies is mainly reflected in joint space operations, information and intelligence sharing, military training and military exercises. On the basis of the “Five Eyes”, the United States brought France and Germany into the *Combined Space Operations (CSpO)* initiative, and released the *Combined Space Operations Vision 2031* in February 2022, which put forward requirements for the future combined space operations between the United States and its allies from three dimensions: guiding principles, mission objectives and realization paths. At the 2021 NATO Brussels summit, NATO leaders explicitly extended space to the domain of “collective defense,” stating that “attacks in or from space could lead to the invocation of *Article 5*”.<sup>22</sup> Collective military action under this article originally applied only to more conventional military attacks on land, sea and air. In January 2022, NATO publicly released the *NATO Overarching Space Policy* for the first time, stating that NATO will

strengthen security cooperation in space collective defense and crisis management, and share space military information.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the United States and its allies have regularly held space war exercises such as Schriever, Space Flag and Global Sentinel.

c. Space rulemaking. The Biden administration attaches great importance to cooperation in the development of international institutions for space, vowing to coordinate with the international coalition to jointly develop norms, rules and principles for responsible space behavior. The current international law governing outer space is the *Outer Space Treaty 1967* and its four subsidiary legal instruments. Since the relevant treaties were formulated in the 1960s and 1970s, there are many gaps and loopholes, such as the treaty prohibiting the deployment and use of weapons of mass destruction in outer space, but now most spacecraft can be used for both military and civilian purposes, and it is difficult to define whether they have characteristics of mass destruction. The Biden administration believes that the United States should take the lead in developing the norms, rules, and principles that govern current activities in outer space, with key standards designed to promote the responsible, peaceful, and sustainable exploration and use of space. The Biden administration believes that the process for setting rules in space can be modeled on the development of corresponding rules and laws in the maritime domain, focusing on codes of conduct that clearly define what constitutes a threat, hostile or irresponsible behavior, rather than prohibiting specific weapons. Jake Sullivan, the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, said in December 2021 that the National Security Council would begin developing “proposals for new international norms that protect the space environment while contributing to space stability and security.”<sup>24</sup> In April, 2022, the Biden administration launched an initiative to “prohibit destructive, direct-ascent anti-satellite (ASAT) missile tests” and urged all nations to follow suit, seeking to establish this as a new international norm for “responsible” space behavior. Therefore, the United States promotes the formulation of space-related regulations, which in fact, aims to grasp the dominance of space rule-making, formulate rules conducive to the United States, occupy an advantageous position in the competition in space, and use soft means to limit the development of China’s and Russia’s space capabilities to achieve “rule deterrence.”

### **III . Challenges Facing the Biden Administration’s Space Strategy**

The development of space capabilities requires significant investment. There are a lot of uncertainties about whether the US investment in space can meet the needs of related programs, given its huge budget deficit. In addition, the development of space-related capabilities takes a rather long period of time, often exceeding the four-year term of a president. The 2024 US presidential election has begun, and it is also uncertain whether the next administration will make adjustments to the US space strategy.

**A. The manned mission to the moon has been delayed several times.** Since the introduction of the Biden administration’s Artemis program, the time of the moon landing has been postponed from 2024 to no earlier than 2025. At present, it is likely to continue to be postponed due to technical and budget influences. Artemis 1 was originally scheduled to launch in 2018, but due to the protracted development of the Space Launch System (SLS), it had not entered the launch state until this year, but the launch schedule has been delayed

several times, mainly due to problems such as insufficient exhaust temperature of the SLS engine and fuel leakage. The development of the Gateway lunar space station is also slower than planned, with new space suits not expected to be available until April 2025 at the earliest, and a joint program with SpaceX to develop an astronaut lunar lander has been delayed by nearly seven months due to legal disputes.

Budget issues were another important factor for the repeated delays. The development of space exploration equipment requires a lot of money, and although the Biden administration has increased the space budget, it still cannot fully meet the needs. According to the November 2021 inspection report of NASA's Office of Inspector General, the Artemis program has cost \$ 40 billion so far, and is expected to cost a total of \$ 93 billion by 2025. If NASA does not cut costs, maintaining the Artemis program will face major difficulties.<sup>25</sup>

**B. Research and development of new satellites have lagged behind significantly.** In order to adapt to the changes of the new strategic environment and better detect "hostile acts", the development of a new missile early warning satellite is an important task for the Space Force to strengthen military power. Given the long development cycles of traditional satellites, the high risk of delays due to technical difficulties, and the fact that competitors are rapidly developing new satellites, some of America's satellite development programs could easily become obsolete. Therefore, the traditional way of developing large satellites does not meet the needs of the rapidly changing situation, and the Space Force urgently needs to shift to the development of small satellites and accelerate the procurement process. "The US Space Force is buying satellites worth of billions of dollars that take an average of seven years to develop," said Frank Calvelli, the Space Force's director of acquisition. "China is rapidly building new satellite systems, so a new way of doing business needs to be designed." The Space Force "needs satellites that are smaller, cheaper, and faster to develop."<sup>26</sup> For example, in the missile warning satellite, the United States launched the development of the new generation Overhead Persistent Infrared (OPIR) high-orbit warning system program in 2018 to replace the currently used Space Based Infrared System (SBIRS) missile warning satellite. The US plans to launch its first high-orbit satellite in 2025 and complete the first phase of networking of five satellites in 2029, which is the traditional model of satellite development with a long cycle. In October 2022, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said that the program was progressing behind schedule and that there might be problems with the ground systems, sensors and spacecraft integration, "the 2025 launch target is unlikely to be met."<sup>27</sup> The Space Force's need for high-orbit satellites is also decreasing, saying that the next generation Overhead Persistent Infrared program will be the last high-orbit system, and in the future it will turn to increasing low and medium orbit satellites to improve the resilience of space systems. In 2021, the US Space Warfighting Analysis Center (SWAC) outlined a future missile warning and tracking architecture consisting of low and mid-orbit satellites.

**C. The Space Force construction faces financial difficulties.** Although the US Space Force is focused on streamlining and agility, it still needs to bring in talents from other services. The Space Force opens a transfer channel every year to facilitate the transfer of the military personnel from other services to the Space Force. To this end, the Space Force has continuously introduced incentive policies in management and welfare to improve the enthusiasm of professionals to transfer to the Space Force. For example, the Space Force

launched a high bonus program of \$ 12,000 to \$ 20,000 in April 2022 to attract personnel with professional technical backgrounds to join the Space Force.<sup>28</sup> But for now, the Space Force still have difficulty meeting its staffing plan.

Budget issues have also limited the construction of the Space Force to some extent. The transition of the Army and Navy's satellite communications departments to the Space Force had been delayed until 2022 due to a budget delay for fiscal year 2021. Three days before the launch of the Space Force's new National Space Intelligence Center (NSIC), the US Congress submitted a report saying that "the Space Force's ambitious plans for new architectures and missions do not appear to be supported by the ongoing future budget to achieve capability" and asked the Space Force "not to initiate any program more than it can afford."<sup>29</sup>

## **IV. Conclusion**

The Biden administration has maintained great continuity in the space strategy and put forward new priorities in light of new domestic and foreign situations. The Biden administration has corrected the Trump administration's disdain for science and unilateral stance, and pays more attention to science and technology and international cooperation. It sees science and technology as an important means to maintain the leadership in space, increases the research and development of geoscience and new satellites, and attaches importance to STEM education to maintain the competitiveness of science and technology in the future. At the same time, the Biden administration focuses on integrating the resources of its allies, not only deepening cooperation in the military field, but also integrating in the fields of space exploration, development and governance. In particular, in the space rulemaking, the US intends to lead its allies in pushing for international space norms that benefit the US. In the context of the relative decline of US strength and the rapid rise of China and other emerging economies, the Biden administration's space strategy identifies China and Russia as "strategic competitors" and tries to compete with China, Russia and other countries in space. The essence is to maintain US hegemony in space and serve the great-power competition strategy of the US.

---

### **Notes:**

1 White House. *National Security Strategy*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf/>.

2 White House. *United States Space Priorities Framework*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/United-States-Space-Priorities-Framework-December-1-2021.pdf>.

3 Sputnik. US Defense Secretary Nominee Austin Says Russian and Chinese Space Threats Are Growing. <https://sputniknews.cn/20210120/1032918569.html>.

4 Office of the Director of National Intelligence. *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2022-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

5 UCS Satellite Database. <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/satellite-database>.

6 Zhang Yifan, "What's New in the Biden Administration's First Military Budget". <https://milhuanqiu.com/article/43M3WoSnFOR>.

7 Biden's 2023 defense budget adds billions for US Space Force. <https://spacenews.com/bidens-2023-defense-budget-adds-billions-for-u-s-space-force/>.

8 US Department of Defense. *Nominee to Lead Space Force Testifies Goals, Priorities Before Senate Committee*. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3157116/nominee-to-lead-space-force-testifies-goals-priorities-before-senate-committee/>.

9 *Biden's 2023 defense budget adds billions for US Space Force*. <https://spacenews.com/bidens-2023-defense-budget-adds-billions-for-u-s-space-force/>.

10 US Space Force. *Vision for a Digital Service*. [https://media.defense.gov/2021/May/06/2002635623/-1/-1/1/USSF%20VISION%20FOR%20A%20DIGITAL%20SERVICE%202021%20\(2\).PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2021/May/06/2002635623/-1/-1/1/USSF%20VISION%20FOR%20A%20DIGITAL%20SERVICE%202021%20(2).PDF).

11 *Pentagon leaders discuss China's space ambitions at classified meeting*. <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2022/09/08/pentagon-leaders-discuss-chinas-space-ambitions-at-classified-meeting/>.

12 White House. *The President's Budget for Fiscal Year 2023*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2022/03/28/fact-sheet-the-presidents-budget-for-fiscal-year-2023/>.

13 White House. *Executive Order on the National Space*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/01/executive-order-on-the-national-space-council/>.

14 White House. *United States Space Priorities Framework*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/United-States-Space-Priorities-Framework--December-1-2021.pdf>.

15 White House. *Interagency Roadmap to Support Space-Related STEM Education and Workforce*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/09-2022-Interagency-Roadmap-to-Support-Space-Related-STEM-Education-and-Workforce.pdf>.

16 *US still committed to landing Artemis astronauts on the moon, White House says*. <https://www.space.com/biden-administration-commits-to-artemis-moon-landings>

17 *US Space Command releases commercial integration strategy*. <https://www.c4isrnet.com/battlefield-tech/space/2022/04/05/us-space-command-releases-commercial-integration-strategy/>

18 White House. *President Donald J. Trump Is Unveiling an America First National Space Strategy*. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-unveiling-america-first-national-space-strategy/>.

19 White House. *United States Space Priorities Framework*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/United-States-Space-Priorities-Framework-December-1-2021.pdf>.

20 *NASA's Lunar Gateway: The plans for a permanent space station that will orbit the Moon*. <https://www.sciencefocus.com/space/nasa-lunar-gateway/>.

21 *Combined Space Operations Initiative Welcomes France And Germany*. <https://spacewatch.global/2020/02/combined-space-operations-initiative-welcomes-france-and-germany>.

22 *Brussels Summit Communiqué*. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm?selectedLocale=en).

23 *NATO's overarching Space Policy*. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_190862.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_190862.htm).

24 *Biden administration turns focus to space security*. <https://spacenews.com/biden-administration-turns-focus-to-space-security/>.

25 *NASA will spend \$93 billion on Artemis moon program by 2025, report estimates*. <https://www.space.com/nasa-artemis-moon-program-93-billion-2025>.

26 *Space Force procurement chief criticizes over-engineered satellite programs* [EB/OL]. <https://spacenews.com/space-force-procurement-chief-criticizes-over-engineered-satellite-programs/>.

27 *On National Security | Tough to-do list for new Space Force boss*. <https://spacenews.com/on-national-security-tough-to-do-list-for-new-space-force-boss/>.

28 *Space Force Offering Bonuses Up to \$20,000 for New Guardians with Tech Backgrounds*. <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2022/04/25/space-force-offering-bonuses-20000-new-guardians-tech-backgrounds.html>.

29 *Space Force Launches New Intelligence Unit as Congress Voices Concerns over Growth* [EB/OL]. <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2022/07/05/space-force-launches-new-intelligence-unit-congress-voices-concerns-over-growth.html>.

(Translated by Liu Yaojun)

# France's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Military Arrangements

Zhang Chi and Peng Tingfa, International Defense College,  
National Defense University

**Abstract:** *France has overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific region and has long deployed military forces over there. With the introduction of its Indo-Pacific strategy, France has taken proactive actions militarily, showing various new trends in its military arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region. Against the backdrop of intensified competition among major countries and accelerated reshaping of regional patterns, France has multiple intentions in its plot for the Indo-Pacific region, which will have an impact on the overall security environment and relevant parties in the region. Due to various factors, France's Indo-Pacific strategy and its military arrangements are also facing multiple difficulties, and there are still many obstacles for it to achieve the expected goals.*

**Key Words:** France's Indo-Pacific Strategy; Military Arrangements; Regional Security; US-China Contest

As the Indo-Pacific region gradually becomes a global geopolitical center of gravity, the strategic competition among major countries over the Indo-Pacific region is becoming increasingly prominent. In 2018, French President Macron set out France's concept of the Indo-Pacific strategy. After three years of deliberation and adjustment, the French government officially released the official document entitled France's Indo-Pacific Strategy in July, 2021. Under the guidance of its Indo-Pacific strategy, France has actively devised its military arrangements, which will have a significant impact on the regional environment, Sino-French relations and the contest between China and the United States.

## I. France's Indo-Pacific Strategy

The term Indo-Pacific first appeared in the 1920s and did not receive widespread attention at its inception. In the 21st century, under the vigorous promotion of politicians and scholars in the United States and Japan, the term Indo-Pacific has gradually become a buzz word in international politics. As the United States officially introduced its Indo-Pacific strategy in 2019, its Asian and European allies have followed suit and formulated their own Indo-Pacific strategies based on their own strategic interests. Among them, France successively issued 5 official documents related to the Indo-Pacific in just three years since it set out the Indo-Pacific concept, and officially released France's Indo-Pacific Strategy in July, 2021, thus becoming the first EU country to introduce the Indo-Pacific strategy.

**A. The formulation of France's Indo-Pacific strategy.** France has for long paid close



attention to the Indo-Pacific region, and the formulation of its Indo-Pacific strategy can be divided into four stages:

Stage 1: Historical origin. As early as the 17th and 18th centuries, France initially set foot in the Asia-Pacific region during its colonial expansion, and it established colonies in the region in the 19th century. After the Cold War, France gradually adjusted its global strategy and attached greater importance to the Asia-Pacific region. In early 1994, the Mitterrand government issued France's Asia Initiative, advocating for increased investment and market expansion in Asia.<sup>1</sup> In 1996, French President Chirac delivered his New Asia speech during his visit to Singapore, emphasizing that Asia is France's "new frontier".<sup>2</sup> During the Hollande government, France proposed the policy of "pivot to Asia".<sup>3</sup> In 2017, the French government issued Defense and National Security Strategy Review, which clearly expressed concern for security in the Asia Pacific region. However, the French authorities still used the term Asia-Pacific and had not yet used the term Indo-Pacific till the end of the Hollande administration's term.

Stage 2: Conceptual phase. Macron continued and increased France's attention to the Asia Pacific region when he came to power in May, 2017. On May 2, 2018, Macron publicly proposed France's Indo-Pacific concept for the first time during his visit to Australia.<sup>4</sup> On May 3, Macron delivered a speech after arriving in New Caledonia, stating that France is an Indo-Pacific power and that the Indo-Pacific region is at the core of France's policy.<sup>5</sup>

Stage 3: Deliberation and formulation. From 2018 to 2021, France released five official documents related to the Indo-Pacific region, namely *France's Asia Pacific Strategy by 2030*, *France and Security in the Indo-Pacific*, *France's Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*, *Report on Strategic Issues in the South China Sea* and *France's Partnership in the Indo-Pacific*. These 5 documents explain France's policy proposals concerning the Indo-Pacific region from different perspectives, laying the foundation for France's official version of the Indo-Pacific strategy. In July, 2021, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs formally released an official document entitled France's Indo-Pacific Strategy, marking France's Indo-Pacific strategy's taking shape.

Stage 4: Modification and adjustment. In September, 2021, the United States, Britain and Australia announced the establishment of AUKUS trilateral security partnership. The relationship between France and Australia reached a freezing point when Australia unilaterally abrogated the contract for French submarines. France subsequently deleted the content related to Australia in its Indo-Pacific strategy and released a revised version of *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy* in February, 2022. The new version removed the content concerning cooperation with Australia, stating that "France is reassessing the strategic partnership between the two countries".<sup>6</sup> This version is the latest version of *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy* officially released by the French government to date.

**B. The main content of France's Indo Pacific strategy.** The main content of France's Indo-Pacific strategy can be summarized in the following five aspects:

The first is to emphasize the important strategic position of the Indo-Pacific region. According to *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, the important strategic position of the Indo-Pacific region is reflected in three aspects: firstly, the waters covered by the Indo-Pacific region are not only a key area for global trade and energy supply but also a place where various disputes and threats overlap, having a profound impact on the global situation. In the context of competition among major countries, the geopolitical balance in the Indo-Pacific region is

being reshaped, and France advocates for working together with Indo-Pacific partners to maintain a rule-based multilateral international order. Secondly, the region is an important axis of global economy. The economic potential of the Indo-Pacific region is enormous, and it is expected that its GDP will account for more than 50% of the global total by 2024.<sup>7</sup> Indo-Pacific countries are also at the forefront of the world in terms of infrastructure connectivity and high-tech, especially digital technology. Thirdly, major global issues are intertwined in the Indo-Pacific region, and the achievement of sustainable development goals is closely linked with the Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific region is facing multiple threats in areas such as climate change, biodiversity and healthcare, and “France’s Indo-Pacific strategy aims to address various traditional and non-traditional threats faced by the region”.<sup>8</sup>

The second is to consolidate France’s presence and influence in the Indo-Pacific region. France’s presence and influence in the Indo-Pacific region cover the following five aspects: France’s overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific region and their important roles; Various institutions and institutional networks of the French government in the Indo-Pacific region; France’s military presence and distribution in the Indo-Pacific region; Economic ties between France and the Indo-Pacific region; The cooperative relationship between France and the Indo-Pacific region in fields such as education, scientific research and innovation. Currently, 7 out of France’s 13 overseas departments and territories are located in the Indo-Pacific region; France has an exclusive economic zone of 10.2 million square kilometers in the Indo-Pacific region, which is also the second largest exclusive economic zone in the world, accounting for more than 90% of the total area of France’s exclusive economic zone; There are approximately 1.65 million French citizens residing in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>9</sup>

The third is to strengthen France’s partnership in the Indo-Pacific region. France regards India, Japan and ASEAN countries as its priority strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific region and plans to forge a France-India-Australia trilateral axis in the Indo-Pacific region, attempting to build an Indo-Pacific partnership network centered on France and led by France. *France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy* states that “the United States is an ally of France and an important actor in the Indo-Pacific region, and France hopes to maintain close relations and strengthen coordination with the United States”.<sup>10</sup> France has also established strategic partnership with Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam and seeks to further deepen cooperation with Malaysia, ROK and New Zealand in Indo-Pacific affairs. In addition, relying on its overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific region, France actively participates in international organizations and multilateral mechanisms related to the Indo-Pacific in its capacity as an Indo-Pacific country, and its participation in various regional affairs and agendas continue to increase.

The fourth is to clarify France’s goals and actions in the Indo-Pacific region. France’s actions in the Indo-Pacific region revolve around “four pillars”: security and defense; economy, connectivity, research and innovation; multilateralism and the rule of law; climate change, biodiversity and sustainable ocean management. *France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy* further clarifies specific goals of action for each pillar and provides examples for each goal of action. The “four pillars” constitute the core content of France’s Indo-Pacific strategy, with the first pillar “security and defense” being the focus of the strategy in documents, slogans and practical actions.

The fifth is to promote the active participation of the European Union in Indo-Pacific

affairs. *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy* proposes that the strategic and economic situation in the Indo-Pacific region has a direct impact on the security and prosperity of the European Union, and the EU can also provide solutions to the economic, security and ecological challenges faced by the region. France is also actively working with other EU member states to promote EU participation in Indo-Pacific affairs. Under the vigorous promotion of countries such as France, Germany and the Netherlands, the European Commission released its *Indo-Pacific Strategy Guidelines* in July 2021 and officially released *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* in September 2021, which is the EU version of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

**C. The main characteristics of France's Indo-Pacific strategy.** France has followed the footsteps of the United States in launching its Indo-Pacific strategy with considerations of responding to the call of the United States and jointly defending Western dominance. However, due to the fact that France has sovereign territories in the Indo-Pacific region, advocates for "strategic autonomy, seeks great power status and refuses to take sides in the competition between China and the United States, France's Indo-Pacific strategy, based on its own strategic interests, has prominent French characteristics.

The first is to rely basically on its overseas territories. France has 7 overseas departments and territories in the Indo-Pacific region, making it the only EU country with sovereign territories in the Indo-Pacific region. Overseas territories are the fundamental basis for France to expand its influence and presence in the Indo-Pacific region, project strategic will and carry out various activities, thus "providing a secure platform for France to project its power to the entire region".<sup>11</sup> French President Macron delivered speeches concerning the Indo-Pacific region in New Caledonia in May, 2018, in Reunion Island in October, 2019 and in French Polynesia in July, 2021 respectively, emphasizing the significance of overseas territories for France's overall arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region. The existence of overseas territories means that France has a "bridgehead" for deploying military forces, expanding partnerships and conducting maritime activities in the Indo-Pacific region. On the other hand, it also provides legal basis to a certain extent for France's participation in Indo-Pacific affairs and high-profile plot of its Indo-Pacific strategy.

The second is to focus on security and defense with prominent military characteristics. Security and defense is the first and foremost pillar of France's Indo-Pacific strategy. Compared to the Indo-Pacific strategy of the European Union and some of its member states, France's Indo-Pacific strategy has more prominent military characteristics, emphasizing security and defense. The reasons are as follows: firstly, France has a strong willingness to bolster security and defense in the Indo-Pacific region. *France and Security in the Indo-Pacific* points out that the security situation in the Indo-Pacific region is becoming increasingly severe as regional security is currently facing multiple challenges such as eroding multilateralism, nuclear proliferation and terrorism. France needs to use military means to expand Indo-Pacific partnerships and maintain its security and economic interests in the Indo-Pacific region; secondly, France has corresponding capabilities to step up its military deployments in the Indo-Pacific region. France has independently designed and built nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, fighter jets, warships, missiles, satellites and C<sup>4</sup>ISR equipment. It has relatively rich experience in overseas military operations and has the ability to rely on overseas territories for military deployments and force projection.

The third is to rely on the European Union as its backbone and "amplifier". France has

always been committed to strengthening the EU's participation in Indo-Pacific affairs. On the one hand, this is because France lacks the strength to shape the entire Indo-Pacific landscape on its own, and it needs to maximize France's strategic goals by leveraging the power of the European Union behind it. On the other hand, the Franco-German Axis is the core driving force of the European Union, and France is also the leader of the EU in political and security affairs. Its strategic preferences and policy tendencies often drives the EU's guidelines, principles and policies to a large extent. France also regards the European Union as its "amplifier" and "multiplier" of influence, intending to leverage the EU to further enhance its international status and discourse power. By promoting the EU's key role in Indo-Pacific affairs, France aims to enhance its own influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

The fourth is to identify itself as an Indo-Pacific country and a "balancing force". *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy* constantly emphasizes its dual identity in the Indo-Pacific region. On the one hand, France claims to be a "fully-fledged Indo-Pacific country" based on its sovereign territories in the Indo-Pacific region and has continuously been solidifying such an identity at both regional and international level. The recognition of such an identity determines that France's Indo-Pacific strategy incorporates its strategic intention of defending national sovereignty, territorial integrity and exclusive economic zone security. It also provides internal driving force and external rationality for France to participate in Indo-Pacific affairs and mechanisms. On the other hand, France regards itself as a "balancing force" and strives to be a balancer in the competition among major countries in the Indo-Pacific region, emphasizing the need to open up a "third way" between China and the United States. French President Macron has repeatedly emphasized that France should act as a "balancing force", play a "balancing role" in international affairs and serve as a "balancer" among major countries. He has called for the establishment of an inclusive and free multilateral order in the Indo-Pacific region and called on regional countries to reduce their dependence on China and the United States. The identity as a "balancing force" is beneficial for France to avoid taking sides and seek more initiatives in the competition among major countries.

The fifth is to have policy continuity and relative stability. The Indo-Pacific strategy proposed by the Macron government is an inheritance and development of France's previous Asia-Pacific policies. Although the wording has changed, it basically continues the trend of increased focus of successive French governments on the Asia-Pacific after the Cold War, and is in line with France's previous policies. The process from proposing the Indo-Pacific concept to officially releasing *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy* is generally one of gradual improvements in the set direction, without any obvious twists and turns. Its Indo-Pacific strategy demonstrates strong continuity. Since France released its Indo-Pacific strategy, the COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine conflict have had a significant impact on a global scale, and there have also been the "yellow vest" movement, retirement reform protests and social unrest caused by the immigration issue in France. Under the influence of domestic and international situations, France's foreign policy, especially its policies towards Russia and Africa, has undergone significant adjustments. However, its Indo-Pacific strategy has kept stable. Except for the brief chill of Franco-Australian relations caused by the submarine crisis, there have been basically no significant changes or alterations.

## II. The Main Trends of France's Military Arrangements in the Indo-Pacific Region

*France's Indo Pacific Strategy* lists security and defense as the primary pillar of its “four pillars”. In the field of security and defense, France is guided by its Indo-Pacific strategy and actively strengthens its military arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region with the following trends:

**A. Building a France-led network of military partnerships with its focus on pivot countries in the Indo-Pacific region.** With the formulation of its Indo-Pacific strategy, France has shifted from relying on “major power diplomacy” to actively building a diversified “partnership network in the Indo-Pacific” in developing its partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region, focusing on pivot countries to build a partnership network led by France and centered around France-India-Australia in an attempt to increase its say in Indo-Pacific security affairs. Especially since the Macron government, France has expanded its capabilities to project strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific region in all aspects and at multiple levels, significantly increasing the frequency of high-level military and political dialogues and exchange of visits with India, Australia, Japan, ASEAN countries and other pivot countries in the Indo-Pacific region. It has also forged strategic partnerships with Indonesia, Singapore, South Africa, ROK and Vietnam, and signed defense cooperation agreements with Djibouti, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar. It has also actively participated in various regional security organizations and security dialogue mechanisms by taking advantage of its identity as an “Indo-Pacific country”.

In November, 2020, France created a new post of Indo-Pacific Envoy, highlighting its emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region. France and India have concluded *The Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region*, reaching consensus on bilateral and international coordination, strengthening joint exercises and training, sharing maritime intelligence and protecting sensitive information. The relationship between France and Australia returned to normal after Australian Prime Minister Albanese took office when the two countries overcame the submarine crisis. France has continued to expand its military partnership with Japan. In December, 2021, it initiated negotiations on *Reciprocal Access Agreement* with Japan. In May, 2023, France and Japan held the seventh “2+2” meeting between their Foreign and Defense Ministers. Of particular concern is that France places more emphasis on the EU's input in the Indo-Pacific region rather than that of NATO and vigorously promotes the establishment of a strategic partnership between the EU and ASEAN. Due to France's active advocacy, CRIMARIO I-the EU's Indian Ocean situational awareness information sharing mechanism has been upgraded to CRIMARIO II, expanding its activities from the Indian Ocean to South and Southeast Asia.

**B. Consolidating and optimizing military deployments in the Indo-Pacific region based on its overseas territories.** In recent years, France has been forced to withdraw its troops from multiple African countries, and the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis has deepened France's concern and anxiety over domestic security. But France's military deployments in the Indo-Pacific region has remained stable and even strengthened, with the proportion of its troops deployed in the Indo-Pacific region continuing to increase in its total overseas troops.

After the implementation of its Indo-Pacific strategy, France gradually reduced its military deployments in some African countries while increasing its forces stationed in overseas territories such as the French West Indies and New Caledonia. The increased forces mainly consist of “national emergency forces” that can be deployed to various mission areas within 48 to 72 hours. At present, France has 5 joint regional command centers in the Indo-Pacific region, deploying a total of 7 detachments including ground, sea and air elements. In terms of weaponry, 23 fixed-wing aircraft, 17 helicopters and 12 ships are deployed there. France’s military forces in the Indo-Pacific region are mainly deployed in the United Arab Emirates, Djibouti, the Southern Indian Ocean, French Polynesia and New Caledonia, with a total force level of 7,000 (including 4,100 in the Indian Ocean and 2,900 in the Pacific Ocean). As of December, 2023, the proportion of French troops deployed in the Indo-Pacific region has increased from 47% in 2022 to 57% of its global overseas military deployments.<sup>12</sup> France is the major Western country with the second largest number of troops deployed in the Indo-Pacific region after the United States. In addition, with the gradual implementation of its Indo-Pacific strategy, France’s military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region, especially that of its navy and air force, have improved significantly. The French naval base in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, is capable of berthing all types of naval vessels except aircraft carriers, and the 104th and 188th air bases are equipped with Mirage 2000 – 5, Jaguar helicopters, transport aircraft and refueling aircraft, among other military aircraft, thus laying a solid foundation for the French military to enhance its joint operations capabilities in the region in the future, especially in terms of rapid maneuver, rapid intervention and logistics supply.

**C. Steadily advancing arms sales to the Indo-Pacific region.** France has an independent defense industry system, with a relatively solid foundation in defense industry. Its weapons and equipment are self-contained, reliable in performance, diverse in functions and have high cost-effectiveness. It has a strong comparative advantage in the international market. In recent years, France’s global military sales have continued to increase significantly, reaching nearly 27 billion euros by the end of 2022. With the gradual implementation of its Indo-Pacific strategy, except for the suspension of some arms sales in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19, France’s overall arms sales to the Indo-Pacific region has continued to rise since 2018, reaching a new high of 19.1 billion euros by the end of 2022 which accounted for 70.7% of France’s total global arms sales in that year.<sup>13</sup>

From the perspective of destinations of French arms sales, major destinations of French arms sales in the Indo-Pacific region include countries such as India, Singapore, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates and Australia. From the perspective of categories of arms sales, the largest number of weaponry exported by France to the Indo-Pacific region in recent years is fighter aircraft and missiles. For example, France sold a total of 92 Rafale fighter aircraft in 2022, of which 86 were ordered by Indo-Pacific countries (80 by the United Arab Emirates and 6 by Indonesia).<sup>14</sup> In 2021, France delivered 25 fighter aircraft, 88 missiles and 101 missile launch systems to India as well as 17 missiles to the Philippines.<sup>15</sup>

**D. Actively taking a leading role and participating in joint exercises and training in the Indo-Pacific region.** In recent years, France has increased the scale and frequency of its joint exercises and training in the Indo-Pacific region, with more diverse forms and subjects. Specifically, there are the following three trends:

Firstly, France and India is integrating and expanding their joint exercises and training while maintaining the existing level. The bilateral military exercise between France and India began in 1993 and was officially named Exercise Varuna in 2001, marking an important milestone in the strategic relationship between France and India. In January, 2023, France dispatched its top-tier armaments, including De Gaulle nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, to participate in Exercise Varuna, continuing the consistent high standards of the series of exercises and extending the duration of the exercise compared to previous ones. There is a tendency that the mechanism of bilateral joint exercises and training between France and India is expanding to multilateral ones. In 2021, the United Arab Emirates was invited to participate in Exercise Varuna for the first time. And in the same year, India was also invited to participate in La Perouse joint exercise led by the United States and France. The exercise area is no longer limited to the coastal areas of France and India, and has begun to extend towards the western Indian Ocean.

Secondly, France and Japan has significantly stepped up both bilateral and multilateral joint exercises and training. With the gradual implementation of France's Indo-Pacific strategy, the French military and the Japanese Self Defense Forces have significantly increased the scale and frequency of bilateral and multilateral joint exercises and training. For example, from December, 2020 to September, 2021, France and Japan held 8 bilateral or multilateral joint maritime exercises consecutively within less than a year. In the first half of 2023, France and Japan held two joint training sessions and one joint exercise in April, May and July.

Thirdly, France's enthusiasm for taking a leading role and participating in multilateral joint exercises in the Indo-Pacific region has greatly increased. France is actively taking a leading role in various multilateral military exercises in the Indo-Pacific region, represented by Exercise La Perouse. In May, 2019, France, the United States, Japan and Australia held their first La Perouse joint exercise in the Bay of Bengal. In April, 2021, the participating countries of the exercise were expanded to include France, the United States, Japan, Australia and India. In 2023, the UK and Canada also participated in the series of exercises. France has also actively participated in joint exercises and training in the Indo-Pacific region led by other countries, such as Exercise Northern Edge led by the United States in July, 2023 and Exercise Pitch Black led by Australia in August, 2022.

**E. Conducting the “freedom of navigation” operations in the Indo-Pacific region.** As early as 2016, France proposed at the Shangri-La Dialogue to actively promote patrol activities in the South China Sea, with the reason of ensuring France's “freedom of navigation”. In recent years, with the formulation and gradual implementation of its Indo-Pacific strategy, France has dispatched at least one to two warships to the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait every year to conduct “freedom of navigation”, close-in reconnaissance and forward deterrence operations. For example, the French Navy's Vendemiaire frigate crossed the Taiwan Strait in April, 2019. Its Prairial frigate sailed into the South China Sea in March, 2020. Emeraude—France's Rubis class nuclear-powered submarine and Seine submarine support ship went on patrol in the South China Sea in February 2021. Vendemiaire frigate sailed into the South China Sea and underwent “shutdown maintenance” in February 2022. In addition, France, along with India, Japan and other countries, has jointly issued unanimous statements on “maintaining freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region”, and actively

plots to set up a joint patrol convoy with the Philippines, India and other countries to conduct joint patrols in the South China Sea in the name of “maintaining freedom of navigation”.

### **III. The Intention, Impact and Dilemma of France’s Military Arrangements in the Indo-Pacific Region**

**A. France has multiple intentions in its military arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region.** France has multiple intentions in formulating and implementing its Indo-Pacific strategy and intensifying its military arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region.

The first is to protect France’s sovereignty over its overseas territories and safeguard its overseas interests in the Indo-Pacific region. More than half of France’s overseas territories are located in the Indo-Pacific region, which are important anchors for France’s strategic design and its efforts to shape the situation in the Indo-Pacific region and even the world. 90% of France’s exclusive economic zones are located in the Indo-Pacific region, and trade with the Indo-Pacific region accounts for more than one-third of its trade in goods outside the European Union.<sup>16</sup> As the significance of the Indo-Pacific region is growing in global trade and international landscape, France is attaching greater importance to its overseas interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Faced with various traditional and non-traditional security threats such as the ongoing contention among major countries in the Indo-Pacific region, the DPRK nuclear issue, transnational crimes, maritime security and climate change, France believes it necessary to make more proactive strategic designs, and adjust and optimize its military arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region. France’s fundamental intention is to prepare resources and preposition forces for risk prevention and response in the Indo-Pacific region so as to better protect its sovereign overseas territories and safeguard its overseas interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

The second is to seek to build a multi-polar order in the Indo-Pacific region centered around France so as to boost its global influence and discourse power. As one of the five permanent members of the United Nations, one of the major Western countries and one of the core leaders of the European Union, France’s global ambitions have remained consistent despite the fact that its comprehensive national strength and global influence have declined. Its perception of France’s identity as a major power has not changed significantly with the decline of its national strength or changes of government. The current internal and external policies of the Macron government also clearly demonstrate the inheritance and continuation of Gaullism. France’s Indo-Pacific strategy and its relevant military arrangements both focus on building a partnership network in the Indo-Pacific region. In fact, it seeks to build a multi-polar order in the Indo-Pacific region centered around France in an attempt to step up its involvement in Indo-Pacific affairs, gain more initiative in making rules, setting agendas and building orders in the Indo-Pacific region, and enhance its discourse power in the Indo-Pacific region as a global geopolitical core region. Its ultimate goal is to boost France’s global status and influence.

The third is to play the role of a “balancing force” between China and the United States so as to demonstrate its strategic autonomy and maximize its strategic interests in the contest between China and the United States. Faced with strategic competition between China and the



United States, France is neither able nor inclined to extricate itself from its deep alliance with the United States. It is also unwilling to bear the loss of benefits caused by decoupling from China. Compared to directly taking sides, choosing the “third way” outside of China and the United States can not only demonstrate France’s consistent advocacy for “strategic autonomy” but also ensure France’s flexibility in the contest among major countries. In terms of its relationship with the United States, it can avoid excessive bundling with the United States and acting as a pawn to damage its own interests. And in terms of its relationship with China, it can avoid adopting a clearly intimate attitude towards China that may cause dissatisfaction among its allies and bring ideological burdens for it to bear. From the military perspective, France’s overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific region make its military arrangements in the region legally sound. Its force level and military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region may to a certain extent echo the impetus of the United States, but are not enough to truly threaten China’s security. Its military arrangements and scale are currently within the limits acceptable to both China and the United States. It can be seen that France’s neutral stance in the Indo-Pacific region is not only a concrete manifestation of its pursuit of strategic autonomy, but also the best strategy and choice to maximize its own interests in the face of the current situation in the Indo-Pacific region.

**B. France’s military arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region has multiple impacts.**

Currently, the direct impact of France’s military arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region is not yet clear. However, with the constant rise of the international status of the Indo-Pacific region and continued overlapping of its internal and external contradictions, France may accelerate the shift of its strategic focus to extricate itself from domestic difficulties. In the medium and long term, as France shifts external strategy from “prioritizing Africa” to placing equal emphasis on Africa and the Indo-Pacific region, the gradual enhancement of France’s military arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region is bound to have multiple impacts.

The first is to exacerbate the complexity and uncertainty of the geopolitical environment in the Indo-Pacific region. Since the Cold War, especially since the beginning of the 21st century, the Asia-Pacific region has become the main arena of strategic competition among major countries. Countries both within and outside the region have been contending for multiple interests, causing a significant increase in the complexity and uncertainty of the regional situation. In this context, France has introduced its Indo-Pacific strategy and intensified its military arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region, which will inevitably intensify the strategic contention among countries both within and outside the region, cause negative influences on the existing order and relations within the region and have a certain impact on the political landscape and security situation in the Indo-Pacific region. France’s frequent involvement in South China Sea affairs under the pretext of “freedom of navigation” will further complicate the South China Sea issue, adding new factors of interference and external pressure to the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes by relevant countries.

The second is to support the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States by coordinated action and boost the impetus of the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. Despite grudges between France and the United States, the relatively stable alliance and foundation for extensive and in-depth cooperation between the two countries have not wavered. The alliance of democratic and liberal values between the United States and the West remains solid, and France still cannot do without cooperation with the United States in Indo-Pacific affairs. The

United States and France have successively formulated their Indo-Pacific strategies based on the same strategic anxiety that China's rapid rise may trigger tremendous changes in the situation in the Indo-Pacific region and even the world and thus shake the Western-dominated global order. France has followed closely in the footsteps of the United States in terms of the timing of its acceptance of the Indo-Pacific concept and formulation of its Indo-Pacific strategy, and toed the line of the United States in tilting its overseas strategic focus towards the Indo-Pacific region. France's adherence to and cooperation with the United States, even if it is just superficial, will undoubtedly boost the overall impetus of the United States in the Indo-Pacific region and encourage the United States to exercise long-arm control over Indo-Pacific affairs. After the row over the submarine contract, France may not actively come closer together with the US-led AUKUS alliance in the short term, but France and the United States will continue to promote their fundamental cooperation in various fields in the Indo-Pacific region.

The third is to add factors of uncertainty to the stable development of Sino-French relations. Although France has repeatedly stated that its Indo-Pacific strategy is not intended to "make China an enemy" and clarified its attitude of "not taking sides" in the contest between China and the United States, its official statements concerning the Indo-Pacific region are quite indicative by repeatedly stating or implying that China's rising strength poses a threat to security in the Indo-Pacific region. France is striving to create a circle of friends in the Indo-Pacific region, which inevitably intends to counter-balance China's influence. On the South China Sea issue, France is clearly targeting China in both words and actions. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road proposed by China passes through the Indian Ocean, which is the key area of France's Indo-Pacific strategy. *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy* mentioned "strengthening infrastructure development in the Indo-Pacific region", which means that it may also compete with the projects under the Belt and Road Initiative in the future.

The fourth is to reflect that the United States and its allies are not completely monolithic in their attitudes towards China. France's Indo-Pacific strategy and its military arrangements have certain negative impact on the Indo-Pacific region, China and Sino-French relations. However, it should also be noted that there are many differences in the Indo-Pacific strategies of France and the United States. Different from the consideration of the United States to engage in comprehensive strategic competition with China by gathering its allies, the core appeal of France's Indo-Pacific strategy is to maintain its own interests and boost its global status and influence. In terms of its attitudes towards China, France is not keen on confronting China and clearly opposes decoupling from China though it regards China as a threat. It repeatedly emphasizes that France should uphold strategic autonomy and act as a "balancing force" between China and the United States. While the United States is wooing its allies in the Indo-Pacific region to shape a posture of strategic encirclement of China, France's unequivocal statement of "not taking sides" indicates its unwillingness to follow the United States at every step and band together to contain China.

**C. France's military arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region face multiple challenges.** Since the formulation and implementation of its ambitious Indo-Pacific strategy, France has consolidated and optimized its military arrangements in an attempt to play its role in changing and adjusting the Indo-Pacific landscape, and shaping an Indo-Pacific order that is more in line with its own interests and values. However, France's Indo-Pacific strategy faces many

limitations and difficulties in practice, and its actual effectiveness still needs to be observed.

Firstly, its strength is no match for its ambition with severe constraints of its resources. Since the introduction of its Indo-Pacific strategy, the French authorities have continuously elaborated on the reasons, objectives and future vision for their role in Indo-Pacific affairs, demonstrating their strong ambition to make significant contributions in the Indo-Pacific region. However, France's available resources are far from sufficient to support its ambitions. In terms of its economy, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian crisis have hit the French economy in succession, further aggravating the government's financial pressure. In terms of its society, the intensification of domestic social contradictions and divisions has continued to have a negative impact on social stability. Mired in urgent domestic issues, the French government has limited resources available, which will inevitably affect its investment in the Indo-Pacific region. In terms of its military, there is still a significant gap in the scale and capability of France's military presence in the Indo-Pacific region compared to its strategic goals. It has limited troops deployed in the Indo-Pacific region with limited and relatively obsolete weapon systems, which are only fit for low-intensity military missions. And its capabilities for long-range strategic projection lack practical verification. It is therefore difficult for France to develop a potent military deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, The most fundamental security concern of France still lies in France and Europe, and the Ukrainian crisis has compelled France to increase its focus on European security. In order to sustain its long-term investment in the Indo-Pacific region, France needs to balance its already limited resources and capabilities, and its real actions and ultimate effects will be greatly reduced accordingly.

Secondly, it is impossible for France to shake off the yoke of values with numerous obstacles facing its pragmatic approach. France claims to uphold "strategic autonomy" and act as a "balancing force" between China and the United States. However, trapped by the inherent ideology of the Western camp, France is essentially only avoiding taking sides publicly, and there is still a significant gap between its stance and true neutrality. After Macron, who has economic and financial background, came to power, his government tended to adopt relatively pragmatic policies, and the evaluation of values often "stopped at the right moment". However, once it comes to the most sensitive issues in ideology, the Macron government would inevitably return to value diplomacy, standing in solidarity with the alliance of values of the United States and the West. After the outbreak of the Russian-Ukraine conflict, there was an obvious policy shift on the part of the French government which was originally inclined to having dialogue and maintaining energy cooperation with Russia. Macron and his political party fervently supported Ukraine and won a large number of votes in the 2022 presidential election, thus helping to secure his successful re-election. Whenever France deepens cooperation with countries with vastly different ideologies such as China, it often incurs criticism and questioning within France. It can be seen that ideology is still one of the most powerful factors affecting the direction of France's foreign policy. Even if the government is inclined to adopt pragmatic policies, it would only repeatedly sway between pragmatic diplomacy and value diplomacy under the composite influence of values inertia, election strategies and pressures from all parties and cannot really shake off the yoke of ideology. In the Indo-Pacific region, France hopes to establish good relations with regional countries and promote its model of governance and values of freedom and democracy at the

same time. It cannot stop criticizing some Indo-Pacific countries for their “human rights” and “democracy” issues. Such differences in values will also constrain the development of France’s partnership in the Indo-Pacific region and hinder its progress in implementing the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Thirdly, there are differences between France and its partners in terms of their roles and attitudes, making it difficult for their cooperation to meet their expectations. France’s Indo-Pacific strategy is inseparable from the establishment of the partnership network in the Indo-Pacific region and the participation and support of its EU partners. However, both its European and Indo-Pacific partners find it difficult to “align with France” in terms of strategic intent. And it is difficult for its Indo-Pacific partners to be “on the same wavelength” with France in terms of national strength. It is therefore difficult for both its Indo-Pacific and European partners to achieve the desired effects in their cooperation with France. On the one hand, it may be difficult for France to achieve its goals in the Indo-Pacific region by leveraging the EU due to differences between France and its EU partners. France’s efforts in promoting its Indo-Pacific initiatives within the European Union has been supported and echoed by some EU member states such as Germany. However, France’s Indo-Pacific strategy aims to boost its own status, focusing on security and defense, and it is also exclusive to a certain extent. Its core appeals are different from those of Germany’s and the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy. Within the EU, some member states are not keen on distant Indo-Pacific affairs. In the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, some EU member states are eager to rely on the protection of the United States and NATO for their own security, and they are neither optimistic about nor supportive of developing independent European defense. They are more inclined to rely on the United States while taking a tough stance against Russia and even China. Although the EU has introduced its Indo-Pacific strategy, its member states have different thoughts and it is difficult for them to reach consensus on specific activities in the Indo-Pacific region. These differences will constrain cooperation and interaction between France and its EU partners in the Indo-Pacific region, making it more difficult for France to implement its Indo-Pacific strategy. On the other hand, it is difficult for France and its Indo-Pacific partners to achieve the desired effects in their cooperation. From the perspective of their willingness, many small and medium-sized countries in the Indo-Pacific region regard the development of partnerships with France as an important means to obtain development assistance. However, given France’s colonial history in the region and its past nuclear tests in the Southern Indian Ocean, these countries cannot fully trust France’s Indo-Pacific narratives.<sup>17</sup> For India and Japan, differences between France and India and Japan in terms of their strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific region and perceptions of China may affect their enthusiasm for deepening cooperation with France in the future. From the perspective of their strength, France’s Indo-Pacific partners, especially some small and medium-sized countries, have limited comprehensive national strength and often find it difficult to be on the same wavelength in their cooperation with France. It is difficult for France’s cooperation with its major partners such as India, Japan and ASEAN to match the scale and volume of Sino-French cooperation in the short term, and France may gain only limited actual benefits from its Indo-Pacific partners. As such, its partnership network in the Indo-Pacific region may be mired in the dilemma of “being more in name than in reality”.

**Notes :**

1 Thierry de Montbrial: La politique étrangère de François Mitterrand: Text publicé sous le titre 'Quantize ans de politique étrangère' dans la Revue des Deux Mondes, may 1995, <https://thierrydemontbrial.com/la-politique-etrangere-de-francois-mitterrand/>.

2 Dorient René, « Un septennat de politique asiatique: quel bilan pour la France? », Politique étrangère, 67 année, N.1 (2002), pp.173–188. Dorient René, « Un septennat de politique asiatique: quel bilan pour la France? », Politique étrangère, 67 année, N.1 (2002), pp.173–188.

3 Qiu Lin, “The Origins and Implementation Paths of France’s Indo Pacific Strategy”, in *Blue Book of France: Development Report of France, 2020*, pp.197–209.

4 Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, Président de la République, sur les relationships entre la France et l’Australie, Sydney, le 2 mai 2018, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/206113-declaration-de-m-emmanuelmacron-president-de-la-republique>.

5 Discours du Président de la République, Emmanuel Macron, sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie à Nouméa, 5 mai 2018, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/05/05/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-sur-la-nouvelle-caledonie-a-noumea>.

6 La stratégie de la France dans l’Inopacifique, Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, février 2022, p.42.

7 La stratégie de la France dans l’Indopacifique, Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, février 2022, p.11.

8 La stratégie de la France dans l’Inopacifique, Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, février 2022, p.8.

9 La stratégie de la France dans l’Inopacifique, Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, février 2022, p.17.

10 La stratégie de la France dans l’Inopacifique, Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, février 2022, p.42.

11 La stratégie de défense française en Indopacifique, Ministère des Armées, may 2019, p7.

12 Principales Opérations des Armées Françaises, Ministère des Armées, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations>.

13 Rapport au Parlement 2023 sur les exportations d’armement de la France, Ministère des Armées, p. 113.

14 Ventes d’armes: très forte hausse des exports françaises en 2022, Direction de l’information légale et administrative, le 23 août 2023, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/en-bref/290728-ventes-darmes-tres-forte-hausse-des-exportations-francaises-en-2022>.

15 Rapport au Parlement 2022 sur les exports d’armement de la France, Ministère des Armées, p.121.

16 Athanée Michel-Villaz, “La présence de la France dans l’Indo-Pacifique: une légitimité souveraine,” *Revue Défense Nationale*, Vol.844, No.9, 2021, pp.68–74.

17 Zhang Ji, “The Shaping of Autonomous Identity and Its Dilemma in France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy”, in *Contemporary World*, June, 2023, pp.44–49.

(Translated by Huang Qin)

