

Chapter 1: Overview

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a historic watershed signifying the end of the "post-Cold War" era. With February 2024 marking the second anniversary of the start of the aggression, the war in Ukraine will continue to be the most destabilizing political and economic factor internationally. In addition, the intensification of the competition between the US and China and the Hamas-Israel conflict have ushered in an "era of turmoil". Amid these circumstances, countries now face challenges in such areas as defense and national, energy, food and economic security, and are seeking ways to respond to these challenges.

The Strategic Annual Report 2023 looks back on the year 2023, a year in which frequent conflicts established the notion that a chaotic state in the international arena is somewhat normal. It also offers recommendations on how the world can find ways to rebuild international security and cooperation and discusses what role Japan is expected to play in this endeavor.

The "three fronts" facing the US and the world

The US and European countries have stepped up their military support for Ukraine. Ukraine's efforts to conduct a counteroffensive are underway. However, with the war at a stalemate, careful diplomatic moves to end the war by concerned countries, eyeing the reconstruction of Ukraine, have begun to emerge. The leaders of both Russia and Ukraine have also been intensifying diplomatic activities aimed at strengthening their countries' positions in preparation for a protracted war, most prominent among them being Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's participation in the G7 Hiroshima Summit and attendance at the UN General Assembly, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's summit meeting with North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un.

In Europe, Finland has successfully joined NATO and Sweden's membership is considered certain. This further eastward expansion of NATO was what Russia had hoped to avoid, but it ironically became a reality as a result of Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Tensions on NATO's northeastern front have risen to an unprecedented level following Russia's deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus and Wagner's move to Belarus, and Russia has further toughened its confrontational stance toward the US and NATO as the US and Europe have stepped up their support for Ukraine. Japan, as a member of the G7, needs to align with other members in supporting Ukraine, but there is no guarantee that the US and European countries will be able to continue their current level of support and economic sanctions; indeed, additional support for Ukraine is currently in a state of limbo in the US Congress.

In addition, the next US presidential election will be held in 2024 and, depending on the outcome, discussions toward arranging a ceasefire or ending the war may gain momentum in the Western countries that have provided Ukraine with the weapons and supplies necessary to continue the war. While

developments will depend on the effectiveness of Ukraine's counteroffensive and the spread of international support for "a peace proposal for Ukraine", the international community may begin discussing features of a "post-Ukraine war" that would be acceptable to Ukraine. The Japanese government's proactive involvement in the discussions would be desirable to ensure that the principles of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and international order based on international law are not undermined.

The mood of détente in the Middle East, which had begun with the Abraham Accords that came close to establishing diplomatic relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, has come to an end due to the Hamas attack on Israel in October. The region has now reverted to the status of a "global powder keg". Can a full-fledged ceasefire or peace be achieved quickly? How can Gaza be managed after the war? Is the long-term goal of a two-state solution possible? Difficult questions such as these await not only the Israelis and Palestinians but also Western nations, Russia, China, Iran, and Arab nations.

In the Indo-Pacific region, the US continued to regard China as its most important strategic competitor. At the same time, the US made diplomatic efforts to manage the risk factors that exist between the two countries. Beijing also desires a certain degree of stability in its relations with the US and accordingly took part in high-level dialogues, including many ministerial-level meetings leading up to the US-China summit held during the APEC Leaders' Meeting. That said, crisis management between the two countries remains a challenge, especially in terms of effective communication between military/defense officials. The current situation does not allow the Biden and Xi administrations to meet halfway at a strategic level. The Biden administration cannot weaken its stance against China in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election, and the Xi administration, which well into its third term is seeking to further solidify its governance system amid internal and external difficulties, cannot make concessions to the US.

North Korea has steadily advanced its missile development program and even conducted a series of ballistic missile tests despite condemnation from the international community, posing a greater threat to regional security. At the August Japan-US-Republic of Korea (ROK) summit meeting held at Camp David at the initiative of the US, the three countries agreed to hold regular summit meetings and expand the scope of trilateral cooperation, ushering in a new era in trilateral relations. Meanwhile, relations between Russia and North Korea, two isolated entities in the international community, have been strengthened. This added another element of concern in relation to the war in Ukraine and to North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

US forces are believed to be adequately maintaining the necessary postures, including the provision of extended deterrence, to safeguard against attempts by China to change the status quo in Taiwan and in the East and South China Seas. Yet if the perception arises that the US is incapable of adequately dealing with matters on the Asian front due to its expending resources on other fronts, those challenging the status quo may take advantage of the anxiety of parties in the region or may mistakenly act on this very perception to embark on aggressive actions. To prevent this, it is important to build and maintain greater trust between the US and its allies and partners in the region.

In 2014, US President Barack Obama declared that the US could no longer be the “world’s policeman” and made a strategic shift to focus its resources on countering China (the “Pivot to Asia”). Yet it was President Putin who saw a power vacuum and decided to invade Ukraine. The Hamas-Israel conflict in the Middle East, where the US has, until recently, concentrated its diplomatic and military resources, has indeed dealt a further blow to the US, as it was hoping to concentrate its resources on countering China.

The “Trump shadow” looming over US diplomacy

In addition to the “three fronts” of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia in terms of diplomacy and military affairs, the United States faces another vulnerability: division within the United States. When President Obama delivered the above-mentioned “world policeman” speech, the opposition Republican Party bitterly criticized Obama’s strategy as one that would diminish the US’s position in the world. Now, though, such a Republican Party is nowhere to be found.

Although it is too early to predict the course of the 2024 US presidential election, it is certain that former US President Donald Trump will become a storm center as a presidential candidate. If the former President is re-elected, his second term’s foreign policy, dubbed Trump 2.0, will be more US-first and deal-oriented than that of his first term. Some pessimistic observers contend that this could lead to a disregard for alliances in some cases.

In view of this potential disruption, the US and its allies and friends will feel the need to “pin” diplomatic achievements while the current Biden administration is still in office. The leaders of Japan, the US and the ROK gathered at Camp David in August and committed to “institutionalizing” trilateral cooperation by agreeing to build a global cooperative relationship that goes beyond the traditional trilateral cooperation agenda of dealing with North Korea or the peace and security of the East Asian region. This is nothing less than a statement of the three countries’ desire to work together over the medium to long term to address common challenges, no matter what administration is in the White House. The year 2024 may well see a “rush” by Asian and European allies to pursue such diplomatic achievements with the US. In the meantime, various thoughts will no doubt be going through the minds of those outside the circle of US allies and like-minded countries, too, as they prepare for a potential Trump 2.0. The international community may well face a year with little predictability.

Multi-diplomacy stagnant in an “age of inward looking”

This “inward-looking” orientation of countries around the world and upheavals in various regions are undermining the credibility of global governance centered on the United Nations as a universal international institution and architectures such as the G20 and WTO that reflect diversity. As Russia’s aggression in Ukraine continues and the great power competition between the US and China grows more severe, the UN, especially the Security Council, continues to be dysfunctional, with many events indicating fragmentation in the international community rather than unity.

Delivering results in multilateral international cooperation, including those efforts seeking to address global challenges and economic recovery, has become difficult, as such endeavors must overcome the divisions between developed and developing countries. The importance of international cooperation, particularly in addressing climate change and the rapid progress of AI, became more evident than ever in 2023. At the same time, there is no small amount of frustration in developing countries over the slow progress made toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 and the lack of adequate development funding from developed countries. Also, in the areas of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation, the results of the Preparatory Committee for the NPT Review Conference have clearly shown serious divisions within the international community.

In preparation for the UN Summit of the Future to be held in 2024, there is an urgent need for the international community to reform UN governance and to conduct rulemaking for global issues such as climate change and generative AI, but the outlook is not bright.

2024: “A year of elections”

While many agree that the biggest event in international politics in 2024 will be the US presidential election in November, it is hardly the only election that deserves attention. There will be a flurry of elections that will determine national politics not only in developed countries but also in the emerging and developing countries often called the Global South. Starting with Taiwan (presidential election in January), a number of major countries and key regions will be holding elections that will have a major impact on international affairs: Finland (presidential election in January), Indonesia (parliamentary elections in February), Russia (presidential election in March), India (parliamentary elections in April), the ROK (parliamentary elections in April), South Africa (parliamentary elections in May), the United Kingdom (House of Commons elections, once dissolved), Lithuania (presidential election in May and parliamentary elections in October), Mexico (parliamentary elections in June), the European Union (parliamentary elections in June), and Romania (presidential election in November). In many cases, changes in internal politics could have a significant impact on countries’ foreign and security policies. As centrist forces seemingly recede in several countries, populist forces on both the left and right wings may emerge. This could lead to undesired rigidity in diplomacy.

With information flooding through social networking services and with cyberspace-based election meddling becoming the norm, how will existing political parties stand up to rising populism and emphasize the validity of their own policies? The democratic process of elections must not become the *a priori* vulnerability of democracies. Modern elections are also a battle against an “invisible enemy” in the cognitive and cyber realms. A close eye should be kept on the major elections taking place in these countries/regions from the perspective of whether there is such third-party “electoral intervention”. ■