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By International Crisis Group

10 Conflicts to Watch in 2022

Troubling undercurrents in 2021 – from the U.S. to Afghanistan, Ethiopia or the climate emergency – didn't send battle deaths soaring or set the world ablaze. But as our look ahead to 2022 shows, many bad situations round the world could easily get worse.

After a year that saw an assault on the U.S. Capitol, horrific bloodshed in Ethiopia, a Taliban triumph in Afghanistan, great-power showdowns over Ukraine and Taiwan amid dwindling U.S. ambition on the global stage, COVID-19, and a climate emergency, it's easy to see a world careening off the tracks.

But maybe one could argue things are better than they seem.

After all, by some measures, war is in retreat. The number of people killed in fighting worldwide has mostly declined since 2014 – if you count only those dying directly in combat. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, figures through the end of 2020 show battle deaths are down from seven years ago, mostly because Syria's terrible slaughter has largely subsided.

The number of major wars has also descended from a recent peak. Despite Russian President Vladimir Putin menacing Ukraine, states rarely go to war with one another. More local conflicts rage than ever, but they tend to be of lower intensity. For the most part, 21st-century wars are less lethal than their 20th-century predecessors.

A more cautious United States might also have an upside. The 1990s bloodletting in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia; the post-9/11 Afghanistan and Iraq wars; Sri Lanka's murderous campaign against the Tamils; and the collapse of Libya and South Sudan all happened at a time of – and, in some cases, thanks to – a dominant U.S.-led West. That recent U.S. presidents have refrained from toppling enemies by force is a good thing. Besides, one shouldn't overstate Washington's sway even in its post-Cold War heyday; absent an invasion, it has always struggled to bend recalcitrant leaders (former Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir, for example) to its will.

Still, if these are silver linings, they're awfully thin.

Battle deaths, after all, tell just a fraction of the story. Yemen's conflict kills more people, mostly women and young children, due to starvation or preventable disease than violence. Millions of Ethiopians suffer acute food insecurity because of the country's civil war. Fighting involving Islamists elsewhere in Africa often doesn't entail thousands of deaths but drives millions of people from their homes and causes humanitarian devastation.

Afghanistan's violence levels have sharply dropped since the Taliban seized power in August, but starvation, caused mostly by Western policies, could leave more Afghans dead – including millions of children – than past decades of fighting. Worldwide, the number of displaced people, most due to war, is at a record high. Battle deaths may be down, in other words, but suffering due to conflict is not.

Moreover, states compete fiercely even when

they're not fighting directly. They do battle with cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, election interference, economic coercion, and by instrumentalizing migrants. Major and regional powers vie for influence, often through local allies, in war zones. Proxy fighting has not so far sparked direct confrontation among meddling states. Indeed, some navigate the danger adeptly: Russia and Turkey maintain cordial relations despite backing competing sides in the Syrian and Libyan conflicts. Still, foreign involvement in conflicts creates the risk that local clashes light bigger fires.

Standoffs involving major powers look increasingly dangerous. Putin may gamble on another incursion into Ukraine. A China-U.S. clash over Taiwan is unlikely in 2022, but the Chinese and U.S. militaries increasingly bump up against each another around the island and in the South China Sea, with all the peril of entanglement that entails. If the Iran nuclear deal collapses, which now seems probable, the United States or Israel may attempt – possibly even early in 2022 – to knock out Iranian nuclear facilities, likely prompting Tehran to sprint toward weaponization while lashing out across the region. One mishap or miscalculation, in other words, and interstate war could make a comeback.

And whatever one thinks of U.S. influence, its decline inevitably brings hazards, given that American might and alliances have structured global affairs for decades. No one should exaggerate the decay: U.S. forces are still deployed around the globe, NATO stands, and Washington's recent Asia diplomacy shows it can still marshal coalitions like no other power. But with much in flux, Washington's rivals are probing to see how far they can go.

Today's most dangerous flash points – whether Ukraine, Taiwan, or confrontations with Iran – relate in some way to the world struggling for a new equilibrium. Dysfunction in the United States hardly helps. A delicate transition of global power requires cool heads and predictability – not fraught elections and policy seesawing from one administration to the next.

As for COVID-19, the pandemic has exacerbated the world's worst humanitarian disasters and propelled the impoverishment, rising living costs, inequality, and joblessness that fuel popular anger. It had a hand this past year in a power grab in Tunisia, Sudan's coup, and protests in Colombia. The economic hurt COVID-19 is unleashing could strain some countries to a breaking point. Although it's a leap from discontent to protest, from protest to crisis, and from crisis to conflict, the pandemic's worst symptoms may yet lie ahead.

So while today's troubling undercurrents haven't yet set battle deaths soaring or the world ablaze, things still look bad. As this year's list shows all too starkly, they could easily get worse.

"Foreign involvement in conflicts creates the risk that local clashes light bigger fires."

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1. Ukraine

Whether Russia, which has been massing troops on the Ukrainian border, will again invade its neighbor remains unclear. But dismissing the menace as a bluff would be a mistake.

The Ukraine war began in 2014 when Putin, angered at what he saw as a Western-backed overthrow of a president friendly to Moscow, annexed Crimea and backed separatists in Ukraine's eastern Donbass region. Facing a military rout, Ukraine signed two peace accords, the Minsk agreements, largely on Russia's terms. Since then, separatists have held two breakaway areas in the Donbass.

What was for several years a simmering conflict heated up in 2021. A truce agreed to by Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who came to power in 2019 promising to make peace, fell apart. In the spring of 2021, Putin amassed more than 100,000 troops near the border, only to withdraw many of them weeks later after a meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden. Since November, he's built up similar numbers.

Russia's grievances are clear enough. Moscow is upset at Ukraine's lack of follow-through with the Minsk agreements, particularly its denial of "special status" to the breakaway regions – which entails autonomy and, as Moscow defines it, a say in foreign policy.

Putin, angry at what Moscow sees as decades of Western encroachment, has drawn a new red line on NATO, rejecting not only the idea that Ukraine would join the alliance, which (in reality) won't take place any time soon, but also growing military collaboration among Kyiv and NATO members, which is already happening. Russia proposes a new European order that would prevent NATO's further enlargement east and curb its military deployments and activities.

Russia may intend for the buildup to force concessions. But given Putin's track record and underestimation of the hostility Moscow inspires among Ukrainians outside separatist-held areas, no one should rule out another military adventure. If Russia plans to fight, its options vary from limited support of separatists to a full-scale assault.

Western powers, which too often have relied on bluster packaged as strategic ambiguity, need to clarify what they would do to support Ukraine, relay that to Moscow, and hold fast to red lines. Biden, who will meet Putin one-on-one in early January, has made a start by threatening damaging sanctions and a larger military buildup on NATO's eastern flank. Western leaders might also warn of reactions they don't intend but might struggle to control, perhaps including NATO members deploying more personnel to Ukraine itself, with all the attendant risks.

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But deterrence will be short lived without efforts to de-escalate and lay the groundwork for more sustainable settlements in Ukraine and beyond. Choreographed de-escalation could involve Moscow pulling back forces, both sides limiting military exercises in the Black and Baltic Seas, a return to Minsk agreement negotiations, and talks on European security – even if the one-sided arrangement Russia proposes is out of the question.

In reality, no one will get what they want from the standoff. Kyiv may not like the Minsk

agreements, but it signed them, and they remain the internationally accepted way out of the crisis. Putin hopes for a pliant neighbor in Ukraine, but that's a pipe dream – unless he's ready for a painful and costly occupation. Europe and the United States can neither deter without some risk of escalation nor resolve the Ukraine crisis without grappling with broader European security. As for Biden, he may want to focus on China but can't relegate Russia to the back burner.

2. Ethiopia

Two years ago, Ethiopia was a good news story. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed appeared to be turning the page on decades of repressive rule. Instead, more than a year of fighting between Abiy's federal army and forces from the northern Tigray region has torn the country apart. A small window may have just opened up to bring the war to a close.

Battlefield dynamics have fluctuated dramatically. Abiy first ordered federal troops into Tigray in November 2020 following a deadly attack on a military garrison there by loyalists of the region's ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Federal forces, supported by troops from enemy-turned-friend Eritrea, quickly advanced alongside forces from Ethiopia's Amhara region, which borders Tigray, installing an interim administration in the Tigrayan capital, Mekele, in December 2020.

Over subsequent months, TPLF leaders regrouped in the countryside, mobilizing Tigrayans livid at massacres, rapes, and havoc wreaked by federal and Eritrean troops. In a startling reversal, the rebels drove their enemies out of most of Tigray at the end of June before marching south. They then formed an alliance with an insurgent group in Ethiopia's populous, central Oromia region. An assault on the capital, Addis Ababa, appeared in the offing. Mid-November, however, brought another about-face. A counteroffensive by federal troops and allied militia forced Tigray forces to withdraw back to their home region.

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But if federal forces, for now, are ascendant, both sides command strong support and could drum up more recruits. Neither is likely to deliver a mortal blow.

Brutal fighting has embittered an already acrimonious dispute. Abiy casts the war as a battle for the Ethiopian state's survival. Many Ethiopians outside Tigray revile the TPLF, which dominated a repressive regime that ruled Ethiopia for decades before Abiy's election.

Abiy paints TPLF leaders as power-hungry spoilers, bent on trashing his modernized vision for the country. In contrast, Tigrayan leaders said their initial attack that triggered the war preempted a campaign to subjugate Tigray by Abiy and the TPLF's old foe, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, with whom Abiy signed a 2018 peace deal. They see Abiy's reforms as an attempt to water down Ethiopian regions' rights to self-rule.

More war would spell more disaster. Fighting has already killed tens of thousands of people and uprooted millions of Ethiopians from their homes. All sides stand accused of atrocities. Much of Tigray, denied aid by federal authorities, is nearing famine. The wounds the bloodletting has left on Ethiopia's social fabric will be hard to heal. Neighbors beyond Eritrea could get pulled in. Sudan, another good news story that turned sour in 2021 when its generals grabbed power, has its own disputes with Ethiopia over territory in the fertile borderlands of al-Fashqa and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile, where Addis Ababa has started to fill the reservoir. With Ethiopia in

turmoil, Sudan – along with Egypt – could see a moment to press its advantage.

Recent battlefield developments may have opened a small window. Tigrayan leaders have dropped a key condition for talks, namely that Amhara forces leave disputed areas they seized in western Tigray. In late December, federal authorities announced they would not advance further to try and vanquish Tigrayan forces. Diplomats should now push for a truce to get humanitarian aid into Tigray and explore whether compromise might be feasible. Without that, bloodshed and hunger will continue, with terrible consequences for Ethiopians and, potentially, the region.

3. Afghanistan

If 2021 brought one chapter of Afghanistan's decades long tragedy to a close, another is starting. Since the Taliban's seizure of power in August, a humanitarian catastrophe has loomed. U.N. data suggests millions of Afghan children could starve. Western leaders shoulder much of the blame.

The Taliban's win was swift but long in the making. For years, and especially since early 2020, when Washington signed a deal with the Taliban pledging to withdraw U.S. forces, insurgents advanced through the countryside, encircling provincial and district centers. In the Spring and Summer of 2021, they began seizing towns and cities, often persuading Afghan army commanders demoralized by the impending end of Western support to surrender. The government collapsed in mid-August, and the Taliban entered Kabul mostly without a fight. It was a stunning end to a political order Western powers had spent two decades helping to build.

The world responded to the Taliban's takeover by freezing Afghan state assets, halting budgetary aid, and offering only limited sanctions relief for humanitarian purposes. (The Taliban are sanctioned by the United Nations and Western governments.)

The new government can't pay civil servants. The economy has tanked. The financial sector is paralyzed. All this comes on top of a punishing drought. Although overall violence levels are significantly down from a year ago, the Taliban face a vicious fight against the Islamic State's local branch.

The new regime has done little to endear itself to donors. Its interim cabinet includes almost exclusively Taliban figures, no women, and mostly ethnic Pashtuns. Early Taliban decisions, notably closing girls' schools in many provinces, sparked international outrage (some have since reopened). Reports have emerged of extrajudicial killings of former soldiers and police.

Still, Western decision-makers bear the lion's share of responsibility for Afghans' plight. The sudden cutoff of funds to an entirely aid-dependent state has been devastating. The United Nations estimates 23 million people, more than half the population, will suffer from hunger this winter. Humanitarian support alone can't stave off disaster. Donors are squandering genuine gains their funds helped deliver over the past two decades, notably in health and education.

There is another way. International financial institutions, having released a small part of the almost $2 billion earmarked for Afghanistan, should disperse the rest. The United Nations and United States, which have now lifted some sanctions to allow in humanitarian aid, should go further by easing restrictions to permit regular economic activity. Biden should release Afghanistan's frozen assets, with an initial tranche to test the waters.

If the White House, loath to underwrite Taliban rule, won't take that step, internationally supervised currency swaps could infuse dollars into the economy. Propping up health care, the

education system, food provision, and other basic services should be priorities – even if this requires Western policymakers to work through Taliban ministries.

The alternative is to let Afghans die, including millions of children. Of all the blunders the West has made in Afghanistan, this one would leave the ugliest stain.

4. The United States and China

Shortly after pulling out of Afghanistan, the United States announced a new pact with Australia and the United Kingdom to counter China. Known as AUKUS, the deal will help Canberra acquire nuclear-powered submarines. It was a stark illustration of Washington's aspirations to move from combating Islamist militants to major power politics and deterring Beijing.

In Washington, one of the few views shared across the aisle is that China is an adversary the United States is inexorably at loggerheads with. U.S. leaders see past decades of engaging China as enabling the rise of a rival that exploits international bodies and rules to its own ends, repressing opposition in Hong Kong, behaving atrociously in Xinjiang, and bullying its Asian neighbors. Competition with China is becoming an ordering principle of U.S. policy.

Biden's China strategy, while not precisely articulated, entails keeping the United States the dominant power in the Indo-Pacific, where Beijing's military capacity has ballooned. Biden appears to see the costs of Chinese regional primacy as graver than the risk of confrontation. Concretely, that meant shoring up U.S. alliances and partnerships in Asia as well as elevating the importance of Taiwan's security to U.S. interests. Top officials also make stronger statements backing Southeast Asian countries' maritime claims in the South China Sea.

Beijing sees things differently. Chinese leaders, having hoped at first for improved ties with Washington under Biden, now worry more about him than they did about former U.S. President Donald Trump, a leader they hoped was an anomaly. They express disappointment at Biden's decision not to roll back trade tariffs or sanctions as well as his efforts to mobilize other countries. They recoil at rhetoric about democracy and human rights, which they view as ideological bombast that implicitly calls their government's legitimacy into question.

"Beijing wants a sphere of influence in which its neighbors are sovereign but deferential."

In essence, Beijing wants a sphere of influence in which its neighbors are sovereign but deferential. It views dominance of the first island chain – which stretches from the Kuril Islands, past Taiwan, and into the South China Sea – as vital to its growth, security, and ambition to be a world naval power.

Over the past year, while not disavowing its official "peaceful reunification" policy, Beijing escalated military activity near Taiwan, flying record numbers of jets and bombers as well as conducting drills near the island. Beijing's growing military clout and assertiveness have provoked more dire assessments in Washington about the threat of a Chinese assault on Taiwan.

A virtual meeting in November between Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping took some of the edge off the frosty rhetoric of previous months. It could yield more working-level engagement, including the resumption of defense dialogues. In 2022, with the Beijing Winter Olympics, the 20th Party Congress, and U.S. midterm congressional elections, both sides likely want quiet fronts abroad, even if they rattle sabers for audiences at home. The nightmare scenario – a Chinese attempt to seize Taiwan, potentially forcing the United States to come to Taipei's defense – is unlikely for now.

Still, the two giants' rivalry casts a long shadow over world affairs and heightens dangers across flash points in East Asia. Beijing sees scant benefits in cooperating on issues

like climate change when Washington frames the relationship as competitive. Along the first island chain, things are particularly frightening. Warplanes flying close to one another near Taiwan, for example, or warships crossing paths in the South China Sea are more common. A mishap would ratchet up tensions.

When U.S. and Chinese planes collided in 2001 during a period of reasonable calm between Beijing and Washington, it took months of intense diplomacy to resolve the spat. Today, it would be harder – and the danger of escalation greater.

5. Iran vs. the United Stated and Israel

The nail-biting brinkmanship between Tehran and Washington instigated under Trump may be over. But as hope of reviving the Iran nuclear deal fades, another escalation looms.

Biden took office pledging to rejoin the nuclear deal. His predecessor had unilaterally withdrawn Washington in 2018, reimposing sanctions on Iran – which, in turn, stepped up its nuclear development and power projection across the Middle East. The Biden administration lost time posturing about who should make the first move and refusing substantive goodwill gestures. Still, for a few months, talks made some progress.

Then, in June, Ebrahim Raisi won Iran's presidential election, giving hard-liners control of all the Islamic Republic's key power centers. After a five-month hiatus, Iran returned to the table, driving a harder bargain. At the same time, it is accelerating nuclear development. When the deal took effect six years ago, Iran's breakout time – the time it would take to enrich enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon – was around 12 months. It's now estimated at three to six weeks and shrinking.

Although Tehran hasn't unilaterally pulled out of the deal like Trump did, it's still playing with fire. Failure to restore the deal in the months ahead would likely make the original agreement moot, given Iran's technological advances. There are options: Diplomats could pursue a more comprehensive deal, though that would be a hard slog given the bad blood the original deal's demise would entail, or they could seek an interim "less-for-less" arrangement that caps Iran's continued nuclear progress for limited sanctions relief. But a collapse of negotiations is a real possibility.

That would be a disaster. Iran's nuclear program would continue unhindered. For Washington, accepting Iran as a threshold nuclear state – one able to build a bomb even if not yet having done so – will likely prove to be too bitter a pill to swallow. The alternative would be to approve or join Israeli strikes aimed at setting back Tehran's nuclear capability.

If that happened, Iran's leaders – whose calculations are likely informed by the toppling of former Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi, who forfeited his nuclear weapons program, and the respect Trump showed toward nuclear-armed North Korea – may well sprint toward weaponization.

Tehran would also likely lash out across the Middle East. Nascent efforts at de-escalation between Iran and Persian Gulf monarchies may help lower risks, but Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria would all be in the crossfire. Incidents could heighten the danger of direct confrontation between Iran and the United States, Israel, or the two allies together, which the parties have thus far avoided despite provocations. Such

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clashes could easily spin out of control on the ground, at sea, in cyberspace, or through covert operations.

Talks fizzling could, in other words, combine all the dangers from the period before the 2015 deal with the worst worries of the Trump years.

6. Yemen

Yemen's war faded from headlines in 2021 but remains devastating and could be poised to get worse.

Houthi rebels have encircled and advanced into the oil- and gas-rich governorate of Marib. Long underrated as a military force, the rebels appear to be running an agile and evolving multifront campaign, pairing offensives with outreach to soften local tribal leaders' resistance. They now control Al-Bayda, a governorate neighboring Marib, and have made inroads into Shabwa, farther east, thus cutting off supply lines to Marib. Of Marib governorate itself, only the main city and hydrocarbon facilities nearby remain in the hands of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi's internationally recognized government.

Should those sites fall, it would mark a sea change in the war. The Houthis would score an economic as well as a military victory. With Marib's oil and gas, the Houthis will be able to bring down fuel and electricity prices in areas under their control, thus bolstering their image as a governing authority deserving of international legitimacy. The loss of Marib, the Hadi government's last bastion in the north, would likely herald the president's political demise.

Some nominally Hadi-aligned Yemenis already mutter about replacing him with a presidential council. That would further undercut the government's international status, likely reinforcing the Houthis' resistance to peace talks.

Anyone hoping that a Houthi win would presage the war's end is banking on an illusion. In southern Yemen, anti-Houthi factions outside Hadi's coalition – namely southern separatists backed by the United Arab Emirates and a faction led by Tareq Saleh, nephew of Yemen's late long-serving leader – would battle on. The Houthis, who see the war as pitting their nationalist forces against neighboring Saudi Arabia – which backs Hadi with air power – would likely continue cross-border attacks.

The United Nations' new envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, who assumed his role at the helm of international peacemaking efforts last September, needs to do two things at once. First, he should seek to avert a battle for Marib city by hearing out, without necessarily accepting, Houthi proposals and pushing for a government counteroffer that reflects the reality of today's power balance. The U.N. also needs a new peacemaking approach that goes beyond two-party talks between the Houthis, on the one hand, and the Hadi government and its Saudi backers, on the other. Yemen's war is a multiparty conflict, not a binary power struggle; any hope of reaching a genuine settlement requires more seats at the table.

7. Israel-Palestine

This past year saw the fourth and most destructive Gaza-Israel war in just over a decade, illustrating again that the peace process is dead and a two-state solution looks less likely than ever.

The trigger for this latest outbreak was occupied East Jerusalem. The threatened eviction of Palestinian residents of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood coincided in April 2021 with clashes during Ramadan between stone-throwing youth and Israeli police using lethal force

on the compound that comprises the Haram al-Sharif, holy to Muslims, and the Temple Mount, holy to Jews.

That set off a chain reaction. Hamas, which controls Gaza, fired long-distance rockets indiscriminately into Israel. Israel responded with a harsh aerial assault, sparking an 11-day conflict that killed more than 250 people, almost all Palestinians, and left in ruins what remained of Gaza's civilian infrastructure. West Bank Palestinians demonstrating in solidarity were met with the Israeli army's live fire. In Israeli cities, Palestinian citizens took to the streets, sometimes clashing with West Bank settlers and other right-wing Jews, often supported by Israeli police.

While hostilities were all too familiar, this bout brought new elements. Palestinians, for the first time in decades, transcended their fragmentation by joining voices across the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, and Israel itself. Also striking was debate in Western capitals, Washington especially. Democrats, including mainstream figures, used unusually stern language about Israel's bombardment, suggesting that, among the party, views of the conflict are evolving.

Still, fundamentals remain unchanged. Though Israelis were apparently taken aback by the intensity of Hamas's rocket fire, the war provoked no rethink of Israel's Gaza policy – economic strangulation to weaken Hamas and divide Palestinians; "mowing the grass" every few years to stifle attacks – or its general treatment of Palestinians. Abroad, most capitals wrung their hands but did little. The Biden administration, despite Democrats' new tone, claimed to conduct "quiet, intensive diplomacy" but more or less allowed the conflict to run its course.

Nor have the months since brought hope. A hodgepodge coalition ousted Israel's longest-serving prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, in June. After Netanyahu's belligerence, the new government put a softer face on Israel's foreign relations and declared its hope to "shrink" the conflict by improving the occupied territories' economies and marginally strengthening the Palestinian Authority, which partly rules the West Bank. Yet it continues to expand illegal settlements and repress Palestinians much as its predecessors did. In October, it outlawed six respected Palestinian civil society groups on specious terrorism charges.

For anyone still eager to renew negotiations, the last year was cause for despair. The center of gravity in Israeli politics has long since shifted away from peace, as successive governments have abandoned talks in all but name. Most Palestinians have lost faith they will win statehood through negotiations.

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There are ways to buy quiet: a longer-term truce and opening up of Gaza; ending expulsions of Palestinians in East Jerusalem; returning to preexisting arrangements that kept the holy sites reasonably calm.

But those can only stave off the next war for so long. Diplomats' lip service to a two-state solution that is all but out of reach gives cover for Israel to advance de facto annexation of the West Bank. Better now would be to try to end Israeli impunity for violations of Palestinian rights. It's time, in other words, to address the situation on the ground as it is.

8. Haiti

The Caribbean nation has long been tormented by political crises, gang warfare, and natural disasters. Nevertheless, this past year stands out for many Haitians as particularly bleak. Few expect a brighter 2022.

In July, hit men assassinated President Jovenel Moïse in his home; his security detail apparently did nothing about it. Shellshocked elites squabbled over who would run the country. (Succession lines were muddled as Moïse had appointed Ariel Henry as his new prime minister but Henry had not yet been sworn in.) Henry eventually became the country's interim leader but has struggled to assert authority.

An earthquake in August destroyed much of southern Haiti. Rampant kidnappings by gangs that lord over much of the capital of Port-au-Prince have hampered international relief efforts. Criminals' seizure of oil terminals brought the country to a standstill in early November. Haiti, meanwhile, lags behind the rest of the Americas in distributing COVID-19 vaccines. Increasing numbers of Haitians are seeking better prospects abroad; many new departures – and indeed many Haitians who left the island some time ago – are camped out along the southern U.S. border.

As for the post-Moïse transition, two factions propose competing plans. Henry and several parties have inked a deal allowing him to rule until elections in 2022. In contrast, the Commission for a Haitian Solution to the Crisis, an umbrella group of civil society organizations and political parties, insists the country's wounds cut so deep that only root-and-branch reform can stanch the bleeding. They want a two-year transition, with a council more representative of society holding power until new polls. With the constitution largely a dead letter (postponed elections mean two-thirds of Senate seats are empty) and responsibility for Moïse's killing unclear, Haiti's immediate stability requires reconciling these two options.

Gangs also have political clout. Jimmy "Barbecue" Chérizier, a former police officer who is capo of the so-called G9 criminal alliance that seized the oil terminals, has demanded that Henry resign. Police corruption, an enfeebled judicial system, and the hemisphere's highest poverty rates provide ideal conditions for gangs to recruit and expand. Chérizier himself combines brute force with politicking designed to appeal to impoverished, unemployed young men.

Many Haitians bristle at the idea of a new U.N. peacekeeping mission, let alone U.S. military intervention, but without some overseas help it is hard to see Haiti escaping its predicament. Donors supporting a specialized joint Haitian-U.N. office tasked with prosecuting top officials, police, and judges accused of serious crimes could help reduce violence and sever ties between criminals and politicians.

The first priority, though, is for Haitians to agree on a new transition plan. Without it, they will face another year of gridlock, crime, and unrest as more depart in search of better lives elsewhere.

9. Myanmar

Since the February 2021 coup, a crackdown by the country's military (known as the Tatmadaw) on mostly peaceful protests has fueled broad-based resistance, ranging from civil disobedience to armed clashes with security forces. A deadly stalemate exacts a terrible human toll.

If the generals hoped to reboot Myanmar's politics, they miscalculated. Piqued at Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy's landslide win in the November 2020 elections, military leaders called the vote rigged and detained civilian politicians. Their plans for new elections seemingly aimed to install friendlier faces to power. Instead, mass protests

against military involvement in politics rocked towns and cities. A crackdown resulting in hundreds of deaths fueled fiercer resistance.

Since then, deposed lawmakers set up their own National Unity Government (NUG) and in September called for revolt against the regime. While the NUG is still developing its own military capability, resistance forces, many of which support the NUG but are mostly not under its direct control, stage attacks daily, ambushing military convoys, bombing regime-linked targets, and assassinating local officials, suspected informants, and others they see as junta loyalists.

Myanmar's ethnic armed groups, some of which comprise tens of thousands of fighters and control vast upland areas, have themselves adapted. Some have remained aloof; others, responding to constituents' anger at the coup, have resumed fighting the Tatmadaw. Some shelter dissidents, provide them military training, and are negotiating with the NUG. For its part, the NUG has sought to win over armed groups, including by promising a federal system for Myanmar.

Majority views about ethnic minorities are also changing: Long blamed for Myanmar's problems, minorities' demands for a fairer share of power today enjoy more support. While a united front against the regime is unlikely, given rebels' historical rivalries, significant political and military cooperation is taking place.

For its part, the Tatmadaw has doubled down. It detains, sometimes executes, and routinely tortures opponents, often abducting kin as hostages. Battalions have crushed urban dissent, using tactics that aim to kill as many people as possible. (A U.N.-backed investigation's preliminary analysis suggests crimes against humanity.)

In rural areas, the army fights new resistance groups with old counterinsurgency methods, namely its "four cuts" strategy, aimed at denying rebels food, funds, intelligence, and recruits. It targets civilians; in the latest of many reported incidents, credible accounts suggest that at the end of December the military massacred dozens of civilians fleeing violence in eastern Myanmar. The regime has also attempted to persuade armed groups from entering formal alliances with the NUG, in some cases keeping groups – including the Arakan Army, with which it fought a brutal war in 2019-2020 – off the battlefield.

Having locked up their rivals – Aung San Suu Kyi has already been sentenced to two years' imprisonment and could end up locked up for life – the generals are moving to amend electoral rules in their favor and hold a vote in 2023. However, any poll that would usher in a military-backed government would be seen as a farce.

The standoff's human cost is devastating. Myanmar's economy is freefalling, the national currency has crashed, health and education systems have crumbled, poverty rates are estimated to have doubled since 2019, and half of all households cannot afford enough food. Myanmar's generals, convinced of their role at the country's helm, are steering it off a cliff.

For the most part, the world is losing interest. While outside actors have little influence on the Tatmadaw, it is critical that they keep trying to get aid in without empowering the regime. They can also usefully throw greater weight behind the diplomatic efforts of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which have so far been mostly dysfunctional, and the new U.N. special envoy. Beyond the human toll, a collapsed state in the heart of the strategically vital Indo-Pacific region serves no one's interests.

10. Islamist militancy in Africa

Since 2017, when the Islamic State lost its so-called caliphate in the Middle East, Africa has suffered some of the world's most ferocious battles between states and jihadis. Islamist militancy on the continent is nothing new, but revolts linked to the Islamic State and al Qaeda have surged in recent years.

Weak states struggle against nimble militant

factions across vast hinterlands where central governments hold little sway. Parts of the Sahel have seen spiraling bloodshed, mostly due to fighting involving jihadis, whose reach has extended from northern Mali to the country's center, into Niger, and across rural Burkina Faso.

Boko Haram's insurgency has lost the swaths of northeastern Nigeria it controlled some years ago, and the movement has fractured. But splinter groups still wreak tremendous harm around Lake Chad. In East Africa, al-Shabab, the continent's oldest-surviving Islamist rebellion, remains a potent force, despite more than 15 years of efforts to defeat it. The group holds large parts of Somalia's rural south, operates shadow courts and extorts taxes beyond those areas, and occasionally mounts attacks in neighboring countries.

Africa's newest jihadi fronts – in northern Mozambique and eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo – are also troubling. Insurgents who claim a new Islamic State province in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region have stepped up attacks on security forces and civilians. Nearly a million people have fled the fighting. Militants have loose ties to Islamic State networks that stretch both up the continent's east coast and into Congo's war-torn east. There, another Islamist rebel group – a faction of the Allied Democratic Forces, a Ugandan militia that has long operated in Congo – now declares itself an Islamic State affiliate. It launched attacks in the Ugandan capital of Kampala last November.

Mozambique's government, which long resisted outside involvement in Cabo Delgado, finally agreed last year to let in Rwandan troops and units from the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a regional bloc. Those forces have reversed insurgent gains, though militants appear to be regrouping. Rwandan and SADC forces risk a protracted war.

In Somalia and the Sahel, Western impatience could be decisive. Foreign forces – the EU-funded African Union Mission in Somalia, or AMISOM, and French and other European forces in the Sahel – help keep jihadis at bay. Yet military operations often alienate locals and further erode relations between them and state authorities.

There's little to show for years of foreign efforts to build up indigenous armies. Malian colonels have seized power in Bamako twice in the space of just over a year, while the regional G5 Sahel force, comprising troops from Mali and its neighbors, also struggles against jihadis. (Chad recently pulled out some of its troops from the force, fearing upheaval at home.) As for the Somali security forces, units, caught up in political bickering, often shoot at each other.

If foreign efforts wind down, battlefield dynamics would undoubtedly shift, perhaps decisively, in the militants' favor. In Somalia, al-Shabab could seize power in Mogadishu much as the Taliban did in Kabul. Intervening foreign powers are caught as they were in Afghanistan: unable to achieve their goals but fearful of what will follow if they exit. For now, they appear set to stay.

Even so, a rethink in both places – entailing a greater civilian role alongside military campaigns – is overdue. The Sahel governments need to improve their relations with citizens in the countryside. Somalia needs to repair relations among elites; late December saw another eruption in a drawn-out election feud. More controversial is talking to jihadis. It won't be easy: Somalia's neighbors, which contribute troops to AMISOM, oppose any engagement; and while Sahel governments have been more open, France rejects negotiations. No one knows whether compromise with militants is feasible, what it would entail, or how populations would view it.

But the military-centric approach has mostly spawned more violence. If foreign powers don't want the same dilemma haunting them in a decade's time, they need to prepare the ground for talks with militant leaders.