

THE YEAR COMMENCES, BUT WITH DEEP FOREBODING

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'The Israel-Hamas conflict has resurrected many fires that had plagued the region previously' | Photo Credit: AP

Seldom has a new year commenced with such deep foreboding as 2024. Both the geopolitical and domestic outlook appear distinctly unfavourable. Predicting how much worse the situation could become as the year advances could, however, be hazardous.

The war in Ukraine, while stalemated at present, is set to enter a new phase. Since neither side appears ready for peace talks or negotiations, the danger is that one side or the other might be tempted to escalate matters in their favour by resorting to still more dangerous weapons available in their armoury, not excluding nuclear. It is obvious that neither Russia nor Ukraine (plus the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) can afford to be seen as having been forced to retreat — for if Russia is compelled to step back, not only would it mean the humbling of Russia per se but it would also signal a major victory for the West. If, on the other hand, Ukraine (plus NATO) is compelled to accept peace on Russia's terms, it would comprehensively alter the politics of Europe. Key questions would thereafter arise about the very utility of NATO as a bulwark against aggression.

It is the situation in West Asia that is cause for greater alarm. The Israel-Hamas conflict has resurrected many fires that had plagued the region previously. The conflict is getting further enlarged as the Iran-Pakistan stand-off in recent weeks has demonstrated. It could well set-off a 'prairie fire' across the region, which would have consequences for much of the world.

Iran is, in the meantime, displaying an aggressive mien, and Arab monarchies are preparing for the worst. Iran is encouraging the Houthis in Yemen to attack United States and foreign ships, while engaging in open warfare with both Iraq, and of late, Pakistan; Iran is also accusing Pakistan of instigating terror groups located within their country to attack Iranian targets. The outcome is that West Asia which has always had a cornucopia of problems, is beginning to see many of them come alive. U.S. diplomacy, which has been largely confined to steps such as sending its Sixth Fleet to the region, is making little impression. The absence of purposeful diplomacy means that the situation can only worsen.

The Indo-Pacific region may appear less incendiary as of now, but there are several underlying

tensions that could turn the situation explosive during the year. The elections in Taiwan have produced an anti-China dispensation, whose leader Lai Ching-te is on record stating that his mission is to defend Taiwan from intimidation from China and protect its democratic way of life. China is least likely to take kindly to this, though it may not be provoked into taking any pre-emptory steps just yet.

Nevertheless, an 'anti-Main Land China Government' in Taiwan could well act as a lightning rod. Many countries in east Asia such as the Philippines, may feel encouraged to display a more aggressive mien in their disputes with China over territories lying within the First and Second Island Chains. This could provoke China, thus raising the stakes for everyone in the East Asia and Indo-Pacific regions. The area is already being touted as one of the main areas of strategic contestation between the U.S. and China, and, hence, could bring in the U.S. to stake its claims. The consequential result would be heightened tension across the region, involving many countries of East and Southeast Asia, not excluding India.

All this also suggests that 2024 may not see any lowering of tensions between India and China, including on the issue of the disputed border between the two countries. China may remain preoccupied with several of its other concerns, but India cannot but maintain a strict vigil as far as the China-Indian border is concerned. Not to be lost sight of also is the fact that despite China's economic difficulties, the West's aggressive wooing of India at this time may well provoke China into taking measures that could result in the humbling of India in the eyes of the world. Hence, heightened vigil is called for against any possible manoeuvre on China's part.

India may also be required this year to spruce up its relationship with some of its neighbours. Any simulation of 'wolf-warrior diplomacy' of the kind practised by China, would not suit India when it comes to its neighbours such as the Maldives. India must adhere to its traditional policy of maintaining excellent relations with all countries, specially those in the South Asian region. Bhutan falls into a special category and will need close attention. Every effort needs to be made in 2024 to strengthen relations with Bhutan which is being aggressively wooed by China.

The global outlook notwithstanding, India may face its share of internal problems in 2024. Elections are scheduled to be held in the middle of the year, and though the results, ipso facto, may not provoke any problems, there could be other issues. The build up to the elections and the immediate aftermath could become a problem. A feature of the forthcoming elections is the strong veneer of religiosity that pervades the campaign propaganda of certain groups, unlike that in many previous elections. More to the point: an impression exists that this election is in the mould of a 'do or die struggle', leaving little scope for any 'give or take', which is greatly inflaming passions across the spectrum.

In popular imagination, the Ramjanmabhoomi issue and the installation of Ram's idol in Ayodhya have currently become intertwined with the ruling dispensation's election campaign. Further, the current campaign rhetoric across all parties is not helping matters. It is contributing to a sharp cleavage among the electorate along religious and other lines, a consequence of which could be heightened communal tensions following the elections. It is imperative, after the elections, that care is taken to see that the situation does not get out of hand.

Apart from the communal aspect, close attention may also need to be paid to some of the other problems that had plagued India in the past, but have remained dormant. Manipur is a case in point, viz., that peace in the Northeast cannot be taken for granted. Apart from Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Assam, especially the last named with the United Liberation Front of Assam's anti-talk faction again raising its head need close attention. On the mainland, left-wing extremist activity has declined of late, but should not be ignored since its underpinnings and its ability to resort to violent attacks in some of the mainland States of the country remain. Internal

security during 2024 will, thus, demand heightened vigilance.

The year 2024 could also be the year of reckoning for India's Parliament. Much more than damage control may be needed. The final weeks of Parliament in 2023 had witnessed an unfortunate series of events that besmirched India's record as an upholder of parliamentary traditions. First, came the lamentable incident where Parliament security was breached by two outsiders. The sequel to this was an unprecedented stand-off between the Opposition and the ruling party, followed by the suspension of 146 members of both Houses. In the surcharged atmosphere that might prevail after the elections, many more efforts of this kind to stall parliamentary proceedings may well occur. It is important that after the new Parliament is convened, House leaders of all parties ensure the smooth conduct of Parliament. One of the fundamental responsibilities of Parliament is to protect constitutionally guaranteed liberties, and if an elected Parliament fails to do this, it would deal a mortal blow to the nation.

If the situation does not improve even after a new Parliament is convened, it would only provide ammunition to opponents of parliamentary democracy. This, then, could well become the key issue in 2024. It is vitally important, and necessary, to reinforce the unambiguous understanding that Parliament is fundamental to the functioning of democracy as we have known it.

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