

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW 2022-2023: UKRAINE, OPT AND HARDLY ANYTHING ELSE



PHOTO:
The Doctors Without Borders team during a rescue of 602 people in the central Mediterranean. The assigned Italian port to take them was Bari, 40 hours sailing time away.

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1

INTRODUCTION

By definition, any review involves looking back to try and identify what has characterised the period under review. More than a chronology of the most significant events, this report serves to try to draw some conclusions that allow us to better understand what has happened and, in the best of cases, to glimpse where efforts should be directed to avoid a repetition of the most negative effects of said events and to reinforce guidelines or approaches that bring us closer to the ideal of a fairer, safer and more sustainable world.

2

UKRAINE CONTINUES TO SET THE AGENDA

The weapons will continue to impose their deadly discourse over any well-intentioned peace proposals

In relation to the period analysed in these pages, it is undeniable that the issue of greatest international impact has been the start of the Ukraine war on 24 February 2022, with a contaminating effect that has been felt far beyond the territory where the fighting has been taking place since then. The tragedy caused by Vladimir Putin is multidimensional. On the one hand, the Ukrainian death toll is already estimated at more than 70,000, with more than 120,000 wounded, while Russia has already counted around 120,000 dead and 180,000 wounded. Added to this is an exodus of some 6.5 million refugees and a similar number of internally displaced persons in a country of 46 million people, which gives some idea of the human impact of the war. As a positive counterpoint in this case, it is worth highlighting the response given by the European Union, activating directives that have allowed prompt and effective aid to this large group of refugees, in clear contrast to so many other examples of passivity or neglect, when other people have been affected by similar circumstances. Evidently, Moscow's systematic destruction of infrastructure of all kinds also adds to the dismal situation in which the Ukrainian population is trying to cope with a punishment that in 2022 resulted in a 35% drop in the country's GDP.

Worst of all, as 2023 draws to a close, **the war looks set to drag on indefinitely**. The Ukrainian counter-offensive has not been so successful as to suggest that its aspiration to regain full territorial integrity is just around the corner. It is true that it retains the initiative on the battlefield and that as long as its Western allies remain willing to maintain the flow of supplies of increasingly sophisticated equipment, it cannot be expected to relent in its efforts to drive the invading troops out of its territory. But it is also unimaginable that Russia would abandon its militaristic adventure empty-handed (or even losing the Crimean peninsula), when it has not yet exhausted all its options of force. This means that both sides are likely to maintain their military commitment for a long time to come, with no willingness to lower their maximalist positions in order to enter into negotiations that would allow for a cessation of hostilities in the first instance and, ideally, a peace agreement. As a result, whatever desires for peace we may harbour, it reinforces the idea that **weapons will continue to impose their deadly discourse over any well-intentioned peace proposals**.

In the meantime, the harmful effects of the prolongation of this war are already being felt in many areas. This is the case, for example, with the neglect of so many other crises in different parts of the world, in an unfortunately long-standing dynamic that means that **attention given to one problem leads to the neglect of all the rest**, both in terms of diplomatic efforts to remedy them and the volume of funds activated to attend to the victims and, where necessary, for reconstruction. A good example of this, as is shown throughout this report, is what is happening with official development assistance and humanitarian aid.

Similarly, the war in Ukraine is accelerating the growth of military spending, with major powers assuming that high-intensity conventional warfare is not a thing of the past. In this line, the dominant response has been the **notable increase in military budgets**, calculating that it is necessary to have not only sufficient combat means to win against any enemy, but also a defence industry capable of sustaining the war effort for as long as necessary. Data provided once again this year by the renowned Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) leave no room for doubt: **global military spending has once again reached an all-time high of 2.24 trillion dollars in 2022**. This represents an increase of 3.7% in real terms (6.5% in nominal terms) compared to the previous year and a continuation of the upward trend for an eighth consecutive year.

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Only for those who mistakenly think that the more weapons they own, the higher their level of security, does that figure represent good news. However, as soon as we review the data on the **number of conflicts ravaging the planet**, we can immediately conclude that, according to the School for a Culture of Peace (ECP), if in 2002 there were 25 active hotspots in different parts of the planet, **in 2022 there were already 32**. In any case, today, with the war in Ukraine and tensions in the Indo-Pacific as the most powerful drivers, all regions of the world, with the exception of Latin America and Africa, are experiencing significant increases in their defence budgets. A trend in which the United States (with \$877 billion, up 0.7% from a year earlier) once again leads, accounting for 39% of the total, followed by **China** (\$292 billion), accounting for 13% of the total, with the added nuance that, while Washington has seen some downward swings so far this century, Beijing has been on an uninterrupted upward path for at least 28 years (when SIPRI began publishing this data). If **Russia** is added to these countries (with an annual increase of 9.2% to reach \$86.4 billion), the result would be that these three countries **now represent 56% of world military spending**.

Beyond these giants, to which we must immediately add India (\$81.4 billion), Saudi Arabia (\$73 billion) and Japan (\$46 billion), the combined budgets of all European countries amount to \$345 billion, which means an increase of 13% over 2021, and a cumulative increase of 30% in their defence budgets since 2013. Among them, Ukraine is the country with the highest year-on-year increase, up 640% to \$44 billion (34% of its GDP, compared to 3.2% a year earlier).

In addition to these global dynamics, similar movements can also be perceived at the regional level, such as the one affecting Algeria and Morocco, which have long been engaged in a dispute over leadership in the Maghreb. The two countries remain convinced that military power is the main lever for achieving their objective, without understanding that their behaviour only increases their own instability and that of their neighbours (and inevitably also has repercussions in Spain), without this effort

serving to solve any of their internal problems or the disputes between the two countries. Another example of what is also happening in the cases of Greece and Turkey, India and Pakistan or Saudi Arabia and Iran, and so many others.

The effect of the war on food security in many countries is no less significant. Ukraine is one of the world's leading producers and exporters of grain, but Russia's determination to weaponise grain at all costs is seriously aggravating the situation in many African and Asian countries. Putin has played with the food needs of millions of people in order to get different governments to align politically in his favour, and to this end he had no qualms about backing out of the Turkish-brokered agreement reached a year earlier in July to allow Ukraine to ship grain out of three Black Sea ports under UN and Turkish supervision. A decision that, accompanied by the physical destruction of Ukrainian silos and port infrastructure - with the clear intention of causing the collapse of the Ukrainian economy - has a very negative impact on the ability to meet the food needs of those who depend on these supplies for their livelihoods.

Ukraine, in short, looks set to remain at the centre of the international agenda for a long time to come. And from this we can only expect more negative consequences, without ruling out the possibility that the situation could get even worse, if neither of the opposing sides achieves a decisive victory and the conflict becomes hopelessly chronic.

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3

LOOKING BACK TO SEE AHEAD

One might delusionally think that if it were not for the war in Ukraine, the resulting panorama of the period analysed in these pages would be much brighter. But the sad reality immediately shows us that there are still many areas of concern and human hardship, and many unresolved issues that are piling up on our agenda. The bad thing is that when we look back, taking advantage of the fact that these Reports on Humanitarian Action began 20 years ago, analysing what happened in 2003, this feeling of unease only increases when we see the lack of will demonstrated in trying to correct the course, both in the broad field of international policy and in the more specific area of security and defence, or in development cooperation and humanitarian action.

What emerges from a hurried memory exercise of those two decades is a gruesome picture in which a sense of novelty is lost through the mere reiteration of issues that have been dragging on for so many years, and perspective is gained on constants that have been repeated, and even aggravated, over the years. The litany of unfinished business may be boring, but it serves not only to explain and understand the ills from which we suffer, but also to keep insisting on the urgent need to act if we are to correct the course before it is too late. Thus, for example, we can continue to say, with increasing dismay, that:

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— ***The UN is losing its weight as a legitimate representative of the international community and its capacity to deal with today's problems.*** Without losing sight of the vital work of many of its agencies, and without making the mistake of confusing the Security Council with the whole organisation, it is a fact that **the UN suffers from a profound dysfunctional imbalance, resulting from the unwillingness of some of its most powerful members** to update its structure (both in the Economic and Social Council, as well as in the Security Council and the Human Rights Council), to reform its decision-making processes and to provide itself with the necessary means to efficiently fulfil its multiple tasks.

The increasing marginalisation of the UN determines, on the one hand, a return of the competition for power between the great powers - with the United States and China as the most prominent contenders on a global level - and, on the other, successive (frustrated) attempts to create new bodies that claim to assume the governance of globalisation, be it the illusively renewed BRICS, the G-7, the G-20 or any other initiative that can in no way claim to represent the totality of the states that make up the international community. All this while other non-governmental organisations - multinational companies, above all - are acquiring a weight and a prominence that is barely limited by an international order incapable of regulating their operations effectively.

Nor does it seem that the Global South can be a functional reference, if only because of the immense diversity of situations and positions within it. The mere fact of sharing a discomfort with an international order that claims to be based on values and rules, but which primarily serves the interests of the United States and its Western allies, does not seem a sufficient basis for launching an alternative that is up to the current challenges.

— ***Existential threats remain on the rise and remedies are still on hold.*** Diagnoses of the seriousness of the danger posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the climate crisis and technological disruption are increasingly accurate. However, strategies for responding to the risks involved have not materialised, and we seem to be stuck in a state of short-sightedness, incapable of seeing beyond the mere day-to-day management of the situation. The classic argument blaming the accumulation of the economic crisis that broke out in 2008, the pandemic, and now the war in Ukraine, is not enough to accept the delay in the adoption of measures that must reform the structures that have brought us here, knowing that time is running out.

In the case of WMD, there is an extreme weakening of the instruments designed to prevent proliferation, with particular concern in the case of nuclear weapons, at a time when the nine existing nuclear powers are in the process of modernising their capabilities and other countries (not only Iran) are already interested in following the same path. Regarding the climate crisis, it is clear that **the Paris Agreement is failing to deliver a real energy transition**, while we are approaching a point of no return that would be a disaster of unimaginable proportions (the earthquake in Morocco and the floods in Libya are just two examples of an increasingly worrying scenario). As far as technological disruption is concerned, in parallel to a remarkable commercial competition for the most attractive markets, there is

a growing perception that **the development of the most advanced innovations may bring with it a myriad of problems**, from those affecting privacy to those that may further strain international relations and the security of states in their various dimensions. And all this without it being possible to approve any type of effective regulation so far.

- ***The securitisation of the international agenda is becoming increasingly evident.*** It is not only about increasing military budgets, but also about an approach that combines militaristic visions, which have proved so ineffective in places like Iraq or Afghanistan, with populist ideological resentments, which believe that it is possible to solve by force issues that respond to social, political and economic deficiencies of many different kinds.

A good example of this is the security bias that has characterised the way in which European Union countries are responding to migratory flows. According to the UNHCR, 108.4 million people were forcibly displaced by the end of 2022 (19 million more than a year earlier) as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events that severely disrupted public order. Of these, 35.3 million were refugees, 62.5 million were internally displaced persons, 5.4 million were asylum seekers and 5.2 million were others in need of international protection.

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Despite the evident failure of the EU's migration and asylum policy - combining harsh police repression with funding to the governments of the countries of origin or transit in order to get them to stop or readmit people trying to reach EU territory, **there is no indication that there is going to be a change of model.** On the contrary, there has been an increase in the construction of barriers and fences, as well as the deployment of means that instead of saving lives, are dedicated to protecting the borders against those who are labelled as illegal migrants or even terrorists. The same goes for the **criminalisation of those who strive to prevent daily tragedies** (it is estimated that at least 22,000 people have died in the central Mediterranean in the last decade) and regulatory changes that not only make life more difficult for those who are only seeking a better life than the one they have in their countries of origin, but also entail endorsing crimes and breaches of legal commitments such as those contained in the 1951 Refugee Convention.

And all this, even if it is shown that this security scheme does not work - in the sense that it does not serve as a deterrent for those who have understood that life in their places of origin is not possible - and although it is obvious that, based on our declining fertility patterns, the arrival of immigrants is an imperative necessity (without this in any way meaning that it solves the problem derived from the ageing process of our developed societies).

- ***The US and China intensify their competition for global hegemony.*** In this general framework of growing tension, the shooting down last February of a Chinese balloon crossing US airspace led to a suspension of bilateral relations, while signs of **the commercial, technological and geostrategic war in which the two giants have been engaged for years** became more visible. However, Antony Blinken's subsequent visit to Beijing overcame this point of disagreement, but it would be very risky to assume that a new page has been turned on so many issues on

which the positions of Beijing and Washington diverge significantly.

In positive terms, both countries can recognise that they have a clear interest, and even a special responsibility, in trying to ensure economic stability - but this does not mean that Beijing will limit itself to accommodating the space that Washington wants to give it in an international economic order dominated until now by the dollar and by the weight of the US in multilateral economic bodies. And the same is true of the effort needed to tackle the climate crisis (given that the two countries are the world's biggest polluters), the scientific response to future pandemics, food security and the fight against drug trafficking.

But even such a hypothetical collaboration, in the framework of what could become a peaceful coexistence, will depend significantly on progress in other areas. Among these, the most pressing in the short term is the war in Ukraine. On the one hand, while Beijing cannot be expected to align itself with Washington on the war in Ukraine, what the US can hope for is a commitment from China not to supply Russia with lethal material. On the other hand, recognising that China is the country with the greatest capacity to influence Vladimir Putin's plans today, it can also hope to put pressure on Moscow to avoid nuclear escalation and to convince it of the need to seek an agreement. At best, if China is convinced of the desirability of such an effort, in defence of its interests, it will clearly demand something in return. And there is nothing more valuable on their agenda right now than clarifying the path to Taiwan's absorption. In other words, one can imagine at this point that Beijing might be willing to make such an effort if Western condemnation, sanctions and criticism, led by the United States, of its desire to complete what it sees as reunification are reduced or removed.

While waiting for time to confirm whether the vision of "de-risking" will prevail, taking into account the intensity of the interdependencies created between the two and the tremendous cost of breaking them, rather than that of "de-coupling", fuelling confrontation in all areas, the only clear thing that has emerged from Blinken's visit for the moment is the mutual willingness to continue the dialogue.

— ***The Western economic and political model is in a state of disarray.*** It is not only that the **market economy and parliamentary democracy** do not seem to be able to solve today's problems, but also that they **appear to be largely responsible for having brought us to this point.** Seen from within societies that consider themselves democratic and developed, the rise of populism with anti-democratic roots is very visible, attracting more and more people who feel abandoned and punished by a system that they consider does not represent them, subjugated by the illusion that there are easy and immediate solutions to complex problems. What is also surprising at this point is the lack of reaction from current political and economic leaders to reformulate the rules of the game, who remain determined to maintain models that increase polarisation and inequality or, in other words, are putting social peace and the very sustainability of the system at clear risk.

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The problem is compounded by the **consolidation** of what have come to be called **illiberal democracies** - with autocracies as notable as Russia's or China's - which are now unabashedly presented as more functional alternatives and as models for others. In the same vein, it is worth mentioning the growing number of coups d'état, such as those suffered during this period by some African countries, as a further sign of the loss of attractiveness of a model that was once believed (Fukuyama, 1989) to be universally shared as an absolute reference.

— ***The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) lose weight on the international agenda.*** The problem is not only that the COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine are delaying the achievement of the minimum goals set in 2015, but that these goals are being directly attacked on several fronts. The most recent SDG progress report expresses deep concern about the possibility of effectively meeting the goals set for the end of this decade without a substantial change in current patterns of behaviour at both the individual and collective levels. The fact is that, of the 140 or so goals that were set, half are far or very far from the desired trajectory and more than 30% of these goals have either not progressed at all or, worse, have regressed compared to the situation in 2015. From this, it follows that **failure to redouble global efforts to achieve the promise of a better world for all would lead to extraordinary political and economic instability and irreparable environmental damage.**

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In addition, as we mentioned in the previous Report, anti-globalist movements have made the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs a direct target of their criticism from radical ultra-nationalist positions, expressing their opposition to admitting any kind of supranational authority over and above that of the state, as if it were not clear enough that no country can harbour the slightest hope of successfully overcoming the global challenges that affect us. The promoters of these movements understand that instead of addressing the major socio-economic and environmental challenges of our age, their aim is to destroy the middle classes, eliminate the sovereignty of nations, and attack the family and life.

In short, **the international outlook continues to darken without there being a sufficient reaction to break out of the negative dynamics imposed by short-termism and an unwillingness to address the necessary reforms.** The current models, both in the field of international relations and security, are very poorly adjusted and do not serve to go beyond the mere bureaucratic management of the problems and challenges that define our world. And as if this darkness were not enough of a concern, the year is coming to a close with a new outbreak of violence in Palestine. But let us remember that the war in Palestine did not start on 7 October. For years, Israel has turned Gaza into the world's largest open-air prison, disregarding its obligations as an occupying power and collectively punishing the people imprisoned there in defiance of international law. Likewise, Hamas and the other groups involved in the condemnable operation on Israeli territory have committed a clear violation of international law. Their action does not help the Palestinian cause and only fuels a cycle of violent action and reaction that will in no way serve to improve the welfare and security of the Palestinian people or to achieve the dream of a Palestinian state. A new outbreak of violence with devastating consequences, in which the impotence of the UN and the main actors on the international

Palestine once again reveals the impotence of the UN and the main actors on the international stage

stage to resolve this prolonged conflict is once again revealed, as well as the contempt of those fighting for the most basic principles of international law and human life. Israel's ongoing violence against Gaza and its people constitutes **a further violation of international law that must be unequivocally condemned.**

In such circumstances, when the system has reached this level of exhaustion and time is against us, proposals that emphasise human security (as a fundamental complement to the security of states), the prevention of violent conflicts, and an economic model that focuses on improving people's level of wellbeing so that no one is left behind, make perfect sense. There is still time.

PHOTO:
Damage caused by air strikes in Gaza.

OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES ©
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