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[Q&A](#)

FP Live Looks Back at 2023

Stephen Walt explains why countries are accusing America of hypocrisy.

By [Ravi Agrawal](#), the editor in chief of *Foreign Policy*.

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Every December, FP Live dedicates one episode to looking back at the year that was. 2023 has been a particularly turbulent year in global politics. If the ongoing war in Ukraine wasn't enough, Hamas shattered any illusions of stability in the Middle East with its attack on Israel on Oct. 7. Add to that climate-related disasters, debt crises, and high inflation, and you have a hectic 12 months of events to chew on.

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I sat down with one of FP's most popular columnists, Stephen Walt, for his take on the year's biggest developments. Walt is a professor at Harvard University and one of the world's leading scholars of realism. Subscribers can watch the full interview in the video box atop this page. What follows is a condensed and lightly edited transcript.

Ravi Agrawal: Stephen, welcome back. Here's to two grumpy men trying to make sense of 2023.

Stephen Walt: I'm trying not to be too grumpy, but it's difficult.

RA: We'll try.

This time last year, when we [looked ahead](#) at 2023, I got you to make some [predictions](#). I imagined that one year later, we'd look back and find you had gotten everything wrong. But you didn't. For example, when I asked you about a risk the world was underweighting, you replied with this: "I worry that in supporting Ukraine and in hoping for the best outcome, we are understating the possibility that a year from now, [Russian President] Vladimir Putin is still in power, the Russian military is actually doing well, the Ukrainian forces are at the end of their strength, and this suddenly looks like a much different conflict."

Is that what happened in 2023?

SW: To a first approximation, that's exactly what happened. I'm sorry to say that, because it's not a prediction I wanted to see occur, but it is, in fact, what happened. 2023 has gone badly for Ukraine by any indicators. They lost the battle for Bakhmut at some considerable cost to them. (There was also some cost for the Russians, but they have much deeper reserves than the Ukrainians do.) The vaunted Ukrainian counteroffensive failed to achieve its tactical or strategic objectives. And then there's the prospect of diminishing external support for Ukraine.

Things are not looking good for Ukraine at all. We're seeing signs of dissent within the Ukrainian government that have been largely muted for the past couple of years. Even [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky has now called for the Ukrainians to focus more on defensive preparations rather than renewed offensives, which is an indication that they understand they're increasingly beleaguered.

RA: What mistakes have they made that have led us to this point?

SW: There were several mistakes. Opinion has shifted back and forth rather dramatically. People initially thought Russia was going to win easily, then succumbed to overoptimism when things didn't go Russia's way at first. In fact, when the Ukrainians were doing well, a number of people, including the [then-]chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mark Milley, said that was the time to start getting serious about a negotiation.

Looking back, you could argue that the United States should have taken the possibility of a negotiated settlement more seriously early on. We now know that there were negotiations in March 2022 that were making some progress that might have ended the war very quickly. That opportunity was squandered.

Then when the Ukrainians did well in the fall of 2022, that might have been another opportunity to press for some kind of cease-fire or agreement.

Finally, the third error was to believe that the Ukrainian offensive was going to succeed and make dramatic gains, possibly even a breakthrough against some very well-entrenched Russian defenses. If you looked at what the Ukrainians actually had, the amount of time and training they'd been able to receive and the formidable nature of the Russian defenses, it was never very likely that they were going to succeed. That unfortunately squandered a lot of Ukrainian military strength and has left them in a position now where they have to fight on the defensive and hope for the best.

RA: One year ago, when I asked you about the Middle East, you said that the United States and Israel would have a "difficult relationship," and they have. What no one predicted was that Hamas would blow things up the way that it did. How much did that surprise you?

SW: It surprised me completely. A number of people had pointed out that the Abraham Accords and the renewed push for some kind of normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia was leaving one critical factor, the Palestinian issue, out of the equation. People were pretending it had gone away and was no longer going to cause trouble. Of course, we were all wrong. Perhaps the person most famously wrong was National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, who unfortunately published an article in *Foreign Affairs*, roughly a week before Oct. 7, saying the Middle East had never been quite as peaceful.

RA: This was in the print edition, which was later [updated](#) online after Oct. 7.

SW: Yes, that's exactly right. But that was just an indication that nobody really saw this coming. There's been lots of finger pointing in Israel about the intelligence failures and other political failures that led to the tragedy that befell them on Oct. 7. We're now seeing the profound ripple effects of this war on conflicts elsewhere, on America's global image, and on the U.S.-Israeli relationship.

The only point I'd correct is that I said there would be frictions between the United States and Israel. There have been some, but since the conflict broke out, the Biden administration has

basically been 100 percent behind Israel. They have made some rather cosmetic gestures to try to get some moderation, but without much effect. There may be anger within the administration that the Israelis aren't listening, but you're not seeing much daylight in public between the White House and the Netanyahu government.

RA: If you had to grade the Biden administration's response to events in the Middle East after Oct. 7, how would you assess its performance? Rashid Khalidi, the Columbia University professor, gave the Biden administration an [F-minus](#). Aaron David Miller and Steven Simon [wrote](#) in *Foreign Policy* that [President Joe] Biden faced a really tough situation and, all things considered, he did about as well as you could expect. Where do you stand on this?

SW: The American posture of a full embrace of Israel—increased military aid while they're prosecuting a war where civilians are suffering enormously in full view of the rest of the world—has been enormously damaging to the American image in the world. As a number of people have pointed out, the contrast between our response in Ukraine and our response in Gaza is not lost on others.

The other difficulty here is that this war is now being prosecuted to no good purpose. There's little chance that Israel is going to wipe out Hamas or, if it does manage to deal with Hamas, there will be another resistance movement that will emerge. You're not going to be able to expunge the Palestinian desire for their own state by bombing civilians. Bombing civilians tends to promote greater resistance. It doesn't lead people to decide that they want to simply accept their fate.

We're seeing enormous humanitarian suffering, but to no good strategic purpose. When this is finally over, we're still going to be left with the larger political problem of how the 7.5 million Palestinians and the 7.5 million Jewish Israelis are going to share—or coexist within—the same territory. To do that, as everyone has known for 30 or 40 years, you need a two-state solution. In order to get a two-state solution, you would need a sea change in U.S. policy, where the United States puts a lot of pressure on both sides to get a deal that involves a rebuilt Palestinian Authority, something the Netanyahu government opposes. But that sea change in American policy is not going to happen for all of the reasons that Rashid Khalidi, Aaron David Miller, and Steve Simon all know, and it has mostly to do with American domestic politics. There is a solution here, but it's not a solution we are likely to see, certainly not anytime soon.

RA: With the two wars that we've been discussing, are we seeing strains on the global order as we know it? You mentioned that it is not lost on the rest of the world how the United States and the West have responded to Ukraine and Gaza in very different ways. I'm guessing you're referring there to what is known as the so-called global south, which has really emerged as a group with more clout in terms of how they organize themselves and how they collectively seem to be asking for certain things at global convenings.

SW: The principal strain—and you see it with both Ukraine and Gaza—is a deeper awareness of hypocrisy. The rules-based order that the United States has touted is now perceived as being full of holes.

The first time I really observed this was at the Munich Security Conference last year where the gulf between how Westerners and people from the global south were talking about the war in Ukraine was quite striking. It's not that people from the global south were defending Russia's invasion or were sympathetic to the Russian position. They just didn't see that conflict as the be-all and end-all where the future of freedom was at stake. Their view was that there were

lots of equally important conflicts elsewhere that the West was paying relatively little attention to. Selective attention troubled them.

A few weeks ago, it was reported that there are 7 million displaced people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, most of them displaced by violence. This is barely noticed in American newspapers, devoting page after page of coverage to Ukraine or to Gaza. A tragic civil war is taking place in Sudan and, again, getting relatively little attention from the outside world.

So, there's this sense of selective attention. And then there's a perception of hypocrisy. We talk about democracy, we talk about human rights, but if you look at U.S. practices it doesn't live up to those standards. Both of those have contributed to a growing sense that the Western notion of world order that we've been trying to defend—and that the Biden administration has been particularly vocal about claiming that it stands for—is looking pretty tattered right now.

RA: Around the time of the U.N. General Assembly, Gordon Brown, a former British prime minister, published a piece in FP [arguing](#) that multilateralism as we know it is broken. And he made the case that we need to fix it because if you have a global crisis like another pandemic or an asteroid hitting the earth, you need a place like the United Nations that could deal with it in a way that's equitable to all countries. You need the World Bank. You need the IMF [International Monetary Fund]. If these things didn't exist, we'd reinvent them. But to do all of this, the United States needs to rejuvenate multilateralism. In other words, that over the last year it's really prioritized regional arrangements, bilateral arrangements, smaller groups like the G-7, which American policymakers rely on a fair bit these days. But it's not prioritizing the United Nations. In 2023, it became clearer that the United Nations seems utterly broken and divided, and in some senses, the need for it is greater than it's ever been.

SW: That is unfortunately a tragic paradox. I like the way you put it: never needed as much, but also never as ineffectual. Some of that reflects the broader geopolitical trends. The division between the United States and China makes that problem worse. The tacit alliance between China and Moscow and their united opposition to what they see as a U.S.-led unipolar order as well. That reflects the legacy status of some U.N. institutions, most notably the Security Council, whose permanent members reflect a balance of power that is 75 years out of date, where almost everyone understands it needs to change, and no one can agree on how to change it. You have an institution that is no longer fit for purpose but can't easily be modified. It's hard to sketch out a process by which you would start rebuilding or reshaping some of those institutions to make them more relevant.

Given that, it's not surprising that China starts to try to develop parallel institutions to the ones that exist and that the United States falls back on the institutions where it has great influence. We suddenly want to rely very heavily on NATO, where we feel like we have lots of influence. We want to rely on the G-7, having thrown Russia out. Temporarily, we'll rely on like-minded countries. We like to rely on bilateral ties with other countries because in almost all circumstances, those are countries that are not as strong as we are. All of these things contribute to the fragmenting of the existing global order, and I don't see anything that's likely to reverse that process, even though I agree with the former prime minister that a return to somewhat greater multilateralism would be useful.

One of the big events in 2023 that we didn't talk about at all a year ago was artificial intelligence. Suddenly this technological achievement, which had been in the works for a while but hadn't been fully appreciated, burst forth, and people became immediately aware of the potentially revolutionary implications in a variety of industries for society more generally,

certainly on the battlefield and in a variety of ways. When you start thinking about how human beings are going to try to manage this technology, which has to be done on a global scale, you can't just manage it in one country because this is a technology that others are going to be developing in a variety of ways. I am pessimistic because humanity's track record at limiting or channeling technological development, particularly when it's decentralized and when it's happening very rapidly, is not particularly good. The global community, if such a thing still exists, really needs to tackle this task. And yet it's hard to imagine what institutions would be appropriate for tackling it or how they could get a leash on this potential monster before it's already out and having a big impact. We didn't see it coming, but we're going to be talking about it for a long time.

RA: Indeed. As you mentioned, the tension between trying to compete but also regulate at the same time is playing out in real time around the world. FP's summer print issue focused on [artificial intelligence](#).

I'm going to take us to discuss China in a minute. But what else strikes you as a story or a trend that has stayed with you in the last year?

SW: 2023 was the warmest year on record. COP28 was surrounded by a bit more controversy than normal. It's always been a politically contentious forum, but this year seems to be heightened a bit more, partly by some of the statements made by the head of COP28, Sultan [Ahmed] al-Jaber. He appeared to question some of the science behind climate change. The fact that it was held in Dubai was seen by some as at least indicative that it was not likely to make much progress in weaning the planet off of fossil fuels.

We have this interesting juxtaposition of greater evidence of the importance of climate change and the damaging effects it's had here in the United States. It's increasingly clear that climate change is going to have very far-reaching and destructive effects on human society. Yet the one global institution we have for trying to address this doesn't appear to be working particularly well. That, to me, is a very big story for 2023 and one that, again, we'll be talking about for a long time to come.

RA: Indeed. You mentioned Sudan. You mentioned the DRC. What do you think is the most under-covered story in 2023? Come on, I will take the criticism.

SW: I'll say two, and they're kind of connected. One is, in 2023, we saw additional evidence that the question of migration and refugees is just central to a lot of what's happening in politics here in the United States. We refer to it as the border crisis. Suddenly, American aid to Ukraine is being held up in part because the Republican Party wants a particular set of deals on the so-called border crisis here. There is a geopolitical issue, American support for Ukraine, that is being linked to a migration issue. We also see it all over the world.

The emergence and the continued presence of populist parties in different places is in part a reaction to the migration crisis. Geert Wilders's political success in the Netherlands in part reflects this concern that foreigners are somehow getting into Europe and that's going to have terrible cultural effects. It seems to me that that always lands on page 10 or 11 of the newspaper and not page one, unless there's a particular issue happening in the U.S. Congress.

RA: You were going to mention one more. What was the other one?

SW: I was going to say there's this interesting story, a good-news, bad-news story on what I might call populist nationalism. On the one hand, you could point to the Polish elections and

say here was a case where a country moved away from a very rigid nationalist populism in the direction of more of a multilateral, rules-based, and EU-oriented position. That was good news. The elections in the Netherlands you might see as bad news; the election in Argentina, depending a little bit on how the new government behaves, might be seen as a sign of things going in the wrong direction. We still have the U.S. election to come next year. Again, my conclusion is populist nationalism of the sort we've seen for a decade or more is not going away. It may not be taking over, but it's a fact of life in our politics, and not just here in the United States, but in many other democracies as well.

RA: We've managed to have a pretty lengthy discussion without talking about China at any great length. Looking back at 2023, what surprised you about the way China's economy has performed, and the way its politics have delivered?

SW: I'm not sure it's been surprising to me. Many people have predicted for a long time now that the Chinese economy was going to slow. 2023 was the year a lot of these things came together. Some of it was self-inflicted, such as [Chinese President] Xi Jinping's decision to emphasize political control over economic growth and the market. Some of it is demographic: As people have predicted for a long time, an older population and a declining workforce was going to have a drag effect on the Chinese economy. There's been some internal disarray, too—the foreign minister being removed without a good explanation being provided.

The dramatic slowdown of the Chinese economy, and the fact that it didn't have a big post-COVID rebound, surprised many people. That has led to two further developments: one, something of a Chinese charm offensive toward the outside world, attempting to convince global businessmen to keep investing in and trading with China, as well as an attempt to mend some of the relations that may have been strained with Australia and with some European countries as well. We finally saw this culminate in a tactical adjustment between the United States and China when Xi and Biden met in San Francisco. I don't think there was any rapprochement or even *détente* there. Both sides were clearly staking out positions and recognizing they're going to remain rivals. But there was something of an attempt to lower the temperature a little bit. That also reflects the Chinese sense that, for the moment, they're maybe not quite as triumphant as they may have felt a decade ago and that it was time for them to cool their jets—without abandoning some of their larger strategic ambitions.