



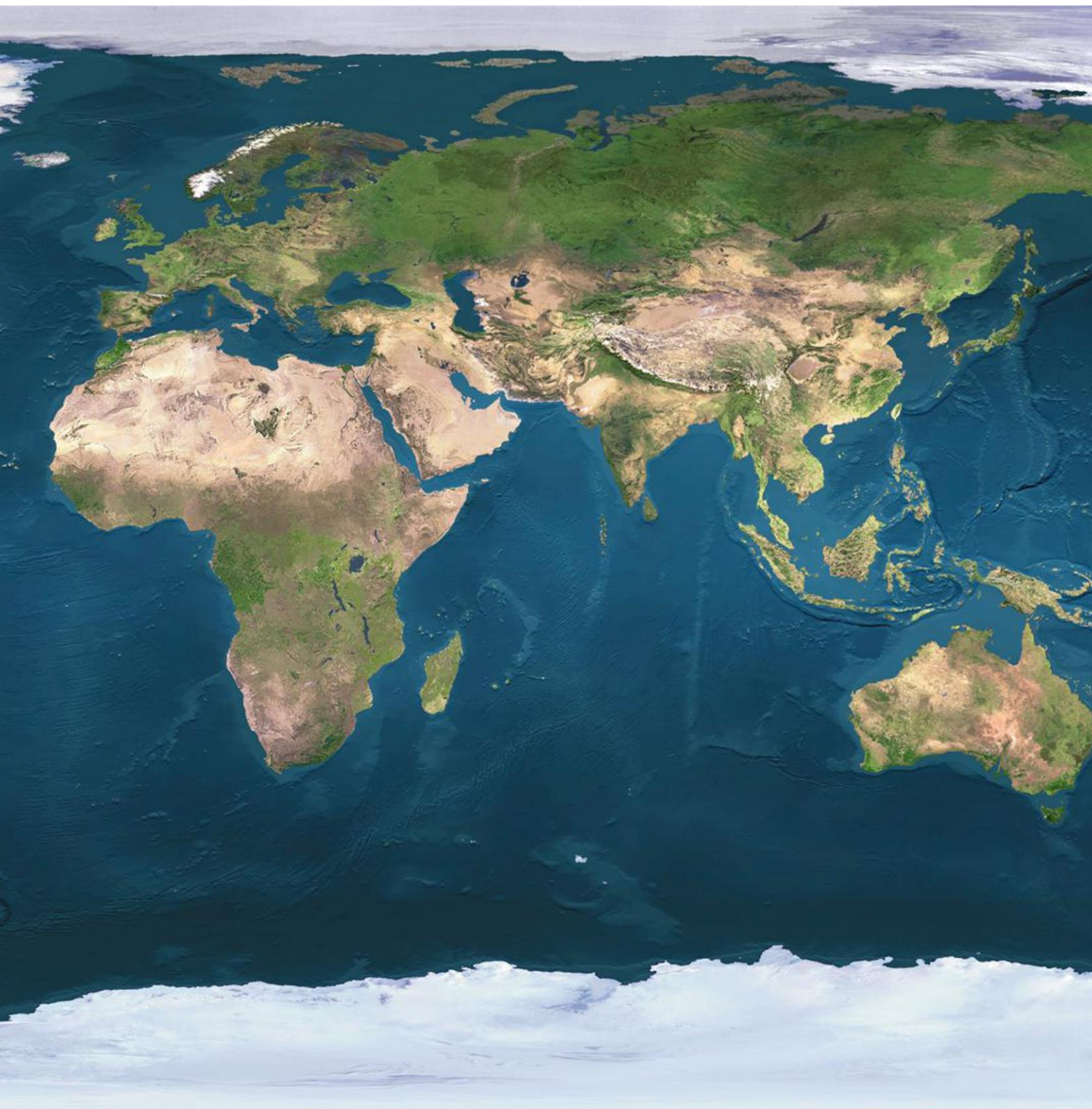
# Osservatorio Strategico

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# **Osservatorio Strategico 2022 Issue 7**



# Osservatorio Strategico

YEAR XXIV ISSUE 7 - 2022

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## Osservatorio Strategico 2022

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# **Osservatorio Strategico**

## **Part One**

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## **Libyan Dossier: Mediterranean dimension and domestic developments**

### **Institutional stalemate continues at the end of Williams' mandate**

In early July, the end of the mandate of the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Libya, Stephanie Williams, coincided with a stalemate in the national reconciliation dialogue. In previous months, her mediation work had led to the revival of constitutional-institutional dialogue between the two parliaments, the Tobruk-based House of Representatives and the Tripoli-based High Council of State. Meeting for three sessions (April, May, June) in Cairo, the representatives of the two institutions had reached an agreement in principle that was supposed to lead Libya toward new legislative and presidential elections. In the end, however, in the last round of talks in Geneva restricted to the presidents of the two parliaments, a final agreement was not signed (UNSMIL, 2022a). The end of Williams' term interrupted the positive progress produced in the previous weeks. The American diplomat expressed her disappointment at the failure to reach an agreement in two interviews with Arab media, in which she pointed the finger at the Libyan parties, who have shown during her tenure an unwillingness to reach a compromise. In addition, Williams highlighted the fragile legitimacy of the two parliaments, whose mandates have long expired, and the resulting urgency of returning to elections (Al Arabiya, 2022; Asharq al-Awsat, 2022). In early September, UN Secretary General Guterres appointed Williams' successor. He is Senegalese diplomat Abdoulaye Bathily, who will also serve as head of the UN mission in Libya, UNSMIL (UNSMIL, 2022b). On October 14, Bathily took office in Tripoli, taking over with no small amount of difficulty the work done by Williams previously (UNSMIL, 2022c). On October 24, Bathily appeared before the UN Security Council for the first time. The Senegalese diplomat gave an overview of the Libyan situation, confirming his willingness to continue the course of action already undertaken by Williams, which consisted of maintaining a dialogue with all Libyan actors (UNSMIL, 2022d).

The negative assessment given by Williams was reiterated in similar terms by the American ambassador to Libya, Richard Norland, who added a harsh criticism of the two opposing Libyan governments vying for the country's political leadership, the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU) of Mohammed Dbeibeh and the Sirte-based Government of National Stability (GNS) of Fathi Bashagha (Al-Harathy, 2022a). Indeed, it is on the political front that the dualism between two opposing executives continues to perpetuate. An additional element of complexity has been added in recent weeks. Following a bilateral meeting in Morocco between Khalid Al-Mishri, President of the Tripolitan parliament, and Aguilah Saleh, head of the Cyrenaic parliament, the hypothesis of forming a third executive that could replace GNU and GNS and recompose national unity has resurfaced (Assad, 2022a). The same hypothesis has already been discussed in mid-August in two separate meetings organized in Cairo by the Egyptian intelligence chief, Abbas Kamel, with Saleh and Al-Mishri (Al-Harathy, 2022b). However, this is still a scenario opposed by too many actors, starting with Dbeibeh, who advised the two parliaments to focus on reaching an agreement on organizing the elections (Assad, 2022b).

### **The battle for the control of the National Oil Corporation**

In July, the contention between GNU and GNS focused on the control of the National Oil Corporation (NOC) and its revenues. In mid-July, Dbeibeh decided to remove Sanallah from the helm of the state-owned company (he had been in office since 2014) and promote a reshuffle of the board, triggering a power struggle for control of the oil sector (Assad, 2022c). The changing of the guard occurred in a haphazard manner, with Sanallah refusing to relinquish the role. Only the

intervention of Misrata militias loyal to the GNU forced Sanallah to desist. Former Libyan central bank governor Farhat Bengdara was appointed to head the company. He is a personality considered close to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) because of his previous activity in the Gulf country. The choice of Bengdara seems to suggest the existence of a power-sharing agreement between Dbeibeh and Khalifa Haftar, the military ruler of Cyrenaica, who is also close to Bengdara and sponsored by the UAE. To confirm this reading, it should be recalled the meeting in the UAE within days of Bengdara's appointment between Saddam Haftar, son of General Khalifa Haftar, and Ibrahim Dbeibeh, son and adviser to the GNU Prime Minister (al-Harathy, 2022c). It should also be remembered that Haftar has never wholeheartedly supported the GNS, the executive politically created by the House of Representatives in Tobruk, even though he belongs to the same Cyrenaic camp. Bashagha's inability to dismiss Dbeibeh seems to have convinced Haftar in recent weeks to reposition himself politically, placing himself in an intermediate position between the country's two executives to play as a free rider, pending a clearer definition of the country's political future. Haftar would also be guaranteed by the GNU an unspecified number of posts in which to place personalities close to him, both on the NOC board and in other top positions. Two days after the change at the helm of the oil company, Bengdara announced the removal of the production blockades at all oil sites in the country (Libya Observer, 2022; NOC, 2022). A development that confirms the thesis about the existence of the partition agreement described above.

### **Violence returns to hit Libyan cities**

After a spring of quiet – interspersed only by Bashagha's feeble attempts to establish itself in Tripoli and sporadic clashes – the summer months were marked by an increase in violence between opposing militias. Early July saw an increase in social tensions, devoid of political affiliation. On the night of July 1 these resulted in the largest street protests since 2019 in several cities in the west and east of the country (Megerisi, 2022). These demonstrations were soon followed by a return of clashes between rival armed factions. In late July, in Tripoli, the arrest of an alleged drug trafficker by the deterrence force, the Rada, triggered clashes with the Revolutionary Guard, with which the arrested was affiliated. Once again, the Libyan capital was the scene of armed clashes on the night of August 26-27, as a result of which more than 30 people died (Nova Agency, 2022a). Prime Minister Dbeibeh intervened on what happened, speaking of a failed attempt maneuvered by foreign powers aimed at destabilizing his government (Agenzia Nova, 2022b). Again, it is unclear what are the causes and who are the actors behind the tensions. Overall, however, this is an event that should be read as part of the cyclical increase in violence in the country, even though the October 2021 cease-fire that had ended Haftar's last failed military campaign to take over Tripoli is still in place (Megerisi, 2022b). The resistance of militias loyal to the GNU demonstrated in recent weeks has strengthened Dbeibeh's power. On the other hand, Haftar has continued to perpetuate a position of ambiguity, claiming that he has not supported any of the parties involved in the recent escalation or taken direct part in the clashes (Nova Agency, 2022c). Ambiguity also emerges in several speeches delivered in recent weeks by the Libyan military leader. On one of these occasions, he called on the population to take to the streets, claiming that the army would defend the street protests from the actions of political figures who lacks popular legitimacy (Agenzia Nova, 2022d).

### **Turkey's renewed activism**

Recent months have seen continued activism by regional actors involved in the Libyan dossier, starting with Turkey. On the diplomatic front in August Ankara hosted a dialogue between the opposing Libyan factions. The Turkish focus in recent weeks seems to have changed. After consolidating its role as the main foreign power supporting the government in Tripoli, thanks to military aid that proved decisive in blocking Haftar's 2019-20 military offensive, Turkey seems to want to expand its role, standing up as an interlocutor for the factions in Cyrenaica as well. Having

stabilized its presence in Tripolitania, and taking advantage of the temporary vacuum left by the end of Williams' tenure, Ankara has led major diplomatic meetings over the summer months. In early August, Turkish President Erdogan met with Aguilah Saleh and Abdullah Lafi, vice-chairman of the Libyan National Council representing Tripolitania (Agenzia Nova, 2022e). The speaker of the Cyrenaic parliament said he was very pleased with the meeting, which was aimed at restoring relations with Ankara at the highest level (Ahmed, 2022). In early September, Erdogan met with Libyan political leaders, Dbeibeh and Bashagha. It is unclear whether the two met with each other after the bilateral meetings with the Turkish president (Nova Agency, 2022f). In late October, Erdogan met again with the two Libyan leaders. Ankara has set up a competitive strategy with another very active player on the diplomatic front such as Egypt, including taking advantage of the diplomatic crisis between Cairo and the GNU in early September, when Egypt protested for the presence of GNU Foreign Minister, Najla El Mangoush at the Arab League ministerial hosted by Cairo (Agenzia Nova, 2022g; Santoro, 2022). Even Qatar, a longtime partner of Ankara, have been playing a pivotal role in the diplomatic front. Indeed, Doha doubled the Turkish diplomatic effort by hosting separate meetings with Saleh, Dbeibeh and Saddam Haftar (Assad, 2022d).

The most important development came on October 3 (Bayar, 2022). During the visit of a large Turkish delegation to Tripoli led by Foreign Minister Cavusoglu, Turkey and GNU signed a new Memorandum of Understanding, along the lines of the one signed in 2019<sup>1</sup> (Libya Review, 2022; United Nations, 2019). As stipulated in Article 1, the aim of the understanding is to strengthen cooperation in the hydrocarbon sector, in terms of science, technology, legal, administrative and trade. Read together with the 2019 agreement, the recent MoU is designed by Ankara to strengthen its Mediterranean projection, at the expense of rival countries such as Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt. If implemented, the agreement would consolidate Turkey's role in the Libyan energy sector, while also strengthening its role as a trans-continental energy hub between Europe, Africa and Asia. The signing of the agreement provoked protests from Greece and Egypt. Within hours of the MoU signing, Greek Foreign Minister Dendias flew to Cairo where he met with his Egyptian counterpart. Both expressed concern about the agreement signed by Ankara (Euractiv, 2022; Hellenic Republic MFA, 2022). Criticism was also expressed by Libyan actors. Saleh dubbed the MoU signed by the GNU as «illegal» in a letter sent to the UN Secretary General, appealing to the expired mandate of the Tripoli-based government (The Libya Update, 2022). Reservations were also expressed by the Presidential Council, which says it was not consulted beforehand (Assad, 2022e). Finally, on October 25 during Dbeibeh's trip to Istanbul, GNU and Turkey signed two agreements in the defense sectors. According to Libyan sources, Ankara will provide Turkish Bayraktar drones to Tripoli (it is unclear which models and what numbers), other weapons systems and military training (Assad, 2022f).

### **Russia and the Mediterranean balance**

In recent months, Russia has shown that it is moving under the radar in the Libyan dossier, which by Moscow, as by Ankara, is read in relation to its Mediterranean policy. In early October, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, declared Russia's willingness to reopen its embassy in Tripoli soon (Hidri, 2022). This is a surprise announcement considering that Moscow is the only state to recognize the GNS and for years has been the main military supporter of the Cyrenaic factions, starting with the army led by Haftar. Bogdanov's words can be read as an attempt to overcome the special relationship with the Cyrenaic factions and, in particular, the failed political investment made in the GNS, which was unable to establish itself as a unified political authority in the country. Moreover, broadening the perspective, it can be interpreted as an attempt to penetrate

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<sup>1</sup> The November 2019 MoU had been signed by the then prime minister of Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA), Fayez al-Sarraj. In exchange for the military support provided by Turkey to counter Haftar's military advance, al-Sarraj had agreed to the demarcation of reciprocal contiguous Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), considered by countries such as Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt as "illegal".

the Western camp (United States and European countries), trying to establish a relationship with the GNU, an executive recognized as legitimate by the international community. This move would allow Russia to regain ground in the Mediterranean area at a stage when, on the European front, the counteroffensive of the Ukrainian armed forces is succeeding. Alongside diplomatic developments, Moscow continues to show itself as a military factor in Libya. In July, for example, an exercise by the private company Wagner, Russia's armed arm in the North African country, was spotted in Al Jufra (Agenzia Nova, 2022h). This can be interpreted as a signalling activity, at a stage when there are not active military campaigns in the country.

Russian policy in Libya is part of its Mediterranean strategy. The military difficulties encountered in Ukraine are pushing Moscow toward an attempt to broaden hostilities in secondary theaters such as the Mediterranean. In this area, Moscow's repositioning has been underway for the past decade, at least since its intervention in Syria in 2015 (De Bonis, Figuera, 2017). Indeed, the Syrian military base in Tartus is the nodal point of the Russian navy's presence in the Mediterranean. As highlighted by Navy Chief of Staff, Admiral Credendino, just following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has multiplied its presence in the Mediterranean. From a single logistics ship anchored in Tartus, in recent months Moscow has deployed a dozen naval units, including surface ships and submarines – numbers not seen since the end of the Cold War (Limes, 2022). In August, Russian navy units also pushed as far as the Adriatic Sea, where they were closely monitored by the Italian navy (Di Feo, 2022). In this sense it is clear the Russian intention to open a "Mediterranean front" with NATO in the medium term, challenging the post-Cold War status quo established in this area. The Libyan theater is a central part of this strategy. Broadening the perspective further, the willingness to open a new military base in Port Sudan, Sudan – an attempt momentarily suspended (Mackinnon, Gramer, Detsch, 2022) – and the actions to penetrate and destabilize the Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, etc.) fall under the same strategy.

## **Conclusions**

In the domestic front, the political and institutional stalemate of the past year continues to persist. Cyclically there are repositionings of prominent personalities or a partial change in the internal balances, which, however, are unable to give a decisive turnaround to the country's politically and institutionally fragmented situation. A prime example is the struggle for control of the NOC and the recent rapprochement between GNU and Haftar at the expense of the GNS. Recent talks between Saleh and Al-Mishri on whether to create a third national unity executive also do not seem likely to produce effective outcomes. On the constitutional front, it should be monitored the activity of the new UN Special Representative for Libya, Senegalese diplomat Bathily, who is expected to pick up the heavy legacy left by Williams. From the initial moves, it appears that Bathily wants to follow the path laid out by Williams, characterized by an effort to involve as many local actors as possible, including the GNS – which formally has no international legal legitimacy. The recent increase in violence in the country (with a spike at the end of August), perpetuated by periodic clashes between rival factions, stands as a reminder that the North African country may turn into a powder keg as in the past.

On the international front, the last few weeks have instead seen an increase in diplomatic activism by two key countries in the Libyan rebus, Turkey and Russia. In both cases, these are movements that should be read within a broader "Mediterranean game" involving many countries – Greece, Cyprus and Egypt as well as Italy and France. The regional de-escalatory trend of the last two years still seems to be holding. However, it cannot be ruled out that the rhetorical back-and-forth, which has seen Turkey and Greece clashing in particular, could soon turn into an escalation, as occurred in the summer of 2020 in the Aegean. Egypt may also feel the need to turn to a more assertive stance, setting aside the diplomatic talks with Ankara in which Cairo has participated over the past two years. As of today, only a "diplomatic competition" aimed at accrediting itself as an

honest broker between the different Libyan actors is ongoing between the two countries. Finally, the course of the conflict in Ukraine continues to be the main variable that can determine the future of Russia's Mediterranean policy. Moscow may be interested in increasing instability in secondary areas such as the Mediterranean whereas the Ukrainian armed forces succeed in confirming the good performance in the resistance and counteroffensive to regain control of illegally occupied regions. In this sense, there are two fronts that should be monitored. The first is the Libyan one, where Moscow can count on the presence of the Wagner company and where it is also attempting a political repositioning in Tripolitania. The second is the maritime one, mainly in the dimension of security of submarine infrastructure (undersea cables and gas pipelines) and of freedom of navigation, with the Sicilian Channel and the Otranto Channel as two focal nodes from the Italian and Atlantic Alliance point of view.

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## **A study of the domestic and regional implications of the coup in Burkina Faso**

On October 21, an assembly formed by the country's civilian and military sectors appointed the *interim* President of the Burkinabé transitional government, the 34-year-old army captain Ibrahim Traoré. Traoré had seized power by a coup d'état on September 30. At the head of a group of young middle and low-ranking officers, the captain deposed the executive led by Colonel Paul-Henry Sondaogo Damiba. The latter had overthrown the elected government of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré last January. After Kaboré's deposition, the military organized the power structure into a junta called the Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (MPSR). Traoré's seizure of power has highlighted the lack of cohesion within the MPSR. During his swearing-in speech in Ouagadougou, Traoré promised to support the political transition toward the return of a civilian-led government, scheduled for the summer of 2024, and to improve the country's security conditions. Like other Sahel countries, Burkina Faso has been under increasing pressure from jihadist movements for nearly a decade. The coup, the second in eight months, is thus the result of the concurrence of factors inside and outside the country exacerbated by a long series of violent terrorist attacks. Over the next few months, developments will be decisive for Burkina Faso's stability and West Africa. The future of multinational operations to counter jihadist groups depends on the policy choices that the Traoré executive will make on par with the resilience of the military junta. After Mali and, to some extent, Guinea, international counterterrorism cooperation is in danger of losing another regional stakeholder. This eventuality will have to be monitored as there is a threat of a wildfire spread of the jihadist presence toward the littoral countries favored by the interdependent and permeable nature of the West Africa security complex.

### **1. The second coup d'état**

On the overnight of September 29-30, a small contingent of the Burkinabé army led by some young officers surrounded the presidential palace in the country's capital Ouagadougou. A few hours later, a dozen uniformed military officers read a statement via state television announcing the removal of the *interim* President, Colonel Damiba. What happened between the troops' arrival at the presidential palace and the reading of the official statement remains shrouded in mystery. According to reports from the Damiba presidency's communications office, a brief gunfight followed by a couple of hours of talks and negotiations took place inside the building. The vague news from the heart of Ouagadougou had prompted small groups of Damiba supporters to protest, triggering a series of clashes throughout the country. Tensions quickly escalated in the country's major urban centers. Fear among international observers that a full-blown fratricidal war could break out between soldiers remaining loyal to Damiba and contingents supporting Traoré increased. Following mediation by representatives of religious and clan bodies, Damiba resigned and left the country, finding asylum in Togo. Damiba's departure from the scene triggered the reshuffling of posts within the MPSR, the military body created in the wake of January's coup that overthrew the government led by President Kaboré. Captain Traoré reaffirmed to the population and the international community the junta's commitment to improving security conditions and promoting the transition path to new elections and then convened a national assembly or forum. The meeting, led by another military, Colonel Célestin Compaoré, gathered in Ouagadougou the main political parties, representatives of social and religious groups, and key members of the Burkinabé security apparatus. Participants discussed the country's needs and outlined future steps in the political transition. The proceedings concluded with

the appointment of Traoré as a new *interim* President. The convening of a national forum as an instrument of coup legitimacy was not new to Burkina Faso. A few days after the overthrow of the Kaboré government, a similar meeting was held, which ended with the subscription of a transition charter, a kind of pact between the Damiba-led military and civilians. The charter, which has been renewed during the recent *forum*, stipulates, among other things, that the *interim* President cannot run in presidential, legislative, and local elections following the end of the transition phase. Despite the lip service, many doubts remain about the military's intentions. Although both national forums wanted to project the image of a military junta that is open and inclusive of civil society, the military made decisions exclusively. This dynamic is likely to stay the same in the coming months. For this reason, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is watching recent developments in Burkina Faso with deep concern. During the same days of the national *forum*, Traoré had to reassure an ECOWAS delegation led by former Nigerian President Mahamadou Issoufou. Over the past two years, the economic organization of West African states has experienced considerable challenges in countering the democratic regression of several countries in the region. In less than twenty-four months, Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad, and Guinea have experienced at least one coup d'état. ECOWAS is working through dialogue policies and, in some cases, sanctions to ensure that countries ruled by military juntas embark on the path to restoring constitutional order. Traoré reiterated the MPSR executive's commitment to the democratic transition roadmap agreed upon by Damiba with ECOWAS representatives. The road map calls for the gradual strengthening of democratic institutions and for elections to be held in July 2024. However, like other regional cases, for instance, Chad, many doubts remain about the military's willingness to return power and authority to a civilian government.

## **2. The infighting within the Burkinabé security apparatus.**

The new coup will likely increase the military and civil society gap and exacerbate rifts within the Burkinabé security apparatus. Captain Traoré's appointment to lead the transitional phase was less consensual among the military than the one for Damiba. The latter represented a generational linking figure within the army. At the time of the seizure of power, Colonel Damiba, although still very young, 41 years old, was a long-serving officer. For this reason, Damiba was respected and partly admired by younger and lower-ranking officers, including Traoré. At the same time, the colonel enjoyed prestige among his colleagues and higher-ranking officers because of his background and training at the École Militaire in Paris. By contrast, Traoré's leadership immediately raised misgivings and discontent among the country's military elites. While his young age and rank of captain have secured him the support of soldiers, many Burkinabé officers seem hesitant to take orders from a subordinate. The inter-generational dimension is not a minor factor in the tensions within the Burkinabé military. Traoré is an exponent of a new generation of soldiers who did not attend the Prytanée Militaire de Kadiogo (PMK), a military secondary school. The PMK is a military academy of colonial origin directly subordinated to the Ministry of Defense. Those coming out from PMK are known as the "sons of the troops" because the academy was established initially as an *élite* school open only to the soldiers' sons. Still, nowadays, entry to the institute is highly selective. Traoré is not a son of the troops and comes from a background entirely outside the army's world. Until a recent and controversial reform promoted by former Defense Minister Yéro Boly, it was impossible to apply for the army's official recruitment exams for those who had not attended military schools. Traoré, who graduated from the University of Ouagadougou after civilian education, benefited from Boly's reform to enlist in the army in 2010. For this reason, within the Burkinabé military, many officers and soldiers do not consider Traoré, a true soldier. There is an additional generational issue. The young age makes Traoré the representative of the first post-Compaoré generation of officers. Like other young officers who perpetrated the coup, the new *interim* President never operated under the orders of the colonels and generals close to President Blaise Compaoré in his nearly three decades of

undisputed power (1987-2014). The lack of a direct link to the Compaoré period and its armed wing, the dissolved Regiment of Presidential Security (RSP),<sup>1</sup> is another weakness for Traoré in the eyes of veteran officers. At the same time, however, the lack of any connection to the violent methods used by the RSP is a point in his favor among Burkinabé society, especially in comparison with Damiba. Traoré's predecessor, despite the efforts, had failed to shed the image as an officer of Gilbert Diendéré, the historic RSP commander and Chief of Staff during the Compaoré years.

In addition to inter-generational factors, the Traoré executive's resilience is also made precarious by the power Damiba's circle holds among the military. The influence of figures close to the former *interim* President is still influential within the country's different security apparatuses. Among those who enjoy considerable power is Lieutenant Colonel Yves Didier Bamouni. Bamouni is considered one of Damiba's loyalists, who had placed him in charge of the Commandement des opérations du théâtre national (COTN). The COTN is a pivotal body established by the MPSR in February to reconfigure the countering of jihadist activities. Within the power structure configured by Damiba after the coup, the COTN forms the core of the initiatives promoted by the MPSR. The COTN enjoys full authority over all Burkinabé security forces and is the main interlocutor of the French forces operating in Burkina Faso under Operation Sabre. Most importantly, COTN has taken over the management of mining concessions, the country's primary source of income. Although Bamouni has also fled to Togo, he continues to exert a strong influence over many contingents and senior officers of the Burkinabé military.

### **Analysis, evaluation and forecasts**

Political trends in Burkina Faso must be monitored closely due to the long-term effects they could have on the stability of West Africa. The interdependent character of the regional security complex has allowed the country to suffer from the spillover effects of instability in neighboring Mali in recent years. Likewise, the possible collapse of Burkinabé state authorities could generate far-reaching effects in all surrounding countries. In addition, the high permeability that characterizes regional countries has opened up a new arena of global competition, particularly between Russia and Western countries. While it is complicated to forecast the evolution of the Burkinabé scenario, it is possible to identify three distinct, intertwined variables whose combination will determine the future course of the crisis. The first variable concerns the limited cohesion within the military. As shown, the indications of the rift within the country's security apparatuses increase uncertainty about the stability of the MPSR. One month after the coup, Traoré's leadership is weak. Consequently, a sudden new takeover by other Burkinabé military officers cannot be excluded. Traoré and his circle are aware of how much their position relies on whether or not they can provide security in the face of the growing jihadist threat. The ineffectiveness demonstrated by the Damiba-led executive in countering the advance of Islamist groups resulted in its fall. Although Traoré seems aware of this situation, some of his early decisions risk bolstering jihadist forces in the country's peripheral areas. The new ad-*interim* President has called several contingents of the Cobra unit back to the capital. The Cobra unit is an elite group within the Burkinabe armed forces that supported the coup on September 30. Traoré's choice is motivated by the need to increase his executive's protection from intra-MPSR rivals. However, the Cobra unit contingents were deployed along the front line of countering the jihadist advance, which could therefore benefit from their relocation. Traoré's choice highlights how at the top of his agenda is counteracting dissident military factions. With this in mind, the captain reshuffled offices in key positions within the national security apparatus. Although not yet an official appointment, the COTN has been led by Commander Constantin Kaboré, one of the men closest to the young officers for the past month. Although Kaboré is not a high-ranking member of

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<sup>1</sup> RSP was the secret service responsible for the president's security. The organization, autonomous from the military, acted primarily in domestic politics by persecuting and suppressing dissent and potential rivals to Compaoré.

the Burkinabé army, he has the advantage over Traoré of having attended the PMK. The decision to place him at the top of the critical body of the military's power structure is an attempt by Traoré to defuse some of the internal discontent within the army. The turnover of offices launched after the coup also affected intelligence. Within a week, Traoré replaced the heads of the two most important intelligence agencies in the country: the Agence nationale de renseignement (ANR) and Groupement de sécurité et de protection républicaine (GSPR). Captain Yabré Oumarou was appointed to head the NRA, while Captain Zango Souleymane took over as head of the GSPR. In less than a year, the second internal reorganization of security apparatuses will result in setbacks in countering the jihadist groups. Therefore, it is necessary to assess the possible long-term effects. Weak and highly militarized governance risks further deteriorating relations between political power and civil society by widening the distance between the military and civilians. The prospect that entire communities will perceive themselves as "forgotten" and marginalized by the junta would foster the grip of the leading Salafist group active in the country, Ansaroul Islam, on rural villages. In addition, the military's violent responses will increase the risk of abuse of civilians. All of this will have the overall effect of further increasing the population's loss of trust in state authority. Moreover, these dynamics will likely foster political ramifications for the Salafist jihadist group. Ansaroul Islam's goal is to consolidate its presence in the northern provinces partly through the weapon of terror and partly by implementing governance mechanisms. The Salafist group wants to present its authority as an alternative to that of the state. Establishing strongholds in the country's north have allowed the Salafist group to cut communication lines (north-south) and launch targeted attacks on Bobo-Dioulasso, the country's economic capital. The greater freedom of maneuver enjoyed by jihadist militias will have far-reaching regional implications. Burkina Faso is a key country for both jihadist groups and multinational forces involved in counter-terrorism. Its geographic location makes the country a north-south and east-west gateway for many cross-border operations. The new coup is freezing Burkina Faso's relations with some neighboring countries, such as Niger, as well as with France, its leading extra-regional partner. If relations with these two partners do not improve, the Burkinabé junta will likely review its multilateral engagement in operations against jihadist groups. The downsizing of Burkina Faso's coordination with extra-regional (France, United States) and regional (G5 Sahel) actors risks dealing a blow to multilateral counter-terrorism efforts. The immediate outcome will be reduced cooperation in border areas with the danger of exacerbating regional security gaps and fostering greater freedom of cross-border movement for jihadist fighters. Remarkably, less coordination at the regional level could be affected by the international choices of the Traoré-led junta. Since the hours immediately following the new coup, France, Burkina Faso's great ally in the fight against terrorism, has been watching the country's domestic events with growing concern. The Paris apprehension is that the change of leadership within the security apparatus could push Burkina Faso to change its international alliances by moving closer to Russia, similar to what happened in Mali. Traoré and his circle have already said they want to change the country's security strategy, starting with finding new partners. The French fear of a Burkina Faso shift toward Moscow is also rooted in the growing anti-Western feelings among the Burkinabé population. During the frenetic hours of Traoré's seizure of power, junior officers spread the rumor that Damiba had escaped to France with logistical support from Paris. The news later proved false and triggered violent protests against the embassy and the country's two main French cultural centers. The crowd chanted against Paris by raising Russian flags. After Mali, Burkina Faso also shows the effectiveness of Russian propaganda in Africa. In the Sahel, Moscow aims to exacerbate anti-colonial grievances and consolidate pro-Russian sentiments among the population and the political *élite*. Several MPSR figures look to the Malian example and opening up to Moscow as an opportunity to gain greater autonomy in defense and security matters and, simultaneously, as a way to gain support for regime consolidation. While, to date, there are no concrete signs of Russian influence in Burkina Faso, it seems inevitable that the Traoré junta will distance itself from France as part of the partners' diversification. As elsewhere, Moscow intends to



exploit the opportunity to increase its ties with the MPSR. Also, the United States is watching these dynamics with great concern. Any strengthening of Russian ties with Ouagadougou will raise regional tensions by complicating Burkina Faso's relations with Niger, where U.S. troops operate.

The retrenchment of Burkinabé's commitment to international counterterrorism operations and the diversification of security partners with a likely alignment to Moscow will create a stalemate by fostering the spread and entrenchment of jihadist groups. The most significant risk is that the renewed freedoms of maneuver enjoyed by Ansaroul Islam and other terrorist groups will accelerate the trend toward the Gulf of Guinea. As analyzed in the case of Benin,<sup>2</sup> jihadist groups exploit Burkinabé soil to spill over into littoral countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and, indeed, Benin.

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<sup>2</sup> See OS 2/2022.

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## **The Gulf' relations with China**

The Gulf Cooperation Council states are trying to maintain a delicate balance in their relationship between the United States and China. Beijing has no desire to take over from the United States as the region's security provider but, given its dependence on energy and global ambitions, it may find itself having to play a larger role in the Gulf in the coming decades. Furthermore, so far it has had to balance between the two regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran: with the increase of tensions maintaining the balance will be increasingly difficult<sup>1</sup>.

China overtook the European Union as the GCC's largest trading partner in 2020 with bilateral trade worth \$161.4 billion<sup>2</sup>.

China is the world's largest importer of crude oil and imports are vital to its economy. The energy sector is an important and stable part of economic cooperation between China and the Gulf countries, innovation has become a crucial part of the cooperation in addition to economic transformation and upgrading, as well as the development of wind and solar power plants, and in the new field of infrastructure there are many opportunities such as the development of 5G and smart cities<sup>3</sup>. Massive infrastructure projects in the Gulf region – such as Lusail Stadium in Qatar and high-speed rail lines in Saudi Arabia – offer very lucrative opportunities<sup>4</sup>.

UAE is China's largest export market and the largest non-oil trading partner in the Middle East and North Africa region<sup>5</sup>: the amount of trade in 2020 was \$49.2 billion, 800 times higher than in 1984, when the two countries officially established bilateral relations. China is also Oman's largest crude buyer, imports are about 78.4% of its production and will play a significant role in the Belt and Road Initiative<sup>6</sup>.

In the 1970s, the Gulf States viewed with suspicion the relations between Tehran and Beijing, which began in 1971 and improved after the Islamic Revolution. The GCC (established in 1981) settled diplomatic relations with China during the 80s, continuing to be wary of relations with Iran in view of their rapprochement in fields such as weapons technology and energy<sup>7</sup>. Publicly maintaining a neutral stance, China had provided support to the Islamic Republic during the 1980-1988 conflict with Iraq<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Abdel Ghafar, "Sino-GCC relations: past, present, and future trajectories", Middle East Council on Global Affairs, June 2022; <https://mecouncil.org/publication/china-gcc-relations-past-present-and-future-trajectories-2/>.

<sup>2</sup> F. Tang, "China Meets Gulf Oil Bloc with Sights Set on Trade Deal, Energy Security", South China Morning Post, January 12, 2022; <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3163121/china-meets-gulf-oil-bloc-sights-set-free-trade-agreement-and>.

<sup>3</sup> Global Times, "Scholars call for innovative cooperation between China, Gulf countries", April 27, 2021; <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1222285.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> C. Lons et al., "China's Great Game in the Middle East", Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019; [www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/china\\_great\\_game\\_middle\\_east](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/china_great_game_middle_east).

<sup>5</sup> A. O. Al Dhaheri, "The UAE-China Relationship in 2021: A Golden Year, a Golden Future", China Daily, December 2, 2021; <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202112/02/WS61a817dfa310cdd39bc78c9a.html>.

<sup>6</sup> M. Chaziza, "The Significant Role of Oman in China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative", Contemporary Review of the Middle East 6, no. 1, March 2019, pag. 44–57.

<sup>7</sup> T. Karasik, "The GCC's New Affair with China", Middle East Institute, February 24, 2016; <https://www.mei.edu/publications/gccs-new-affair-china>.

<sup>8</sup> K. Huang, "China and Iran: A Relationship Built on Trade, Weapons and Oil", South China Morning Post, January 9, 2020; <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3045253/china-and-iran-relationship-built-trade-weapons-and-oil>.

The GCC position towards China has changed considerably over the years: in 1993 a visit to the Gulf countries by Li Lanqing, then Chinese vice premier, marked the beginning of energy cooperation<sup>9</sup>.

In the 2000s, the GCC's economic engagement with China brought some balance to Beijing's Iranian policy<sup>10</sup>. Since 2001 both Saudi Arabia and Iran have become two important elements in China's relationship with the Gulf countries<sup>11</sup>, both with a relevant role in the BRI.

Beijing has so far avoided any involvement in regional disputes and conflicts, but the growing Saudi-Iranian rivalry over the past two decades has made it increasingly difficult to balance relations with both. As well as establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia<sup>12</sup>, the People's Republic has been pursuing a strategic partnership with Iran that encompasses several sectors such as finance, agriculture, telecommunications, ports, and railways. In return, China will receive heavily discounted Iranian oil for the next twenty-five years<sup>13</sup>.

This agreement was first proposed by President Xi Jinping during a state visit to Iran in 2016, following the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015, but it was suspended during the Trump presidency which then withdrew the United States from the JCPOA in May 2018, adopting towards Tehran the maximum pressure policy. The Chinese proposal was then signed in 2021 after Joe Biden election and in the last months of the Rouhani presidency<sup>14</sup>. The agreement, which entered in the operational phase with the Raisi presidency, has raised Saudi Arabia's concerns: Riyadh believes that its security interests are not being taken into consideration, given that proxies supported by Iran, such as the Houthis in Yemen, keep attacking the Saudi territory.

China has supported the new negotiations for the JCPOA, resumed under the Raisi presidency and still ongoing, and is collaborating for their restoration. However, any deal that doesn't address Iran's destabilizing regional activities could drag Beijing into a conflict between two of its key strategic allies in the Gulf.

The pandemic has presented China with an opportunity to increase its influence by reacting quickly: GCC countries initially sent health supplies to China, but as the crisis continued, the relationship reversed. Chinese pandemic diplomacy has won over the Gulf states, grappling with economic and health consequences<sup>15</sup>, as a soft power tool to further consolidate its presence in countries where it pursues diplomatic and economic influence to displace Western rivals.

In early 2021, Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China Wang Yi visited six countries in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Oman<sup>16</sup>.

The visit to Saudi Arabia was important not only for energy and trade partnerships, but highlighted Saudi political support to the Chinese approach in Xinjiang.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmed, "In Search of a Strategic Partnership: China-Qatar Energy Cooperation, from 1988 to 2015", in *The Arab States of the Gulf and BRICS: New Strategic Partnerships in Politics and Economics*, ed. T. Niblock, D. Sun, A. Galindo, Berlin, Gerlach Press, 2016, pag. 193.

<sup>10</sup> T. Karasik, "The GCC's New Affair with China", Middle East Institute, Feb 1, 2016; [https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17585#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17585#metadata_info_tab_contents).

<sup>11</sup> J.Y.S. Cheng, "China's Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council States: Multilevel Diplomacy in a Divided Arab World", *China Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 2016), pp. 35-64; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43709960>.

<sup>12</sup> J. Fulton, "Strangers to Strategic Partners: Thirty Years of Sino-Saudi Relations", Atlantic Council, August 2020; [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Sino-Saudi-Relations\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Sino-Saudi-Relations_WEB.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> F. Fassihi, S. L. Myers, "Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership", *New York Times*, September 24, 2021; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/world/asia/china-iran-trade-military-deal.html>.

<sup>14</sup> C. Aizhu, A. Lawler "China buys more Iranian oil now than it did before sanctions, data shows", *Reuters*, March 2, 2022; <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-buys-more-iranian-oil-now-than-it-did-before-sanctions-data-shows-2022-03-01/>.

<sup>15</sup> Y. H. Zoubir, E. Tran, "China's Health Silk Road in the Middle East and North Africa amidst COVID-19 and a Contested World Order", *Journal of Contemporary China* (2021), 1-16; <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10670564.2021.1966894>.

<sup>16</sup> I. Papa, "China's Foreign Minister Tours the Middle East: Outcomes and Implications", *PolicyWatch 3468*, Washington, DC, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-foreign-minister-tours-middle-east-outcomes-and-implications>.

The UAE, as a regional trading hub and major oil exporter to the Asian market, controls the access to key maritime entry points in the Indian Ocean, Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, making Abu Dhabi an essential partner for Beijing<sup>17</sup>. Ties between the two countries cover trade, energy, global health and vaccine diplomacy, with the UAE becoming a manufacturing hub for the Sinopharm vaccine<sup>18</sup>. China maintains a small base in Djibouti, with 400-1,000 troops providing logistical support for anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and humanitarian programs in Africa<sup>19</sup>.

Perceived US withdrawal from the region has prompted GCC States to diversify their security partnerships and arms suppliers.

China has been trying to play a role as a security supplier through the export of defense technology. A 2019 report on Saudi Arabia-China cooperation to develop missiles has provoked considerable debate in Washington, even though Saudi Arabia buys only a small fraction of its arms supplies from China<sup>20</sup> and for the access to ballistic missile technology only when the United States is willing to provide it<sup>21</sup>. Congress has warned Saudi Arabia about arms purchases from Russia and China, while the Trump administration has used this element to boost arms sales to the Saudi kingdom<sup>22</sup>.

The UAE's relationship with China too alarmed Washington which would have preferred the exclusion of the Huawei company from the 5G network and a limitation of defense cooperation with the country: the Congress therefore introduced the "*Monitoring China-UAE Cooperation Act*"<sup>23</sup>. The UAE's reaction was to freeze the F35 deal and to purchase a French-made Rafale fighter jet clarifying their multiple options for defense procurement.

Both UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and Saudi Arabia Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman enjoyed a close relationship with the Trump administration, it is not so with President Biden. Beijing, on the other hand, enjoys continuity of leadership and policies, presenting itself as a reliable long-term partner.

The United States continues to be the main security provider in the region: it owns the al Udeid air base in Qatar, expanded in 2021<sup>24</sup>; Manama, in Bahrain, is the home base of the United States Fifth Fleet and the United States Naval Forces Central Command, CENTCOM<sup>25</sup>; in the UAE, the US is present at Al Dharfa Air Base, used to launch Patriot missiles to defend the UAE against Houthi attacks in 2022<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> A. Krieg, "The UAE's Tilt to China", Middle East Eye, October 1, 2020; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/why-security-partnership-between-abu-dhabi-and-beijing-growing>.

<sup>18</sup> Bloomberg, "China Picks UAE as Regional Production Hub for Sinopharm Covid-19 vaccine", Straits Times, March 28, 2021; <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/china-picks-uae-as-regional-production-hub-for-sinopharm-covid-19-vaccine>.

<sup>19</sup> D. Sun, Y. H. Zoubir, "Securing China's 'Latent Power': The Dragon's Anchorage in Djibouti", Journal of Contemporary China, 30, no.130, 2021, pag. 677–92; <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10670564.2020.1852734>.

<sup>20</sup> J. Lewis, "Why Did Saudi Arabia Buy Chinese Missiles?", Foreign Policy, January 30, 2014; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/30/why-did-saudi-arabia-buy-chinese-missiles/>.

<sup>21</sup> P. Mattingly, Z. Cohen, J. Herb, "Exclusive: US intel Shows Saudi Arabia Escalated Its Missile Program with Help from China", CNN, June 5, 2019; <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/05/politics/us-intelligence-saudi-arabia-ballistic-missile-china/index.html>. Jeffrey Lewis, "Why Did Saudi Arabia Buy Chinese Missiles?," Foreign Policy, January 30, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/30/why-did-saudi-arabia-buy-chinese-missiles/>.

<sup>22</sup> D. De Luce, "Senators Warn Trump Admin Not to Bypass Congress Again on Arms Sales", NBC News, July 10, 2019; [www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/senators-warn-trump-admin-not-bypass-congress-again-arms-sales-n1028566](http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/senators-warn-trump-admin-not-bypass-congress-again-arms-sales-n1028566).

<sup>23</sup> Congress.gov. "Text – H.R.6269 – 117th Congress 2021–2022: Monitoring China-UAE Cooperation Act", December 14, 2021; <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/6269/text>.

<sup>24</sup> F. AlSharif, "Qatar's Defence Ministry 'Modernises' Al-Udeid Air Base in Latest Expansion Project", Doha News, August 4, 2021; <https://www.dohanews.co/qatars-defence-ministry-modernises-al-udeid-air-base-in-latest-expansion-project/>.

<sup>25</sup> Commander, Navy Installations Command Notification; <https://www.cusnc.navy.mil/>.

<sup>26</sup> J. Gambrell, H. Altman, "US Troops Sheltered, Fired Patriot Missiles during Yemen Houthi Attack on UAE", Military Times, February 1, 2022; <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2022/02/01/us-military-fired-patriot-missiles-during-yemen-houthi-attack-on-uae/>

Successful BRI projects in the region will involve closer political engagement, which China has long avoided<sup>27</sup>, but it will be difficult to develop closer relations with Saudi Arabia and to maintain strategic and economic relations with Iran at the same time<sup>28</sup>. The demand for Chinese capital in the region is very high as various GCC monarchies try to implement their “Vision” projects for economic development and diversification.

Just as China will need to carefully balance the relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, the GCC countries will need to carefully balance their relations between China and the United States.

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<sup>27</sup> Y. Evron, “The Challenge of Implementing the Belt and Road Initiative in the Middle East: Connectivity Projects under Conditions of Limited Political Engagement”, *China Quarterly* 237, March 2019, pag. 196–216, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001273>.

<sup>28</sup> L. Zhen, “China, Iran to Forge Closer Ties due to Common Threat from United States, Analysts Say”, *South China Morning Post*, May 23, 2019; [www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3011573/china-iran-forge-closer-ties-due-common-threat-united-states](http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3011573/china-iran-forge-closer-ties-due-common-threat-united-states).



### **The US midterm vote: possible implications for the domestic political balance and the country's international role**

#### **Introduction**

Midterm elections are a relevant event in US political life. For the incumbent President, they are a critical popularity test. Their outcome can also affect how the President will implement his agenda during the second half of his term. To the opposition, they offer the possibility to demonstrate its strength and overturn the existing congressional balance. This year, both aspects take on special significance. Since assuming office, the administration's approval rate has steadily declined, despite its positive results in several areas. At the same time, the internal cleavages in the congressional majority have deepened as the pressure of the opposition intensified. The ongoing Ukraine war adds further complexity to the problem. The measures taken so far have succeeded in achieving the minimum objective of preventing Russian success. However, the lack of a long-term strategy seems to have heightened the divisions between the administration and Congress and within Congress itself. Another crucial issue regards the two major parties' internal balance. In this perspective, the election's results will impact not only the balance between the majority and opposition but also the relative weight of their components and, in the long term, the choice of the candidates for the 2024 presidential vote. President Biden's age, declining popularity and the little favour that seems to gather Vice President Kamala Harris open the problem of the Democratic nomination. At the same time, on the Republican side, Donald Trump remains a cumbersome figure despite being the favourite candidate of a relevant part of conservative voters.

#### **A steadily declining favour**

Joe Biden's and Kamala Harris's success in the November 2020 presidential elections raised many expectations within and outside the US. The European allies openly cheered at the elected President's promise to revive the US international role. In turn, US public opinion welcomed the opportunity to overcome the polarisation of Donald Trump's years. With the COVID-19 pandemic still plaguing the country, Biden's announced priorities to speed up the vaccination program and relaunch growth and employment fuelled the expectations of a country just emerging from a highly divisive electoral year. These expectations largely explain the President's good approval rating at the time of his inauguration (53 per cent according to FiveThirtyEight aggregate figure compared to Donald Trump's 44 per cent<sup>1</sup>). However, the figures and the expectations behind them concealed quite a different situation. Despite over 81 million votes (compared to the 72.2 million of the incumbent President) and a significant gap in terms of popular favour (51.3 per cent against 46.9 per cent; in 2016, Donald Trump collected 46.1 per cent of the popular vote compared to Hillary Clinton's 48.2 per cent), the number of presidential votes that the winner gained in 2016 and 2020 respectively was not so different (306 in 2020 for Joe Biden; 304 in 2016 for Donald Trump). Moreover, although two traditional Republican strongholds, like Arizona and Georgia, fell under Democratic control, the gap between the candidates had been minimal in many crucial states<sup>2</sup>. All these elements were signs of a deeply divided country and cast doubts on the vote's legitimacy, which the defeated President outspokenly challenged. The Capitol Riots (6 January 2021) matured against this backdrop, culminating in the assault on Capitol Hill, where the Senate, chaired by the outgoing Vice President Mike Pence, was gathered to ratify Biden's election formally.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/biden-approval-rating> (accessed: 3 November 2022).

<sup>2</sup> [https://ballotpedia.org/Presidential\\_election,\\_2020](https://ballotpedia.org/Presidential_election,_2020) (accessed: 3 November 2022).

The Riots were almost unanimously condemned and offered the incoming administration a surplus of legitimisation. However, this was not enough to overcome the problems that a fractured Congress posed. The Democratic majority in the House of Representatives was fragile, while the Senate was 50/50 between Democrats and Republicans: a situation that made the Vice President's vote (who is also, *ex officio*, President of the Senate) decisive. This state of things forced the administration to constantly mediate with the opposition and the different souls of the majority. Consequently, all main legislative measures faced an uphill path, the sole exception being the maxi stimulus package ("American Rescue Plan") approved in March 2021 with ample bipartisan support. After that, two highly symbolic measures such as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (passed in November 2021 with massive cuts in Congress) and the Build Back Better Act (introduced in the House of Representatives in the same days and still under scrutiny), had a tormented congressional life, due also to the opposition of some Democratic members. Therefore, despite a good economic record, with the highest GDP growth since the time of Bill Clinton's presidency (Fox, 2022) and unemployment at pre-COVID levels<sup>3</sup>, the administration's performance suffered from a negative perception. The rise in inflation (8.2 per cent in September on a year-on-year basis<sup>4</sup>, the highest figure since the early 1980s) worsened this perception, since the increase in the consumer price index mainly affected everyday goods, such as energy and food.

The White House faced hostility from the Democratic left due to its perceived lack of reformism. Nonetheless, the administration also drew complaints from the conservative and republican world. Immigration policies (a sensitive issue after the tensions that marked the Trump presidency) raised widespread discontent (Alvarez, 2022), while the President's (alleged) passivity in dealing with the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade* sparked several criticisms. Some authors pointed out the groundlessness of these criticisms, which would have been an attempt to cover up the mistakes made by the multifaceted liberal galaxy in Congress (Ponnuru, 2022). Others affirmed that the administration's main weakness was its will to woo the Party's left after the inauguration. This strategy would have led the White House to adopt measures (on environment protection, energy, public spending, and gender issues) triggering economic difficulties and alienating the President from the support of the moderate electorate, which had been one of his assets in 2020 (Douthat, 2022). As already noted, the consequence was a steady decline in Biden's popular favour, which Kamala Harris (who often performed worse than the President in the polls<sup>5</sup>) could not compensate for. The President's role remained weak also in the Party, and the Democratic Congress members often seemed the main source of trouble for the White House. The approach to the midterm vote emphasised the problem, with candidates in risky constituencies trying to strengthen their position by taking distance from an increasingly unpopular administration.

### **A foreign policy on the rollercoaster**

In foreign policy, the administration's life has been equally troubled. In the electoral campaign, the then-Democratic candidate Joe Biden repeatedly expressed his will to relaunch the US role as a global leader, especially on major issues such as protecting human rights and fighting against climate change. The European allies cheered this US "return to multilateralism". The President's first visit to Europe, to attend the G7 summit in Carbis Bay and the NATO summit in Brussels (11-14 June 2021), seemed to confirm this attitude. Both occasions proved the Western convergence on the aim to contain the rise of China and Russia not only as political powers but also as bearers of institutional and ideological systems incompatible with the liberal international order (Robertson, 2021; Parker et al., 2021). However, this convergence was short-lived, and events of the following

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<sup>3</sup> See the latest figures from the Bureau on Labor Statistics at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empst.pdf> (accessed: 3 November 2022).

<sup>4</sup> On inflation, too, see the latest figures from the Bureau on Labor Statistics at <https://www.bls.gov/cpi> (accessed: 3 November 2022).

<sup>5</sup> <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/approval/kamala-harris> (accessed: 3 November 2022).

months would have quickly put it into crisis. The two main problems were the confused withdrawal from Afghanistan between July and August and the poor timing with which the signing of the AUKUS treaty between Australia, Great Britain, and the US (15 September 2021) was announced. These two events marked the lowest point in the US/Europe relationship under the Biden administration and stirred violent tensions between France and Australia (Bechis, 2022). In the domestic realm, while most voters agreed with the idea of ending the country's military presence in Afghanistan, how the withdrawal was conducted dealt another blow to the President's popularity (Schaeffer, 2022). In August 2021, for the first time in the polls, the percentage of respondents disapproving of the President's leadership exceeded that of respondents approving it.

Not even the outbreak of the Ukraine war reversed the trend. After the Russian invasion, despite broad congressional support for the White House decisions, the President's popular favour only slightly increased. The political affiliation of the respondents heavily affected their attitude (see, e.g., Rose, 2022). Again, this is a long-lasting trend. As late as August 2022, a poll by APM Research Lab showed that US citizens' opinion of the President's role as a crisis leader was deeply polarised. According to the figures, 52 per cent of the surveyed believed he should strongly influence the choice of the amount and type of military assistance provided to Ukraine, while 49 per cent believed he should have little or no influence on the issue<sup>6</sup>. The continuation of the war risks exacerbating these divisions. Since late summer, the attitude of the Republican Congress members on the topic of military aid to Ukraine seems to have partly changed, and there have been open talks of ending the time of "blank checks" in favour of Kyiv's government. After the November vote, this posture could strengthen, especially if its results should reward the more "America first" candidates. For many of them, the risk of recession and voters' sensitivity to the economic issues are good reasons to reduce the flow of resources Washington provides to Ukraine. The administration has already warned against the risks of this policy (Samuels, 2022), and Congress is working on a bipartisan maxi aid package, which should be included in an "omnibus decree" to be approved before the next Houses take office (De Luce, Tsirkin and Wong, 2022). However, as some observers noted, the President's policy on Ukraine seems caught between two fires (Knox, 2022).

In fact, on the Democratic side, too, there are signs of malaise. At the end of October, about thirty Representatives of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, belonging to the "liberal" wing of the Party, addressed a letter to the President asking for the opening of direct negotiations with Moscow to end the conflict. Signatories stated that they were: *«united as Democrats in our unequivocal commitment to supporting Ukraine in their fight for their democracy and freedom in the face of the illegal and outrageous Russian invasion, and nothing in the letter advocates for a change in that support»*. However, the criticisms gathered inside and outside the Party (including from the House's Speaker, Nancy Pelosi) forced an almost immediate retraction (Ferris and Peller, 2022). However, the sign must not be underestimated since it outlines a possible bipartisan convergence around reducing the US commitment to Kyiv. The situation poses a double risk to the administration. On the one hand, it would represent yet another repudiation of its political line and a demonstration of how fragile the foundations of multilateralism are today in the US. On the other, it could impact the European allies' position, fuelling the existing doubts about the course of action to take. Moreover, the fact that the US has always been the largest supplier of weapons and equipment to the Ukrainian armed forces raises another problem<sup>7</sup>. Even if they wanted, it would be difficult for the European allies to make up for a relevant reduction in US supplies. Such a problem is even more evident if we consider that, in recent months, their arsenals have been partially depleted and that

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<sup>6</sup> Amid Russia Ukraine war, Americans divided over Biden's influence on military aid. *APM Research Lab*, 8 August 2022. Online: <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/motn/poll-ukraine-military-aid> (accessed: 3 November 2022).

<sup>7</sup> On the value of the US aid to Ukraine until 14 October 2022, see *U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine*, Washington, DC, Congressional Research Service, 21 October 2022. Online: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12040> (accessed: 3 November 2022).

the increase in defence expenditure they have announced will fund the replenishing of their stocks more than strengthening their operational capabilities (Turak, 2022).

### **The doubts behind the November vote**

The Biden administration is therefore facing the midterm vote from a substantially weak position. Traditionally, mid-term elections punish the Party occupying the White House, and 2022 will not be the exception. The real question is about the measure of the defeat and, consequently, the room for action that the Biden administration will have in the second part of its mandate. In recent months, there have been mixed signals. In the summer, polls showed the Democratic Party “holding the line” quite effectively. The Party also performed well in several special elections held during the year. According to some observers, the reaction against the Supreme Court’s decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* could have helped the Party to mobilise its supporters and defend its positions (Klein, Harper, and Tam, 2022). However, the situation remains fluid, despite an almost general agreement on a possible Republican takeover of the House of Representatives. For the White House, the effect would be new difficulties in advancing its agenda; for the Democratic Party, a severe handicap in the 2024 presidential vote. If the Republicans also took the Senate, this scenario would clearly worsen, returning to the one already seen after the 2014 midterm elections, when Barack Obama had to coexist with both Houses under Republican control. Another relevant element is the outcome of the 39 gubernatorial elections since, in the US electoral system, the definition of both the congressional districts and the voting systems (a critical aspect during the 2020 elections) are States’ competencies and are generally exploited to favour the governing Party’s candidates.

Against the backdrop, there is still Donald Trump’s cumbersome figure. The former President has not yet made his official bid for the presidency, even though his «unannounced campaign has been going strong since the day he left the White House» (Bernstein, 2022a). However, several recent polls have shown him as the favourite candidate for many Republican voters. For instance, in early August, a straw poll at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Dallas named Trump as the favourite for the next Republican nomination, with 69 per cent of respondents in favour compared to 24 per cent of Florida Governor, the very popular Ron DeSantis, widely credited as one of the most likely candidates for the presidential race (Warren, 2022). Therefore, even if several Republican candidates have tried to avoid the former President’s endorsement and several Republican leaders have openly taken a stand against him, Trump remains a very popular figure and reverberates this status on the candidates he supports. In this perspective, the vote’s results will impact not only the balance between the congressional majority and minority but also their internal dynamics and the relative weight of their components. Deep cleavages riddle the Democratic Party, as the initiative of the Congressional Progressive Caucus on Ukraine shows. Declining popular favour makes these cleavages more deeply felt, especially in traditional Democratic constituencies such as minorities, young people, and independent voters. It is another long-term trend (Peoples, 2021), but today it takes on new relevance due to the elections and their possible outcomes.

All these elements contribute to the administration’s weakness. Beyond changing the existing congressional balance, by increasing political polarisation and possibly the weight of the “liberal” wing of the Democratic Party, a Republican victory would probably further marginalise the moderate forces whom President Biden traditionally looks for culture and political formation. Observers noted how difficult it was framing Joe Biden in the traditional US political categories since the months of the 2020 electoral campaign. In the same perspective, some analysts highlighted Biden’s closeness to the European Christian Democratic political thought (Invernizzi Accetti, 2020). It is a strange position, which, on the one hand, has been rewarding in intercepting the moderate voters’ favour, frightened by Donald Trump’s aggressive message; on the other, it has never really convinced a progressive world whose posture gradually radicalised. Such a process of radicalisation (which the 2020 vote partly interrupted) could restart after the November elections, especially if, on the

Republican side, Donald Trump's candidates will score a good result strengthening Trumpism with their performance. Today, all elements support the idea that, in the Republican Party, Donald Trump's positions have taken a significant weight and will retain this weight in the foreseeable future, regardless of the former President's choice in the 2024 elections (Hirsh, 2022; Zeliser, 2022). The consequence could be a growing polarisation of US political life, with the possible convergence on an "America first" position of a fair share of Republicans and Democrats, with relevant effects on the US international posture and its role within the current multilateral institutions.

## **Conclusions**

Beyond their immediate effect, the November 2022 elections also assume a particular value due to their possible long-term effects. In many important ways, their results will contribute to defining the background of the next presidential elections, a background that, in turn, will have a significant weight in shaping their outcome. From this perspective, the risk of facing two years of administrative deadlock is a severe problem for President Biden and the Democratic Party, a problem that the probable difficulties that the Party will meet in choosing the candidate for the nomination make more acute. Despite his weaknesses, several sources have repeatedly raised the issue of a possible new bid from the outgoing President. According to others, the electoral machine is already in motion (Scherer and Pager, 2022), although Biden declared he wanted to postpone any decision until after the midterm vote (Habeshian, 2022). On the one hand, the President has been asked to formalise his decision quickly (Bernstein, 2022b); on the other, some influential voices invited him and Vice President Harris not to run again «for the good of the country» (Will, 2022). The media have already begun discussing the entry of several Democratic figures and Party sympathisers in the competition, although none of the "big brasses" has yet formalised his commitment. However, it seems plausible that, as happened in 2020, primaries will be crowded, and for this reason, the leading candidates will end up weakening each other, leading to the emergence of a compromise figure. The doubt is whether this process will not heighten the fractures already existing within the Party and fuel the dissatisfaction that, in recent months, has emerged in many Democratic voters<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://ballotpedia.org/Presidential\\_candidates,\\_2024](https://ballotpedia.org/Presidential_candidates,_2024) (accessed: 3 November 2022).

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## **The United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27): the slow transition toward the carbon neutrality**

### **COP27, between ambitious goals and the “chimera” of reducing emissions**

The upcoming United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27, the Conference of the Parties) – which will take place in the city of Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt between 6 and 18 November – has revitalized the public opinion's interest on the issue of the “green” energy transition, the challenges of the decarbonization process and the damages caused by global warming. World's countries attend COP27 to discuss and mainly undertake actions aimed at achieving global climate goals, as established in the 2015 Paris Agreement, the undisputed reference point in the implementation of the energy transition process. The basis of this Agreement is the commitment assumed (and theoretically shared) by the major world economies and developing countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) with the goal to contain the increase in global average temperature below the 2°C threshold beyond pre-industrial levels, limiting this increase to 1.5°C (UNCC, 2015). Basically, it is an updated edition of the commitments undertaken with the Kyoto Protocol (signed in 1997 and expired in 2020) which for the first time introduced legally binding emission reduction targets for developed countries. The Paris Agreement also introduced the task to monitor Parties' progresses in the energy transition process, namely the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC), which the Parties have to elaborate, communicate (every five years at the United Nations Secretariat for Climate Change) and try to completely achieve<sup>1</sup>. Based on the results and agreements reached at the last COP26 summit in Glasgow in 2021, the Parties will have to demonstrate their willingness to proceed to a phase of effective implementation, transforming the decarbonisation commitments previously undertaken on the Paris Agreement basis into concrete and tangible actions. For instance, at the conclusion of COP26 over thirty nations - including the EU – made a commitment to accelerate the development and use of “renewable” hydrogen (zero emissions) by 2030, through the adoption of national strategies focused on the use of this energy source (UNCC, 2022a).

Despite the declarations of the parties on their commitment against global warming and the adoption of measures and initiatives to reduce GHG emissions, the transition process from fossil fuels to a “clean” energy system – without GHG emissions and based on renewable sources – is proceeding very slowly. In this regard, the Emission Gap Report of the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP, 2022) highlights the delays and difficulties in implementing a decarbonisation process in order to complete energy transition. In fact, despite nations are committed to reduce global carbon dioxide emissions, the initiatives adopted or envisaged so far do not constitute a “credible path” to contain the temperature increase to +1.5°C, because emissions continue to grow globally (UNNC, 2022b). The report calls for a greater political and economic commitment of the States to change the current trend and avoid the climate disaster connected with global warming. In order to achieve the Paris objectives would be necessary in the next eight years a GHG reduction to unprecedented levels. On the basis of the current climate commitments – provided that they are then respected - the temperature is destined to increase by 2.4-2.6°C, while if we consider the measures actually taken until now, it is expected a dangerous increase of 2.8°C. According to UNEP, the

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<sup>1</sup> These climate actions are at the basis of the possible realization of the Paris Agreement long-term objectives, so that the peak of greenhouse gas emissions could be reached as soon as possible, then these will tend to reduce. Obviously we should consider that the developing nations will take longer to peak emissions and that reductions must necessarily take place on an equitable basis in a context of sustainable development and the fight against poverty, which are critical priorities for the low-income economies.

achievement of the NDC elaborated by the Parties will lead to a reduction of global emissions between 5 and 10% by 2030, while to keep global warming at +1.5°C emissions should instead decrease by 45%. However, following the current trends emissions will grow by 10% so to contain the increase to +2°C would be needed a cut of 30% (UNEP, 2022; Meneghello, 2022).

Undoubtedly, a factor to be taken into consideration in the evaluation of the existing initiatives to combat global warming is represented by the effects of the global energy crisis due to the Russian-Ukrainian war, destined to affect the capacity and timing of achieving climate goals. In fact, the key question of the International Energy Agency World Energy Outlook 2022 is whether the current condition of extreme vulnerability of global energy markets can imply a slowdown in the energy transition process or instead act as a catalyst to implement more incisive policies and greater commitment to achieve the carbon neutrality goal. It is particularly evident that, in recent months, the commitments to reduce emissions and to implement climate policies have been substantially set aside, in order to seek immediate solutions to ensure regular and safe supplies of fossil fuels (coal, oil, natural gas which account for more than 2/3 of the global energy mix) and to cope with the sudden volatility of market prices (IEA, 2022). However, the IEA report points out that for the first time in history the base scenario - STEPS, Stated Policies Scenario or the scenario that will materialize following the implementation of the policies currently undertaken – predicts that the fossil fuels demand will reach its peak in the next ten years. In fact, the coal demand is set to collapse soon and natural gas demand will reach the plateau by 2030, while the large diffusion of electric vehicles will imply the reduction of oil demand from 2035. This perspective is rightly considered as an historical result, considering that the fossil fuels global use has been in constant growth since the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century, as well as the gross domestic product. The gradual decrease foreseen in the STEPS will reduce the share of fossil fuels in the energy mix from 80% to 75% in 2030 and 60% in 2050 (IEA, 2022).

Although these progresses are significant, the goal to reach the climate neutrality and to limit the temperature's increase to 1.5° C appear far to be reached, as the realization of the STEPS scenario will imply a global temperature increase of 2.5°C by 2100. The IEA underlines how a significant increase in investments and the application of modern technologies can allow to fill the gap between the Paris Agreement's goals and the real scenario, reducing price volatility and contributing to the creation of a zero emissions energy system. According to the STEPS scenario, the adoption of new policies and initiatives in the major world energy markets will attract energy investments exceeding 2 trillion dollars by 2030 (compared to 1,300 billion dollar of today), even if in the NZE scenario (Net Zero Emissions, based on the total abatement of emissions by 2050 and the achievement of the +1.5°C target) investments for the clean energy production would exceed 4 trillion dollars by 2030 (ibidem). We are discussing on huge and targeted investments to promote the production of clean electricity from renewable sources, the electrification of national and regional energy systems through modern and intelligent networks, in order to reduce GHG and consumption costs. In addition, the large-scale diffusion of electric cars, batteries, technology to capture polluting emissions, the use of hydrogen will help speed up the energy transition. Nonetheless, if we consider the problems which affect the current global energy scenario and the strategic interests pursued by individual governments in terms of energy policy (including the often divergent positions between the rich economies and the developing nations) the realization of these objectives appears to be truly ambitious.

### **The Parties and the COP27: focus on the European Union and China**

The EU holds the global leadership with regard to initiatives to complete the energy transition, so intends to promote a synergic approach about the environmental issue: with the Green Deal, Europe has embarked on an ambitious path that will lead it to be the first continent to reach climate neutrality (zero emissions) by 2050. The emergence of a dangerous condition of vulnerability in

terms of energy security – due to excessive dependence on an unreliable supplier such as Russia, following the invasion of Ukraine - has pushed the EU to elaborate and adopt the REPower plan, which aims to realize a Russia energy phase-out by 2030.

With the “Fit for 55” climate package, the EU has committed itself to reduce by 2030 its GHG emissions by 55% compared to 1990 levels. The combination between the commitment to achieve climate goals and the needs deriving from the new energy scenario that emerged from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict prompted the European Commission and the member States to formulate a proposal to revise upwards the EU targets in terms of renewable energy and energy efficiency, contributing to the implementation of the strategy aimed at gradually end the dependence on imports of oil, natural gas and coal from Russia (Taylor, 2022). With the Global Gateway Strategy, the EU encourages the green transition by investing in climate mitigation and resilience, as the production of clean energy is conceived as a means to achieve the Sustainable Developments Goals and the objectives of the Paris Agreement (European Commission, 2022).

In view of COP27, the EU ministers of the environment were able to agree on a negotiating position to hold, focused on the commitment to reach the climate goal (NDC) as soon as possible, even if it will be necessary to complete the relevant legislation with the European Parliament. In the negotiations with the Parties, the EU member States intend to pursue some priorities, such as the adoption of a climate mitigation program, ending subsidies for fossil fuels, completing the phase out of coal from the energy mix, reducing methane emissions, implementing measures that allow the achievement of the key goal to contain the temperature increase to 1.5°C (European Commission, 2022).

In the final text, which had to be unanimously approved, the EU countries also affirm that the National Contributions (NDCs) collectively presented are “insufficient”, pressing and inviting the main economies and developed countries to review and strengthen their NDCs in time for COP27. As regards climate finance for developing countries, the EU ministers of the environment plan to reach the purpose of providing 100 billion dollars a year by 2023, certifying the impossibility to achieve this goal in the current year. According to EU Climate Officer Frans Timmermans, the EU could be a “bridge builder” explaining that there already are some ideas to propose to the negotiating table at COP27, such as promoting data sharing and systems early warning. Germany has also proposed a “global shield” that would include the rapid implementation of solutions for climate-related damage and the mobilization of additional funds, a proposal that has met with favour from other European nations such as France and the Netherlands (Taylor, 2022).

In a global perspective, the goal to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5°C does not appear feasible without the full involvement of China. On the one hand, the Asian nation is currently the world's largest energy consumer and carbon emitter - alone is responsible for 1/3 of global emissions – but on the other hand China is also the world's leading producer of renewable energy, heavily investing in research and application of low-carbon technology. China's commitment to carbon neutrality is based on the announcement made in September 2020 by Chinese President Xi Jinping that China would reach its peak emissions before 2030 and reach climate neutrality before 2060. During the Climate Ambition Summit in December 2020, the Chinese President publicly made a commitment to increase the share of non-fossil fuels in total energy consumption to 25% by 2030 (20% in 2025), compared to 16% in 2020 (Xinhua, 2020). This is a significant commitment and an extremely ambitious goal, as it will involve the adoption of highly incisive measures to reduce polluting emissions in a nation that has an energy mix within which coal accounts for 60%. As a result, Beijing's commitment to reducing emissions will affect the success or the failure of efforts to contain global warming (IEA, 2021).

Unlike the COP26 in Glasgow - in which President Xi Jinping did not participate but sent a written text (Mathiesen, 2021) - according to the Director of the Climate Change Department at the Ministry of Ecology and Environment Li Gao a Chinese delegation will take part in the COP27

(although the presence of XI is not certain). The participation of the Chinese delegation confirms Beijing's willingness to collaborate with all the actors involved so that the meeting achieves concrete results, focusing efforts on climate adaptation and support for developing countries. According to Li, the priority objective of COP27 will be to concretely implement the NDCs aimed at reducing GHG emissions with effective actions and not setting renewed objectives, as well as avoiding "empty slogans" but committing to the implementation of the goals that will guarantee climate neutrality (Xie, 2022).

Beijing also takes up the key issue related to the climate change adaptation, which represents the main concern for developing nations, also defined as a global priority by United Nations Deputy Secretary General Amina Mohammed. At COP26, the most developed countries pledged to allocate 40 billion dollar per year until 2025 for climate adaptation. However, according to Mohammed a clear roadmap with achievable goals and how the funds will be allocated is needed, reiterating that this is an almost negligible contribution if we consider that it would take 300 billion dollars a year to promote climate adaptation of developing countries. For Li, the world's main economies should provide at least 100 billion a year for the considered period. (ibidem).

The achievement of the peak emissions by 2030 implies profound transformations in the national energy sector essentially in three key areas: energy efficiency, renewable energy and carbon reduction. China has the know-how and technical skills, economic means and political willingness to successfully undertake a rapid energy transition process pursuing the 2030-2060 goals. In this regard, it is sufficient to remember that since 2015 the Chinese government has increased by 70% public spending and investments in the R&D (research and development) sector focused on low-carbon technologies. According to the APS scenario of the IEA – Announced Pledges Scenario (APS) reflecting the goal of carbon neutrality by 2060 - primary energy needs in China will grow slowly after 2030 Concerning singular sources, solar will become the main energy source by 2045, demand for coal will collapse by 80% in the next 30 years, oil demand by 60% and gas demand by 45%, while 1/5 of the electricity produced will be used to produce hydrogen by 2060 (IEA, 2021). To achieve these goals, China will have to plan massive investments, about 640 billion dollars per year by 2030, nearly 900 billion dollars per year by 2060, a 60% growth compared to impressive investments made in these years (IEA, 2021).

As the world's leading producer of renewable energy, China has the concrete possibility of assuming world leadership also in the production of "green" hydrogen (a clean energy produced from renewable sources), accelerating the energy transition, the decarbonisation process and the achievement of 2030-2060 targets. China is the world's largest producer and main consumer of hydrogen – it produces 24 million tons per year, which represents about 1/3 of global production – obtained from coal processing, an economic option also compared to the extraction of hydrogen from natural gas but which remains still polluting. In perspective, the development of technology for the production of hydrogen from coal with the capture, use and storage of carbon will allow to increase the availability of "clean" energy for different fields of application, including transport, also reconciling the achievement of carbon neutrality objectives and the needs of energy security (De Blasio and Pflugmann, 2020).

At the same time however, the combination between the energy needs deriving from the pandemic emergency (interruption of international supply chains) and to cope with the frequent shortages of supplies in various provinces (avoiding social tensions) have pushed China to increase investments for the construction of new coal-fired power plants. In 2020, 38 gigawatts (GW) from new coal-fired power plants became available – 3 times more than the entire additional global capacity – instead of reducing coal use (and polluting emissions) according to the national programs and goals, factors that reinforce doubts about Beijing's will and ability to achieve carbon neutrality goals (Herrero and Tagliapietra, 2021). These investments are part of the national plan, which

provides the construction of new coal plants (43 would be under construction) for a total of 73 GW, a capacity 5 times greater than that planned worldwide (Proietti Silvestri, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

Despite the declarations of the developed countries, the enormous difficulties to abate greenhouse gas emissions and reducing the use of fossil fuels will negatively affect the results that will emerge from the United Nations Climate Conference. The Secretary General of the United Nations Guterres launched an alarm cry of particular concern according to which “*we are on the right path to irreversible climate chaos*”, precisely because the Parties appear powerless in the face of the problem of global warming, unable to find a joint solution.

Even the idea to build a pact of trust between developed economies and emerging countries appears essentially unrealistic as strategic national interests tend to prevail over the common and shared goal of climate transition. The probable marginal role assumed by China and India (whose presidents will not probably attend COP27) will influence the decisions that will be taken, also because these will not include two of the major GHG emitters.

The energy context that emerged following the Russian-Ukrainian war certainly does not facilitate the implementation of climate goals, as short-term energy needs become a priority, especially with the arrival of winter, as evidenced by the contribution of coal plants (pollutants) to meet the energy needs of the European nations. The Green Deal and the EU REPower are ambitious programs, which can receive a significant boost from the changed energy scenario: however, the vulnerability of the energy security condition could push in the opposite direction, postponing the pursuit of the objectives.

Finally, the issue of economic compensation towards developing countries or those most affected by climate change remains a key issue to be resolved, as it should also be addressed in terms of making available the large-scale application of low- carbon emission technology, supporting these nations’ efforts towards a sustainable system of clean energy production.

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## The evolution of disinformation as a hybrid threat

### Disinformation

Information manipulation and disinformation activities have attracted increasing attention in recent years. Disinformation refers to the intentional use of false or unbalanced information by States or non-State actors with the hidden purpose of misleading, confusing, or provoking disagreement between sectors of the population of other countries. In general, the ultimate goal of the actor practicing disinformation is to obtain a strategic benefit from the effects of disinformation (in particular, favorable decisions of the government of the country affected by such activities) and thus to increase its power or prestige.

Disinformation is usually analytically distinguished from misinformation (see, among others, Jerit and Zhao 2020) because the latter lacks the fundamental requirement of intentionality in spreading false or inaccurate information. However, in practice, disinformation campaigns can also use misinformation and even portions of true information.

Crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, can fuel misinformation and generally represent fertile ground for disinformation as well; even Italy, of course, is not immune to these risks (for example, Sciubba Caniglia 2020; see Di Mascio et al. 2021).

In general, information manipulation can be carried out by an actor who belongs to the same country of the targets of these activities, without the presence of an international dimension. In addition, information manipulation may be promoted for purely economic or other non-political purposes. However, the focus in this paper is on transnational disinformation for political purposes (Gerrits 2018; see also Lanoszka 2019, La Cour 2020).

### Disinformation as a hybrid threat

In this context, disinformation can become a foreign policy tool and can be part of so-called hybrid warfare. Overall, disinformation can have significant implications for international security.

International disinformation activities are certainly not a recent invention. For example, already in ancient Rome, in the first century BC, Octavian Augustus (future first Roman emperor) skillfully resorted to disinformation in his fight against rival Mark Antony (e.g. MacDonald 2017).

Nevertheless, it is obvious to note that the technological innovations of recent years have had very far-reaching consequences in this field. The development of the Internet and, in particular, of social media has had the effect of significantly increasing the speed, reach, and ultimately the impact of disinformation.

Additionally, emerging technologies could pose particularly insidious challenges in this field. One can consider, for example, the potential political implications of deepfakes (media based on the technique for synthesizing the human image through artificial intelligence), even at the international level (Chesney and Citron 2019; Barnes and Barraclough 2020).

### Disinformation against democratic states

Today, disinformation activities by foreign States (or by hostile non-state actors) are usually considered a salient threat to democracies, although the scientific debate on the actual extent of this danger is still open (among others, Lanoszka 2019).

Awareness of risks has grown considerably in recent years, after repeated foreign interference in the domestic political process of some Western states, especially during election campaigns. The most notorious case in this regard is probably the Russian interference in the campaign for the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Mueller 2019; see also, among others, Faris et al. 2017). Incidentally, it is

not surprising to note that scientific research on misinformation has grown dramatically since 2016-2017 (Freelon and Wells 2020, 149). The level of attention and concern for these kinds of threats have returned very high on occasion of the U.S. midterm elections of 8 November 2022 (Lee Myers 2022).

In general, in many Western democracies, disinformation risks exacerbating trends that already exist, such as the high level of political polarization and the low degree of trust in political parties and institutions as well as in mainstream media.

### **Disinformation and attribution**

Although it is often easy to understand that disinformation campaigns can serve the foreign policy interests of a particular actor, especially a state, this does not mean that it is equally easy to identify and reveal the real responsibilities. The actor engaged in disinformation activity usually devotes the utmost care to concealing its actual role.

A partial exception to this practice emerged recently with a statement by Yevgeny V. Prigozhin: on 7 November 2022, on the eve of the midterm elections in the United States, this Russian businessman - known for his close relations with President Vladimir V. Putin, and often considered the key figure secretly financing and/or managing the Wagner Group (see Marone 2022b) – reportedly revealed his alleged commitment to interfering in the U.S. elections and his intention to do so again in the future (Reuters 2022; on Prigozhin, see also Laruelle and Limonier 2021).

Dissimulation efforts are generally easier in disinformation on the Internet, since in the virtual sphere of the Web it can be very difficult to trace the origins and sources of a given disinformation campaign and to blame a particular actor for this sort of hostile initiative.

However, the issue of attribution is also crucial to concretely face the threat, at least beyond the preparation of general defensive measures against any potential adversary (Gerrits 2018).

### **The case of Russian disinformation**

From the perspective of the Western States, particular concern has been generated by the commitment of Russian actors in this field. Such extensive efforts have been extensively studied and analysed and appear to be relatively well documented today (e.g. Treyger et al. 2022).

In particular the role of the Internet Research Agency (IRA) has become notorious. This company, based in St. Petersburg and linked to Prigozhin, has been very active in disinformation and propaganda on social media (for example, Dawson and Innes 2019).

Attention to the defensive and offensive dimensions of information manipulation is also clearly present in the doctrine of the Russian Federation (cf. Beccaro 2021). For the Russian leadership of Moscow and for actors linked to it (Laruelle and Limonier 2021), disinformation is a strategy that, in the face of comparatively limited risks and investments, allows them to aspire to achieve significant political objectives.

These goals may vary depending on the opponents. For example, according to a schematic interpretation proposed by experts Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014, cited in Gerrits 2018, 10) before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia's influence through disinformation took the form of concentric circles: Moscow aimed to generate chaos in Ukraine, destabilization in the Baltic States, political influence in Eastern Europe, confusion in the West, and distraction in the United States.

It has been argued that the transnational disinformation activities practiced by Russia today differs greatly from that carried out by the Soviet Union in the past (cf. Rid 2020): according to this view, while the latter also played a significant "active" function of promoting the ideology and values of the Communist regime, the former is limited to the "negative" function of weakening the adversary.

On closer inspection, this interpretation appears to be valid only in part (Gerrits 2018). Russian actors, presumably also through disinformation, has managed, at least until the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, to present Russia persuasively as a model to emulate or at least as an attractive point of

reference for significant sectors of the population and elites of foreign countries, even in the West. It appeared simultaneously to some as a conservative bastion of tradition and order against the alleged limitations and errors of “globalist” liberalism, and to others as the natural heir of the Soviet Union and its struggle against fascism.

Obviously, actors related to the Russian Federation are not the only ones to be engaged in extensive disinformation activities, even against Western countries (see, for example, Curtis 2021, Dubowitz and Ghasseminejad 2020; cf. Byman 2021).

### **Responses to disinformation**

Countering transnational disinformation effectively requires that disinformation is recognized, that its origins and sources are identified, that the intention of the actor promoting it is proved and exposed, and that its effects are neutralized. Each of these tasks is complex and problematic (Gerrits 2018).

Clearly, if, as mentioned earlier, disinformation tends to accentuate already existing problems, the first, not easy, goal should be to remedy these general problems.

In addition, States can put in place a variety of measures and initiatives to address the hybrid threat of disinformation (see, among many others, Hellman and Wagnsson 2017). A first type of response is associated with the objective of increasing the population’s capacity to recognize and reject disinformation, with a combination of awareness-raising campaigns and educational programs on media and digital literacy (e.g. IDMO 2022) and fact-checking initiatives.

A second type of response concerns the creation of rules and codes of conduct to deal with the threat, and the dialogue of governments with the companies that control the main online platforms (see also Di Mascio et al. 2021).

A third type concerns the preparation and implementation of technical measures to detect and stop disinformation, especially on the Internet, including with sophisticated tools such as artificial intelligence (among others, Kertysova 2018).

A fourth type of response has to do with constructing and disseminating credible, consistent, and attractive counter-narratives to counter the messages of disinformation. In this regard, it is important to underline that expectations regarding the effectiveness of counter-narrative strategies should not be too high. In fact, it is presumable that a large part of users who consume disinformation find in such material a confirmation of already existing beliefs and opinions, also reinforced by “echo chamber” mechanisms in the media that lead to the repeated transmission and amplification of beliefs, ideas and attitudes within a relatively homogeneous and closed environment. For this reason, counter-narrative initiatives, even when are technically well-constructed, may be less effective than one might expect; however, this is all the more true when disinformation is combined with the use of conspiracy theories, often difficult to challenge concretely because of their inherent “circular logic” (Marone 2022; among others, see also Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2021).

### **Conclusions**

Disinformation poses a serious threat to security, all the more so for democratic regimes. Moreover, recent developments with the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have further encouraged the use of this hybrid threat, especially on social media. In the face of these dangers, democratic States must strengthen strategies and measures to protect themselves and to react effectively.

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# **Osservatorio Strategico**

## **Part Two**

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## **Reconciliation between Israel and Turkey: a permanent breakthrough?**

### **Why Israel and Turkey turned to dialogue**

After a lengthy negotiation that began in late 2020, Israel and Turkey announced on August 17, 2022, the reestablishment of bilateral diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level (Israel PMO, 2022a). This decision ended a diplomatic crisis between the two countries that began in May 2018. At that time, Ankara had withdrawn its ambassador to Tel Aviv and expelled Israel's top diplomatic representative in Turkey in response to violent clashes between Israeli armed forces and Palestinian protesters at the border with the Gaza Strip in the previous days. The Turkish decision had resulted in the third degradation in the history of Turkish-Israeli relations. Historically, in fact, there have already been witnessed two other diplomatic degradation. The first was in 1980, when Turkey decided to express its opposition to the Israeli parliament's approval of the Basic Law "Jerusalem Capital" (Liel, 1980). The second most recent had occurred in 2010, again by Turkish decision, in response to the Mavi Marmara incident (Efron, 2018) – an event in which the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had responded by force to an attempt by a group of boats led by pro-Palestinian Turkish activists to force a naval blockade on Gaza, resulting in casualties in the clashes. The renewed dialogue between Israel and Turkey is a confirmation of the de-escalatory trend that has been involving all major Middle Eastern countries, from Saudi Arabia to Iran, from Qatar to the United Arab Emirates, for at least the past two years. Alongside systemic reasons, the recent rapprochement between Israel and Turkey should be explained by taking into consideration peculiar factors that, especially following the rise of Erdogan over the past two decades, have made the bilateral relationship between the two countries subject to ups and downs.

Indeed, as in the past, the first input for a revival of diplomatic dialogue came from Turkey. Since the end of 2020, President Erogan has attempted to change the assertive approach that had characterized Turkish regional policy in the previous four years. The process of regional integration between Israel and a number of Arab countries ushered in by the signing of the Abrahamic Accords again made it worthwhile to attempt to engage the Jewish state to break the diplomatic isolation suffered by Turkey in previous years<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, a second bet by Erdogan should be considered: the attempt to convince the Israelis to cooperate on the energy front in order to wedge himself into the Eastern Mediterranean energy cartel organized in the *East Med Gas Forum* (EMGF), a Cairo-based international organization from which Turkey is excluded<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, domestically Erdogan had an interest in finding solutions that could ease the Turkish economic crisis, which is particularly marked by the severe devaluation of the local currency, also in view of next year's presidential elections.

On the other hand, Israel showed initial reticence in returning to the negotiating table, due to the poor consideration of the Turkish President, not considered as a reliable partner following two decades of up and down in bilateral relations (Baldelli, 2022a). The breakthrough in the dialogue came with an unexpected player, namely Israeli President Herzog, elected on June 2, 2021, who convinced the Israeli Prime Minister and Foreign Ministry to engage in serious dialogue (Baldelli, 2022c). The occasion for the breakthrough was the November 2021 negotiations to bring back two Israeli tourists arrested in Turkey, accused of espionage for photographing the presidential residence in Istanbul (BBC, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> Evolution that should also be read in relation to the renewed dialogue between Turkey and several Arab countries like Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

<sup>2</sup> The member States are: Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Palestine (Palestinian Authority).

## **The stages of rapprochement**

Following the deepening of the dialogue in January 2022 was the first telephone conversation between Foreign Ministers in thirteen years. In March, President Herzog visited Ankara, the first time by an Israeli President of the Republic since 2007 (Israel MFA, 2022a). In May, Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu took part in a visit to Israel and the Palestinian Territories (Ravid, 2022). In June, another episode further accelerated the rapprochement. It involved contingent cooperation between Turkish and Israeli intelligence to thwart attempts by Iranian agencies to attack Israeli tourists on Turkish soil (Times of Israel, 2022). The official decision to reestablish diplomatic relations then came last August. In September, a meeting between President Erdogan and Israeli Prime Minister Lapid took place on the sidelines of the opening session of the UN General Assembly in New York (Israel PMO, 2022b). Moreover, during his stay in the United States, the Turkish President met with a delegation of American Jews, to whom he expressed his intention to visit Israel as soon as possible (Kampeas, 2022). The appointment of the ambassadors took place, too – still awaiting accreditation. On September 19, Irit Lillian, Israeli chargé d'affaires in Ankara was promoted to the rank of ambassador to the same diplomatic office (Daily Sabah, 2022). On October 7, Ankara appointed its new ambassador to Tel Aviv, who will be Sakir Ozkan Torunlar, a career diplomat formerly consul in Jerusalem, with deep knowledge of the Israeli-Palestinian dossier (Soylu, 2022). Finally, in late October, Israeli Defense Minister Gantz made a trip to Turkey, during which he met with his Turkish counterpart, Haker, and President Erdogan (Daily Sabah, 2022b). The meetings discussed ways to resume security and defense cooperation.

## **Cooperation and disagreement: main issues**

There are several sectors in which Turkey and Israel are preparing to deepen cooperation, starting with economy. It should be said that even periods of diplomatic crisis have not affected negatively trade cooperation<sup>3</sup>. For instance, in 2021 Turkey represented Israel's seventh largest trading partner, with the latter appearing as Ankara's ninth largest trading partner (WTE, 2022a; WTE, 2022b). In the short term, the civil aviation sector is where the two countries are moving to deepen the partnership. There are five Turkish airlines operating in Israel<sup>4</sup>. Over the last decade Turkish airlines have monopolized air traffic between the two countries since El Al, Israel's national airline, stopped flights to and from Turkey in 2007. Thanks to the recent rapprochement, a new civil aviation agreement was signed, the first since 1951 (Israel MFA, 2022b). That development opened up the possibility of a re-establishment of connections operated by El Al. Far more difficult to expect cooperation in the energy field, a dossier initially brought to the negotiating table by the Turks, only to be shelved. With the energy crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine Erdogan has attempted to revive the Israeli-Turkish partnership for pipeline transportation via Turkey of Israeli to Europe (Hurriyet, 2022). Techno-economic considerations and geopolitical difficulties make this scenario unlikely at present.

On the other hand, in the short term no cooperative developments are expected in defense industries and armed forces fields, although Gantz's visit to Turkey has revived dialogue on these issues. It will take much longer to see a return of cooperation in this sector to the levels achieved between the 1990s and the beginning of the new century. Those partnerships were interrupted in 2010, due to the Mavi Marmara incident<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, the first visit in more than a decade of a Turkish navy ship (TCG Kemalreis, a Barbaros-class frigate) to the Israeli port of Haifa in early September is noteworthy (Tanchum, 2022). On the intelligence front, as previously stated, there are episodic contacts and exchanges between the agencies of the two countries, mainly in anti-Iranian

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<sup>3</sup> A free trade agreement has been in place between the two countries since 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Corendon Airlines, Onur Air, Free Bird Airlines, Pegasus Airlines, Turkish Airlines.

<sup>5</sup> On the industrial front, the role of Israeli companies in projects to modernize or supply weapons to the Turkish armed forces should be mentioned. For an in-depth discussion see Kogan, 2005.

terms. Tehran's activities in the region should be considered an area in which increased collaboration could be observed, particularly in Syria, where Turkey and Israel share some of the objectives (Bakir & Özkizilcik, 2022). A similar pattern is replicated in the Caucasus, where Israel cooperates with Turkey's ally Azerbaijan against Iran.

On the political front, the Palestinian issue will remain the main element of disagreement between Ankara and Tel Aviv in the medium-long term. Cultural, ideological, religious and strategic reasons have made Erdogan's Turkey, along with Iran, a major supporter of the Palestinian cause. And this is precisely the main ground on which the aforementioned diplomatic crises with Israel have been triggered in recent years. In recent months, however, Erdogan has proved himself to be willing to build a practical crisis management, starting with the cyclical escalations between Israel and Hamas, through which he can moderate his condemning statements toward Israeli military operations without having to be forced to break diplomatic relations (Baldelli, 2022b). A central piece of Turkish policy in the Palestinian dossier is its relationship with Hamas. For several years, the Palestinian terrorist organization has enjoyed extensive freedom of movement on Turkish soil, including by obtaining Turkish passports (Reuters, 2020). In addition, according to Israeli sources, the Islamist movement has reportedly installed a base for cyber and counter-intelligence operations in Turkey (The Times of Israel, 2022a). Even in the face of limited restrictions applied in recent weeks by Ankara, Israel does not expect a quick severing of ties between Turkey and Hamas.

## **Conclusion**

Looking at the cyclical development of Turkish-Israeli relations, a deepening of cooperation on targeted dossiers should be expected in the coming months, which, however, will not lead to a final stabilization of the relationship. Therefore, the path of rapprochement should be observed with moderate optimism. In the face of new crises or unexpected events, it could be interrupted again. The main dossier through which testing the *status* of the relationship will remain the Palestinian issue. A new serious escalation in Gaza or a conflict in the West Bank and Jerusalem could convince Erdogan to review his stance, throwing off the pragmatic handling of recent months. Moreover, the consequences of domestic developments on both sides should be taken into account, given the next Israeli general elections scheduled in November and the 2023 Turkish presidential elections. In Israel, the possible formation of a rightwing government led by Netanyahu could cool down the willingness to deepen ties with Ankara. Indeed, apart from political differences, there is personal distrust between the two longstanding leaders. On the other hand, the outcome of Turkish presidential election will clarify whether Erdogan will be able to confirm himself as the country's leader and, possibly, with what numbers. A decrease in his approval ratings could convince him not to invest too much in the relationship with Israel, given the historical closeness of his electorate, and an important segment of Turkish society, with the Palestinian cause.

In the background, structural dynamics capable of affecting regional balances and consequently the state of relations between Israel and Turkey should be considered. From the U.S. mid-term elections to the fate of the Iranian nuclear issue; from the Middle Eastern de-escalatory trend to the conflict in Ukraine, which is having side effects in most of the regions of the world, not only in political-strategic terms but also the economic and energetic levels.

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## **The jihadist variable on Burkina Faso's future**

The two recent military takeovers are directly linked to security concerns stemming from the growing jihadist threat. Like other States in the Sahel, Burkina Faso has been facing pressure from faith-based terrorist groups for almost a decade. Nowadays, more than a third of the Burkinabe territory is not under the control of State authorities. The country's northern provinces are home to several strongholds of the Salafist group Ansaroul Islam (or Ansar al-Islam). Both recent coups (January & September 2022) were justified by the military – organized in the Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (MPSR) – by the need to provide greater security for the Burkinabè population. First, Colonel Paul-Henry Sondaogo Damiba and Captain Ibrahim Traoré blamed their predecessors for ineffectiveness in countering the Salafist group's activities. Both have promised to regain control of the whole of Burkinabè territory. As a result, the future of the current Traoré-led executive and the country's stability depends on the jihadist variable, which, in Burkina Faso, as in all of West Africa, seems to have regained vigor after a low-profile phase.

As a result, the future of the current Traoré-led executive and the country's stability depends on the jihadist variable, which, in Burkina Faso, as in all of West Africa, seems to have regained vigor after a low-profile phase. Since the outbreak of the insurgency in neighboring Mali (2015), Burkina Faso has faced the challenge of a variety of militias. Because of its geographic proximity and the porosity of its borders, the country has become the best place for militiamen operating in Mali to find sanctuary. Some fighting groups have used Burkinabè land only for transit, others as shelter. Most of the militias that have been active in Burkina Faso in recent years belong to armed jihadist groups of different affiliations ascribable to the Qaedist movement Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State's Greater Sahara Province (ISGS). Over the years, the movement that has gained more power in the northern areas of Burkina Faso has been the indigenous Salafist group Ansaroul Islam (or Ansar al-Islam). Established by famous Burkinabè preacher Malam Ibrahim Dicko, a native of the northern province of Soum, Ansaroul Islam cooperates with JNIM but is not formally affiliated with it. Although it has ties mainly with Qaedist movements, Ansaroul Islam has not turned down cooperation with groups that can be related to ISGS. The lack of interest in the jihadist feud – Al-Qaeda vs. Islamic State – has allowed the movement to proliferate without resistance from other groups active in the region. Moreover, Ansaroul Islam has employed an unusual approach to jihadist formations. The Salafist group has opted for a low-profile stance, leaving even media coverage to the more powerful and well-known groups such as JNIM and ISGS. In order to consolidate and enlarge its presence in the northern parts of the country, the Salafist group has combined several tactics, which can be categorized into three distinct areas: a. threat and coercion, b. appeal to local grievances, and c. implementation of welfare policies. The knowledge of the region and its social milieu has undoubtedly helped the group, which since 2017 has been led by the founder's brother Jafar Dicko. Ansaroul Islam has exploited the marginalized condition that historically characterizes the population residing in the country's northern provinces. A perfect breeding ground on which the Salafist movement has been able to proselytize, facilitated by some choices made by the Burkinabè authorities. In December 2016, the first significant support given by the local population to Ansaroul Islam's initiatives resulted from the abuses committed by Burkinabe security forces. Burkina Faso's military reacted to the first raids of fighters from Malian soil in a violent manner. The military's operations indiscriminately targeted members of jihadist groups and the rural communities residing in the border areas. Even in the following years, the Burkinabè security forces' heavy-handed conduct resulted in thousands of

deaths and nearly two million internally displaced persons. The violent tactics of the Burkinabè security apparatus and the humanitarian crisis generated by a flood of IDPs have created an enlistment pool for the Salafist group. Over the years, Ansaroul Islam's approach has gradually refined, showing the ability to adapt to the surrounding environment. The evolution of Ansaroul Islam's message and organizational structure has been affected considerably by its intertwining with events in neighboring Mali. The Dicko brothers' and other leading Burkinabé figures' involvement in the fighting in Malian territory fostered the movement's radicalization process. The experience in Mali allowed the leadership of the Salafist movement to improve techniques to administer the territories under their control. From 2016 to date, the Dicko-led movement has assumed de facto control of many provinces in northern Burkina Faso. The movement presents itself as a credible alternative to state authorities. A further factor contributing to the spread of Ansaroul Islam concerns its connection with Fulani communities, a minority in the country but the majority in the northern provinces. Historically, the Fulani, nomadic Muslim groups, have been completely marginalized from the political and economic administration of the country. The Salafist group has exploited the systematic discrimination faced by the Fulani communities. Most Fulani people cannot access essential public services such as schools and hospitals. The launch of international counter-terrorism operations paved the way for the growth of violence perpetrated by state security forces, particularly the Gendarmerie, against Fulani communities. The abuses, such as the killing or humiliation of elders in rural villages, have stimulated Fulani youth to embrace the Salafist cause to protect their communities and seek revenge. Against this backdrop, Dicko's skillful approach has empowered Ansaroul Islam to present itself in the eyes of many Fulani as the only alternative to their highly marginalized condition. Moreover, an additional factor that facilitated the spread of Dicko's message was the lack of a solid religious authority within the Muslim community and the friction among the various traditional leaders. Finally, many of the people's grievances are related to the exploitation of mineral resources. The northern provinces are wealthy in gold. Similar to what happened in Mozambique, in Burkina Faso, the rich agreements between the government and foreign companies did not benefit local communities. These factors, combined with the weakness of public governance and the many shortcomings of the state security apparatuses, have facilitated the proselytism of Ansaroul Islam.

The insecurity throughout the country and the Salafist group's rise created favorable conditions for the military's double intervention. Violent terrorist attacks preceded both coups, revealing the state's failure to provide security to its citizens. A few months before the Colonel Damiba-led coup, two attacks had killed dozens of people prompting the population to protest against the inability of authorities to counter the terrorist threat. Damiba's eight-month rule has not only failed to counter the jihadist advance, but in the country's peripheral areas, the Burkinabé authorities have lost control of a growing number of territories. Ansaroul Islam's control of entire areas of the country has led to the collapse of some provincial governments such as Banwa, exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, and fomented unrest amongst various components of the army, prompting them to intervene. The lack of progress on security issues internally and growing frictions within the military apparatus were the main drivers of the September 30 coup. Even before the recent coup led by Captain Traorè, some Salafist fighters had conducted a large-scale offensive in Tuy province, laying siege to cities and succeeding in cutting off major roads.

Therefore, as seen, the jihadist factor is a determinant variable for the future of Burkina Faso and beyond. The lack of a comprehensive strategy that does not dwell solely on the military dimension but provides for intervention in the northern provinces on multiple levels-economic, social, political, and normative-could be the only brake on the spread of Ansaroul Islam. Unless the issues underlying the proliferation of solidarity feelings with the jihadist movements are resolved, the Burkinabe authorities are unlikely to be able to regain control of the territory.



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## **After a year of deadlock Iraq has a government**

More than a year after the parliamentary elections<sup>1</sup> Iraq has a government: Mohammed al-Sudani – the preference of the largest parliamentary bloc, the Shia Coordination Framework – was sworn in as Prime Minister in October, along with 21 of 23 cabinet ministers<sup>2</sup>.

The new President Abdul Latif Rashid<sup>3</sup> is a veteran of the PUK, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, brother-in-law of the former President (2005-2014) Jalal Talabani. At the time of the vote, the KDP, Kurdistan Democratic Party, had announced the withdrawal of its candidate, Rebar Ahmed, to back up Rashid, with the support of Nouri al-Maliki<sup>4</sup>. Immediately after being sworn in as President, Rashid asked the candidate from the majority bloc to form a government, according to the constitutional process<sup>5</sup>. The Coordination Framework had formed the largest bloc with 138 MPs and had already chosen Sudani as a candidate for the premiership. Although he has significant experience as a provincial governor, various ministerial positions and as a member of parliament, the premiership is a big step forward for Sudani, but he owes much of his career to former Prime Minister al-Maliki, so it will be hard to escape his shadow.

Sudani's agenda centers on fighting corruption, creating economic opportunity and improving public services<sup>6</sup>. However, given his party's near-total dependence on larger coalition partners, governing will not be easy.

The al-Furatain party won only three out of a total of 329 seats in the Iraqi parliament, one of which was Sudani's (Prime Ministers and cabinet members are not allowed to hold parliamentary seats, so he will vacate the seat). Sudani is heavily dependent on his larger coalition partners in this fragile consensus government – even if winning his own seat gives Sudani a credibility that his two predecessors lacked. Since 2003, the assignment of governmental roles has taken place within a system of co-optation between the Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish communities – *muhasasa*. This has provoked internal political struggles over the control of public resources, highlighting the degree to which the security of client networks – rather than the implementation of competing governance visions – remains the key factor in Iraqi politics.

Managing the multiple security agencies that formally fall under the Prime Minister's authority will be particularly difficult: the Iraqi State does not have a monopoly on violence, and a priority will be to curb the autonomy and influence of Iraq's many paramilitary groups - particularly those affiliated with Iran.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Hadad, "Iraqis voted a year ago but still don't have a government", The Washington Post, October 10, 2022; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/10/10/iraq-government-stalled-parliament-sadr/>.

<sup>2</sup> H. Hadad, "Climate of opportunity: Iraq's new government as regional conciliator", European Council on Foreign Relations, 4 November 2022; <https://ecfr.eu/article/climate-of-opportunity-iraqs-new-government-as-regional-conciliator/>.

<sup>3</sup> AlJazeera, "Iraqi parliament elects Abdul Latif Rashid as new president", 13 October 2022; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/13/iraqi-parliament-elects-new-president-abdul-latif-rashid>.

<sup>4</sup> S. Jiyad, "Can a New Government Save Iraq?", The Century Foundation, October 14, 2022; <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/can-a-new-government-save-iraq/?agreed=1&agreed=1>.

<sup>5</sup> S. Mahmoud, I. Naar, "Iraqi president asks Mohammed Shia Al Sudani to Form Next Government," The National, October 13, 2022; <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2022/10/13/iraqi-president-nominates-mohammed-shia-al-sudani-to-form-next-government/>.

<sup>6</sup> D. Mansour, "Iraqis protest is symptom of embedded corruption", Chatham House, 2 September, 2021; <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/iraqis-protest-symptom-embedded-corruption>.

The new Iraqi Prime Minister will have to contend with the Sadrist movement<sup>7</sup>, both a political party and a social movement<sup>8</sup>. The Sadrists won the most seats in the 2021 election, before withdrawing all their MPs in June 2022, frustrated by their inability to form a majority government. It is unclear whether the leader Muqtada al-Sadr will again address the crowd to undermine the Coordination Framework and force new elections. As the only major political party not involved in the government with a significant mobilization capacity and a track record that has proven unpredictable, the Sadrist Movement is a key factor in the Iraqi political scene.

Sudani will have to navigate Iran's burdensome influence over the country and partnership with the United States but, unlike many other Iraqi politicians, he was not exiled during the Baath regime and has not cultivated political ties as an exiled opposition figure. His lack of previous ties with the West puts him in a position to bring Iraq closer to its regional neighbours, promoting its expansion in the mediator role between Iran and Saudi Arabia<sup>9</sup>. This could be of significant international significance given the polarization that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused and the fraying of ties between Washington and Riyadh<sup>10</sup>.

Clashes in August 2022 between Muqtada al-Sadr's supporters and the Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF, have pushed Iraq to the brink of civil war and internal strife among Shiites is continuing, setting the stage for a wider conflict<sup>11</sup>. The influence of the Iranian-aligned PMFs is waning, making them more determined to reject Sadr's claim on the political landscape: the October 2021 election results describe the extent to which rivalries between major movements and blocs of Iraq have intensified.

<sup>7</sup> R. Mansour, B. Robin-D'Cruz, "Understanding Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Inside Baghdad's Sadr City", Chatham House, 8 August 2022; <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/08/understanding-iraqs-muqtada-al-sadr-inside-baghdads-sadr-city>.

<sup>8</sup> Al Jazeera, "Iraqi Protesters Storm the Parliament in Baghdad's Green Zone", July 27, 2022; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/27/iraqi-protesters-storm-parliament-muqtada-al-sadr-green-zone>.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Monitor "Iran Reports Progress in Talks with Saudi Arabia", July 6, 2021; <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/iran-reports-progress-talks-saudi-arabia#ixzz7VQIm2SYt>.

<sup>10</sup> D. Gavlak, "US-Saudi Oil Dispute Fraying Longtime Relations", VOA, October 21, 2022; <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-saudi-oil-dispute-fraying-long-time-relations/6799752.html>.

<sup>11</sup> R. Alaaldin, "Iraq's next war: implications for the region", Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 25 October 2022; <https://mecouncil.org/publication/iraqs-next-war-implications-for-the-region/>.

**The Euro-Atlantic area and the strategic competition with the People's Republic of China: possible developments in the light of the Twentieth congress of the Chinese Communist Party**

The Twentieth congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been a crucial step in consolidating Secretary-General Xi Jinping's power. The renewal of his mandate for a third term and the lack of credible successors paved the way for his indefinite staying in control. At the same time, the adoption of "Vision 2035" has defined the political and economic trajectory that China will follow in the next fifteen years. In terms of the internal balance, the Secretary-General has tightened his grip over the Politburo's steering committee, replacing the outgoing members with new and more loyal figures and reducing the weight that factional debate has had so far in shaping the People's Republic's politics. On the economic side, the emphasis has been placed on per capita GDP growth, although some analysts raised doubts about its feasibility<sup>1</sup>. Other priority targets have been defined in the growth of the productive system's quality and efficiency and the reduction of external dependence, with imports increasingly seen as just a complement to national production. Special attention has been paid to technology and the need to develop solid national foundations in this field. In this regard, the Secretary-General stressed how, in the coming years, the PRC intend to focus on «national strategic needs, gather strength to carry out indigenous and leading scientific and technological research, and resolutely win the battle in key core technologies»<sup>2</sup>. Here again, self-sufficiency is a crucial target, especially in light of the revival of the ongoing "chip war" with Washington (Herman, 2022; Foroohar, 2022).

Important signals also came on foreign policy issues. The resignation of seventy-two-year-old Yang Jiechi, Director of the CCP General Office's Central Foreign Affairs Commission, will lead to the appointment of a new foreign minister next spring. However, this change is unlikely to affect the current assertive strategy. Since 2020, Beijing has strengthened its presence in the South China Sea by installing permanent military facilities in contested areas (Polling, 2022). In the same period, clashes with Indian forces happened along the border between the two countries (Davidson, 2022). Finally, the PRC has moved significantly closer to Russia, politically and economically. The Sino-Russian rapprochement led to a meeting between President Putin and Secretary-General Xi Jinping on the eve of the Ukraine invasion when has been adopted what the parties labelled a "no limits" partnership. While opinions about this partnership's strength are uncertain (Wei, 2022; Huang, 2022; Cadell and Nakashima, 2022), Congress' final documents have pointed out China's search for global security as the country's top priority. In this perspective, attention had been paid to the need to protect China's interests abroad, counter "foreign interference" in the Taiwan issue, and shelter the ROC from the negative impacts of an increasingly dangerous strategic environment. Overall, a more "antagonistic" foreign policy, both in terms of actions and ideology, which, without naming it directly, looks at the US as the main rival. The US, in turn, has recently adopted a new National Security Strategy, which identifies the PRC as «the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it [...] using its technological capacity and increasing influence over international institutions to

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<sup>1</sup> China's Economy Needs to Double in Size to Meet Xi's Ambitious Plans. *Bloomberg*, 17 October 2022. Online <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-17/xi-s-gdp-per-capita-pledge-seen-as-challenging-as-growth-slows> (accessed: 4 November 2022).

<sup>2</sup> China's Xi Vows Victory in Tech Battle After US Chip Curbs. *Bloomberg*, 16 October 2022. Online: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-16/china-s-xi-pledges-victory-in-tech-battle-after-us-chip-curbs> (accessed: 4 November 2022).

create more permissive conditions for its own authoritarian model, and to mold global technology use and norms to privilege its interests and values»<sup>3</sup>.

The new Chinese assertiveness poses a significant challenge to the Atlantic Alliance. The current Strategic Concept repeatedly stresses the need to address Beijing's «systemic challenge» to NATO's values, interests, and security. The outcomes of the Twentieth congress and the future they outline for the PRC strengthen the concerns underlying the Madrid document. The search for economic self-sufficiency and technological leadership foreshadows an increasingly inward-looking China, committed to widening the gap that separates it from its potential partners and increasingly capable of dictating conditions in bilateral relations (Kynge, Yu and Lewis, 2022). How this leadership is sought, and its possible political use have long been concerns to Western governments. The clash that, starting in 2019, involved China, the US and Europe on the 5G issue is just one example (Venkataramakrishnan, 2022). The antagonistic language framing Beijing's economic ambitions is another source of concern. In the same way, Beijing's military activism, supported by a significant increase in China's defence budget, seems to reflect the PRC's will to establish itself as a regional point of reference in this field, too. The exercises that the People's Liberation Army carried out last summer off Taiwan's coasts offered a significant demonstration of the capabilities and readiness of the Chinese armed forces (Gale and Youssef, 2022). It is not surprising, therefore, that Beijing's ambitions fuel the fears of NATO and its «global partners», such as Japan, which, in response to Chinese initiatives, has for years now launched a policy of rearmament that is a source of concern for the overall stability of the area (Hanssen, 2022)<sup>4</sup>.

### **Final remarks**

Against this backdrop, NATO's role is still largely to define. The leaders of the Atlantic Alliance have repeatedly stated that – despite NATO's commitment to «global partners» – it is not in its interest to spread its direct presence to the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, Chinese action unfolds in many areas (such as economics or technology) where NATO has little or no room for actual intervention. On the other hand, the Alliance can act as a hub, aggregating its capabilities with other players in the Euro-Atlantic theatre. In this field, the recent hardening of the European Union's position on China may provide a first common ground. Among others, NATO could grant the EU preferential access to its expertise in security analysis, strategic foresight, and military risk assessment (Trinkwalder, 2022). An increasing number of European countries are looking at the PRC as a possible security threat (Brzozowski *et al.*, 2022), and this is another element that could favour possible convergence. EU's policy still suffers from many uncertainties, especially regarding the desire to safeguard access to the Chinese market. However, Beijing's self-sufficiency strategy could affect this posture. For years, the EU has classified China as a systemic rival, promoting an alternative vision of the international order. However, several member states have not yet resolved their ambiguities. On the other hand, Beijing's current attitude and seeming proximity to Moscow has also prompted the Central and Eastern European countries (traditionally, mostly pro-China) to partially revise their position (Bergsen and Šniukaitė, 2022) and pay greater attention, among others, to the possible security implications of their economic ties with the PRC (Harper, 2022).

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<sup>3</sup> [The US] *National Security Strategy*, Washington, DC, October 2022, p. 23. Online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf> (accessed: 4 November 2022).

<sup>4</sup> According to SIPRI - Stockholm International Peace Research Institute data, in 2021 (latest available figure), China allotted some 293 billion dollars to its armed forces, with a 4.7% increase compared to 2020, marking the twenty-seventh consecutive year of growth in military spending.

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### **The global impact of Saudi-American divergences in the OPEC framework**

During the Vienna summit held in early October, OPEC+ – an organization which includes 13 nations of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and 10 of the largest oil exporting countries in the world (including Russia) which are not members of traditional OPEC – announced a significant cut in oil production – which would amount to 2 million barrels of oil per day starting in November (OPEC, 2022). This is the largest voluntary reduction in production since 2020: if realized, this cut will imply a significant reduction of available supply in the international markets and a further prices' increase in a global economic context characterized by high inflation and serious threats of recession.

Existing data confirms OPEC's key role to preserve the global oil supply: 80% of the world's proven oil reserves are located in OPEC member countries, with the Middle East plays a leading role as it holds 67.1% of the Organization's total reserves (OPEC, 2021). In August 2022, the total production of OPEC countries reached 29.7 million barrels per day (mbpd), 1/3 of which (10.9 mbpd) produced by Saudi Arabia, followed by Iraq (4.5 mbpd), United Arab Emirates (3.2 mbpd) and Kuwait (2.8 mbpd) (Al Jazeera, 2022).

Fearing the repercussions on a global level and the implications on the domestic political-energy scenario, the United States has expressed a very firm opposition to this initiative. Since the announcement, Biden Administration has asked Saudi Arabia – leader of OPEC producers – to postpone the decision to cut oil production by at least a month, to avoid repercussions on the electoral campaign for the US mid-term elections scheduled for November. Saudi Arabia defended the ratio of the OPEC+'s decision, which has not been taken for political reason but it is based on economic forecasts and strategic needs of the producing countries, so postponing the cut could have negative economic consequences (Turak, 2022).

The tightening of positions between Washington and Riyadh reflects the need of both parties to protect their energy security interests.

US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby refused the Saudi approach, noting that the decision to cut production will benefit Russia increasing its energy export revenues, so reducing the impact of US and EU sanctions adopted to condemn Russian invasion of Ukraine. Kirby also stated that other OPEC nations might be against Saudi decision, but they did not oppose to avoid retaliation, while Riyadh has offered no economic justification to support the initiative (De Young and Fahim, 2022).

Saudi Arabia replied to these claims reiterating how OPEC+ decisions are taken by consensus among member states and not based on unilateral decisions of a single nation, confirming that the production cut responds to economic needs in order to maintain a condition of balance between demand and offer in the world energy markets. In fact, the Saudi decision has been openly supported by some Middle Eastern petro-monarchies that are OPEC members. The Minister of Energy of the United Arab Emirates Suhail Mohamed Al Mazrouei and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kuwait confirmed that the decision has no political motivations but responds to market needs, achieving the purpose to contain the fluctuation of prices – with benefits for both producers and consumers. Iraq, Oman and Algeria also expressed their support to cut production (Al Monitor, 2022). Price volatility issue represents a non-negligible factor in the Saudi energy strategy, considering that in only three months prices have dropped from 120 dollars to 90 dollars a barrel due to the fear of a global recession. The New York Times recalls how during the 2008 global financial crisis oil prices fell from 100 to 40 dollars a barrel in a few months, reaching then 32 dollars, while OPEC and Saudi Arabia

were unable to contain economic damages even when they belatedly reduced production. Therefore, Saudi Arabia and OPEC current move should be interpreted as an attempt to anticipate the effects of a possible crisis and to contain price volatility (Wald, 2022).

Washington, on the other hand, appears motivated by an opposite interest, because the desirable increase in Saudi production and OPEC would allow to mitigate prices so finding a way to alleviate the highest level of inflation in the last 40 years. It should also be considered that since 2008 the success of the shale oil revolution in the United States (unconventional oil and gas extracted with the fracking technology, namely the hydraulic fracturing of rocks) has produced a reduction in the market shares of OPEC countries and the United States' legitimization as the world's largest oil producer. Furthermore, Washington's strong support to the energy transition – from a system based on fossil fuel sources to a “clean” one based on renewable energy – is destined to have a significant impact on the economies of the Gulf monarchies, which are based on the hydrocarbon's exports.

On October 31, the Biden Administration's special envoy for international energy affairs Amos Hochstein met Saudi and Emirati energy ministers in Abu Dhabi, declaring that because of the global economy crisis it is necessary to have additional volumes of oil and natural gas (and not a production cut), as energy prices must reach a level which stimulate economic growth, otherwise they will rapidly decrease triggering the consequent economic crisis due to the gradual contraction of energy demand (SP Global, 2022). In spite of Washington's position, Saudi Arabia and the UAE confirmed the correctness of their decision. If the Emirati energy Minister used a more conciliatory tone by declaring OPEC's readiness to increase oil production to meet global demand – in a context of balance between supply and demand – Saudi Minister of Energy, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman, defined the US decision to make available 1 mbpd from national strategic reserves – to reduce gas prices in the international markets - as a distortion, “a mechanism to manipulate the markets” (ibidem).

The existing distance between the positions firstly shows how the United States is not able to control Riyadh's initiatives and OPEC's energy policy. Despite the fact that Biden Administration has also considered the adoption of “extreme” economic measures (to suspend the sale of arms to the largest purchaser of American weapons and the adoption of a rigid antitrust legislation), even if it seems unrealistic to envisage an irremediable break in the partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia. Riyadh has already confirmed the high-relevance of bilateral economic cooperation, defining relations with the United States as strategic and based on mutual respect (Elhamy and Abd-Alaziz, 2022). It should also be emphasized that this decision to reduce production is justified in the current situation, while in the long term Saudi Arabia and the UAE have energy policy goals which appear diametrically opposed, namely aimed at increasing oil production, from 11 to 12-13 mbpd for Riyadh while the United Arab Emirates would raise production from 3.2 to 5-6 mbpd.

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## The metaverse: Risks and potential security threats

### The metaverse

The metaverse<sup>1</sup> can be defined as an evolution of the Internet, currently in the design phase, based on an immersive virtual reality in which users can interact with digital representations of themselves and of others and with digital objects. Using individual virtual avatars, users, in unlimited numbers, should be able to move, interact with other people, work, learn, play or perform other activities in permanent, shared, three-dimensional virtual spaces (among others, see Vonorio 2021).

According to some recent estimates, the development of these new technologies could give a boost to the global economy quantifiable in 1.4 trillion USD by 2030, and 25% of people could spend at least one hour a day in the metaverse by 2026 (figures quoted in Europol 2022, 5). These estimates can suggest the extent of the consequences that the metaverse could lead to.

It is therefore not surprising that large technology companies have already decided to devote considerable energy to this sector. In the fall of 2021, Facebook announced massive investments. On 28 October 2021, the company's Chairman, CEO and founder, Mark Zuckerberg, even announced the decision to change the name of the parent company from Facebook to Meta (officially Meta Platforms, Inc.), explicitly reiterating the interest in this ambitious project. In October 2022, however, some indications emerged that Meta is facing delays and difficulties in developing its own metaverse (Heath 2022). In addition to Meta, other technology companies, based in Western countries, such as Microsoft, or in other regions (especially China), have also invested in this area (among others, see Council of the European Union 2022).

In this regard, it is worth noting that, if large private companies today occupy a central role in the development of the metaverse, many of the underlying technologies derive from long-term public research initiatives, including military ones (Vonorio 2021).

### The risks of the metaverse

Like most technologies, the metaverse might offer significant opportunities, but it might also lead to vulnerabilities and dangers, including potential security threats (in particular, Europol 2022; Interpol 2022).

In addition to several common criminal activities (among others, Europol 2022), the metaverse could be used to promote forms of violent extremism and terrorist activities (among others, Elson et al. 2022).

First, this new technology could further facilitate indoctrination and recruitment activities for violent extremist groups. As is well known, the Internet has already proved to be a very useful tool for these processes (among others, Marone 2019). The development of the metaverse could further increase risks by providing virtual environments in which extremist messages could be effectively discussed and disseminated.

Similarly, the metaverse could be a breeding ground for misinformation and disinformation activities (cf. Marone 2022), even more insidious because they could be tailored to the characteristics of the targets (in particular, Europol 2022, 20).

Violent extremists could also build entire virtual spaces where their beliefs and social norms could be enacted and propagated, in a kind of extremist parallel world (made up, for example, by

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of "metaverse" derives from the science fiction novel *Snow Crash*, written in 1992 by American author Neal Stephenson.

online jihadist “caliphates” or communities founded on white supremacist principles) (Europol 2022, 19).

Second, the metaverse risks offering new opportunities for coordination among violent extremists and even for planning acts of violence. For example, on the basis of preliminary intelligence-gathering and reconnaissance activities, violent extremists could create virtual environments that reproduce the actual layout of buildings, roads and other physical objects in the real world, in order to precisely select targets, prepare the execution of attacks, identify escape routes, and study alternative plans in case of incidents or unforeseen events (Elson et al. 2022)<sup>2</sup>.

The metaverse could eventually offer new targets for hostile actions directly in this virtual space. Violent extremists and other malicious actors could, for example, disrupt the activities and services of economic-financial actors and public authorities. They could also harm or violate virtual events or places (for example, virtual sites of a political or religious nature or with commemorative functions). In this regard, however, it may be useful to recall that many studies have shown that, overall, terrorists tend not to be inclined to tactical and operational innovations (among others, Dolnik 2007; Gill et al 2013; cf. Marone 2021).

This sort of hostile action could cause serious material damage in the real world (financial loss, reputational damage, etc.). It could also produce significant symbolic consequences (Elson et al. 2022); currently available indications suggest, in fact, that psychological reactions to events that take place in the virtual sphere tend not to differ significantly from those that occur in the real world (Jurecic and Rozenshtein 2021).

### **Responding to potential threats**

The risks associated with the metaverse require appropriate responses. First, private companies engaged in the construction of these virtual spaces may be called upon to identify and ban activities and individuals that promote hatred and violence. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, even if there is a genuine willingness to engage in these efforts (even at the cost of reducing profit margins), contrasting hatred and violence is already proving to be an uneasy task on the Internet (see Jurecic and Rozenshtein 2021).

Public authorities will therefore be called upon to intervene to contain the risks and vulnerabilities of the metaverse. To this end, they could already strengthen their online presence, even in the most sophisticated virtual spaces, train their staff for these types of challenges, and promote dialogue with the main technology companies (see Europol 2022).

Other relevant stakeholders, such as researchers and activists, could also play an important role in responding to threats posed by the most advanced technologies in the virtual world (Elson et al. 2022).

### **Conclusions**

Although at the time of writing the metaverse is still a project under construction, it is clear that due attention should be paid to the potential threats it might present. The metaverse could in fact magnify risks and vulnerabilities already present on the Web. Similarly, it is useful to reflect right now on the responses that might need to be put in place.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, it can be mentioned that in February 2022 a Siberian teenager reportedly was sentenced to five years in prison for terrorism on charges of being engaged in planning an attack on a virtual building of the FSB (the main security agency of the Russian Federation), created specifically on Minecraft (the popular 3D video game that contains already some preliminary elements of the metaverse) (Euronews 2022; cf. Lakhani et al. 2021).

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## **Acronyms list**

3D:	three-dimensional
ANR:	Agence nationale de renseignement
APS:	Announced Pledges Scenario
AUKUS:	Australia, United Kingdom, United States (Trilateral security pact for the Indo-Pacific region)
BC:	Before Christ
CCP:	Chinese Communist Party
CEO:	Chief Executive Officer
COP:	Conference Of Parties
COTN:	Commandement des opérations du théâtre national
COVID-19:	Coronavirus disease 2019
EU:	European Union
FSB:	Federál'naja Služba Bezopásnosti
GDP:	Gross Domestic Product
GHG:	Greenhouse gas
GSPR:	Groupement de sécurité et de protection républicaine
IDP:	Internal Displaced People
IEA:	International Energy Agency
IRA:	Internet Research Agency
ISGS:	Islamic State's Greater Sahara Province
JNIM:	Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen
MPSR:	Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration
NATO:	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDC:	Nationally Determined Contributions
NZE:	Net Zero Emissions
PMK:	Prytanée militaire de Kadiogo
PRC:	People's Republic of China
RSP:	Regiment of Presidential Security
STEP:	Stated Policies Scenario
U.S.:	United States
USD:	United States dollar
WEO:	World Energy Outlook

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## **Defense Research and Analysis Institute**

Within the Ministry of Defense, the Defense Research and Analysis Institute (IRAD) is responsible for carrying out and coordinating research, advanced training and strategic analysis on various issues of political, economic, social, cultural and military nature and on the effects of the introduction of new technologies that determine significant changes in the defense and security scenario. IRAD contributes to the development of culture and knowledge for the general public and the national interest.

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The areas of interest monitored in 2022 are:

- The Balkans and the Black Sea;
- Mashreq, Gran Maghreb, Egypt and Israel;
- Sahel, Gulf of Guinea, sub-Saharan Africa and Horn of Africa;
- China, Southern and Eastern Asia and Pacific;
- Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa;
- Persian Gulf;
- Euro/Atlantic (USA-NATO-Partners);
- Energy policies: interests, challenges and opportunities;
- Unconventional Challenges and threats.

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