



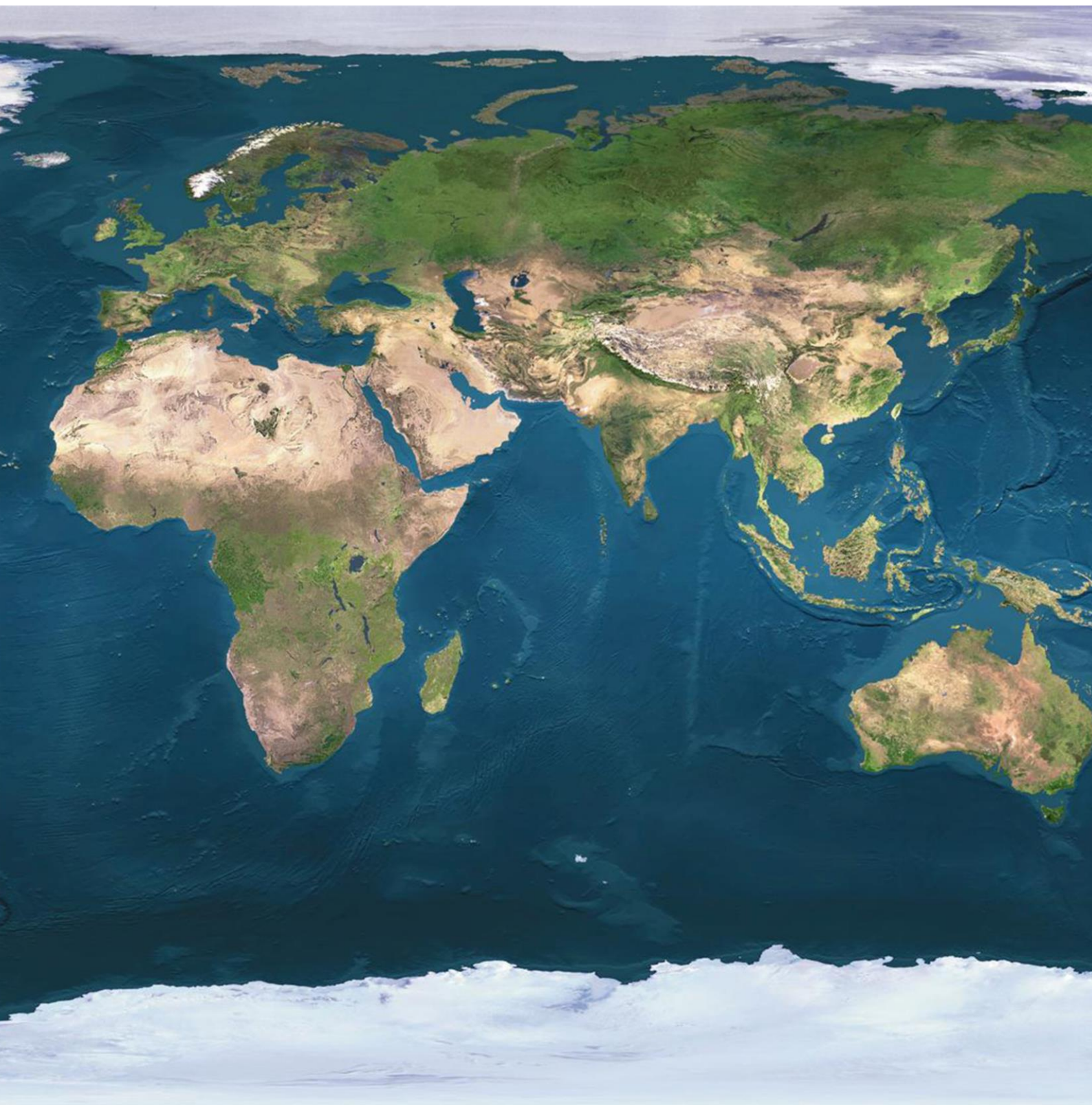
# Osservatorio Strategico

2022

5

Year XXIV – Issue 5

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# **Osservatorio Strategico 2022 Issue 5**



# Osservatorio Strategico

YEAR XXIV ISSUE 5 - 2022

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## Osservatorio Strategico 2022

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Printed by Typography of the **Center for High Defence Studies**

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**Closed in November 2022**

**ISBN 979-12-5515-024-4**



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# **Osservatorio Strategico**

## **Part One**





## **Iraq on the verge of civil war: causes, actors and scenarios**

### **The roots of Iraq's political-institutional crisis**

For ten months now, Iraq has been going through a turbulent political-institutional crisis. The causes of the current situation can be traced back to the outcome of the October 2021 legislative elections, which proved to be able of disrupting the *consensus* that has reigned for years among the different souls of the ruling Iraqi political elite. The main variable in this shift is the overwhelming electoral victory of the movement headed by Shiite politician and cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Ever since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, al-Sadr has accredited himself as a multifaceted political-religious figure, able to maintain a steady popular *consensus* thanks in part to his anti-American rhetoric, concretized at the time by the creation of the so-called Mahdi Army – a Shiite para-military militia that militarily opposed the American presence in Iraq. Its “revolutionary” agenda aspires to disrupt the institutional set-up of Iraq that rose from the ashes of Saddam Hussein's regime. The three cornerstones are: an end to the American presence in Iraq; regional cooperation with neighboring countries but an end to foreign interference (in this sense, including that of the Islamic Republic of Iran); and questioning of the confessional constitutional system (*Muhasasa*) based on the division of offices among the three sectors of Iraqi society: Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds (Awaj.media, 2022)<sup>1</sup>. An agenda that, thanks to the broad electoral victory, al-Sadr seems to want to advance more decisively. The shift in the balance of power generated by the outcome of the polls has led to an institutional paralysis and a return of social tensions and street clashes between protesters from different sides. The main dossiers on which this situation is spilling over are two: the formation of a new government and the election by Parliament of a new president of the Republic. The only appointment so far has been the reappointment, in January 2022, of Mohammed al-Halbousi, leader of the Progress Party (PP), the leading Sunni party in Parliament, in the role of parliamentary speaker.

Early elections had been called last fall to curb the vast popular demonstrations that began in the autumn of 2019 and for two years never fully ceased despite the pandemic. These were the fifth elections since 2003, the year of the U.S.-led military intervention and subsequent ousting of Saddam Hussein's regime. Faced with the lowest turnout since 2003 (36 percent), the election result delivered a revolutionized political landscape<sup>2</sup>. A development that, while it could have been felt by the Iraqi electorate as a push for change, actually had as its main effect the mere breakdown of the balance of power between the country's different political and ethno-religious elites<sup>3</sup> (Higel, 2021). As anticipated, the main changes were witnessed in the Shiite camp. The Sadrist movement won the elections overwhelmingly, obtaining 73 seats (in the 2018 election round it had obtained 54). Big defeats went to Shiite forces that can variously be described as “pro-Iranian”, including the Fateh alliance, which fell from 48 to 17 seats. The electorate of the pro-Iranian Shiite camp was also fragmented by the presence of other formations that entered parliament such as State of Law, led by former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki (33 seats). There was also the new entry of a movement expression of the popular protest, Emtidad (9 seats). The overwhelming victory of the Sadrists generated intra-Shiite tensions, to such an extent that the defeated Fateh-led factions declared that

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<sup>1</sup> To read the constitution see: <https://bit.ly/3T1JHCt>

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the parties that entered Parliament and the number of seats won by each side see: <https://bit.ly/3A9PtJM>

<sup>3</sup> The surprising electoral outcome was also generated by the change of the electoral law, to which the Sadrist movement proved to be better adapted.

they would not recognize the results, which they said were the result of electoral fraud (al-Salhy, MacDonald, 2022).

Politically, in the weeks following the election, the most notable consequence was the creation of the Coordination Framework (CF), an alliance of all Shiite parties opposed to the Sadrist movement (Saadoun, 2022a). Inside this grouping were also factions that in the days following the elections attempted to subvert the outcome using extra-parliamentary tactics. Of particular note is an attack on the residence of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi operated via drones (Davison, Rasheed, 2022). Modes of operation that suggest that the authorship can be attributed to pro-Iranian militias, the military arm of some of the parties represented in the CF, which have the technologies used in the attack. That attempt was followed by clashes between pro-Iranian activists and security forces in the perimeter of the so-called Green Zone, an area where Iraqi public institutions and foreign diplomatic representations are based (Loveluck, Salim, 2021).

For his part, al-Sadr attempted to capitalize on his victory by breaking with the Iraqi political tradition, since 2003, of recomposing the political-parliamentary balance through governments of national unity. Due to the outcome of the result of the polls, the Shiite leader attempted to create a majority government by allying with the main Kurdish party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP) (31 seats) and the leading Sunni party, the Party of Progress led by al-Halbousi (37 seats).

In the months that followed the elections, Iraq also had to deal with problems of a different kind. Like most countries in the Middle East, Iraq has had to deal with the negative effects on the global economy and particularly on food prices generated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Linked to this has been a difficult spring from a climatic and environmental perspective. Peaking in May, various areas of Iraq were hit by sandstorms that caused extensive damage, injuries, and deaths among the Iraqi population (Al Jazeera, 2022; Al-Marashi, 2022).

### **Institutional impasse: the match for the presidency of the Republic and the government**

As anticipated, a first level in which the institutional paralysis was triggered by the election results has been measured is the failure to elect a new president of the Republic. Voting was supposed to be held in February 2022, but has been suspended several times due to the absence of the required *quorum* of two-thirds of MPs. A situation also favored by a Supreme Court pronouncement the previous February, according to which at least two-thirds of the parliamentarians should have been present and voting in order for the session for the election of the President of the Republic to be valid; this first batch featured the Kurdish parties. According to the provisions of the Iraqi constitution, in fact, in the confessional division of the highest offices of state, the Presidency of the Republic is entrusted to a Kurdish-Iraqi citizen. Contrary to an unwritten agreement valid in the past, the main Kurdish party, the al-Sadr-backed KDP, initially refused to support a candidate from the other Kurdish main movement, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In fact, in the past, PUK was informally granted the right to express the President, recognizing KDP as the leader of the Kurdistan regional government (KRG). Back in March, KDP put forward its own candidate, Rebar Ahmed Khalid, a former intelligence officer and current KRG interior minister. However, the anti-Sadr forces walked out of parliament, causing the attempt maneuvered by al-Sadr to fail (Rasheed, Ismail, 2022). Same scenario repeated in April when once again CF, PUK and minor Sunni parties allied to them managed to foment a blocking minority (Saadoun, 2022b). To date, the parliament has been unable to elect a successor to the current President, Barham Salih.

Since May, however, the process of forming a new government and appointing a new Prime Minister has degenerated. As mentioned earlier, the factor keeping this process stalled is al-Sadr's willingness to break with the unwritten tradition of governments by *consensus*, by creating a majority government that would put his rivals in opposition. Thus, two opposing blocs have been created that do not intend to dialogue (Mamouri, 2022). In late May for the first time, the political stalemate led



the Shiite leader to call for new early elections (Shafaq, 2022a). A second breakthrough measure was the call for his movement's MPs to resign on June 12 – a resignation approved within hours by the speaker of parliament, causing the redistribution of empty seats to other parties (Shafaq, 2022b). From that point on, al-Sadr began to play an extra-parliamentary game; formally claiming that he would facilitate the unblocking of the formation of a new government by abandoning seats in parliament, but then in substance fueling the institutional paralysis from the outside in order to enhance his image as a leader of the people, as opposed to the elite seated in the palaces of power.

There were two political consequences of the Sadrists' exit from parliament. First, there was a shift in the parliamentary geography, with the entry of new parliamentarians to replace representatives of the Sadrist movement<sup>4</sup> (Shafaq, 2022c); second, the CF began negotiations for the formation of a government of national unity that could also co-opt the allied parties of the Sadrist movement that remained in Parliament (KDP and PP). From the outset, however, the goal was to identify a figure who would be acceptable to al-Sadr, so as to prevent his extra-parliamentary opposition from escalating into violent demonstrations (a hypothesis that as will be seen later occurred on time). At this stage, KDP leader Masud Barzani assumed a central role, attempting an initial compromise with the parties united in the CF. A dialogical approach embarked upon since the end of May when in an unusual visit to Sulaymaniyya, stronghold of PUK rivals, he met with his opponents to converge on a common candidate for the Presidency of the Republic – thereby disqualifying the tactics he had been using so far –and find solutions on the government formation (Shafaq, 2022d; Agenzia Nova, 2022a).

### **Iraq on the brink of civil war**

The situation escalated again on July 27. As expected, al-Sadr began capitalizing on his extra-parliamentary opposition by convening the "march of the million", which led activists and his sympathizers to storm the parliament and other state buildings (Al-Monitor, 2022a). A second raid occurred on July 30 to prevent the holding of the parliamentary session that was supposed to appoint the figure on whom the agreement was eventually reached to form the new government (Nova Agency, 2022b). That was Mohammed al-Sudani, considered to be a figure close to Tehran (Al-Monitor, 2022b). From that moment on, the occupation of state buildings became permanent, lasting for several days. Confirming how the situation had now degenerated in the hours of the assault on parliament, pictures began to circulate depicting Nuri al-Maliki with a rifle in his hand on the streets of the Green Zone (Nova Agency, 2022c). Omen of an "armed" drift in the ongoing political confrontation, as has also happened in the past. A few days later, the CF convened a counter-manifestation in the streets of Baghdad, further exacerbating tensions, in the capital where the army is now also deployed (Agenzia Nova, 2022d). Faced with this situation al-Sadr returned to calling for new elections in his sermon on Friday, August 5 (Al-Monitor, 2022c). A position on which some CF figures such as Haider al-Abadi, leader of the Nasr alliance, but also Iyad Allawi, head of the Sunni-led National Coalition, began to converge (Agenzia Nova, 2022e). In contrast, a different position was taken by al-Maliki, who argued that only following the convening of a new parliamentary session could any legally valid decision be contemplated (Agenzia Nova, 2022f). This hypothesis was countered by al-Sadr, who on the contrary in the same hours called for the intervention of the High Council of the Judiciary in order to legally dissolve the Parliament, and then facilitate the convening of early elections (Agenzia Nova, 2022g). Just near the building of the highest judicial body on August 23, Sadrist protesters staged a large protest demonstration that led to the suspension of the institution's work (Iraqi PMO, 2022c).

Since mid-August, the acting Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, has been attempting to break the deadlock. In a public speech delivered in Mosul al-Kadhimi, called for the opening of a national

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the composition of parliament after the resignation of the Sadrist MPs see: <https://bit.ly/3A9PtJM>

dialogue that could lead the country out of its current political stalemate (Shafaq, 2022e). Thus, a first meeting of the national dialogue was staged on August 17 in the presence of the parliamentary speaker and the President of the Republic (Iraqi PMO, 2022a). The meeting was judged positively by the participants. Great absentee, however, was the delegation of the Sadrist movement, which called the dialogue format led by al-Khadimi yet another attempt by the ruling elites to preserve the *status quo* (Shafaq, 2022f). In the final statement issued by the Prime Minister's office, five points are listed from which to start in order to find a solution to the crisis. Among these, two elements should be emphasized. First, any solution must contemplate a legal-constitutional basis (wording used to sanction the extra-parliamentary tactics adopted by al-Sadr); second, for the first time it opens up to the possibility of early elections, a development in earlier days called for by al-Sadr himself (Iraqi PMO, 2022b).

For the time being, the mediation attempt put in place by the Prime Minister has failed, as evidenced by the urban guerrilla warfare unleashed in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities over the last weekend of August. Yet another assault on government buildings by Sadrists, this time the Government Palace, sparked violence among different factions and security forces. In 24 hours more than 30 people were killed (Agenzia Nova, 2022h). Iraqi security forces unsuccessfully attempted to limit the unrest by imposing a curfew in the capital from 3:30 p.m. (Shafaq, 2022i). Interviewed by several of the country's political leaders for many hours al-Sadr refused to call his supporters to calm, doing nothing to stop the violence. For the first time, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi issued a harsh statement calling al-Sadr to his responsibilities. For his part, the political-religious leader in an unexpected move announced his retirement from politics, continuing in that tactic of ambiguity that sees him moving within institutions but also in the streets (Al-Jazeera, 2022b). Only 24 hours after the start of urban guerrilla warfare, al-Sadr called on his supporters in a press conference to end the clashes (Shafaq, 2022l). Confirming how serious and at risk of escalation the situation in the Shiite camp was, press reports revealed that in the most tense hours a mediation by Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah intervened, who reportedly succeeded in convincing the two Iraqi Shiite blocs to cease the clashes (Amwaj.media, 2022b).

### **Iraq: territory “penetrated” by foreign powers**

Also continuing to weigh on the context of the political-institutional crisis in the Levantine country is its status as a territory “penetrated” by foreign powers, which operate in a covert or overt manner to advance their own international agenda. It is a condition that intersects with the already fragile political-ethnic-religious balance that as previously analyzed is being exacerbated at this stage. There are two drivers that need to be presented. The first is the U.S.-Israel-Iran triangle. The second is the role played by Turkey. Regarding the first driver, Iraq is periodically shaken by operations, attacks, and incursions part of the shadow war being tacitly fought in the Middle East between the three mentioned countries. The most prominent recent developments include an Iranian ballistic missile attack on the U.S. consulate in Erbil last March. With cyclical cadence, pro-Iranian Iraqi militias have attacked military bases and posts belonging to the United States in recent years. However, this attack represented a major escalation because of the weapon systems used: not drones or rockets but ballistic missiles. The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) claimed responsibility for the attack, calling it a response to Israeli incursions into Iranian territory – specifically an Israeli operation against an industrial drone site in Iran – and an attack that targeted an alleged Mossad outpost (Fassihi, Bergman, Schmitt, 2022). Iran's decision not to adopt plausible deniability has to be considered also as an element of escalation.

The second driver to monitor is the role of Turkey. As of May 2019, the Turkish Armed Forces launched three different military air and ground operations in northern Iraq: Claw-Tiger (ground) and Claw-Eagle (air) in 2020, and Claw-Lock, launched in April 2022 which is still ongoing. The Turkish

Defense Ministry's stated goal is to foil a new terrorist wave on Turkish soil<sup>5</sup> (TRT World, 2022). The target of the offensive is the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), considered a terrorist organization by Ankara. More generally, since the 1990s, Ankara has periodically raided Iraqi soil to combat the foreign branches of PKK, which operates directly or through related organizations in the Kurdish-majority areas of Iraq and Syria (MEMO, 2022). The Turkish goal is to create a security buffer zone "reclaimed" from the PKK's logistical rear guard. As occurred in the past, at this juncture the operation was tacitly supported by the KRG and instead condemned by the central government of Baghdad as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty. It should be highlighted how Barzani met with Turkish

President Erdogan in Ankara just two days before the launch of the operation (Daily Sabah, 2022).

Nevertheless, tensions between Ankara and Baghdad escalated when on July 20 a bombing attributed to Turkey by the Iraqi government hit a tourist resort in Dohuk governorate, killing a dozen tourists and injuring many others (Shafaq, 2022g). Popular protests immediately arose in Baghdad near the Turkish embassy, with the Turkish ambassador being summoned by the Iraqi Foreign Ministry (Shafaq, 2022h). UNAMI, the United Nations Mission in Iraq, condemned the attack without identifying any perpetrators (UNAMI, 2022). For its part, the Turkish Foreign Ministry denied any responsibility, saying there were no ongoing Turkish operations in that area (MEE, 2022). Ankara accused Kurdish militants of being behind a false-flag attack, while other sources and news circulating in Turkish social media called it an Iranian false-flag attack (Soylu, 2022). True, tensions between Turkey and Iran have escalated in recent weeks especially over the Syrian dossier. Indeed, Erdogan reiterated at the last Astana format summit, held in Tehran in July, that he also wanted to launch a new military operation on Syrian soil. A possibility opposed by Russia and Iran, which would see its grip on the country weaken (Turkish Presidency of the Republic, 2022)<sup>6</sup>. As highlighted previously, the international game being played on Iraqi soil only exacerbates the already precarious domestic political stability.

## Conclusions

The political *impasse* in government formation is nothing new in the Iraqi institutional system that arose following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. What is new, on the contrary, is the presence of a party such as the Sadrist party, which, thanks to its electoral result, is able to promote a political agenda aimed at subverting that system that has been consolidated since 2003. Coupled with this dynamic is a constant and widespread feeling of popular disillusionment that Iraqi society has exhibited in alternating phases over the past two decades toward the local ruling class, but which has exploded most recently with the protests of 2019-20. It is currently rather difficult to understand the real intentions of al-Sadr, the real ruler of the game, other than to prolong a condition of uncertainty in which he can increase his popular consensus by presenting himself as the only political leader who is not compromised with power and can properly address the popular needs and demands. The undulating leadership he plays makes him an actor interested in playing on a double table. On one hand, the institutions, and on the other, the public square. However, there is no doubt that in the short term only a positive decision by him with respect to the results of the nascent national dialogue led by al-Kadhimi can break the deadlock.

In the medium term, the scenario of an intra-conflict Shiite confrontation-conflict is looming, a novelty compared to the cyclical inter-conflict tensions in Iraqi history (Higel, 2022). The creation of two opposing political blocs responds to this dynamic, which is also matched by the never-quenched

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<sup>5</sup> A few days before Claw-Lock began, in Bursa there was the latest in a series of terrorist attacks, when a bomb was detonated against a prison police bus.

<sup>6</sup> Tension that in recent weeks has matched the Israeli-Turkish rapprochement, materialized in intelligence cooperation to thwart Iranian attacks on Israeli tourists in Turkey and the declared return of ambassadors to Ankara and Tel Aviv (Cohen Yanarocak, 2022; Israel PMO, 2022).



rivalry in the Kurdish sector, where, on the other hand, political tensions that have escalated into armed clashes are nothing new. It also should not be underestimated the intertwining of political parties and armed militias that populate Iraq, a country where does not exist an actual monopoly of military force of the regular armed forces<sup>7</sup>. A condition that makes political uncertainty far more worrisome, as it is subject to the risk of a spillover into more serious violent confrontation. In this sense, civil war is not a scenario to be ruled out.

What we have been witnessing in recent months is clearly an internal dispute among the various Iraqi elites, who are interesting in keeping intact their share of power guaranteed through the confessional system. On the other hand, however, it is worth monitoring the extent to which the Sadrist movement may in the medium term want and possibly succeed in imposing its revolutionary agenda aimed at subverting the entire political-institutional system codified in the 2005 constitution. Some moderating factors at the moment mean that the situation has not completely degenerated. The first domestic one is the aforementioned “pact of the elites”, who understand that any civil conflict would lead all parties to the loss of positions and power accumulated over the past two decades. Ultimately, on the international level, it should be pointed out that the external powers active in Iraq, above all the United States and Iran, to date do not intend to exacerbate hostilities due to their engagement at the diplomatic table on the Iranian nuclear negotiations. Different is the condition of Turkey, which has been showing high assertiveness in recent weeks that is not likely to ease in the short term.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, in recent years the Popular Mobilization Forces, a coalition of Shiite militias formed in 2014 to fight against Isis, have increased their power. A faction close to the pro-Iranian CF parties.

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## **The implications of worsening Franco-Malian relations for the future of Mali**

On August 15, the French Defense Ministry announced that it had ended the withdrawal of the last contingents deployed on Malian soil as part of Operation Barkhane. The withdrawal, announced at the beginning of the year, terminated the presence of French troops in the African country after nearly a decade of military intervention. A few hours after the French military command statement, news spread that the Malian Foreign Minister, Abdoulaye Diop, had sent an official letter to the Chinese chair of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). With the missive, the Malian government urged the calling of a UNSC special meeting in response to a French act of aggression. Specifically, the letter requested formal condemnation of France's repeated violations of Malian airspace. Malian authorities have reported more than fifty unauthorized incursions carried out by the French Air Force since the beginning of the year using drones, helicopters, and military jets. According to the Bamako government's allegation, France used air raids to gather information about the movements of Malian army troops and their Russian partners. The collected data, still according to Malian authorities, would later be forwarded to unidentified terrorist groups operating in the country. In the letter sent to the UNSC, Diop denounced the alleged espionage activities carried out by French forces and assured that Bamako had evidence of the material support provided by the French army to some jihadist groups. It is not the first time the Malian government has denounced unauthorized activities carried out by the French military. Last April, the French press's release of images taken by an unauthorized drone caused an uproar. The frames revealed the presence of a mass grave not far from the Gossi military base in the north of the country. The military outpost is in use by the Malian army and private Russian military personnel. In addition, in that case, Mali blamed France for clandestine activities aimed at destabilizing the military junta led by Colonel Assimi Goïta, in power since May 2021. The August episode, however, comes after six months marked by rising tensions between the two countries triggered by the expulsion of the French ambassador in late January. The allegations the military junta addresses mark the most probable final break in relations between Paris and Bamako. At the same time, recent developments open a phase of rethinking the future of the different peacekeeping and counterterrorism international missions operating throughout the Sahel. Indeed, the rapid deterioration of Franco-Malian relations also involves other Western players, mainly Europeans, who are present with some contingents in the region. Moscow's growing influence over the Malian military junta makes the picture even more challenging. As it is happening with other African countries (Mauritania, Chad, Sudan, Central African Republic), Russia intends to exploit any political and security-related vacuums left by Western actors to its benefit. This trend has been ongoing for some years. However, since the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, it has been exacerbated. The retrenchment of the presence of Western military contingents has revitalized the activities of jihadist groups and rebalanced systems of regional alliances and partnerships by increasing the leverage of Russian influence in an area strategic to European interests.

### **1. A decade of instability and insecurity**

Relations between Paris and the former colony entered a new phase a decade ago due to the high instability that affected Mali. In January 2012, the outbreak of an armed insurgency in the north of the country led one of the main Tuareg rebel groups, the National Movement for the Liberation of

Azawad (MNLA), to proclaim Azawad's independence. The Tuareg initiative and the growing internal violence driven by the activities of jihadist groups back from Libya increased the concern and discontent of several military officers. On March 22 (2012), a group of military officers successfully committed a *coup d'état* by deposing the government of Amadou Toumani Touré. The international community's unanimous condemnation prompted the military junta to appoint an interim civilian government led by former parliamentary Speaker Dioncounda Touré. During the same weeks, an internal feud broke out in the northern regions placed under Tuareg control between the MNLA, a secular movement, and several Islamist groups such as Ansar Dine, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA). These groups wished to establish a caliphate in the Azawad territories. The Islamist rise prompted Bamako to request support from Paris. In agreement with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), France chose to coordinate the military intervention of a multinational force on Malian soil: Operation Serval. The operation immediately yielded good results. Malian authorities regained control of most of the northern territories thanks to the rapid deployment of French air power, Special Forces contingents, and a series of targeted attacks on Islamist strongholds conducted by African armies. The French military intervention not only had a solid legal basis, thanks to a series of United Nations resolutions, but also enjoyed support from contingents of two other missions, the EU Training Mission to Mali (EUTM) and the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), which made the operation highly effective from the start (Boeke and Schuurman, 2015). Behind the French intervention in Mali, there was a plurality of rationales stemming from colonial-era ties and regional economic and security interests. From an energy perspective, the country's northern regions bordering Niger are rich in uranium mines, responsible for about 20 percent of the fuel needed to power French nuclear reactors. From an international security perspective, the main fear of France and its Western partners, such as the United States, was that Mali could become a new sanctuary for global jihadists. The results achieved by Operation Serval made it possible to restore an essential degree of internal stability and security to Mali, which was then consolidated by the launching of the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), a mission approved by the UNSC and replacing AFISMA. The retreat of Islamist groups, some of which took refuge in Niger, paved the way for the peace agreement between the authorities in Bamako and the Tuareg and the subsequent elections that resulted in the victory of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. Keïta's first term was marked by widespread violence throughout the country. The northern regions were plagued by regular attacks by Islamist militant groups and ongoing infighting between different Tuareg factions. In light of the growing instability, France decided to launch a new mission in the summer of 2014: Operation Barkhane. The counter-insurgency operation launched in coordination with the G5-Sahel, built on the experience gained in Mali as part of Operation Serval to promote the security and stability of countries in the Sahel region. Paris' goal was to help regional governments under pressure from Islamist terrorism to maintain territorial control and counter the spread of the jihadist phenomenon in Africa. The Keïta presidency, supported by France and other Western partners, was not without shadows, such as the many episodes of abuses carried out by Malian troops and rising ethnic tensions. In an atmosphere of general insecurity, new elections were held in the summer of 2018, marking the beginning of Keïta's second term.

## **2. The rise of Goïta and the rapprochement with Moscow.**

The inability of government security forces to counter the spread of violence from jihadists and Tuareg rebel groups accentuated the malaise of the population and several branches of the military. In the spring of 2020, following the contested National Assembly elections, the main opposition parties, organized into the Mouvement du 5 Juin-Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques (M5), launched several weeks of protests. The whole situation finally degenerated in August when a group

of five Malian officers, Malick Diaw, Ismaël Wagué, Sadio Camara, Modibo Koné, and Assimi Goïta, marched with their troops toward Bamako. After arresting Keïta, the Prime Minister, and other senior officials, the military took control of the country through the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP). The international community immediately condemned the military coup, but the Malian population welcomed it. Although it has not been proven, three other prominent Malian security figures were likely responsible for directing the coup: Moussa Diawara, former head of national security under Keïta; General Cheick Fanta Mady Dembélé, a key player in several pan-African peacekeeping operations; and Ibrahima Dahirou Dembélé, former Minister of Defense. Mali soon found itself regionally isolated. The Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) suspended Bamako while ECOWAS decided to impose sanctions on Mali. The sanctions were a significant blow to the military junta because Mali, as a landlocked country, is commercially dependent on its neighbors. To avoid the country's collapse, the CNSP agreed to initiate an 18-month political transition that was supposed to facilitate the election of a civilian government. A group of seventeen CNSP constituents appointed Bah N'daw as *interim* President. The choice fell on a retired officer, formerly Minister of Defense, because he was considered the most suitable figure to mediate with regional and international partners. The youngest of the plotting officers, Assimi Goïta, was appointed vice President. The choice turned to the young colonel because, as with N'daw, the other officers considered him a weak figure and, as such, easily controlled and manipulated. Not yet 40 years old – he was born in 1983 – Goïta made a rapid and brilliant career in the ranks of the Malian army until he became Special Forces commander in 2020. Despite what the other four officers behind the coup believed, Goïta quickly managed to gain more and more power by acting in the shadows.

The regime change was a significant blow to French policy in the Sahel. Paris saw Mali as the pivot of its regional strategy and Keïta as one of its most reliable interlocutors in the Sahel. Although France continued to condemn the coup, it gradually moved closer to the Bah N'daw-led executive, partly directing its transition toward returning to civilian rule. Within the country, the executive faced new protests organized by the M5<sup>1</sup>. Behind the discontent, were the constitutional reforms promoted by N'daw, the centrality held within institutions by the army, and the economic crisis exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In May 2021, faced with growing public dissatisfaction, N'Daw promoted a government reshuffle. Two officers who masterminded the coup, Sadio Camara and Modibo Koné, were dismissed from their ministerial offices. The *interim* President's action angered the officers who chose to intervene by arresting N'Daw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane under charges of violating agreements on the transition path. Goïta exploited the opportunity to take over as President and appointed Choguel Maïga, a leading member of the M5, as Prime Minister. France reacted to the new coup by announcing the suspension of joint military operations with the Malian army. Paris' move was partially revised a few weeks later, but it was consistent with the changes in French strategy for the Sahel promoted by President Emmanuel Macron. As of summer 2021, France has adopted an approach aimed at reducing its regional troops through the gradual withdrawal and the Europeanization of the ongoing missions. Regardless of criticism from Paris and other Western capitals, Goïta embarked on a process of centralizing power by appointing figures close to him – such as Foreign Minister Diop – at the same time, the military junta has intensified its search for alternative partners, finding a willing and interested ally in Russia. Bamako has thus accelerated its course of rapprochement with Moscow by entering into security and defense agreements with some private security companies close to the Kremlin, such as Wagner Group. Defense Minister Sadio Camara led the Russian-Malian talks. Camara exploited ties established when he was a student at

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<sup>1</sup> On August 22, 2022, President Goïta replaced the Prime Minister with another officer, Abdoulaye Maïga. Choguel Maïga's poor health officially prompted the choice.

the Moscow War College. Although Bamako continues to deny making any agreements with Wagner or other Russian private military companies, it does not hide the presence of an unspecified number of Russian army instructors in Mali. Over a thousand fighters from private Russian contractors and more than a hundred Russian army advisers and experts are currently estimated on Malian soil. They are primarily based in Timbuktu at a military base abandoned last December by French forces. The increase of Russian personnel has raised the annoyance of Paris and its European partners - Germany - who have decided to suspend their military engagement alongside the Malian army. Growing tension erupted in January with the expulsion of the French ambassador in Bamako. Provoking the reaction of Malian authorities was French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian's statement condemning the Malian junta's choice to rely on Wagner for security. The military junta's decision marked no return in bilateral relations. The break was sealed by the dissolution of the Defense Cooperation Treaty and the subsequent complete withdrawal of French troops stationed in Mali.

### **Analysis, evaluation and forecasting**

Mali's internal security and stability have deteriorated rapidly following a year since the coup that brought Goïta to power. The repercussions of the policies promoted by the military junta are various and involve different dimensions. Internationally, the country now finds itself much more isolated than it was 12 months ago. Relations with Western countries have rapidly worsened, reaching in some cases, as the French case shows, a breaking point that appears challenging to heal to date. After orchestrating Keita's ousting in 2020, the military junta assumed additional powers in May 2021 and is trying to reorient its international relations. Bamako has strengthened its ties with Moscow by leveraging the international atmosphere post-invasion Ukraine. Mali's choice to be aligned with Russia led to inevitable consequences at the international level by further exacerbating relations with the West. At the same time, the position of the military junta has changed *vis-à-vis* major international bodies such as the United Nations. Malian authorities have taken a hostile attitude toward multinational military personnel and practitioners active in Mali as part of the MINUSMA peacekeeping mission. While extended for another 12 months, the MINUSMA's mandate encounters many bureaucratic and political constraints and obstacles, as evidenced by the arrest of 49 Ivorian soldiers. The non-cooperative stance taken by the Bamako government backed by Moscow is driven as much by international political dynamics-Mali first abstained and later voted against the U.N. resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine-as by the increase in investigations of human rights violations conducted by MINUSMA practitioners. In the first half of 2022, 684 human rights violations were reported, including 155 summary executions and 58 disappearances. The environment created by Malian authorities is increasing concerns about the future of the mission among various regional and extra-regional stakeholders. Although the presence of more than 15,000 troops on Malian soil is essential to curb jihadist violence, the Goita-led executive continues to perceive the presence of foreign contingents as a constraint on sovereignty. In this respect, the bilateral agreements concluded with Moscow seem to leave more autonomy to the Malian security apparatus. Although the Russians are trying to replace French troops who have left Mali, the power vacuum created in recent months has allowed jihadist movements to increase their freedom of maneuver and offensive capability. The withdrawal of Western troops has allowed Islamist armed groups to reorganize and carry out several attacks, such as last July against the military base in Kati, a few kilometers from the country's capital. The jihadists' choice was not accidental. The Kati base has had symbolic value for the military junta since both the 2012 mutiny and the 2020 coup began from it. The attack on the military base was claimed by Katibat Macina, a Qaedist group among the founders of Jamaat Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimin (JNIM). The same terrorist group is most likely responsible for another attack carried out in the town of Tessit, in the



central Gao region, which killed more than forty Malian military personnel and Russian fighters. Weaknesses within the Malian security apparatus have facilitated the growing jihadist operational capabilities. Moreover, several doubts are emerging about the effectiveness of the joint initiatives between the Malian military and Russian private military companies. As in Mozambique and, to some extent, in the Central African Republic, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism techniques implemented by private Russian military companies show relative and short-term effectiveness. Consequently, it is not easy to imagine that Russian-Malian cooperation will soon lead to significant improvements. Therefore, a further increase in terrorist activities and a rapid spread of violence in the country can be expected in the coming months. The jihadist attacks must be added to the abuses conducted by the Russian troops against the civilians. These phenomena together are increasing the perception of insecurity among the Malian population. This trend is particularly relevant as it has previously underpinned military interventions in 2012 and 2020. To avoid the risk of an internal feud within the military, President Goïta has sought to recompose the different factions of both the military and Malian society through rhetoric in increasingly harsh tones against France and other European countries, which have been accused of neo-colonialism. The allegations against France and other international actors of supporting terrorist groups to destabilize the government or create conditions suitable for a new intervention must be read within this framework. The anti-French campaign has allowed Goïta to increase his popularity among the population but not to defuse the risk of an internal feud within the country's security apparatus. Although he continues to present himself publicly as the junta's strongman, Goïta does not hold full powers or control over the other four officers instigating the 2020 coup. On the contrary, the centralization of power in the President's hands and figures very close to him has generated a widespread distrust among the other officers. Among them, two distinct alignments have been crystallizing in recent months. On the one side, Ismaël Wagué and Malick Diaw support the extension of the transitional phase desired by Goïta and do not hide their political ambitions. Notably, Diaw is considered by one side of the army as the potential substitute for the President if the situation degenerates. On the other side, the strongman is Sadio Camara, who, in addition to keeping direct links with Moscow, has allied with the current intelligence chief Modibo Koné. Misunderstandings between the two factions are growing, and there is a risk that the outbreak of unrest on the Bamako streets could push one of the sides to organize a new coup that could either consolidate Goïta's power or dismiss him and open yet another unstable phase in Malian politics. Unlike previous ones, however, the future of the African country will increasingly weigh Moscow's preferences and interests.

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## Legacy and innovation in the political thought of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin

### Introduction

The recent assassination of Darya Dugina (August 20, 2022), daughter of the Russian philosopher, political scientist and sociologist Aleksandr Gelyevich Dugin, has rekindled the spotlight on the role he allegedly played in the definition of 'Putinist' political thought (with particular reference to the special operation in Ukraine). In truth, as early as 2000, the year in which Vladimir Putin came to power, Western analysts began speculating on who was the alleged father of his 'ideology', launching themselves into a quixotic enterprise. As a matter of fact, the Russian President seems to have several 'grey cardinals' that have led, over the years, to the creation of a new (or simply renewed) national idea as well as the image of a new leader. Putin has incorporated the ideas of numerous Russian intellectuals, both his contemporaries and predecessors. Reference to Gumilyov's Eurasism as well as Dugin's neo-eurasism, Ilyin's white imperialism or Leontyev's conservatism is appropriate here.

### In search of a spiritual father

To attribute to Aleksandr Dugin a key role in the development of an alleged Putin ideology, given his role in the popularisation of Eurasism and neo-imperial projects<sup>1</sup>, is rather misleading. In fact, if on the one hand the political direction seems to be undoubtedly influenced by neo-eurasist undertones, on the other hand this direction seems to live a life of its own, with its own rules. It leads, for example, to the fact that there is no direct relationship between neo-eurasism (a theory that unites Eurasism with geopolitics) and the Eurasian Economic Union project<sup>2</sup>. Dugin draws his ideological repertoire from the esoteric traditionalism of Julius Evola (1898-1974)<sup>3</sup> and René Guénon (1886-1951), from the German Conservative Revolution<sup>4</sup> of Carl Schmitt (1888 - 1985), Arthur Moller van der Bruck (1876-1925), Ernst Jünger (1895 -1998), Martin Heidegger (1889 - 1976)<sup>5</sup>, etc. which he channelled into his "Fourth Political Theory" (*chetvērtaya politicheskaya teoriya*)<sup>6</sup>. He draws his ideological repertoire also from the intellectuals of the French (Jean-François Thiriart and Alain de

<sup>1</sup> Dugin A.G. (1997), *Osnovy geopolitiki. Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii*, Arktogeta, Mosca.

<sup>2</sup> Inspired by the integration of EU countries, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) was announced in 2011 by Vladimir Putin (then Prime Minister) and came to life on 29 May 2014 with the signing of the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union ([http://www.eaeunion.org/files/history/2014/2014\\_2.pdf](http://www.eaeunion.org/files/history/2014/2014_2.pdf)). The purpose of the EEU, of which the Russian Federation, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are currently members, (in a sense decreeing its failure since Ukraine is not a member) is regional economic integration. <http://www.eaeunion.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Dugin A.G., *Julius Evola e il tradizionalismo russo*. <https://www.rigenerazionevola.it/julius-evola-e-il-tradizionalismo-russo/>; Dugin A.G., *Четвертая Политическая Теория и традиционализм Юлиуса Эвола*, 1 gennaio 2017, <https://www.geopolitika.ru/article/chetvertaya-politicheskaya-teoriya-i-italyanskiy-logos>

<sup>4</sup> The *Konservative Revolution* was a political-philosophical movement that developed in Germany from the conclusion of the Great War (1918) to the advent of National Socialism (1933). It consisted of a series of political-cultural movements whose lowest common denominator was opposition to modernity, understood as capitalism and the Anglo-Franco-American liberal system. The underlying idea was also that of a new united Heimat and the foundations were being laid for a new course of Cartesian idealism of an Alemannic-German origin.

<sup>5</sup> Dugin A.G. (2014), *Martin Heidegger. The Philosophy of Another Beginning*, ed. Radix, Arlington. Foreword of P.E. Gottfried.

<sup>6</sup> Briefly, summarized in the homonymous work, the concept of the Fourth Political Theory was supposed to develop and represent the alternative to the failure of 20th century ideologies, namely American materialist liberalism (of which the philosopher is highly critical), communism and fascism. Dugin A.G. (2009), *Четвертая политическая теория. Россия и политические идеи XXI века*, Амфора.

Benoist)<sup>7</sup>, Belgian (Robert Steuckers) and Italian<sup>8</sup> right, much more than from the Eurasism of the 1920s-30s or that of the historian and anthropologist Lev Nikolaevich Gumilyov, (1912-1992) with whom, in any case, it retains elements of continuity.

Its highest representative – often referred to as “the last of the Eurasists”<sup>9</sup> – Lev Gumilyov<sup>10</sup>, a leading intellectual figure, more than Dugin himself met with the Russian President’s sympathy, reinforced by a personal meeting in 1990 in St. Petersburg. Lev Gumilyov, the son of the poetess Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966) and the poet Nikolai Stepanovich Gumilyov (1884-1921), thanks to his extraordinary scientific production, was the proponent of the revival of eurasism in the last Soviet period. He created a very complex theory based on anthropological and ethnological facts, from which it follows that Russia has always been made up of many ethnic groups, such a human and cultural landscape therefore justifies Russian interests in Asia. Russia should not look to the West, but try to strengthen its role in the former Soviet Central Asia, mainly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and, for example, in Kazakhstan it is meeting with great success and is being promoted by President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who, among others, named the newly founded university in honour of Lev Gumilyov.

Although at the beginning of his political career Putin tried to maintain a “moderate” line<sup>11</sup> of action aimed at strengthening the state, modernisation, openness and maintaining good relations with the US and the EU, with the deterioration of the latter and the outbreak of the coloured revolutions, the country changed its strategic direction by turning east. Thus, in his speech to the assembly of the Russian Federation on 12 December 2012, Putin mentions Gumilyov and his idea of passionarity, understood as the ability to advance and accept changes<sup>12</sup> ([...] *как говорил Лев Гумилёв, от пассионарности, от способности к движению вперёд и к переменам*).

Returning to Aleksandr Dugin’s ties with the institutions and with President Putin in particular, it is interesting to note how, with the institutionalisation of the Eurasian Economic Union (2011)<sup>13</sup>, the philosopher also lost his last chance to secure official *status*. He did not even manage to become a member of the Public Chamber and, given his theories considered excessively esoteric and deeply philosophical to compete with modern ideological currents, he lost his position at Moscow State University<sup>14</sup> during the Ukrainian crisis of 2014.

Going back in time, since 2014 the title of Putin’s past ideological inspirer had been attributed to the émigré thinker Ivan Aleksandrovich Ilyn (1883-1954). Seen by Western academics as a “prophet of Russian fascism”, his thought allegedly legitimised Putin’s “turn to fascism”, allegedly after the “Ukrainian crisis”. This turn has been pointed out by researchers and academics including

<sup>7</sup> Speech by Alain de Benoist on the concept of the Fourth Political Theory at the 6th Eurasian Congress of Intellectual Youth (Moscow, November 2008) *Ален де Бенуа о Четвертой Политической Теории* <http://www.evrazia.tv/content/alien-die-bienua-o-chietviertoi-politichieskoi-teorii>

<sup>8</sup> An expression of Italian interest in Eurasism is the quarterly “Eurasia. Rivista di studi geopolitici” <https://www.eurasia-rivista.com/>

<sup>9</sup> Гумилев — «последний евразиец», 21.08.2012 <https://www.gumilev-center.ru/gumilev-poslednijj-evraziyec/>

<sup>10</sup> Ferrari A., *Lev Gumilëv e l'Eurasia. Fondamenti teorici e destini politici.*, GNOSIS 4/2021 pp.99-109 <https://www.sicurezzaNazionale.gov.it/sisr.nsf/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Ferrari.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Ferrari A., *L'Unione Eurasiatica: slogan o progetto strategico?* ISPI Analysis, No. 149, gennaio 2013, [https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/analysis\\_149\\_2013.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/analysis_149_2013.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> *Послание Президента Федеральному Собранию*, Kremlin official web page, December 12, 2012 <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17118>

<sup>13</sup> Eurasim and the Eurasian Union project confuse Eurasia with the space of historical Russian or Soviet Union domination, with some subtractions and additions (the Baltic States are part of Europe, Mongolia is added but not the South Caucasus, while the Eurasian Union project aims to keep the South Caucasus but has little interest in Mongolia). There is, in any case, a core of Eurasian countries, Russia and parts of Ukraine (seen as a country divided by a ‘civilised’ dividing line between Europe and Eurasia, with eastern Ukraine integrated into Eurasia and western Ukraine moving towards western Europe) and Kazakhstan, which represent the historical interaction between the Slavic and steppic worlds. Albeit with secondary roles, Central Asia and Christian Armenia and Georgia are invited to join. However, the overlap between Russian Eurasism and the Eurasian Union stops there. The Eurasian Union takes nothing from (neo)eurasism in defining a political and economic strategy for the region. No official text produced in Russia on the Eurasian Union mentions Eurasism as an ideology.

<sup>14</sup> *Ректор МГУ уволил Александра Дугина*. Lenta.ru June 27, 2014 <https://lenta.ru/news/2014/06/27/dugin/>

Alexander Motyl, who believes that: “The case for Putin’s Russia being fascist rests on two reasons. The first reason is empirical. As the above typological exercise demonstrated, the three characteristics that distinguish fascist systems from fully authoritarian ones personalistic dictator, a leader cult, and mass popular support apply completely to Putin’s Russia. In a word, Putin’s Russia is a fascist political system because it shares the defining characteristics of fascism as a sub-type of full authoritarianism. The second reason is logical. Putin’s Russia may also be termed fascist because of the syllogism upon which my argument rests. If Putin’s Russia is a fully authoritarian system and Putin is a personalistic dictator; and if fascism can be salvaged as a concept and defined as a political system that combines full authoritarianism with a personalistic dictatorship, then it follows that Putin’s Russia is indeed fascist”<sup>15</sup>. Michail Iampolskii who attributes: “Russia’s rapid fascisation (intolerance of foreigners, democracy, sense of its own national exclusivity) [...] to a delayed reaction to the collapse of the empire. This collapse took Russia by surprise in the early 1990s, but the subsequent period of steady growth in prosperity delayed and softened the reaction to the death of the empire. The increase in consumption (as is often the case) led to a kind of anaesthesia effect, loss of sensitivity and indifference. When the growth of consumption stopped, the predictable fascisation of society began.”<sup>16</sup> or Vladislav Inozemtsev<sup>17</sup>. Having been quoted by the Russian President in a number of official speeches (Federal Assembly and military hearings) has, in short, cost the figure of Ilyn the title of ‘fascist’, without the slightest consideration of his far more complex ideological legacy in contemporary Russian thought. Moreover, this number of quotations is far fewer than the references to many other thinkers, historians, philosophers or men of letters who are part of the Putin pantheon<sup>18</sup>. Like many of his contemporaries, Ilyn was an anti-Bolshevik and a rabid anti-Semite, he was really attracted to the ideas of fascism, which, in his opinion, were spiritually close to the ideology of white emigration. He fled to Nazi Germany, but his ideal was ‘a lighter version of fascism’, embodied in Francisco Franco in Spain and António de Salazar in Portugal. Ilyn’s work is significant in both qualitative and quantitative terms, and his vision of the ‘essence’ of Russia and the ideal of the political regime is truly classical and devoid of any ingenuity. Like many of his Russian contemporaries, he believed that the essence of Russia lay in autocracy, sovereignty, messianic destiny and cultural exclusivity, which is a rather familiar view of Russia. Putin’s quotes, definitely the most common and stereotypical ones such as the praise of statehood as the embodiment of legality, the soldier as the personification of the nation and the eternal Russian statehood, are placed in this context. They reflect nothing more than the most traditional perception of Russia, its culture and the role of the state, none of them related to Ilyn’s more controversial statements about Nazi Germany or Italy.

Putin must overcome the legacy of the Soviet Union, whose collapse is considered by him (as by many) to be the greatest geopolitical catastrophe for the Russian people, at the same time this overcoming passes through the ‘purification, of the Russian soul’ from the theory of communism. To this end, the ‘Putin political philosophy’ is based on the principles of patriotism and national unification. Ivan Ilyn is the ideal philosopher to draw from, he in fact fled the Bolshevik revolution in

<sup>15</sup> Motyl A., “Putin’s Russia as a fascist political system” <https://krytyka.com/sites/krytyka/files/motyl.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> “Быстрая фашизация России (нетерпимость кинородам, демократии, чувствосво ей национальной исключительности) в принципе не вызывает удивления. Мы имеем тут делосотложненной реакцией на распадимперии. Распад этот застал Россию в располх в начале 1990-х, но наступивший затем период устойчивого роста благосостояния задержалисмягчилреакциюнагибельимперии. Рост потребления (как это част обывает) привелксвое города эффектуанестезии, утраты чувствительности, и киндифферентности. Когда жерост потребления прекратился, началась предсказуемая фашизация общества.” Jampol’skij M., Как судят победителей. Михаил Ямпольский о том, почему Россияне очень год итссянароль жертвы. January 26, 2015, <https://www.colta.ru/articles/specials/6088-kak-sudyat-pobediteley>

<sup>17</sup> Inozemtsev V., Putin’s Russia: A Moderate Fascist State, The American Interest, January 23, 2017, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/01/23/putins-russia-a-moderate-fascist-state/>

<sup>18</sup> These include, among others, Nikolai Mikhaylovich Karamzin (1766-1826), a symbol of classical Russian historiography, political figures such as Pyotr Arkadyevich Stolypin (1862-1911), who embodied the Russian path to modernisation at the beginning of the 20th century.

the West and, in an attempt to organise resistance, created his own philosophy, which was to replace the Bolshevik doctrine. Ilyn condemns any ideology and state power that negatively interferes in the lives of citizens, and it is precisely in this context that the quote from the President should be placed. On 25 April 2005, in one of his speeches to the Federal Assembly, criticising the government for abusing “the administrative levers at its disposal”, he said: “*The power of the state*”, wrote the great Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyn, “has limits, indicated precisely by the fact that there is a power that comes to man from without...And all creative states of the soul and spirit, presupposing love, freedom and goodwill, are not subject to the conduct of state power and cannot be prescribed by it...”<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, political power must not interfere with scientific research, religion and art. The quote might seem surprising considering Putin’s political practices, but here the reference is to a dissociation from Bolshevik ideology, which sought to completely control the individual. Ilyn constantly calls for the creation of a new idea for Russia, and in his collection of writings “Our Tasks”<sup>20</sup> (*Наши задачи*), he specifies that this idea will be based neither on ‘the people’, nor on ‘democracy’, nor on ‘socialism’, nor on “imperialism”, nor on “totalitarianism”. It will be a new idea religiously based on its own spiritual resources, as only it can give birth to the new Russia of tomorrow. Ilyn’s vision is radical and proposes a dangerous dialectic according to which the greater the criticism of Russian originality and strength, the less understanding of its thought. However, Ilyn seems almost happy with the western condemnation since this reveals its futility. This passage is important for the formation of the ‘foundations’ of Putin’s thought, namely the rejection of the attempt to create a universal ideology, a turning away from the West and gravitating towards his own tradition and a spiritual society, which should be based on the religion of the majority, i.e. Russian Orthodoxy. This latter aspect, however, changes with the passage of time. Putin, in fact, despite his inclination towards Orthodoxy, is aware that Russian society has several religions, including Islam, practised by 30 million Russians, mainly in the Russian Caucasus and the Southern Urals (for the Muscovites of these regions, Putin recently opened the largest mosque in Europe for ten thousand worshippers in Moscow), as well as the traditional shamanic beliefs of Siberia. However, for Russia’s religious and national diversity, Putin has another unifying idea, instead of Western multiculturalism

A further source of inspiration for Putin is Konstantin Nikolayevich Leontiev (1831-1891), called the ‘Russian Nietzsche’ was, at the beginning of his intellectual life, an advocate of nihilism, but the time he spent in the West led him to radically denounce this society and turn to Russian Orthodoxy as a defender of conservative values. Shortly before his death, Leontiev took his vows by becoming a monk and retiring to an Orthodox monastery. Leontiev saw the decline of the West in its gradual secularisation and his intuition did not disappoint him even though in the 19th century it was still unclear in which direction Western society would move. It makes Leontiev an exceptional figure in Putin’s eyes because he is not just a thinker but a prophet, whose function in Orthodoxy is even more important. Leontiev’s predictions were not limited to the secularisation of Western society, they also foresaw an alliance against Russia, which has now taken the form of economic sanctions. In his 1885 work ‘Byzantinism and Slavdom’ he wrote: “*France, Germany, Italy, Spain will become regions of the new state. [...] They will say to me: “But they will never merge!” I will reply: “Blessed is he who believes: he is warm in the world!”*”.

In addition to orthodoxy, a further element is present in Leontiev’s philosophy: the theory of the state. According to this theory, every state or civilisation goes through three stages: birth, flowering and decline. The decline of Western civilisation, according to Leontiev, began in the Renaissance, with its gradual secularisation. Putin publicly endorsed this theory in a speech on September 19, 2013 at the Valdai Club meeting: ‘*Russia, as the philosopher Konstantin Leontiev figuratively put it, has always developed as a “blossoming complexity”, as a civilisation-state, held together by the*

<sup>19</sup> Послание Федеральному Собранию Российской Федерации April 25, 2005, Kremlin official page <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>

<sup>20</sup> Ilyn I.A., *Национальная Россия. Наши задачи (сборник)*, ТД Алгоритм, 2017.

*Russian people, the Russian language, Russian culture, the Russian Orthodox Church and other traditional religions of Russia*<sup>21</sup>. It is clear from this that Putin does not accept Leontiev's views without exception, because Leontiev saw the future only in the Orthodox Church, which is indispensable for the development of Russian society.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Despite the presence of different authors, the sources of Putin's philosophy (if it can be defined as such) have three pillars: eurasism, Ilyn's white imperialism and Leontiev's conservatism. All these elements seem to interpenetrate with what is the common feeling of the people at the given historical moment: an overlap so strong that one cannot tell who is the originator.

The different currents of thought, whether or not mentioned in this article, only serve as a backdrop to the basic idea: to restore Russia's greatness, whether it has the nostalgic flavour of the Soviet Union or the Empire. In Putin's idea, which also well reflects national sentiment, the country must also be a sort of bulwark of traditional values in stark opposition to Western (especially American) ones: after all, the balances and themes of the Cold War are well reflected in such a context.

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<sup>21</sup> *Стенограмма выступления Владимира Путина на заседании клуба "Валдай", 19.09.2013*  
<https://rg.ru/2013/09/19/stenogramma-site.html>

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## **Afghanistan, a year later**

In August 2021, Afghan President Ghani fled the country, the institutions of the Islamic Republic collapsed, the Taliban entered Kabul and formed an interim government – still in office, the inauguration ceremony has never been held – reconstituting the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

A year later<sup>1</sup> structural violations and violence persist<sup>2</sup> in the form of endemic poverty, repression of civil and political rights and a severe humanitarian crisis. Although military violence has subsided<sup>3</sup>, social conflicts have increased: the *de facto* authority – the Taliban present a non-compact front at various levels with different views on the management of the country – wants to impose its own interpretation of the Sharia and Afghan society, convinced that it always lived according to Islamic and Sharia norms, are at odds with each other.

The social contract imposed by the Taliban during the first Islamic emirate (1996-2001) – security in exchange for personal freedom – is no longer applicable to the current young (65% of the population) Afghan society which in twenty years has gone through many and profound changes, as well as the monopolistic and hegemonic interpretation by the Pashtun group and the abuse of power<sup>4</sup>.

The Taliban are focused on preserving their cohesion<sup>5</sup> and to ensure that no degree of power is granted to individuals or groups beyond the narrow core of the movement, particularly those representing the old regime. Many of the Afghan politicians who fled the country in recent months have kept a low profile and those remained in Afghanistan - among them Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah – are in fact undeclared hostages<sup>6</sup>.

A third group of political and military leaders, including former Vice President Amrullah Saleh, coalesced around Ahmad Massoud and chose the path of armed resistance, forming the National Resistance Front, NRF<sup>7</sup>: it has little external support but it is beginning to pose a real threat to the government<sup>8</sup>.

The Taliban military leaders have launched repeated operations against the NRF with only intermittent short-term successes<sup>9</sup>.

On August 21<sup>st</sup>, Taliban military commander and Deputy Defense Minister Abdul Qayum Zakir took command of the forces fighting the NRF in the Andarab and Panjshir valleys<sup>10</sup>, thus highlighting the concern for the state of the campaign. Zakir is likely bringing hundreds of Taliban reinforcements

<sup>1</sup> G. Battiston, "One Year After the Taliban Takeover, Afghanistan Is Adrift", ISPI, 12 agosto 2022; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/one-year-after-taliban-takeover-afghanistan-adrift-35976>.

<sup>2</sup> UNAMA, Human Rights in Afghanistan, July 2022; [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama\\_human\\_rights\\_in\\_afghanistan\\_report\\_-\\_june\\_2022\\_english.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_human_rights_in_afghanistan_report_-_june_2022_english.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban", 12 august 2022; <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/326-afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban>.

<sup>4</sup> The Wall Street Journal, "Taliban Evict Hazara Shiite Muslims From Villages, Rewarding Loyalists", Spt. 30, 2021; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/taliban-evict-hazara-shiite-muslims-from-villages-rewarding-loyalists-11633009762>.

<sup>5</sup> M. Kugelman, "1 Year Later, the Taliban Are in Full Control", Foreign Policy, 18 August 2022; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/18/afghanistan-taliban-regime-kabul-anniversary/>.

<sup>6</sup> A. S. Erfanyar, "Karzai confirms he, Abdullah banned from travelling abroad", Pajhwok Afghan news, 10 March 2022; <https://pajhwok.com/2022/03/10/karzai-confirms-he-abdullah-banned-from-travelling-abroad/>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nrfafg.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> S. Kermani, "Afghanistan: In a quiet valley the Taliban face armed resistance", BBCNews, 27 July 2022; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-61887714>.

<sup>9</sup> P. Mills, "Taliban struggles to contain Afghan National Resistance Front", Institute for the Study of War, Sep 7, 2022; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/taliban-struggles-contain-afghan-national-resistance-front>.

<sup>10</sup> B. Roggio, "Taliban Appoints Former Guantanamo Bay Detainee to Lead Fight in Panjshir", Long War Journal, August 2021; <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2022/08/taliban-appoints-former-guantanamo-bay-detainee-to-lead-fight-in-panjshir.php>.

from Helmand province, but the counter-offensive has so far been unsuccessful, although severe flooding in the Panjshir Valley in August could hamper the ability to mobilize forces and to conduct offensive operations. Mid-August reports indicate that the NRF is capturing outlying villages within the Panjshir province. However, local Tajik Taliban forces appear to be increasingly reluctant to fight the NRF, which would force the Taliban to concentrate an increasing number of Pashtun forces from southern Afghanistan<sup>11</sup>.

Taliban fighters have previously committed war crimes, torture and extrajudicial executions of local people, mainly Tajiks, in the Panjshir valley<sup>12</sup>.

An influx of Pashtun fighters could exacerbate pre-existing inter-ethnic tensions and worsen cooperation between Taliban Pashtun and Tajik fighters. Internal fighting between Taliban factions is also likely to affect the campaign against the NRF, and the lack of results could empower Taliban commanders of the Haqqani network. Taliban forces based in Panjshir come from the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand and the Haqqani network in south-eastern Afghanistan. Sirajuddin Haqqani and Defense Minister Mohammad Yaqoub, who draws his base from Kandahar, compete for influence within the movement<sup>13</sup>.

It was Sirajuddin Haqqani that hosted former Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri<sup>14</sup> and the group is regaining positions - along with ISKP<sup>15</sup>.

The Taliban mode of centralized control of political power, reinforced by the composition of the executive power, might backfire. The Taliban military supremacy was widely affirmed in the capturing of Kabul, but the ability to administer a country - deeply divided along ethnic lines and hampered by the morphology of the terrain - is conditioned by the lack of representativeness and flexibility towards non-Pashtun groups in political and public life. Faced with brutal repression and the emergence of polarizing local rifts, other forces have no viable option than to oppose armed resistance: this confrontation would turn into a new civil war conditioned by the lack of options for internal actors and the financial availability of external actors.

In a country where tribal, ethnic and territorial loyalties draw the lines of belonging, the refusal to allow to minorities<sup>16</sup> the participation in political and public life will provoke more acute and widespread action by resistance and opposition groups - Afghanistan Freedom Front<sup>17</sup>, NRF, Islamic State of the Khorasan Province and others that are continuing their attacks<sup>18</sup> – probably fuelling the divisions within the Taliban leadership between members of different orientations.

The emirate has so far managed to prevent external actors from extending support to the internal opposition. Although the leadership has managed to establish a *modus vivendi*, deep conflicts remain at the base that divide the acolytes of Serajuddin Haqqani, the *de facto* interior minister, and the Kandahar Taliban, the two main factions that make up the ruling coalition.

<sup>11</sup> S. Kermani, "Afghan resistance attack Taliban, sparking reprisals in Panjshir", BBC News, 16 May 2022; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-61430836>.

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Taliban Torture Civilians in Panjshir", June 10, 2022; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/10/afghanistan-taliban-torture-civilians-panjshir>.

<sup>13</sup> J. Schwartz, Y. Biberman, "A divided Taliban could unleash a new proxy war in Afghanistan", Atlantic Council, June 29, 2020; <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/a-divided-taliban-could-unleash-a-new-proxy-war-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>14</sup> K. Clark, "Al-Qaeda Leader Killed in Kabul: What might be the repercussions for the Taliban and Afghanistan?", Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2 August 2022; <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/al-qaeda-leader-killed-in-kabul-what-might-be-the-repercussions-for-the-taliban-and-afghanistan/>.

<sup>15</sup> K. Chesnutt, K. Zimmerman, "The State of al Qaeda and ISIS Around the World", Critical Threats, 9 Sept 2022; <https://rb.gy/xpz3w8>.

<sup>16</sup> France24, "Taliban failures in governance speed up Afghan brain drain (Part II)", 14/08/2022; <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20220814-taliban-failures-intensify-afghan-brain-drain-part-ii>.

<sup>17</sup> News Vibes of India, "New outfit Afghanistan Freedom Front vows to end Taliban's 'tyrant rule'", March 12, 2022; <https://newsvibesofindia.com/new-outfit-afghanistan-freedom-front-vows-to-end-talibans-tyrant-rule/>.

<sup>18</sup> International Crisis Group, Crisis Watch September Alerts, September 2022; <https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/september-alerts-and-august-trends-2022>.

There is also the division between the ultra-conservative clerics of the south and the politicians who led the movement throughout the jihad. The Taliban are still looking for a formula to convert the widespread structure – proved to be winning in the insurrection of the last twenty years – into a lasting project to manage the country effectively, deeply divided on the resources and the extent of involvement with foreign actors.

In facing the humanitarian crisis, the government has so far shown a certain pragmatism in working with the United Nations, but among the Ulema the idea prevails that the Emirate can do without foreign aid, despite the structural dependence on foreign aid that until 2021 accounted for 75% of government spending<sup>19</sup>.

The debate that started within the international community<sup>20</sup> in the aftermath of the takeover by the Taliban continues - providing aid, even if not strictly humanitarian, to a country whose government does not recognize<sup>21</sup> or abandoning the civil society<sup>22</sup>. The risk is to cause a greater dependence from the outside by the society<sup>23</sup>, thus allowing the Taliban to decline responsibility for (not) providing basic social services.

The February 11<sup>th</sup> 2022<sup>24</sup> executive order of the Biden administration - seizure of \$ 7 billion of Afghanistan's reserves in the United States for humanitarian aid<sup>25</sup> and compensation to the of September 11<sup>th</sup><sup>26</sup> victims' families - made the Da Afghanistan Bank, the Central Bank of Afghanistan, unable to access its foreign exchange reserves, leaving the Afghan banking system isolated from global financial networks. In recent months, Washington and Taliban officials have held talks to negotiate a deal that will allow DAB to resume some of its functions. However, the killing of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul<sup>27</sup> risks derailing the negotiations if they are not already definitively compromised: contrary to what was established with the Doha Agreement in 2020<sup>28</sup>, the Taliban government hosted the al-Qaeda leader.

The disagreements between the regional factions and between the Ulema and the politicians are also reflected in the Emirate's foreign policy, shaped by different visions and tactical objectives. There is only one broad consensus among the different factions: the need to maintain good relations

<sup>19</sup> The Economist, "A cash crunch is crippling Afghanistan", Feb 19, 2022; <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/02/19/a-cash-crunch-is-crippling-afghanistan>.

<sup>20</sup> The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, "Afghanistan's Humanitarian Crisis Requires Tough Choices" podcast, January 20, 2022; <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/commentary-and-analysis/podcasts/afghanistans-humanitarian-crisis-requires-tough-choices>.

<sup>21</sup> R. Shapour, "Donors' Dilemma: How to provide aid to a country whose government you do not recognise", Afghanistan Analysts network, 5 July 2022; <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/international-engagement/donors-dilemma-how-to-provide-aid-to-a-country-whose-government-you-do-not-recognise/>.

<sup>22</sup> P. Wintour, "Afghanistan: NGOs call for assets to be unfrozen to end 'near universal poverty'", The Guardian, 15 August 2022; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/15/afghanistan-ngo-assets-unfrozen-end-near-universal-poverty>.

<sup>23</sup> ACAPS, "Afghanistan, One year into the Taliban takeover", 9 September 2022; [https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20220909\\_acaps\\_afghanistan\\_analysis\\_hub\\_thematic\\_report\\_one\\_year\\_into\\_the\\_taliban\\_takeover.pdf](https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20220909_acaps_afghanistan_analysis_hub_thematic_report_one_year_into_the_taliban_takeover.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Executive Order on Protecting Certain Property of Da Afghanistan Bank for the Benefit of the People of Afghanistan, February 11, 2022, Presidential actions; <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/02/11/executive-order-on-protecting-certain-property-of-da-afghanistan-bank-for-the-benefit-of-the-people-of-afghanistan/>.

<sup>25</sup> Written Statement of Rt Hon David Miliband President and CEO, International Rescue Committee Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, "Afghanistan: The Humanitarian Crisis and U.S. Response", February 9, 2022; [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/020922\\_Milibrand\\_Testimony3.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/020922_Milibrand_Testimony3.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> C. Savage, "Spurning Demand by the Taliban, Biden Moves to Split \$7 Billion in Frozen Afghan Funds", The New York Times, Feb 11, 2022; <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/11/us/politics/taliban-afghanistan-911-families-frozen-funds.html>.

<sup>27</sup> J. Harrington, J. Thompson, "Zawahiri's Death and What's Next for al Qaeda", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 4 August 2022; <https://www.csis.org/analysis/zawahiris-death-and-whats-next-al-qaeda>.

<sup>28</sup> "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America", February 29, 2020; <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

with China<sup>29</sup> that since the Taliban takeover has sent vaccines, food and aid<sup>30</sup> in the aftermath of the earthquake and large state-owned enterprises are discussing new projects. Beijing's main concern is that Uyghur militants are using the country to create instability in Xinjiang; Pakistan – whose relations with Kabul have cooled – represents a particularly critical element *vis-à-vis* China. There are also separatist groups such as Balochi and Sindhi, the Tehrek-e-Taliban Pakistan, TTP, and ISKP, which seem to have targeted Beijing<sup>31</sup>.

After the Taliban taking over, Afghanistan faces growing uncertainty about its political, security and socio-economic future. The Taliban have not been able to provide an inclusive structure and a coherent vision of government with a pragmatic approach in order to solve pressing problems and decisions that regulate the citizens social life and generally limit freedoms and rights<sup>32</sup>.

The decision-making process behind these regulations remains opaque and their application is often inconsistent. The lack of a constitution and a clear framework of the rule of law exacerbates this uncertainty<sup>33</sup>.

The Afghanistan intervention, Enduring Freedom in parallel with ISAF and then RS, represented the latest example of the Western interventionist model of the New World Order that emerged in the 1990s<sup>34</sup>, made explicit with the interventions in Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999) and Iraq (2003) with the objectives of regime change and nation building.

After Afghanistan, the international community does not have the political will, the resources or the global vision to pursue that interventionist project. Before the Taliban takeover of Kabul, Western public opinion was strongly inclined to withdraw troops after a prolonged and costly engagement: demobilization plans had been circulating within NATO at least since the 2010 Lisbon Summit and it has become general opinion that the fight against terrorism can continue with more targeted military activities, avoiding large-scale interventions. Tactically and operationally, NATO troops in Afghanistan have shown resilience, but have been asked to perform too many – often – contradictory – tasks. The Atlantic Alliance has not been involved since the start of the 2001 intervention, but in 2003 only, when Washington turned its attention to Iraq, so the intervention in Afghanistan was not planned. ISAF mandate was peacekeeping in the absence of a ceasefire and consent of the parties, two essential conditions. The Alliance, with underpowered forces, had to expand ISAF to the whole country. Eventually, to face the Taliban resistance, ISAF was forced to switch from peacekeeping to counterinsurgency, for which it did not have the preparation, equipment or organization<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> N. Yau, "China Takes Full Advantage of Taliban's Isolation", *The Diplomat*, July 6, 2022; <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/china-takes-full-advantage-of-talibans-isolation/>.

<sup>30</sup> 2022 Afghanistan Earthquake; <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/2022-afghanistan-earthquake/>.

<sup>31</sup> R. Pantucci, "China in Afghanistan: The Year of Moving Gradually", ISPI, 11 Agosto 2022; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/china-afghanistan-year-moving-gradually-35962>.

<sup>32</sup> H. Hakimi, G. Price, "Afghanistan: One year of Taliban rule", Chatham House, 15 August 2022; <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/08/afghanistan-one-year-taliban-rule>.

<sup>33</sup> "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security" Report of the Secretary-General General Assembly Security Council, United Nations, A/76/862-S/2022/485, 15 June 2022, para 63; [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/220615\\_sg\\_report\\_on\\_afghanistan\\_s.2022.485.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/220615_sg_report_on_afghanistan_s.2022.485.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> J. S. Nye Jr., "Understanding International Conflicts", Harvard University, 1997, New York, pag. 188.

<sup>35</sup> A. Carati, "Lessons from the West's Long War in Afghanistan", ISPI, 11 agosto 2022; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/lessons-wests-long-war-afghanistan-35961>.

### **The Ukraine war: the situation six months since the beginning of the Russian invasion**

#### **Introduction**

Six months after its outbreak, the Ukraine war still seems far from a solution. At both military and diplomatic levels, the situation is a substantive stalemate. In summer, Kyiv's counteroffensives led to the reconquest of large portions of Russian-occupied territory. However, areas under Moscow's control are still relevant, especially in the eastern and south-eastern parts of the country, making restoring the pre-invasion status quo difficult. At the diplomatic level, despite the signing of the Black Sea grain agreement in mid-July, the dialogue still languishes, and there are no signs of possible recovery. In the meantime, in Europe, war fatigue seems on the rise, also fostered by soaring energy prices and the apparent uselessness of the economic sanctions adopted in different tranches since the invasion. With autumn approaching and in the light of the coming months' political events, this state of things raises several questions. The coming of the cold season and the growth the energy consumption will probably increase, in several European countries, such fatigue for a war whose outcome seems already defined. The slowing down of military activity will likely push in the same direction, reducing the media's attention to the conflict and watering its emotional appeal. Playing in Moscow's hands, these dynamics seem to reward its decision to bet on a long-lasting attrition war. The two belligerents will probably use the autumn and winter months to strengthen their respective positions a prepare for a large-scale restart of operations next spring. However, especially for Kyiv, the possibility of benefiting from such a restart is strictly linked to the persistence of Western political and military support, which currently seems at least partly at risk.

#### **A constantly evolving conflict**

The alternation of different phases has marked the six months following the Russian invasion of 24 February, the most recent ones reflecting the effort to overcome the limits emerging at different times. The first phase more or less coincided with the first two months of the war. In this phase, the Russian troops and the pro-Russian militias of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Lugansk engaged in a swift offensive to take Kyiv or promote a regime change, placing a friendly government in power. The blueprint was a "blitzkrieg" in which Moscow's military superiority would have quickly defeated an enemy lagging behind it in numbers and quality. However, the Ukraine armed forces opposed a stubborn resistance, which had been largely underestimated. This is why Russia, since April, revised its strategy, shifting to more massive and systematic action. The conquest of Mariupol in May is a model of applying this new approach. During this phase, the Russian troops abandoned the previous strategy of multiple concentric attacks to focus their efforts on the eastern part of the country, concentrating more resources on a smaller number of targets and, at the same time, reducing the stress of their logistic chain. Coupled with more intense use of artillery, these changes led to more attrition over Kyiv's military capabilities, with the Ukraine troops often forced to choose between relinquishing territory or accepting heavy casualties. The reaction was, in summer, the adoption, on the Ukraine side, of a more offensive posture and an intensification of the attacks on Russian backlines, also employing long-range artillery. The use of more effective weapon systems – such as the M777 155 mm howitzers and the M-142 HIMARS multiple rocket launchers that the US provided in July – was a pivotal element of this strategy, although these assets did not prove the game changer that some observers supposed (Lemon, 2022).

Such a new approach to the battlefield allowed the Ukraine troops to score critical successes, such as in the attacks on the Dnepr bridges east of Kherson in late July/early August and, more

important, in the large-scale penetration on Kupiansk and Izium, in the northern part of the front, in early September. These successes go well beyond the «limited» counteroffensive capability that, still in August, some observers envisaged (Srivastava, Schwartz and Rathbone, 2022). Against this backdrop, the primary reasons for discontent from Kyiv's side are two. The first is the slow pace with which foreign assets are currently delivered. The second is the limitation that the US imposed to use such assets only on targets on Ukraine soil, i.e., not to attack the portion of the enemy supply chain deployed behind the Russian borders. According to Kyiv's military establishment, such a strict rule of engagement heavily hampers the assets' usefulness and – more radically – the possibility of recovering all the lost territories, which is the precondition to starting diplomatic negotiations. From this perspective, the military assistance and its scope have grown into an increasingly sensitive issue in the system of US/Ukraine relations. Although the support will not end, the expectations regarding the use of the new assets seem increasingly diverging. Moreover, Washington has growing concerns about the possible long-term unwanted effects of an excessive Ukraine rearmament. Together with the risks of a conventional or nuclear escalation that could stem from a Ukraine attack on Russian territory, in the last times, fears have emerged about possible diversions of weapons and materiel to the black market (Stohl and Yousif, 2022). In this sense, at the end of August, NATO started assessing how the equipment provided to Kyiv was used (Capaccio, 2022). Finally, a growing share of Washington's new financial assistance is no more directed to support Ukraine's military effort but to replenish the US and NATO countries' stocks, which the massive transfers of the past months have significantly reduced (McLeary, O'Brien and Hudson, 2022).

Together with the coming of the cold season, such developments could open a new phase in the war. This phase could emphasise the attrition elements that already emerged during the last spring offensives (Tavberidze, 2022; Watling, 2022). At the same time, a possible lull in the operations will allow the belligerents to strengthen their respective positions and prepare for a large-scale restart of operations at the winter's end. Russian strikes on Ukraine's infrastructures and gas and electricity grids (especially against the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, whose production normally covers one-fifth of Ukraine's electricity consumption) also fit in this framework. On the one hand, they aim to sap the Ukraine citizens' morale, facing them with the grim perspective of winter with poor energy supply. On the other, they aim to keep Ukraine's armed forces under constant pressure, hindering their re-organisation and increasing the country's dependence on foreign assistance. A further risk is that the coming months could lead to colder relations between Kyiv and its Western allies, especially if the parties should not state more precisely the end state they are pursuing. With the passing of time and the end of the emergency, when repelling the Russian invasion was a clear and shared priority all over the political spectrum, why the war was fought became less and less evident. Beyond the largely unrealistic target of promoting a regime change in Russia, the main question revolves around whether to accept an already tricky return to the pre-invasion status quo or to pursue a more ambitious restoration of the pre-2014 situation. Around this issue, the consensus seems lacking both in the Ukraine government and among its allies: a state of things that weakens the Western pledge to support Volodymyr Zelensky's government and makes it increasingly difficult for many European leaders to justify the hardships they are imposing on their citizens.

### **How adapting to a long war?**

Unsurprisingly, the “war aims” issue has grown increasingly relevant. Around it revolves the possibility of finding a diplomatic solution to the crisis. Around it also revolves the possibility of keeping the pro-Kyiv front united in the long run, especially in front of the decline of the emotional wave that supported it in the war's early months. The sharp divergence between Moscow's and Kyiv's aims has been the main obstacle to starting credible peace negotiations. At the same time, the ability of the Western bloc to put its divergencies aside has been the element allowing Ukraine

to enjoy reliable support. Such an element gains greater importance if we consider how this front is fragmented and how different the interest of the countries composing it are. However, over time, Russia skilfully exploited the war's length to deepen the cleavages, especially among European countries. At the same time, in the US, some voices have emerged asking the government to follow a retrenchment policy more attuned to the country's real interest than to the interests of Ukraine or Washington's Central and Eastern European allies (e.g., Bandow, 2022). Against this backdrop, the definition of clear and shared strategic aims could promote greater cohesion, "trimming the claws" at least to part of the domestic opposition on both sides of the Atlantic. However, this kind of effort also imposes the need for a debate that could highlight the existing divergencies and, possibly, widen them. Such dynamics could impact both the pro-Kyiv coalition and the relations between it and the Ukraine government. In this perspective, Kyiv has already expressed its sharp criticism about the proposals for a diplomatic solution that several European countries advanced in the past (see, e.g., Dettmer, 2022; on the weakness of these proposals, see Bond, 2022).

Another problem is how to keep popular support for pro-Ukraine strategies alive. In this field, the physiological decline in public attention that marks the summer months today couples with a growing sensibility to the war's costs. The growth of energy prices today impacting the industry and household expenses is only the most evident among these costs (Shiryaevskaya, 2022; Hernandez, 2022) and risks being a major source of weakness in the Western bloc's cohesion. During summer, facing an adverse market dynamic and more frequent cuts/stops in the Russian natural gas transfers, the European Union adopted new measures to reduce its vulnerability to Moscow's decisions. In March 2022, during the informal meeting of the Heads of state and government of the EU countries, the EU leaders agreed to gradually reduce the Union's dependence on Russian supply. In the following months, during the extraordinary meeting of the European Council on 30-31 May, the decision was taken to cut some 90 per cent of the Russian oil imports by the year's end. On 27 June, the Council also agreed to new rules to strengthen supply security, speed up gas storage refill and started working to promote resource sharing among the member countries. On 26 July, the Energy Ministers reached a political agreement to reduce by 15 per cent the natural gas demand in winter 2022. Formally adopted as a voluntary pledge, such a reduction can become compulsory in the event of an upcoming supply emergence. Finally, on 5 August, the European Council adopted a regulation to reduce gas demand according to the provisions of the previous political agreement. The regulation will enter into force the day after its publication in the EU Official Journal.

However, it is a widespread opinion that such measures could be only of small help due also to the unexpected heat wave that affected Europe in the past summer. Pushing the consumption up and negatively impacting the hydroelectric sector in several countries, the heat wave worsened the scarcity problems due to the war and the measures the EU adopted against Russia (Haslett, 2022). Decoupling gas and electricity prices by introducing a price cap mechanism is still an uphill battle, even if, in August, German authorities offered their support to the project France and Italy proposed in the previous months (Fleming and Pop, 2022). The actual way to reach such a result and its costs are still largely to be defined. Moreover, due to the growing energy prices, the decline in exports did not really affect Russian revenues. According to the figures that the Russian Ministry for Economy provided in early August, the value of energy export will reach 338 billion dollars by the year's end, with a one-third increase compared to 244 billion dollars in 2021<sup>1</sup>. Such income plays a relevant role in financing the Russian war effort and significantly reduces the effectiveness of the economic sanctions imposed on Moscow. After the first hesitations, the Russian economy also seems to have somehow adapted to the new situation, partly due to the decision of countries like China, India, and

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<sup>1</sup> Russian Energy Export Revenue To Rise By 'Almost \$100 Billion' This Year. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12 August. Online: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-energy-export-revenue-rise/31993030.html> (accessed: 5 September 2022).

Japan not to sever their existing economic and commercial ties with Moscow and/or increase their imports from Russia (Ioanes, 2022). Thus, despite some relevant successes<sup>2</sup>, the effect of sanctions seems to have been lower than expected. A consequence of this state of things has been the strengthening of those who, especially in Europe, put pressure on several national governments to reach a compromise with Moscow to end the war and restore the status quo ante in the political, economic, and commercial intercourses with Russia as soon as possible.

### Three takeouts for Western policy

Six months after the beginning of the invasion, the situation remains fluid. However, some lessons can be learned from what happened until now. First, the battlefield experience highlighted some unexpected points of weakness of the Russian armed forces. These points of weakness – possibly coupled with the Russian underestimation of the enemy's capabilities (Davydenko, Khvostova and Lymar, 2022) – account for the defeats suffered in the first phase of the operations. Low morale, poor training, and rigidities in the chain of command were trademarks of the early weeks of the invasion and have been only partly overcome in the following months due to more massive use of long-range artillery fire, which allowed to mask such inefficiencies. The limits of the logistic system have been another source of problems, worsened by Ukraine's ability to target the Russian supply lines. Heavy losses of men and materiel have been the most immediate consequence of this situation. According to the Pentagon's estimates, Moscow would have lost, in these months, between 70 and 80,000 men, more than the total casualties that the Soviet Union had in the ten-year-long Afghan war. Moreover, Moscow would have lost a sizeable share of equipment: among else, some 1,700 tanks (65 per cent of the pre-war stock), between three and four thousand armoured vehicles, and 200 aircraft (Shull, 2022; on the reliability of these figures, see Knox, 2022). The gap between the two belligerents remains regarding personnel as well as the material resources that can be deployed. For instance, regarding manpower, the *Military Balance 2022* set Russian strength at the beginning of the conflict at 900,000 active personnel and 2,000,000 reservists compared to Kyiv's 196,000 active personnel and 900,000 reservists. However, Russia's high casualty rate and Kyiv's unexpected mobilization capabilities have started changing this balance, and, in the coming months, they could also amplify the problems of morale that emerged in the past.

A second takeout is that economy has had a limited impact in shaping the belligerents' decisions. Interdependence has not been a deterrent to Moscow's aggressive will, nor has sanctions proved an effective tool in changing its attitude after the invasion (Nye, 2022). On the other hand, the Kremlin has been quite skilful in exploiting and fuelling the markets' uncertainties by selectively stopping its energy supply. The consequence of this strategy has been an increase in Russian revenues despite a decline in the volume of natural gas sold. At the moment, vulnerability to the use of the energy lever seems to be the main point of weakness of the Western coalitions. This weakness will probably increase with the coming of the winter season, although storages are at a satisfactory level (97.94 per cent as EU average compared to an 80 per cent target to reach by 1 November) and active differentiation measures have been adopted on the supply side. However, according to some analysts, the real way out passes through promoting the Western countries' ability to drastically reduce their energy consumption by increasing efficiency and implementing a swift transition to renewable sources (Abnett and Sharafedin, 2022). In any case, the price component will play a pivotal role. The current high spot prices are one of the reasons why natural gas continues to flow massively toward Europe instead of reaching other markets, Asia first. In this context, if introducing a price cap could benefit the European consumers, on the other hand, it risks negatively affecting the available stock of resources, especially if the cap is set at a level significantly lower than the

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., the European Council figurs: *Infographic - Impact of sanctions on the Russian economy*. Online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/impact-sanctions-russian-economy> (accessed: 5 September 2022).



Asian prevalent price. Moreover, Russian authorities have announced they will further reduce their supply if the EU or G7 countries should introduce any kind of a price cap.

The third takeout refers to the need for the pro-Ukraine front to rethink its strategy in light of a conflict that could last for a long time. In the first weeks of the war, the United States and its European allies showed a remarkable and largely unexpected degree of cohesion. However, several countries started suffering quite soon from war fatigue, a problem that has grown over time. In public opinion, a poor understanding of how the sanction mechanism works and the assumption that Moscow would have quickly given up in front of the open pro-Kyiv standing of the international community fuelled expectations that were soon disappointed. As a consequence, sharp and sometimes unmotivated criticisms were raised on sanctions and their implementation (on sanctions' effectiveness and the false myths surrounding them, see Sonnenfeld and Tian, 2022). One of the effects of these dynamics has been strengthening the idea that a softer approach toward Russia and greater attention to its requests could favour a quick and smooth return to normal relations. Within the pro-Ukraine front, this is a highly divisive issue. Unsurprisingly, the countries that, in the last months, have more actively moved to find a diplomatic solution to the war have been the Western ones, while the Central and Eastern European countries like Poland and the Baltic republics have been among the most vociferous supporters of the need to provide Kyiv with large-scale military assistance. In the coming months, such a division seems destined to resurface, also fuelled by the impact that the coming cold season could have on the energy market and how the Russian authorities will be able to exploit its dynamics in their favour. As it has already been noted, the Ukraine war is fuelling increasing mistrust among EU members, and their divisions may deepen in the future. The risk is that the cleavages that the Ukraine war opened consolidated, sapping the Union's cohesion also on issues beyond the war and the best posture to assume toward Moscow (Scazzieri, 2022).

## **Conclusions**

Six months after its outbreak, the Ukraine war still seems far from a solution. The situation remains fluid both on the battlefield and at the diplomatic level, and there are few signs that a solution could be reached in a reasonably short time. Dialogue between the belligerents – essential for a diplomatic composition of the crisis – has stalled. Moreover, the tensions between Russia and Kyiv's European allies have escalated, while the European countries seem increasingly distant on the posture to assume *vis-à-vis* the Kremlin. The winter months, highlighting the importance of the Russian energy supply for the European market, will add further momentum to these dynamics. The US, in its turn, seems to have lost interest in playing the leading role it had assumed during the first part of the crisis. The difficulties that the Biden administration is facing and its declining popular favour seem, in this case, to have led to retrenchment and a greater focus on the domestic dimension, which is considered more politically rewarding in the light of the upcoming midterm elections. The elections' results will hardly affect the posture the US has assumed until now since, in Congress, there is a strong bipartisan consensus around the need to keep supporting Kyiv. However, a Republican-led Congress could be less willing than the current one to manage the political implications of a US-Europe relationship growing increasingly complex, especially if the cleavages crisscrossing the Old Continent should deepen in the coming months. From this perspective, as far as the transatlantic relationship is concerned, the Ukraine war seems to be evolving into a far more difficult testbed than expected, possibly challenging, in the long run, the "America is back" narrative that President Biden optimistically trumpeted during his first meetings with the European allies.

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## **Russia and its eastward route of energy export: the “Pivot to Asia” strategy**

### **Russian energy strategy, between West and East**

Russia is one of the major global energy powers. In 2021, it was the world's largest exporter of natural gas (fourth in the world for export of LNG, Liquefied Natural Gas) and in second place behind Saudi Arabia for oil exports. This energy power is linked to the availability of enormous hydrocarbon reserves, which could preserve and further strengthen the role of global energy supplier. In terms of oil reserves, Russia ranks sixth in the world (107 billion barrels) while holds the world's largest natural gas reserves, estimated at 37,000 billion cubic meters (bcm) (BP, 2021, 16.34). In 2021, Russia produced 10.5 million barrels of oil per day (mbpd) – accounting for 14% of global supplies – and exported 4.7 million mbpd to international markets. China is the main importer of Russian oil (1,6 mbpd in 2021, accounting for 30% of total Russian imports) but Europe was also an important partner, since it imported (mainly by sea but also through the Druzba pipeline network) 2,4 mbpd in the reference year (IEA 2022b)<sup>1</sup>.

Concerning natural gas, Russia produced 701 bcm in 2021 (the world's second largest producer behind the United States with 934 bcm), of which about 1/3 is allocated for exports: 201 bcm were exported through gas pipelines (84%) while 40 bcm in liquefied form (16% of total exports), which accounts for 8% of global LNG traffic (BP 2022, 29, 34). It is necessary to take into consideration that, before the invasion of Ukraine, Russia exported 20 bcm of LNG to EU – out of a total of 155 bcm – thanks to the northern terminal of Yamal and the western ones of Vysotsk and Portovaya, geographically closer to the EU markets. Russia was the third largest LNG supplier to EU after Qatar and the United States.

The invasion of Ukraine has heavily affected Russian energy scenario. In fact, the European policy of renouncing Russian hydrocarbons and Putin's own strategy of interrupting energy supplies to the EU (namely, the shutdown of Nord Stream gas pipeline, the reduction or interruption of supplies for some European nations, as a kind of pressure tool to maintain a geopolitical influence) will necessarily push Moscow in the medium term to look for new outlet markets to re-orient its exports, ensuring itself the vital energy revenues to compensate the loss of the European markets. As mentioned above, the sale of hydrocarbons guarantees a conspicuous source of income for the state budget, accounting for almost 50% of it. Despite the sanctions adopted against Russia since February 2022, at present energy exports' revenues have not decreased but have even improved although the reduction of exported volumes, thanks to the exponential growth of prices. According to the International Energy Agency (2022a) estimates, Russia collects \$700 million a day for oil exports and \$400 million for gas sold to the EU. This search for new markets will decisively strengthen the Pivot to Asia strategy, namely the further development of the eastward route of energy export, which Russia has started to seriously implement in 2014, when Western sanctions following the annexation of Crimea pushed Moscow to consider a potential reduction of exports to Western markets. We can observe that until the invasion of Ukraine, the rationale of this strategy was to balance the exports of hydrocarbons between the two vectors, as they were mainly directed towards the European markets through the western transport corridor. This approach is supported by data: in 2015, over two thirds of Russian oil exports (79%) were directed to Europe (mainly to Germany, the Netherlands and Poland), while only 18% was delivered to the Asian market. Concerning natural

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<sup>1</sup> The Netherlands and Germany were the main buyers of Russian oil in 2021, together receiving half of Russian exports (1.1 mbpd) destined for European markets.

gas, 93% of Russian exports were shipped through the westward energy route, while only 6% were sold on Asian markets (Indeo, 2015). Over the past eight years, Russia has sought to enhance its export strategy to Asian markets, also facilitated by the construction of new energy infrastructures and by the growing demand for gas and oil from countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, partially re-adjusting the balance between the two export carriers. This trend is evident above all in relation to oil exports, while in the natural gas sector the dependence on the western export route has been reduced, even if it remains particularly accentuated. In 2021, 50% of Russian oil exports were traded in European markets, while 37% were delivered along the eastward route, for the Asia Pacific region's markets (BP, 2022). In the field of natural gas, 76% of Russian exports (184 bcm) were allocated to the western energy route and to European markets (a definition that geographically includes the European Union, the Balkans, Turkey, the United Kingdom), while 24% were delivered through the eastward energy route. For completeness, it should also be considered that the impact of the western energy route increases further, if we observe that other 27 bcm of natural gas were sold to Belarus and to the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (Ibidem).

### **The eastward route of energy exports**

The development of an eastern vector of energy exports represents a priority for Moscow. This is expressly mentioned in the National Energy Strategy 2030 and 2035 as well as closely linked to a series of geopolitical and economic reasons. As stated above, the East Asia Pacific and India's markets constitute an interesting alternative for Russian energy exports, allowing Moscow to rebalance the strategic importance of the two transport carriers also reducing the reliance on European markets. It should be carefully emphasized that no formulation of the energy strategy and no speech of the Russian authorities mention a total renunciation of European markets, but rather a diversification aimed at rebalancing exports in order to strengthen national energy security (Nakhle, 2022). Furthermore, Chinese, Japanese and Indian energy companies have considerable financial capacities and know-how that could help Moscow to increase production – by exploiting the fields located on the Russian section of the Arctic and exploiting the reserves of non-conventional hydrocarbons – and to create the necessary energy processing and transport infrastructures (liquefaction terminals, gas pipelines) for exports, weakening the harmful effects of the sanctions adopted by western countries after 2014.

These hopes correspond to some key goals contained in the 2035 strategic document. Namely, an increase in the LNG production and export thanks to more investments and technological support to develop promising fields in the most remote areas (Eastern Siberia, Arctic, Russian Far East), also considering the needs of a growing domestic demand stimulated by the implementation of an integrated national energy network (ibidem; Mitrova and Yermakov, 2019). In addition to the economic considerations, there is also the urgent need to bolster the condition of energy security. Energy cooperation with China, South Korea, Japan, India offers the strategic opportunity of exporting hydrocarbons without passing through a third country (i.e the Sino-Russian pipelines, Russian LNG carriers and oil tankers that reach Asian and Indian ports), thus avoiding the problems related to the role of Ukraine in the western export carrier.

Another factor that strengthens the strategic importance of the eastward route is linked to the geographical and territorial proximity of the hydrocarbon reserves (located in Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East, which will be developed in the coming years) with the Asian consumer markets, compared to the European ones. In fact, this availability of Russia's oil and natural gas is a matter of priority importance for the nations of East Asia, in order to reduce the condition of vulnerability connected to the high dependence on oil and natural gas' imports transiting along the chokepoints of Malacca and Hormuz, subject to potential interruptions related to geopolitical issues and international tensions (Indeo 2016). Furthermore, in order to achieve the carbon neutrality by 2050-2060 - eliminating polluting emissions and fossil fuels from the energy mix – China, South

Korea and Japan will require in the medium term large volumes of natural gas (generally considered as the main option for completing the energy transition). The geographical proximity to Russia will ensure regular supplies, also reducing transport costs and times.

China is the main partner for Russia in the development of the Pivot to Asia strategy, as the availability of regular supplies from Russia allows Beijing to successfully implement the geographic diversification of imports, reducing those crossing the Malacca Strait. Since 2017, Russia is the main oil supplier for China – 1.6 mbpd in 2021 – a disputed role with Saudi Arabia but in fact consolidated following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which emphasizes the solidity of the partnership between Moscow and Beijing. Since 2009, the ESPO (Eastern Siberia Pacific Ocean) pipeline, with a capacity of 1.6 mbpd, has been able to satisfy part of the energy demand of China (as well as for Japan and South Korea), through oil tankers leaving from the Russian port of Kozmino in the Pacific as well as through the Skovorodino-Daqing pipeline (capacity 600,000 barrels of oil per day), an infrastructure which directly connects Russia and China. The Chinese government has granted credit lines to the Russian state company Rosneft and to Transneft (a company that manages the energy transport infrastructure) for the construction of ESPO, which guarantees regular supplies to Chinese refineries mainly located on the Pacific eastern coast (Fischer, 2013; Indeo, 2015).

Five years after the signing of the agreement between Putin and Xi Jinping, the Power of Siberia pipeline became operational in 2019, which currently transports 10 bcm of natural gas to China and should reach full transportation capacity of 38 bcm per year by 2025. Again, the Chinese government financially contributed to the realization of the infrastructure, investing in the construction of the Chinese segment of the pipeline. The potentially huge, but in fact largely untapped, reserves of Eastern Siberia are the exclusive source that currently feeds the Power of Siberia (the Kovykta field and in the future Chayandin). This is a piece of a future integrated natural gas distribution system that should transport the additional volumes of natural gas produced in other regions (such as Yakutia and the fields of Sakhalin Island) - thanks to the expected Chinese technological and financial support - in order to deliver Russian gas not only to the Chinese markets but also to other profitable Asian markets (Yermakov and Meidan, 2022). Chinese investments have also contributed to promote the development of LNG in Russia. As a matter of fact, the Chinese companies CNPC and the Silk Road Fund hold 30% of the shares in the consortium (headed by the Russian Novatek and which also includes the French Total) which has been developing the Yamal LNG project, after the construction of a liquefaction and export terminal in the port of Sabetta in the Russian Arctic<sup>2</sup>. It is the first LNG export terminal built in Russia, which can count on the reserves of the South Tambey field (926 bcm), which currently exported 27 bcm of gas per year (Yamal LNG, 2021). With the exception of the gas transported by the Power of Siberia to China, 2/3 exports of Russian gas to Asia are in liquefied form. 14 bcm from the Sakhalin 2 Project and shipped to China, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan, while 8.5 bcm from the Yamal LNG terminal which mainly serves China, but also the three mentioned countries and India (Tsafos, 2022; BP, 2022, 36).

### **Pivot to Asia energy strategy in the context of Russia-Ukraine conflict, between strengths and weaknesses**

Due to a 73% reduction of gas exports to the EU over the last six months (ISPI DataLab, 2022) and the willingness of the EU member states to ban Russian oil imports by the end of the year, Russia needs to increase its exports through the eastern corridor. The data for the referred period show a growth of Russian hydrocarbon exports, especially to China and India. Based on the solid geopolitical partnership between Moscow and Beijing, since February 2022 Russia has significantly

<sup>2</sup> For China, the Arctic-Polar route is strategically important, as it makes possible to avoid transit through Malacca by using an alternative maritime corridor, which was practicable in the eastern direction only in the summer months (when the melting of the ice makes navigable the northern route), while it is always viable towards the west and the European markets.



increased its oil exports to China (around 400,000 additional barrels of oil per day), strengthening its role as main supplier with almost 2 mbpd.

However, the most significant change concerns India, which is emerging as an attractive market for Moscow's exports. In 2021, Indian imports from Russia stood at an average of 200,000 barrels per day, but following the Ukrainian crisis these have reached almost 1 million barrels per day<sup>3</sup>, an exponential growth that has led Russia to be the second oil supplier surpassing Saudi Arabia, covering 1/5 of the total Indian oil imports (Kozhanov, 2022; Rickett, 2022). In Moscow's perspective, India represents an energy partner and an attractive market as one of the world's largest energy-intensive economies, considering that this country currently is the third largest oil importer in the world with over 5 mbpd. New Delhi's government has adopted a national program, which aims to double the share of natural gas in the energy mix through a multi-billion dollar investment program. If until June 2022 India reduced LNG imports by 13% (3.5 bcm) precisely because of the high spot prices, now the trend has reversed thanks to the favourable prices charged by Moscow, which exports LNG to India on the basis of an agreement signed in 2019 (OIES 2022). In fact, the increase of the oil exports through the eastward energy corridor is favored by the enormous discounts practiced by Russian producers (at the beginning of the summer they stood at 25 to 35 dollars per barrel compared to the Brent price) as a form of compensation for the risks to purchase Russian hydrocarbons (Bloomberg, 2022; Rickett, 2022). Russian energy penetration in India has had an impact on the country's traditional suppliers. Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have reduced their exports to India, as well as the United States (the share of Indian imports has decreased since 10 % to 6% between March and May). One of the main consequences to compensate the temporary loss of markets has been the reduction in prices practiced by Iraq and other Middle Eastern suppliers (OIES, 2022; Kozhanov 2022).

Nevertheless, the possibility for Russia to systemically strengthen the eastern vector of exports to offset and gradually replace exports to European markets strongly depends on the ability to develop new projects and the start of production of new fields in Eastern Siberia, Arctic, Russian Far East. Indeed, the major fields currently operating are largely located in Western Siberia, and these feed the European markets through pipelines, a scenario which explains that the creation of new eastward energy infrastructures would be a potentially feasible option but which would require huge investments and long times for the realization. In fact, Russia has long started several projects in the eastern part of the nation but the implementation of these is strongly linked to the involvement of foreign partners, in terms of investments, creation of joint ventures, supply of know-how and technology.

However, the sanctions imposed in 2022 – which are added to those previously adopted following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 – effectively prevent the involvement of the major International Oil Companies (IOC), previously attracted by the enormous energy potential of Russia, and now forced to abandon international consortia, joint ventures and to freeze their investments. The effects of the post-Crimean sanctions have already deeply affected the development of the Russian energy sector. After 2014, the IOCs ExxonMobil and Equinor abandoned the partnership with Rosneft to develop fields in the Arctic, stopping projects in the non-conventional hydrocarbon sector (shale gas and tight oil). With the new sanctions, projects such as the construction of the Arctic LNG-2 terminal - which could allow Russia to double the production of LNG in the Arctic region – will surely suffer slowdowns, in particular in the realization of phases 2 and 3 of the project (Tsafos, 2022). Unlike other IOCs, the French Total does not seem willing to completely leave its activities and investments in Russian territory, but to proceed with a gradual suspension of activities, especially on the Arctic-2 project (where it holds 10% of the shares). Moreover, Total apparently wants to remain in the Yamal LNG consortium, although it will likely freeze its involvement in

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<sup>3</sup> Since there is no pipeline connecting the two nations, oil exports from Russia to India can only be made by sea routes.



development stages 2 and 3 (Henderson, 2022). There are other important projects potentially in progress (Baltic LNG on the Arctic, Far East LNG Project) and aimed to increase production and export capacities towards Asian markets, but none of these have been launched due to the lack of support from international companies, which are discouraged by Western sanctions. For example, the Far East LNG project was particularly promising as it involved the construction of an LNG terminal for exporting Sakhalin's island gas reserves, but ExxonMobil withdrew from the consortium with Rosneft due to the conflict with Ukraine (Reuters, 2022).

Another critical aspect linked to the sanctions - and destined to delay the development of new fields and to affect the Russian production potential - concerns shipbuilding sector linked to energy, because the modern icebreakers and LNG carriers to navigate the Arctic are mainly built in South Korea, a nation that it has expressed its support to US sanctions against Russia. The sanctions will therefore interrupt the transfer of the necessary components and technology, as well as presumably suspend the collaboration of South Korean companies in the joint venture with Rosneft in the Zvezda shipyard, in the Russian Far East (Henderson, 2022).

Russia has tried to promote a sort of autarky to reduce the impact of sanctions, developing technologies capable of replacing those provided by Western IOCs. The Novatek company has developed a liquefaction technology (Arctic Cascade) that can be used to partially replace the western support, even if its application is limited to small plants (1 ton capacity) and therefore does not currently allow the full optimization of the existent energy fields (Tsafos, 2022).

In general (with the exception of South Korea), Asian energy companies for the moment do not seem willing to follow Western and US sanctions and therefore to abandon their assets in the Russian energy sector. Japan, for example, has imposed sanctions against Russia, but at the same time Tokyo justifies the unaltered cooperation with the need to obtain regular flows of gas and oil essential for the national energy security. The Japanese companies Mitsui and Mitsubishi have interests in the Sakhalin 1 and 2 projects as well as in Arctic LNG-2, similarly to Indian companies such as the ONGC, which holds 20% of the Sakhalin 1 field and 26% of the Vankhor Oilfield (Henderson, 2022).

Once more, China plays the role of key partner to support Russian projects to develop an eastern export carrier, primarily protecting its interests and strengthening its energy security situation. In February 2022, a few days before the invasion of Ukraine, Gazprom and CNPC signed an agreement for the supply of 10 bcm of gas for a period of 30 years, in addition to the 38 bcm envisaged by the Power of Siberia gas pipeline. This gas should come from Sakhalin Island and then be transported along the existing Sakhalin-Khabarovsk-Vladivostok pipeline (Galtsova, 2022).

The two sides have also relaunched the idea of the Altai pipeline (which is labeled now as Power of Siberia-2) aimed at connecting the gas reserves of Western Siberia (currently the source of exports to the EU) to China via Mongolia, with an expected capacity of 50 bcm of natural gas per year. Russia has already concluded negotiations with Mongolia, but it is necessary to start building a new pipeline and to obtain financial investments as soon as possible in order to be able to compensate the reduction of exports through the western corridor. Undoubtedly, this project is also attracting great interest from Beijing. If we consider that China will need to import around 100 bcm of gas by 2030 to meet domestic demand, the projects under construction in Russia (added to existing supplies) would make it possible to achieve this goal (Yermako and Meidan, 2022).

## Conclusions

Although Russia has an enormous energy potential - with which it could simultaneously satisfy the Europe and East Asia hydrocarbon demand - the impact of sanctions on production capacity and on the exploitation of existing reserves continues to negatively affect Moscow's ambitions to preserve its role as a global energy power. In fact, the know-how and technology of western energy companies still appear to be crucial to undertake successful exploration and extraction activities in difficult

climatic contexts (Arctic and Eastern Siberia), or to develop the enormous potential of unconventional hydrocarbons in the Russian subsoil, considering that US companies hold a substantial monopoly of the fracking technology.

In the long term, Russia could redirect its exports to the eastern vector, provided that the transport infrastructures will be built to reach Asian markets. At present, the realization of the planned projects (Power of Siberia upgrade, Power of Siberia-2, Arctic LNG) would allow Russia to increase eastward exports by 90-100 bcm by 2030, while exports to the EU in 2021 amounted to 155 bcm, a scenario that implies for Moscow a net reduction of the energy revenues. In fact, only China is wisely investing (but pursuing its strategic objectives) in the development of the Russian energy sector, thus having enormous negotiating power giving Beijing the possibility of obtaining lower prices compared to those charged to other buyers.

Furthermore, even for the nations involved in the eastern vector, the condition of energy security is combined with the need for diversification. If on the one hand the availability of Russian hydrocarbons represents a significant option to reduce dependence on imports from the Middle East, on the other hand China, India and Japan are fully aware of the need to avoid excessive dependence on Russian supplies.

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## Communication and propaganda activities of the Taliban

### The Taliban media system

As is well known, communication and propaganda activities are a crucial element in the strategy of States and non-State actors, including during armed conflicts, all the more so in the current information age.

The Taliban have shown full awareness of this aspect. Especially since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, they have carried out extensive and articulated communication and propaganda activities (in particular, Drissel 2015; Johnson 2017; van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018).

These activities involved the construction and development of a decentralized media system, based on a variety of means of communication, including: graffiti; posters, leaflets and other printed texts (such as the infamous *shabnameh* or “night letters”<sup>1</sup>); press releases; propaganda videos (Mehran et al. 2021); sermons by preachers and imams affiliated or close to the group, including on the occasion of the *khutbah* (the sermon delivered during Friday prayers); poems and poetic songs (*tarana*) (Weinreich and Pelevin 2012; Johnson 2017, chapter 7); websites and web pages, in multiple languages; accounts on social networks (among others, Drissel 2015; Bahar 2020); apps.

### Propaganda activities during the 2001-2021 war

At the time of the long 2001-2021 war (see, in particular, CASD 2022), the Taliban devoted considerable energy to the development of careful communication and propaganda activities in support of their objectives.

For example, the theme of the victimization of the entire Afghan population, for alleged responsibilities of foreign forces and of the Afghan national government, was continually emphasized: according to this view, the “enemies” were not limited to militarily occupying the country and destroying its culture, but they were also even responsible for killing its population. The Taliban placed particular emphasis on cases of killing of Afghan civilians.

Foreign forces were presented as illegitimate invasion forces, as well as “infidel” forces. Moreover, Taliban propaganda argued that even the obvious military inferiority of the “resistance” could be compensated by patience, perseverance and commitment, and ultimately by divine assistance. In this sense, the historical precedent of the humiliating Soviet retreat favored an optimistic interpretation of the disproportion of forces on the military level.

The judgment with respect to the national government in Kabul was, of course, no less unfavorable. Members of the Afghan national police and armed forces were branded as *munafiqun* (“hypocrites”, according to a Qur’anic expression), while representatives of the national administration were assigned derogatory terms such as *ghulam* (“servant”) or *gawdagai* (“puppet”). From a historical perspective, national leaders were compared to controversial figures of the past, such as the Marxist leader Babrak Karmal (1929-1996) at the time of the Soviet occupation of the country.

Moreover, the Taliban were ready to emphasize alleged mistakes, inefficiencies and corrupt practices related to the provision of essential services by the Kabul government (among others, Johnson 2017). Furthermore, the peace agreement with the United States (*Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan*), formally signed on February 29, 2020 in Doha (Qatar), was presented by the

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<sup>1</sup> *Shabnameh* (“night letters” in Persian) is the name given to leaflets posted at night in villages and towns, containing messages aimed at intimidating the local population (or sectors of it) and, at the time of the war in Afghanistan (2001-2021), to dissuade it from supporting the Afghan national government and foreign forces (among others, Johnson 2007; Johnson 2017, chapter 5).

Taliban as a victory and in fact had the effect of further weakening the national government led by Ashraf Ghani.

In general, it is also useful to recall that the Taliban were able to package and distribute information and propaganda products very quickly, adapting them promptly to the evolution of current events. For this reason they were often able to offer their own interpretation of armed clashes and other relevant events before their opponents, thus actively forging the information environment to their advantage and forcing the opponents to be in the conditions of having to only react at a later time (Mehran 2022).

### **The combination of ethnic-linguistic and “national” elements**

In terms of content, the propaganda of the Taliban may often appear relatively simple, but it hides a rather skillful construction.

The armed group, first of all, presents itself with the name of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, even before the (re)conquest of power in 2021; this choice has been obviously intended to confer authority and legitimacy on the organization.

The Taliban, who are predominantly ethnic Pashtuns, often refer to the practices of this ethnic-linguistic group. In particular, they frequently resort to notions from *Pashtunwali*, namely the customary and ethical code and lifestyle of the Pashtun tradition.

The Taliban, at the same time, are careful not to restrict their propaganda activities exclusively for the benefit of this ethnic-linguistic group, committing themselves to developing a communication campaign that aims to embrace all Afghans (as well as to work also at the international level: see below).

In this direction, on the cultural and social level, references to pride and honor aim to potentially attract the attention and consent of members of other Afghan ethnic-linguistic groups, especially in rural contexts. In fact, throughout the country it is traditionally very common to assign great value to “honor” (*nang*) as well as to the duty of “revenge” (*bada*), if honor has been violated or lost.

During the 2001-2021 war, the Taliban skillfully used these concepts in the service of their own political cause, pointing to alleged errors and faults of the Afghan national government and foreign forces, with great attention also to alleged wrongs and claims of a strictly local character. They directed any feelings of anger and frustration present in sectors of the population towards these enemies.

### **References of religious inspiration**

Against this political, social, and cultural background, the Taliban have extensively used a language of religious inspiration, based on the rigid application of principles derived in part from the conservative Sunni current of the Deobandis.

As in all jihadist groups, the concept of *jihad* is of course central. It is understood as an armed effort, mandatory for all Muslims - especially Afghans - against the alleged enemies of Islam, whether they are “infidels” or Muslim “hypocrites”.

In this regard, it should be noted that, unlike Salafi jihadist groups such as the so-called Islamic State / *Daesh*, in recent years the issue of hostility against Shia has not assumed primary relevance. Overall, after the loss of power in 2001, the propaganda of the Taliban has not emphasized the ethnic and religious divisions of the country, preferring to promote a nominally unified vision of Afghanistan, under the banner of Islam (interpreted, of course, from a jihadist perspective), all the more so in a country where, according to available estimates, more than 99.5% of citizens are Muslim.

The Islamic religion was and is instrumentally used to legitimize the decisions and activities of the organization, including violent activities. For example, the Taliban have adopted and celebrated the non-native practice of suicide attacks, presented as acts of “martyrdom” of religious inspiration

(among others, Bertolotti 2010; Ahmadzai 2021; see also Marone 2013). In this view, these extreme acts should confirm the individuals' total availability for the divinity and at the same time for the country.

During the 2001-2021 war, the Taliban were also able to gain the consent of *mullahs* and other religious figures in the country and promoted the construction of unregistered mosques and madrasas (Mehran 2022).

The extremist interpretation of the Islamic religion is also the basis of the system of norms and behaviors promoted by the Taliban. As is well known, the organization has always assigned a crucial role to the commitment to the application of a very rigid version of *sharia*.

### **The turning point of 2021**

The communication and propaganda activities of the Taliban have known a turning point with the victory of August 2021. Unsurprisingly, this event has been presented and celebrated by the organization as a triumph, achieved with patience and determination, supposedly in accordance with the divine will.

After the conquest of Kabul, propaganda products, such as the Arabic magazine *Al-Somud* ("the resistant"), the Taliban soon reiterated their hostility towards the United States and its allies, sometimes called with the Qur'anic expression *al-Ahzab* ("the Confederates", i.e. enemies of the Prophet of Islam), forced to a humiliating escape. They have also emphasized the alleged support offered by the deity. With a rhetorical device, which is recurrent among armed groups, the Taliban have also argued that the enemy listens to and understands only the language of violence. In addition, the Taliban have emphasized the alleged crimes and injustices committed by enemies and reaffirmed their aversion to the principles of liberal democracy. It should be noted, moreover, that their propaganda products are dotted with quotations from Qur'anic verses (including 9:14-16, 32:24), according to a widespread instrumental practice in jihadism (cf. Marone 2022).

In their turn, numerous jihadist and Islamist organizations, with the obvious exception of openly hostile ones such as the Islamic State, welcomed the Taliban's victory and also presented it as a reference model and a source of inspiration (among others, ICG 2021).

### **The narratives used by the Taliban**

Empirical research on Taliban propaganda in recent years has, unfortunately, been limited, all the more so in comparison with other armed jihadist groups such as the so-called Islamic State or Al-Qaeda.

An exception in this regard is a recent quantitative analysis carried out by experts Winter and Alrhoun (2020). This study documented that in the period 1 October 2019 to 30 September 2020, the Taliban created over 45,500 propaganda products, in various formats and languages; in particular, the most widely used format was that of news bulletins, while the most widely used language was Pashtun. In relation to this period of time, this research (Winter and Alrhoun 2020) identified five "narratives" in Taliban propaganda. 1) Capability (effectiveness of the Taliban on the battlefield); 2) Credibility (effectiveness of the Taliban in the government of the territory and the population); 3) Vulnerability (alleged violence and abuse against the civilian population); 4) Legitimacy (reliability of the Taliban for the security and prosperity of Afghanistan in the light of the agreement signed with the USA); 5) Suitability (ability of the Taliban to express and affirm Afghan identity, culture and values).

Subsequent research by the same research group (Winter et al. 2022) proposed a revised version of the five narratives in Taliban propaganda over the time period between 1 July and 31 October 2021, a crucial time for the fate of Afghanistan. The five narratives identified by the authors are: 1) Security (military engagement and use of violence in general by the Taliban); 2) Victimhood (alleged losses and costs for the civilian population); 3) Governance (political activity and credibility

of the Taliban); 4) Foreign affairs (relations of the Taliban with foreign interlocutors and adversaries); 5) Doctrine and ideology (ideology, values and political beliefs of the Taliban). Unsurprisingly, the Taliban victory of August 2021 resulted in a reorientation of the narratives used by the organization, with a significant decline in the use of the narrative on security and a clear growth in that on governance (Winter et al. 2022).

### **The activity of restriction of public debate and censorship**

In addition to active efforts in communication and propaganda, unsurprisingly, the Taliban had already imposed their control over domestic media outlets before the 2001 invasion and had also minimized the presence of foreign media in Afghanistan.

With the advent of the Internet, the Taliban decided to prohibit its use, in the summer of 2001, although access to the Web at the time was in fact still not widespread in the country. Officially this decision was taken to prevent the population from accessing online material associated with “obscenity, vulgarity and anti-Islamic ‘stuff’” (cited in Mehran 2022).

As is well known, even before that the performance and listening of musical pieces had been banned, with the exception of religious or propaganda songs without the accompaniment of musical instruments (cf. Weinreich and Pelevin 2012), and offenders were severely punished.

Immediately after the regain of power in 2021, the Taliban again imposed, even with the use of violence, very heavy restrictions and limitations on the media system and in general on freedom of thought and speech in the country (most recently, see Dawi 2022b).

Nevertheless, for technological reasons, the flow of communications is now much wider and more articulated than it was until 2001. Moreover, compared to traditional media such as print media and television, the censorship activity on the Web in a country where the internet is now widespread and, at the time of writing, accessible by citizens is proving to be less easy and pervasive (for example, Mehran 2022).

### **International communication**

At least since the negotiations with the United States, which began in 2018 and culminated with the signing of the Doha Agreement in 2020, the Taliban have attempted to present themselves abroad as a credible actor and a profoundly renewed organization compared to the period of the first Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1996-2001). Leading members of the movement have personally engaged in this effort, even signing articles in English for some of the most prestigious newspapers in the international press (in particular, Haqqani 2020).

Since the victory of August 2021, the Taliban have further intensified their communication and propaganda campaign at the international level, strengthening a sort of global “public relations” campaign (Maley 2021). The goal, understandably, is to present itself as the legitimate, reliable, efficient and “moderate” government of Afghanistan.

On the internet, there is a considerable growth of accounts in favor of the Taliban, on various platforms. Moreover, in addition to the accounts associated with official spokesmen Yossuf Ahmadi and Zabihullah Mujaheed (currently Deputy Ministry of Information and Culture of the Islamic Emirate), numerous other figures of the Taliban have opened accounts on social networks such as Twitter (among others, Taneja 2021; Bertolotti 2021). However, on other mainstream platforms, such as those of the US company Meta Platforms (known as Facebook until October 2021), Taliban-related pages have instead been removed (among others, Dawi 2022a).

In general, at this stage, the tones of Taliban communication and propaganda abroad tend to be more conciliatory than in the past, presumably in light of the obvious goal of presenting a new and more “moderate” image of the organization and of obtaining or consolidating their recognition internationally.



## **Conclusions**

At least since the loss of power in 2001, the Taliban have devoted great attention to communication and propaganda activities, through a decentralized media system, which has generally proved effective in pursuing their strategic goals. The military victory of 2021 and the assumption of the role of the *de facto* government of Afghanistan has led to a further strengthening and a partial reorientation of their communication and propaganda activities. In fact, while within the country, the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has imposed heavy restrictions on the media system and freedom of speech, abroad it has usually presented itself in conciliatory tones, pursuing the goal of presenting itself as a legitimate, reliable, efficient and “moderate” government authority and of obtaining international recognition and support.

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# **Osservatorio Strategico**

## **Part Two**



## **Tunisia's Constitutional Referendum**

### **The context**

On July 25, 2022, the Tunisian electorate was called to vote in the constitutional referendum sponsored by the President of the Republic, Saied. The Tunisian people were to vote on the new constitutional draft formulated by the constitutional commission appointed by Saied himself, to replace the 2014 constitution. The referendum represented the first stage of the political-institutional transition path inaugurated by Saied starting July 25, 2021, the date when he invoked a state of emergency to give life to a power grab that is still ongoing. His detractors have called the president's moves a "coup d'état", pointing out the authoritarian drift imprinted by the measures he issued through presidential decrees over the past twelve months. On the contrary, his supporters see the presidential actions as a last desperate attempt to lift the serious context of political, social and economic crisis afflicting Tunisia, undermining the democratization path undertaken from 2011-2014. First the pandemic and then the indirect negative effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine have exacerbated a situation that was already showing serious problems in recent years.

Political polarization and social tensions further increased in the weeks leading up to the referendum. Even actors who had previously attempted to engage in constructive opposition to Saied's policies in the last phase stiffened their stance. This is especially the case with the UGTT, Tunisia's powerful trade union. While it had previously maintained a discreet dialogue with the president, starting June 16, it called a nationwide strike involving the majority of the 3 million public sector workers – scenario that led among others to the disruption of port and airport services throughout the country (Bajec, 2022). Officially, the strike was not presented as a political action against the constitutional referendum, but rather as a demonstration of opposition to the timid economic reforms proposed by the president. However, it should be remembered how the UGTT had previously boycotted the work of the advisory commission charged with making non-binding proposals to the constitutional commission for drafting the new constitution (Al Jazeera, 2022a). Another category of workers that stiffened its opposition to the presidential actions in the weeks leading up to the referendum is the judiciary. Beginning in May and for several consecutive weeks, Tunisian magistrates went on strike to protest Saied's decision to remove 57 judges, accused of corruption (Agenzia Nova, 2022a).

Finally, on the political front, it is worth noting the further escalation of tensions between Saied and his main opponent, Rashid Ghannushi, leader of Ennahda, the first party by seats in the dissolved parliament. Just in the weeks leading up to the referendum, Ghannushi appeared in the preliminary hearing at the Tunis court to answer to charges of money laundering (Al Jazeera, 2022b); a trial he described as "political-oriented". The leader of the Islamist party had also previously had his bank accounts frozen as a restrictive measure related to the trial (Al Jazeera, 2022c). The main anti-Saied opposition party has also been the protagonist of the extensive protest demonstrations, spearheaded by the National Salvation Front (NSF) – a coalition of anti-Saied political forces. July 23, in Tunis, saw clashes with police and multiple arrests of protesters. Response that drew harsh condemnation even from the UGTT which called for the release of the detainees (Al Jazeera, 2022d).

### **Results of the referendum**

The referendum outcome largely met expectations. Votes in favor of the new constitutional draft reached 94.6 percent of voters; those against were 5.4 percent (ISIE, 2022a). The low turnout of 30.5 percent was also predicted by international observers, given also the boycott announced by

the anti-Saied political parties gathered in the NSF (ISIE, 2022b). As there was no minimum quorum of voters to validate the result, the new constitutional draft was approved and went into effect.

Saied's supporters, a significant segment of the Tunisian population, took to the streets to celebrate the event. On the other hand, since the hours immediately following the release of the results, various analysts have noted skewed counts of the results (Ltaief, 2022). In particular, discrepancies were reported in the total number of voters in several districts, which even exceeded the total number of eligible voters. A situation that led some civil society organizations to call for at least a recount of the votes with the presence of third-party observers (Tunisians against the Coup, 2022). Nevertheless, the harshest reaction came from the NSF, which published a statement on its social media channels expressing its rejection toward the referendum result and clarifying its position in the changed Tunisian institutional context. The statement reads how the low turnout signals a clear democratic delegitimization of the results; fraud is highlighted and the impartiality of the final count is questioned; Saied's resignation and the immediate organization of new presidential and legislative elections are demanded. Even more relevant is the declaration of "adherence" to the 2014 constitutional charter (National Salvation Front, 2022). The latter is a position that, in the long run, risks creating a dual constitutional-institutional framework such that the anti-Saied opposition would not merely serve as an alternative political actor within a shared institutional framework, but would present itself as a real institutional alternative in the country, with its own bodies and rules.

International reactions include a harsh statement by the U.S. State Department which, while not sanctioning the constitutional referendum and Saied himself, speaks of a regression of Tunisian democracy and its weakening that may result from the post-July 25 constitutional-institutional environment (U.S. Department of State, 2022). In particular, concern is expressed about the low turnout, a symptom of weak democratic legitimacy of the new constitutional charter. Therefore, a return to a full democratic dialectic involving also opposition forces is called for ahead of the December legislative elections. A formulation that can be interpreted as a "loophole" aimed at not completely severing the dialogue with the Tunisian president – among other things, invited to participate in the U.S.-Africa summit organized by President Biden for December – that was also adopted by the European Union in its statement (Council of the European Union, 2022).

### **The new constitution: toward a hyper-presidential system**

On June 30, less than a month after the referendum, the constitutional draft, now in effect, was published, thus giving the electorate severely limited room to cast an "informed" vote. It should also be noted that although the commission charged with drafting the constitutional draft was presidentially appointed, Saied nonetheless made important "motu proprio" changes to the text fired by the commission before submitting it to referendum. So much so that he submitted a second draft after publishing a first constitutional draft in the official gazette. In all of what the chairman stated, the changes he personally made seem to have significantly changed the first version of the text. So much so that the chairman of the constitutional commission, Sadok Belaid, a presidential appointee, went so far as to declare the Saied-led drift "dangerous", which could pave the way toward a "dictatorial regime" (Al Jazeera, 2022e). Furthermore, it should also be noted that the entire constitutional amendment process did not follow the procedures legally required by the 2014 constitution in effect at the time. Any constitutional amendment, in fact, required a qualified majority of two-thirds of the MPs. A provision that was not met, considering the total marginalization of political parties represented in parliament, and the entrusting of the internal process to a presidentially appointed commission.

Overall, expectations have been confirmed, whereby the main change concerns the shift from a parliamentary system to a presidential system, or "hyper-presidential" as defined by some observers (Dworkin, 2022). Associated with this seems to be a strengthening of presidential



prerogatives and powers, and a weakening of the check and balances that were instead provided in the 2014 constitution. According to the new constitution, the president of the Republic holds executive power, assisted by the government and the prime minister (Article 87). The president has the power to appoint the prime minister and the government (Art. 101), to dissolve it (Art. 102) as well as propose bills (Art. 68). Parliament sees its legislative power limited, considering that the same article stipulates that presidential bills have “priority”. Parliament can propose bills but, at the same time, a two-thirds majority is required to block legislative initiatives launched by the president. In addition, the budget bill is submitted by the president and can only be ratified by parliament (Article 78). The parliamentary ability to scrutinize the government’s performance is also weakened. In fact, after two consecutive votes of no confidence in the government, the president has the power to dissolve parliament and call new elections (Art. 115-116). A second chamber, the National Council of Regions and Provinces, is established alongside the Assembly of People’s Representatives (Art. 81), turning the Tunisian parliament into a bicameral institution. The judiciary is in essence subjected to presidential control and the possibility of impeachment of the president disappears (Art. 120). Also concerning the presidential office, there is a clause for an unlimited extension of the term of office in the case of an “imminent danger” to the state (Art. 96). Deviating from the articles governing state powers, it is interesting to mention two other novelties. The first concerns the contraction of the right to strike, which is not provided for labor categories such as the judiciary, armed forces and security forces (Chapter II on “rights and freedoms”, Article 41). A ban that is newsworthy considering the ongoing battle between the president and the Tunisian judiciary, which, as mentioned above, has been on strike for several consecutive weeks. Second, the removal of the reference to Islam as the state religion from the first article of the constitution – present instead in the previous constitutional texts of independent Tunisia, from 1959 and 2014. This is a measure that Saied himself has advocated for years, as a professor of law, and thus should not be read as a mere attempt to marginalize Islamist political forces. Overall, according to his interpretation, religion should not be a legal constraint on state institutions but rather a higher constraint, defining the identity boundary of the nation. According to the provisions of the presidential decree calling the referendum, formally the new constitution came into effect the moment the results were announced.

## **Conclusion**

The constitutional referendum went according to expectations, opening a time frame of further political turbulence that will have as its landing point the legislative elections set for next December 17. At this stage, the main issue of contention will be the drafting of a new electoral law, through which President Saied also intends to bring the next round of elections (Aliriza, 2022) under his control. The main remaining question ahead of the legislative elections concerns whether or not the political parties that boycotted the July referendum, starting with Ennahda, will participate. Should these actors decide to continue with the “Aventine strategy” – as the points presented in the NSF statement seem to suggest – a “Libyan scenario” could materialize from early 2023, albeit limited to the political-institutional sphere. This would consist of the creation of two institutional-parallel entities unable to foster political dialectics within a common constitutional framework. On the other hand, currently it is unlikely to result in a military confrontation, given the absence of two conditions on the contrary prevalent in Libya: “horizontal” decentralization of military force and the active presence of foreign powers ready to advance their own agenda on the ground.

In the background remains the deep uncertainty over the socio-economic situation that has aggravated the condition of the Tunisian population in recent months. This is a terrain on which Saied is struggling to embark on a precise strategy, aware that any option selected would lead to an increase in popular discontent, at least in the short term. In particular, this is the case with any agreement with the International Monetary Fund, with which the Tunisian government has been

negotiating a new loan for some time now. The structural reforms demanded by the international organization are currently opposed by most Tunisian political and economic actors, starting with the powerful UGTT. Finally, it is necessary to monitor what direction will be taken by the growing opposition that the union is manifesting toward the president of the Republic, given its capacity for popular mobilization and its political clout. As demonstrated in the past, rather than individual political parties, it is precisely the trade union that could act as a needle in the balance of power in the North African country.

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## **The resumption of fighting in Tigray: Sudanese ambiguity and Afewerki's ambitions**

In the last week of August, fighting resumed after several months of truce between the Addis Ababa-based federal government and the authorities of the regional state of Tigray, represented by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). With international attention focused on the conflict in Ukraine, the many signs coming from Ethiopia indicating rising tension have gone almost unnoticed. Besides the deadlock in talks between the Ethiopian government and Tigrayan authorities, stalled over the choice of the mediator (African Union or Kenya), several clues had emerged since July regarding preparations for the outbreak of a new phase of the conflict. The conflict began in November 2020 and thus revived on August 24. A few days later, Eritrea, a major ally of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, decided to intervene militarily in the conflict. Behind Asmara's choice lie both tactical considerations determined by the protection of its southern borders and strategic assessments centered on the desire to consolidate the regime and appease the regional ambitions of its leader, Isaias Afewerki. The regional dimension of the conflict also involves Sudan, whose role in supporting Tigrayan forces remains ambiguous and partly undisclosed. Although the scenario remains very fluid and it looks complicated to make forecasts, it is possible to identify some features that will most likely differentiate the current conflict in Tigray from that of the past two years.

Although it is not yet clear whether it was the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) or the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) that broke the truce, it is also true that signs of tension had been present for quite some time. The low-intensity confrontations and skirmishes that characterized the summer months were attempts to gain control of strategic positions in preparation for a new conflict phase. The negotiations stalemate, stagnant for some time despite several mediation attempts by regional and extra-regional actors, has contributed to the rising tensions. However, it does not be considered the only factor. The worsening of the humanitarian crisis in Tigray has also contributed to the resurgence of warfare. Indeed, the northern regional state has suffered a condition of isolation and crisis since early 2021. The blockade imposed by the Ethiopian authorities on access routes to Tigray, only partially lifted with the cease-fire, has exacerbated the living conditions of the Tigrayan population. For nearly fifteen months now, Tigray has not only lacked drugs and essential goods, but water and electricity supplies have also been cut off, telecommunications blacked out, and all banking services suspended. From the Addis Ababa perspective, this state of siege was expected to lead the Tigrayan authorities to accept the peace terms or force them to launch a new offensive. The dramatic living conditions of the Tigrayan population made the negotiation collapse and the resumption of fighting inevitable. Similar to what happened in the summer of 2021, the operations of TDF in recent weeks are directed at breaking the isolation and securing new supply lines. For this reason, the battles have focused on two areas: the northern provinces of the Amhara regional state and the territories of western Tigray. The TDF's breakthrough into Amhara territory has both political and strategic significance. Politically, Tigrayan authorities have wanted to strike the main domestic ally of the Abiy Ahmed-led executive. The Amhara, the second largest ethnic group in the country, has gone through a period of growing internal tensions in recent months that have led to a series of arrests against the nationalist wings, who were less willing to accept the prime minister's choice to enter into negotiations with the TPLF. Strategically, on the other hand, the TDF's choice meets a twofold objective. On the one hand, the advance into the heart of Amhara state has forced regional militias, including the paramilitary group Fano, to abandon their positions in western Tigray to

reorganize the defenses of the main Amhara towns. On the other hand, Tigrayan forces have seized some critical crossroads through which the country's two main infrastructural arteries - north/south and west/east - run. These crossroads are vital in cutting the supply lines between ENDF and Amhara militias. Over the mid-term, however, the main Tigray goal remains the liberation of western Tigray districts occupied by ENDF contingents, Fano militias, and some units of the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF). Regaining control of the western parts of the regional state would have vital symbolic significance for the TPLF. Furthermore, from the Western Tigray, the Tigrayan authorities would guarantee a supply route with the neighboring eastern region of Sudan (Kassala). Ethiopia and Sudan have an open dispute over the complicated Nile issue. Over the past two years, Addis Abeba has accused Khartoum of supporting Tigrayan forces. During the earliest days of the conflict, the Ethiopian federal government released frames of a Sudanese cargo plane shot down over Tigrayan territory. According to Ethiopian officials, the Sudanese Antonov AN-26 was used to supply ammunition to TDF troops. Although doubts remain about the truthfulness of the statements made by the Ethiopian authorities, several sources testify that Khartoum has protected more than five hundred Ethiopian soldiers of Tigrayan ethnicity. These soldiers have remained on Sudanese soil after participating in a peacekeeping mission in the Abyei region, disputed by Sudan and South Sudan, under the auspices of the United Nations. In April, the soldiers requested political asylum in Sudan, fearing persecution upon their return to Ethiopia as Tigrayans. In recent weeks, however, it does seem that the five hundred military officers have entered Tigray by crossing the Sudanese border with logistical support from the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). While Sudan's role in the conflict remains ambiguous, Eritrea's does not. A week after the resumption of fighting, Eritrea decided to intervene by launching a large-scale offensive in the Adayabo area along Tigray's northern border. In the past few months, the Eritrean army had strengthened its positions by increasing troops along the border. Concurrently, President Isaias Afewerki sought to create the political conditions for a new operation. The Eritrean government had intensified relations with some Sudanese tribal leaders, mostly belonging to the Arab Beja clan, to persuade them to take a hostile attitude toward the Tigrayans. In other words, Eritrea wanted to ensure that the TPLF was politically and militarily isolated. While the Eritrean president's effort did not pay off as hoped, it is nonetheless indicative of how Afewerki tries to act as a demiurge of regional political balances. From 2018 to date, Afewerki has successfully rebalanced relations with Addis Ababa from a powerful position. Nowadays, the Eritrean president is trying to take advantage of the Sudanese moment of internal instability and the complicated Kenyan political transition to carve out a leading role for himself in the Horn of Africa's political affairs. Afewerki's ambition is driven by the need to ensure the survival of the regime and the belief that he is currently the strong man in the region.

Regardless of the outcome of the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia is drifting into a spiral of widespread violence from which it risks becoming fragmented and irreparably weakened. The decline of Addis Ababa, the failed hegemon of the Horn of Africa, means new and important room for maneuver for Asmara and its leader. In Afewerki's ambitious project, the Tigrayans, his primary opponents since 1993, remain an obstacle that, from the Eritrean president's view, can be permanently mitigated by a new conflict. For this reason, confronted with the weakness of the ENDF and allied regional militias, the EDF may likely decide to conduct the conflict in Tigray entirely independently from Addis Ababa.

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## Samarkand and the new multipolar order. Is the West still the navel of the world?

### Introduction

On 15-16 September 2022, the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) took place in Samarkand. Founded in 2001, the SCO has eight permanent members (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan; Iran started<sup>1</sup> the procedure for membership in 2021 and will probably be granted it in 2023), while Afghanistan, Belarus and Mongolia have observer status, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka are partner countries. The Uzbek President announced the procedure for the accession of Belarus<sup>2</sup> as well and welcomed the signing of a memorandum on granting dialogue partner status to Egypt and Qatar with similar status for Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, the Maldives and Myanmar<sup>3</sup>.

The summit was the first face-to-face meeting of the leaders of the participating countries in three years, due to the coronavirus pandemic. During this time, the organisation has expanded considerably. Thus, the recent meeting became the most representative in all the organisation's years of existence. The leaders of 15 countries were present (Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan withdrew at the last minute due to the escalating situation on the border with Azerbaijan), including Chinese President Xi Jinping, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as guest of honour.

As a result of the meeting, the Samarkand Declaration<sup>4</sup> was adopted, in which the SCO leaders highlighted how the contemporary world is undergoing global changes, entering a new era of rapid development and large-scale transformations. At the same time, the document reported that crises and conflicts in the world are increasing and, in this context, the member states *"reaffirm their commitment to the formation of the most representative, democratic, equitable and multipolar world order possible"*. The SCO members agreed to strengthen security and jointly combat terrorism, and they promised to intensify their efforts to ensure peace and security by *"supporting the resolution of international and regional conflicts exclusively by peaceful political and diplomatic means"*.

The SCO was originally created to protect the borders of member countries and to fight terrorism, but is now paying increasing attention to economic issues that have become particularly relevant following the sanctions imposed on Russia by Western countries after the launch of a special operation in Ukraine. The Samarkand Declaration enshrined the idea promoted by Russia in recent years about settlements in national currencies and the need to develop logistical supply chains for goods.

### The importance of bilateralism

With all due preamble, the main focus of the Samarkand summit was undoubtedly on bilateral meetings, in particular the talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, the first since the start of the special operation in Ukraine. China takes an intermediate stance on the Ukrainian conflict: while on the one hand, it does not declare support for Russia's actions; on the other hand, it refuses to adhere to Western sanctions and continues to develop an economic cooperation with

<sup>1</sup> Иран официально вступил в ШОС. Иран подписал меморандум о вступлении в Шанхайскую организацию сотрудничества. 15.09.2022 <https://iz.ru/1395690/2022-09-15/iran-oficialno-vstupil-v-shos>

<sup>2</sup> Выступление Президента Беларуси Александра Лукашенко на заседании Совета глав государств - членов ШОС, 16.09.2022 <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/zasedanie-soveta-glav-gosudarstv-chlenov-shanhayskoy-organizacii-sotrudnichestva-1663311323>

<sup>3</sup> ШОС рассмотрит заявку Мьянмы на получение статуса партнера по диалогу. 13.09.2022 <https://iz.ru/1394535/2022-09-13/shos-rassmotrit-zaiavku-mianmy-na-poluchenie-statusa-partnera-po-dialogu>

<sup>4</sup> Disponibile anche in lingua inglese sul sito ufficiale <http://eng.sectesco.org/documents/>

Moscow. This cooperation is fruitful both in terms of exporting energy resources and importing a wide range of products/goods especially for Russia, since it can no longer buy in Europe or the US (e.g. high-tech products).

The meeting of the two leaders was preceded by a statement by the Russian Ministry of Defence on the withdrawal of troops from the Izjumsko-Balaklija direction in the DPR territory. The conflict in Ukraine worries China because in the event of a military failure, Moscow would be weakened, leaving room for Washington, which could concentrate more on confronting Beijing. Another factor is the economic one: China cannot openly support Russia, as this could make it a target for Western sanctions.

At the beginning of the meeting with Xi Jinping, Putin thanked him for the “balanced position” on the Ukrainian crisis. *“We understand your questions and concerns on this issue and during today's meeting, of course, we will explain in detail our position on this issue, although we have talked about it before,”* the Russian leader added. Putin also expressed support for Beijing on the issue of partially recognised Taiwan<sup>5</sup>, which China considers part of its territory. Xi Jinping at the same time refrained from mentioning either topic during the start of the talks, but called Putin “my dear friend”. Commenting on the talks, Putin told reporters that *“it was, in fact, our usual ordinary meeting”*.

Putin's talks with the Turkish leader<sup>6</sup> also attracted attention. The Russian president signalled his intention to review the direction of grain exports from Ukraine within the framework of the agreements reached between the countries with the participation of Turkey and the UN. According to Putin, the wheat agreement was concluded under the pretext of the need to export wheat to developing countries, but in reality, only 3% of Ukrainian products are exported in this direction. Putin, however, did not mention this issue when he spoke at the beginning of the meeting about the progress of the agreement. However, he thanked the Turkish leader for his contribution to the implementation of the agreement and he said that Russia had been informed about the possibility of exporting its agricultural products with Ankara's help. *“Turkey is a reliable partner in this regard and will be able to guarantee certain deliveries through its territory, to all countries of the world, including countries in Asia, Latin America, Africa”*. Putin also highlighted the functionality of Russian energy supplies through Turkey, announcing an agreement to pay 25% of the cost of Russian gas supplies to Turkey in roubles.

Putin's meeting with the president of Azerbaijan took place immediately after the talks with Erdoğan. At the beginning of the negotiations with Putin, Aliyev thanked him *“for the prompt response to the escalation in the Armenian-Azerbaijani border area”*, fortunately, the clashes lasted less than eight hours, and the fact that they stopped almost immediately indicates that there was no intention of a large-scale escalation of the conflict. Later, at a press conference, Putin told reporters that *“first of all, under Russia's influence, this conflict was localized”* since *“[...] in this situation, one of the key tasks of the SCO is to promote political and diplomatic solution of conflicts along the perimeter of the external borders, including Afghanistan”*, Vladimir Putin said. Indeed, Afghanistan was much talked about in Samarkand.

At the same time, the escalation between the two SCO members Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan<sup>7</sup>, which degenerated on the night of 16 September into serious clashes with casualties and injuries, seemed to be ignored by most. The two presidents, Sadyr Japarov and Emomali Rahmon, who are also allies of the CSTO, were sitting at the same table discussing mainly the recognition of the SCO outside of the Eurasian continent, and the importance of security cooperation, in particular, in relation to the aforementioned Afghanistan. In truth, the leaders had already agreed in a private meeting on

<sup>5</sup> In August, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi made an official visit to the island despite protests from mainland China, to which Beijing responded with days-long naval exercises.

<sup>6</sup> **Встреча с Президентом Турции Реджепом Тайипом Эрдоганом. В Самарканде прошли переговоры Владимира Путина с Президентом Турецкой Республики Реджепом Тайипом Эрдоганом. 16.09.2022** <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69364>

<sup>7</sup> **Союзники по ШОС открыли залповый огонь. Киргизия и Таджикистан оказались на грани войны. Kommersant** 16.09.2022 **Союзники по ШОС открыли залповый огонь – Мир – Коммерсантъ** ([kommersant.ru](http://kommersant.ru))

the withdrawal of additional forces. Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin assured in his speech that Russia supports the cooperation of all countries with the SCO, because it is in this organisation that interaction is based on selfless approaches. Which, as can be seen from the speech, cannot be said of other “participants in economic cooperation” who use *“instruments of protectionism, illegal sanctions and economic selfishness for their own purposes”* while *“[...] a vivid example of this selfishness is the European Commission’s decision to lift sanctions on Russian fertilisers. We know how important fertilisers are in solving the food problem. Of course, we welcome the same decision to lift the sanctions. However, it turns out that these sanctions, according to the European Commission’s clarification of 10 September this year, were only lifted for EU member states. It turns out that only they can buy our fertilisers. But what about the developing and poorest countries of the world?”*. The Russian leader informed UN Secretary General António Guterres about 300 thousand tonnes of Russian fertilisers stockpiled in the ports of EU countries: *“We are ready to transfer them to developing countries free of charge”*, Vladimir Putin assured.

### **A summit in the shadow of conflicts**

On the eve of the summit between Armenia and Azerbaijan, dialogue partners of the SCO, there was an escalation of the conflict between the two countries. As mentioned earlier, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan cancelled his visit, in contrast, the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, built his speech on the conflict between Yerevan and Baku during one of the meetings in Samarkand. According to him, there was a “large-scale provocation” on the border with Armenia, which dealt a ‘blow to the peace process’. However, the president of Azerbaijan assured that work on a draft of a peaceful agreement between the republics should continue; perhaps the absence of Prime Minister Pashinyan saved the general atmosphere from the cooperation of those present in the courtroom. After all, since the leaders of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan did not resolve things publicly, disagreements between Yerevan and Baku were the only threat to internal peace.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict was also the subject of discussion during bilateral talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin with Ilham Aliyev and, later, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Although the situation remains tense, Putin reiterated his satisfaction at stopping the escalation. At the same time, the Russian president spoke on Friday about another conflict: the one with Ukraine. During the bilateral meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi<sup>8</sup>, it emerged that not only Xi Jinping has questions and concerns about the Ukrainian situation: *‘I know your position on the conflict in Ukraine and the concerns you constantly express’*, Vladimir Putin said after remarks on the active development of relations with India. *“We will do everything to ensure that the conflict ends as soon as possible. Only, unfortunately, the other side, the leadership of Ukraine, has announced its refusal from the negotiation process, declaring that it wants to achieve its goals by military means, as they say, “on the battlefield. [...] However, we will always keep you informed about what is happening”*, the President of the Russian Federation explained to the Indian Prime Minister the prospects for a political and diplomatic solution to the conflict. Narendra Modi reiterated that: *“I know that now is not the era of wars. We have talked about it many times, particularly in our telephone conversations. Democracy, diplomacy, dialogue – these are important tools for us to find solutions. It is necessary to achieve peace in the future”*.

Vladimir Putin spoke again about Ukraine already during the press conference with journalists, stating that the first condition for negotiations with Kiev is Ukraine's consent to dialogue, a condition which seems to be absent at the moment. The president assured that Russia's plans remain unchanged and are being implemented, despite the Ukrainian army's counter-offensive. *“Our offensive*

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<sup>8</sup> Встреча с Премьер-министром Индии Нарендрой Модой. В Самарканде по окончании саммита ШОС состоялась встреча Владимира Путина с Премьер-министром Республики Индия Нарендрой Модой. 16.09.2022 <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69362>

*operation in the Donbas is not stopping, it is proceeding at a slow pace, but gradually, the Russian army is occupying more and more new territories".*

## **Conclusions**

Although the summit was almost totally ignored by the Western media, it is one of the most important events of the past year, both in view of the regional and global situation. Indeed, the meeting reaffirms the Russian Federation's inexorable estrangement from the West, with all that this may imply in terms of the cessation of economic, energy, but also diplomatic relations, redirected elsewhere.

This involves the creation not only of new geopolitical balances that will see a more united – and stronger – Eurasia economically, but also, as Putin himself said in his press conference on 16 September: *"Fundamental transformations have taken place in world politics and the world economy and they are irreversible"*<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Пресс-конференция по итогам визита в Узбекистан. В завершение визита в Узбекистан Владимир Путин ответил на вопросы представителей СМИ. 16.09.2022 <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69366>

## **Qatar: international role and *soft power***

While regional and international insecurities pose challenges to Qatar as a small state, the intelligent Doha diplomacy built up in recent years has turned challenges into new opportunities<sup>1</sup>.

In February 2022, the Qatar' Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, was the first Gulf leader to meet with President Biden since he took office. Recognizing the key role of Qatar's diplomacy and security at the regional and international level, President Biden announced at that meeting the designation of Qatar as Major Non NATO Ally.

Three months later, Sheikh Tamim visited several countries<sup>2</sup> – Iran, Turkey, Slovenia, Spain, Germany, Great Britain, France, Switzerland - in conjunction with two critical developments: the stalled negotiations between Iran and the United States regarding the JCPOA nuclear deal and Russia's conditioning on energy resources, in particular gas, towards European countries following the conflict in Ukraine.

Qatar's reputation as a rational, impartial and reliable partner has strengthened its role in the international arena. Doha's diplomatic activity and international prestige are supported by active foreign policy, financial influence, security ties, hydrocarbon leverage, media outreach and a genuine interest in promoting stability and security in the region and beyond.

These factors have made Qatar's diplomatic commitment essential with its role of mediation and reconciliation in the international arena. Over the past two years, Qatar has taken on more and more critical tasks related to political, diplomatic, economic and security domains in the region and beyond. Following the 2021 al-Ula agreement – which ended the diplomatic breakup with other GCC countries that began in 2017 – Doha expressed its readiness to play a mediating role between the GCC and Iran on the one hand, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey on the other<sup>3</sup>.

Qatar continued also its long tradition as mediator in Africa. Following its efforts in the peace agreement between the Sudanese transitional government and the armed movements, Doha assumed mediation roles in 2021 and 2022 between Somalia, Kenya and Somali factions, as well as with the transitional government of Chad and Chad rebels. Qatar's role in Afghanistan before, during and after the US withdrawal from the country, in particular, serves as an excellent case study of Doha's crucial role<sup>4</sup>.

Currently, Qatar is focusing on relaunching negotiations between Iran and the United States on the nuclear deal. The JCPOA is of great importance to Washington, Tehran and the region. The critical value of this agreement has increased with the onset of the Ukrainian crisis. In the event of a reactivation of the JCPOA, the agreement will facilitate the return of Iranian oil and gas to the international market, thus contributing to market stabilization efforts, preventing further price increases and weakening Russia's ability to use energy resources against the West<sup>5</sup>.

Initially, Israel and several Gulf countries, primarily Saudi Arabia, opposed this agreement by complaining that the agreement did not change Tehran's regional behaviour. Several regional actors

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<sup>1</sup> A. Bakir, "Qatar's indispensable role for international security", MENA Affairs, 20 June 2022; <https://menaaffairs.com/qatars-indispensable-role-for-international-security/>.

<sup>2</sup> A. L. Jacobs, "Qatar Diplomacy Spotlights Active Role in Global Security", The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 24 May 2022; <https://agsiw.org/qatar-diplomacy-spotlights-active-role-in-global-security/>.

<sup>3</sup> Chatham House, "Qatar's regional and international role", 16 february 2022; <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/members-event/qatars-regional-and-international-role>.

<sup>4</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "A Conversation With Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani of Qatar", September 23, 2021; <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-foreign-minister-sheikh-mohammed-bin-abdulrahman-al-thani-qatar>.

<sup>5</sup> ISPI, "Iran Deal: From "Close to Revive" to "Close to Stalling"?", 08 September 2022; <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/iran-deal-close-revive-close-stalling-36086>.

fear that reactivating the agreement will increase Iran's influence in the region and strengthen its regional agenda. However, the no-deal scenario is no less problematic as it would encourage a nuclear arms race among regional players.

Parallel to the growing interest of international powers in Doha's role in relaunching the JCPOA talks, Qatar's ability as a leading LNG player in the international energy market has emphasized its possible role in the energy security sector in Europe and in Italy<sup>6</sup> in the aftermath of the conflict in Ukraine. Qatar, world LNG leading exporter, secured around 24% of total LNG imports to Europe in 2021. Most of Doha's energy exports are directed to East Asian markets through long-term contracts, limiting its manoeuvrability to increase quotas to Western countries. Despite this, Qatar has a vital role to play in Europe's energy security and diversification strategy.

In addition, the 2022 FIFA World Cup, which will start in November, has become a diplomatic opportunity with security agreements<sup>7</sup> and diplomatic upsurge towards Israel<sup>8</sup>.

Qatar's commitment to pursue its pivotal role at regional and international level - in the areas of conflict resolution, security, energy and humanitarian aid<sup>9</sup> - will strengthen its role far beyond the mere physical dimension, having already proved on several occasions how soft power and the strategy of diplomatic independence have in the long term prevailed over its neighbours attempts to reduce it.

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<sup>6</sup> ENI, "Eni entra nel più grande progetto al mondo di GNL in Qatar", 19 giugno 2022; <https://www.eni.com/it-IT/media/comunicati-stampa/2022/06/eni-entra-grande-progetto-gnl-qatar.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Ministero della Difesa, "COVI: firmato il Technical Arrangement tra Italia e Qatar per FIFA2022", 25 agosto 2022; [https://www.difesa.it/SMD/\\_Eventi/Pagine/COVI\\_firmato\\_il\\_Technical\\_Arrangement\\_tra\\_Italia\\_e\\_Qatar\\_per\\_FIFA2022.aspx](https://www.difesa.it/SMD/_Eventi/Pagine/COVI_firmato_il_Technical_Arrangement_tra_Italia_e_Qatar_per_FIFA2022.aspx).

<sup>8</sup> F. Salari, "Qatar pushes Israel to allow Palestinians to attend World Cup 2022: report", DohaNews, September 11, 2022: "Qatar has remained vocal in its criticism of Israeli aggression against Palestinians, repeatedly expressing its staunch refusal to normalise with Israel."; <https://dohanews.co/qatar-pushes-israel-to-allow-palestinians-to-attend-world-cup-2022-report/>.

<sup>9</sup> Gulf International Forum, "Qatar's Growing Role as a Humanitarian and Diplomatic Hub", March 14, 2022; <https://gulfif.org/qatars-growing-role-as-a-humanitarian-and-diplomatic-hub/>.

**The death of Elizabeth II: a critical passage in British political life**

The death of Queen Elizabeth II (1926-2022) happened at a critical juncture in British political and institutional life. A few days earlier, she had dismissed the former Prime Minister, the conservative leader Boris Johnson, and appointed his successor, the former Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, after two months of a *de facto* power vacuum. Elected to assume the heritage of the man that, after the 2016 referendum, had led Britain out of the European Union, Truss is, nonetheless, the product of a deeply divided party: a large share of it (42.6 per cent) voted, in the last ballot, her rival, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak. In the international realm, Great Britain is the European country more actively supporting the Ukraine government in its war against Russia. However, this role exposes it to Moscow's attacks. Moreover, if, on the one hand, it strengthens London's "special relationship" with the United States, it also contributes to distance it from the more "dialoguing" EU countries. On the domestic front, the Northern Ireland Protocol (which, after Brexit, regulates the trade intercourses between London and Dublin) remains a source of tension with Irish and European authorities (O'Carroll, 2022), while the issue of Scotland's independence seems to resurface. In the past weeks, the Scottish Prime Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, mentioned the possibility of holding a new referendum in October 2023 and warned the premier not to gerrymander its rules (Weaver, 2022). In the background, while it is still uncertain whether and when the new Prime Minister will call for general elections, the problems that, to different degrees, have affected European countries in the last months remain. Among else, inflation in July topped 8.8% on a year-on-year basis (in July 2021, it was 2.1%)<sup>1</sup>, while energy prices, which have steadily grown during the last months, are deemed to further increase all over 2023 (Bolton and Stewart, 2022).

The Queen's death adds further complexity to these tangled problems. At the institutional level, there has been no breach in the dynastic continuity, with King Charles III formally ascending the throne at the moment of his mother's death. On the other hand, the King's actual worth is still to assess. In her seventy-year-long reign, Elizabeth (the most long-lived among the British monarchs) was a crucial element in Britain's political balance, «ke[eping] the crown above party politics, but [...] always fully engaged with the political world» (Lang, 2022). The popularity she enjoyed (but for some short periods) allowed her to effectively manage such a position, despite disagreeing with some cabinets' views and lacking personal alchemy with some of their leaders. Politically neutral due to her role as a constitutional monarch, Elizabeth also actively exerted her power to «advise and warn» ministers whenever deemed expedient, thus endowing the Crown with a discreet but influential role in steering the Cabinets' action. Finally, as monarch of fourteen Commonwealth realms and Head of an organisation that currently includes fifty-four countries plus the United Kingdom, Elizabeth actively supported London's international role. She did so from a symbolic perspective, as the embodiment of the "imperial unity", but also from a more practical perspective, with the network of relations she created and maintained during her state visits and other official engagements. Once again, it is largely a matter of soft power. However, the length of her reign and the many tours she had between her ascent to the throne in 1952 and 2015, the year of her last travel abroad, ensured that, under Elizabeth's subterranean influence, the role of the British sovereign as Head of the Commonwealth progressively gained more substantial value (Murphy, 2013).

The question is whether Charles III will be able to replace his mother in this complex web of domestic and international interactions. The new King's popularity cannot be compared to Elizabeth's one. The Queen, behind her political and institutional role, was able to impose herself as

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/timeseries/l55o/mm23> (accessed: 9 September 2022).

a “pop icon” at home and abroad: a move that boosted her image. The postures that the Prince of Wales openly assumed in the past, e.g., on the environment and the environmental policies, are another source of perplexity among the observers, especially if compared to the low profile that his mother typically sported on every “politically sensitive” issue. In the first comments, the press repeatedly stressed – with somehow negative undertones – these aspects of Charles’ personality. These same aspects seem destined – in the coming months – to fuel a new debate on the British monarchy’s future<sup>2</sup>, especially if one considers that the Queen’s death happened at a moment when – despite the Platinum Jubilee – the monarchy itself entered one of its many times of crisis (Langfitt, 2022). The challenge is one that the Crown already faces, viz relaunching its image, to keep up with the times without affecting its traditional foundations. However, Britain’s situation and the need for the Truss cabinet to deal with it make the task particularly difficult. Under Elizabeth, a mutual support policy could be defined between Downing Street and Buckingham Palace; today, the relative weakness of the two parties makes the possibility more fragile. As some authors noted, Charles’ actions will be carefully monitored for quite a long time (Neumann, 2022), but this is also true for the new Prime Minister: a state of things that makes it difficult for both of them to act one as the support of the other with the authority and credibility the situation requires.

### **Final remarks**

The chronological coincidence of the Queen’s death with the inauguration of the Truss cabinet opens a period of institutional realignment whose impacts could be relevant in the medium-to-long term. Soon after her appointment, the Prime Minister announced her will to tackle the energy price problem with an aggressive price cap strategy. However, her proposal was widely criticised (Ward-Glenton, 2022), confirming the intractable nature of the issues facing Britain and the other European countries, but, at the same time, the potential weakness of Liz Truss’ political position. Truss’ arrival at Downing Street will probably also force the Labour Party to revise its parliamentary strategies, making them more effective. The new Prime Minister is more ideologically stiff than her predecessor and sports arch-liberal economic positions that could strengthen the Labour’s positions and favour their political proposal (Walker, 2022). The consequence could be greater political polarisation and growing coldness in London’s relations with the European Union. Some signs of this coldness seem already evident (Adelr, 2022). Against the backdrop of a transforming monarchy, such developments could have more significant consequences than expected and evolve into an important testbed for the new King. As Prince of Wales, Charles III repeatedly expressed his will to reform the monarchic institution. His stated ambitions were to transform its formal, more “external” aspects along the lines of a “lighter” and “cheaper” establishment. However, the Prince also affirmed his will to revise how the sovereign’s function was conceived, partly distancing from the model his mother followed during her reign (Ryner, 2022). Today, Britain’s political and institutional situation provides the opportunity to test if these projects are feasible and the occasion to relaunch the image of a King who will have to struggle to shake off his predecessor’s cumbersome heritage.

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<sup>2</sup> King Charles III: Who is the UK’s new monarch?. *Euronews*, 8 September. Online: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/09/08/king-charles-iii-who-is-the-uks-new-monarch> (accessed: 9 September 2022).



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### **ENI's energy interests in Cyprus: hydrocarbons and problems to access on regional and international markets**

On 22 August the Italian energy company ENI announced an important gas discovery in the territorial waters of the Cyprus island. After drilling in the Cronos-1 well (the second well drilled in block 6 granted by the Nicosia authorities to ENI and the French company TotalEnergies), ENI has discovered natural gas reserves of 70 billion cubic meters (bcm). For the Italian company this is the second important gas discovery in Cypriot waters, after Calypso field in 2018, discoveries which therefore confirm the economic and commercial attractiveness of the Cypriot offshore reserves, where ENI operates since 2013 (ENI, 2022). ENI has undertaken an effective strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean, as it has been able to move in time foreseeing the existent enormous potential of hydrocarbons, and having the know-how and the suitable technology to successfully proceed with the exploitation of offshore reserves. Following the agreements with the Nicosia government, the Italian company operates blocks 2, 3, 6, 8 and 9, and holds stakes in blocks 7 and 11 operated by TotalEnergies.

Cronos-1 and Calypso's discoveries appear to confirm ENI's predictions in relation to the potential of Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The hydrocarbon reserves contained in the subsoil constitute an extension of the Zohr giant gas field (with offshore gas reserves estimated at 850 bcm, the largest field in the eastern Mediterranean), which was discovered by the Italian company in Egyptian territorial waters in 2015, and productively operational since 2017 (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2022). Overall, the Eastern Mediterranean could contain natural gas reserves of at least 10,000 bcm, and within it the Levant basin (an area that includes Cyprus, Israel, Lebanon) would have reserves of nearly 3,400 bcm. These estimates appear realistic considering that the natural gas reserves discovered in the territorial waters of Israel and Cyprus exceed 1,300 bcm (EIA, 2013; Indeo, 2021). Although the potential reserves located in the Cypriot offshore are still largely untapped, since 2011 the international energy companies have discovered within the island's EEZ the Aphrodite field (with reserves estimated at 129 bcm), then Glaucus-1 (with reserves which oscillate between 142 and 227 bcm) and now the two findings of ENI. This discovery assumes strategic importance in the current scenario of uncertainty and vulnerability, which characterizes the EU's energy sector following the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In fact, it strengthens the role that Cyprus – and in general the gas reserves present in the Eastern Mediterranean – can play to strengthen the EU energy security, providing regular supplies of natural gas from European producers (as in the case of Cyprus) and in any case geographically close to the EU, as in the case of Egypt and Israel. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the Italian press - at least initially – described Eni's discovery with excessive emphasis, defining Cronos-1 as a mega-field or as one of the most significant finds of recent years. In fact, even considering the relevance and the future importance of Cronos-1, its reserves (70 bcm) are not comparable with other offshore fields discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean such as Zohr (reserves estimated at 850 bcm), or the Leviathan (605 bcm) and Tamar (307 bcm) fields in Israeli territorial waters.

The scenario of traditional geopolitical conflict between Cyprus and Turkey particularly complicates the plans of ENI (and of the other international energy companies involved, such as TotalEnergies, ExxonMobil, the South Korean Kogas) for the full development and exploitation of the offshore fields.

Given the permanent division of the island between the Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), the government of Ankara considers illegal any energy exploration activity conducted in Cypriot territorial waters by the Nicosia government. The Turkish

part is substantially excluded from economic benefits and revenues, while TRNC also claims sovereignty rights over some stretches of sea included in the Nicosia's EEZ. In 2019, a Turkish exploration ship (escorted by warships) carried out exploration and drilling activities in block 7 – where the Nicosia government granted a joint exploration license to Eni and Total. Furthermore, a year earlier the Saipem 12000 ship was intercepted by the Turkish navy and forced to leave the Cypriot territorial waters, where it intended to carry out exploration activities in block 3 (Caffio, 2019). This rivalry with Turkey heavily influences the feasibility of export corridors which could deliver Cypriot gas both to the regional and international markets. Some years ago, the option of building a LNG (liquefied natural gas) terminal in Vasilikos – on the southern coast of the island – was seriously considered, as a regional energy terminal aimed at collecting the Aphrodite field's production and volumes of gas from Israeli offshore fields. However, this kind of infrastructure is economically sustainable (in terms of investments) only with a high capacity to process and deliver gas to the markets (over 10 bcm per year), in addition to the fact that ten years ago – as well as today – Cypriot gas production is not sufficient to support a project of this size (Tagliapietra, 2016).

In 2018 Egypt and Cyprus signed an agreement for the construction of an underwater gas pipeline (1 billion dollars of estimated cost) which should connect the Aphrodite field to the Egyptian liquefaction terminals of Idku and Damietta - which have an overall processing capacity of over 15 bcm per year – by 2024-2025 (Al Monitor, 2020). It should be noted that ENI – which holds shares in the company Seagas, owner of the Damietta terminal - has an interest to further increase operations in the Egyptian LNG terminal, which was put back into operation by the Italian company in 2021 after 10 years of inactivity. Indeed, in the next years, Damietta terminal could also export the gas extracted from Zohr by the international consortium which operates the Shorouk concession, in which ENI holds 50% of the shares.

The adhesion of Cyprus to the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum shows the willingness of the Nicosia government to actively contribute to the creation of a regional gas market, promoting collaboration and dialogue between production areas and consumer markets. As a member state of the EU, Cyprus intends to play a leading role in strengthening the European energy security condition through a diversification of supplies also based on hydrocarbons from the Levant basin. In this perspective, future natural gas supplies extracted in the Eastern Mediterranean will be shipped through a different (and alternative) corridor compared to the southern energy corridor, which currently transports only Azerbaijani gas but which in the future could also transport supplies from the Central Asian republics or from the Middle East.

In 2020, Cyprus signed an agreement with Israel and Greece for the construction of the Eastmed gas pipeline. It should transport 9-12 bcm of gas per year extracted from the Cypriot and Israeli fields to Italy (through the Poseidon underwater gas pipeline, which should connect Greece and Apulia region under the Adriatic Sea) and the European markets crossing Crete and Greece. In reality, this project has only recently been revitalized – due to the energy crisis linked to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine - as the US decision to terminate diplomatic and economic support for the construction of the infrastructure seemed to have decreed the definitive abandonment of the project.

In conclusion, Cyprus' possibility to export its natural gas production to the international markets strongly depends on a desirable compromise with the positions expressed by Turkey. Undoubtedly, the project of an underwater gas pipeline allowing the export of Cypriot gas through the Egyptian LNG terminals appears to be the most realistic option. In fact, this solution would not be affected (unlike the Eastmed pipeline) by the effects of the 2019 bilateral agreement between Turkey and Libya for the definition of an exclusive economic zone, although this is not recognized by the international community.

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## **The debate on the role of drones in contemporary armed conflicts**

### **Drones in modern conflicts**

Over the past two decades, drones have become an increasingly present and an increasingly relevant element in armed conflicts. Recent examples of their wide application include the Syrian civil war, the Libyan civil war, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the current war in Ukraine.

Drones, technically called unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), unmanned aircraft systems (UASs) or also remotely piloted aircrafts (RPAs), are means that fly without a human pilot and, unlike rockets and missiles, can perform landings and make repeated flights. The tasks that these aircraft can perform on the battlefield are manifold and range from surveillance and reconnaissance to real combat. Among the advantages they offer, in addition to the fact of not exposing a pilot to the risk of being killed or captured, there is the benefit of being able to keep the vehicle in flight even for many hours, making it possible for the operators who control it alternate remotely.

The spread of military drones has fueled a wide debate among scholars and experts. In addition to the reflections on the legal and ethical aspects of their use, the discussion of their actual influence in military affairs is particularly salient.

### **The effects of the use of drones on armed conflicts**

According to many observers, the increasing use of UAVs has the effect of significantly altering the nature and evolution of modern conflicts. Some experts have gone so far as to argue that their spread is even capable of directly “revolutionizing” war and indirectly even international politics.

Those who emphasize the profound influence of UAVs in contemporary armed conflicts point to at least three major effects of their use (cf. Calcara et al. 2020). First, today the low cost and the unsophisticated technological level of numerous drone models determine a low “entry barrier” for their acquisition and use by States and also by non-state actors, including even terrorist groups (among others, Grossman 2018; Marone 2018). This fact would reduce the military asymmetry between the parties to the conflict, favoring the party that is weaker and has fewer resources. Secondly, by virtue of their small size and other technical characteristics, military drones would be able to penetrate enemy air defense systems more easily and thus they would favor military operations of an offensive nature. Third, drones, by making long-range precision strikes more accessible, would even have the effect of eliminating or at least reducing the weight of close combat on the battlefield and of ground military operations.

### **The limits of the use of drones**

On the other hand, some scholars have downplayed the influence of the use of drones in contemporary armed conflicts. In particular, in a recent study, Calcara and colleagues argued that the increasing use of drones does not lead to a “revolution” in military affairs (Calcara et al. 2022).

That is because, according to these authors, the spread of drones probably: 1) does not significantly reduce the asymmetries of military power between the parties to the conflict, since the effective use of these technological means still requires extensive and complex military resources and assets and highly trained personnel; 2) it is not able to alter the so-called offence/defense balance in favor of the former, also because there remains a vulnerability to air defense systems; 3) it cannot reduce the weight of close combat because ground forces retain the opportunity to hide, especially in urban environments.

### **The case of the current war in Ukraine**

In the current war in Ukraine, unleashed by the Russian Federation on February 24, 2022, both the parties are making extensive use of drones, including commercial models, especially to identify enemy targets and to accurately direct artillery fire (among others, Kallenborn 2022).

The Ukrainian armed forces have been particularly successful in this deployment, using indirect fire to compensate for their disparity in terms of artillery and tanks compared to Russia. Kyiv has also deployed drones for offensive operations. The well-known Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 UAVs, that Ukraine has purchased since 2019 (among others, Kahn 2022), have been particularly useful; the use of these combat drones has attracted considerable attention and has also been widely publicized by the Ukrainian side, producing a sort of “Bayraktar mythology” (Winkie 2022).

In addition, especially in recent months, Ukrainians have also made resort to commercial models, less expensive, but also less powerful (BBC 2022), continuously experimenting with new technical measures (for example, Kramer 2022).

### **Conclusions**

Drones have become an increasingly visible and relevant element of armed conflicts. Nevertheless, there is currently no agreement among scholars on their actual effectiveness. If, on the one hand, some experts have emphasized their large potential, on the other hand, other specialists have argued that they alone are not able to “revolutionize” war, much less international politics. The case of the current war in Ukraine suggests that drones may assume a very important role in armed conflicts, as a component of a broader integrated military apparatus, and they may be influential even in symbolic and propaganda terms. However, drones in and of themselves can hardly be a decisive factor for the fate of a war.



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## **Acronyms list**

AFISMA:	African-led International Support Mission to Mali
AQIM:	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
bcm;	billion cubic metres
CNSP:	National Committee for the Salvation of the People
ECOWAS:	Economic Community of West African States
EDF:	Eritrean Defence Forces
ENDF:	Ethiopian National Defense Force
ESPO:	Eastern Siberia Pacific Ocean
EU:	European Union
EUTM:	EU Training Mission to Mali
HIMARS:	High Mobility Artillery Rocket System
IEA:	International Energy Agency
IOC:	International Oil Companies
OIF:	Organisation internationale de la Francophonie
LNG:	Liquefied Natural Gas
M5:	Mouvement du 5 Juin-Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques
mbpd:	million barrel of oil per day
MINUSMA:	Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA:	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MOJWA:	Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa
JNIM:	Jamaat Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimin
RPA:	Remotely Piloted Aircraft
SAF:	Sudanese Armed Forces
TDF:	Tigray Defense Forces
TPLF:	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UAS:	Unmanned Aircraft System
UAV:	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
USA:	United States of America



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- China, Southern and Eastern Asia and Pacific;
- Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa;
- Persian Gulf;
- Euro/Atlantic (USA-NATO-Partners);
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