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DEFENSE RESEARCH AND
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OSSERVATORIO STRATEGICO

2021

Issue 1



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DEFENSE ANALYSIS AND
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Osservatorio Strategico 2021 Issue 1

Osservatorio Strategico

YEAR XXIII ISSUE I-2021



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The articles are written using open source information.

The “Osservatorio Strategico” is available also in electronic format (file .pdf) at the following link:
http://www.difesa.it/SMD_/CASD/IM/CeMiSS/Pubblicazioni/OsservatorioStrategico/Pagine/default.aspx

Osservatorio Strategico 2021

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

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Closed in September 2021 - Printed in October 2021

ISBN 978-88-31203-77-7

Osservatorio Strategico - Part One

Index

The Balkans and the Black Sea	8
The road to Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and the Slovenian Presidency of the EU Council	
Matteo Bressan	
Mashreq, Gran Maghreb, Egypt and Israel	13
Libya between stability and divisions	
Andrea Beccaro	
Sahel, Gulf of Guinea, sub-Saharan Africa and Horn of Africa	19
The Tigray conflict: implications and pitfalls for the Ethiopian and regional stability	
Federico Donelli	
China, Southern and Eastern Asia and Pacific	23
The Korean peninsula and the Biden Administration	
Matteo Dian	
Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus	30
Implications of the NATO and US forces withdrawal from Afghanistan: reaction and interests of the Russian Federation and the gravitating countries	
Sylwia Zawadzka	
Persian Gulf	35
Iran: Ebrahim Raisi' presidential victory and the JCPOA future	
Francesca Citossi	
Euro/Atlantic (USA-NATO-Partners)	40
The Biden administration six months after the inauguration: an assessment	
Gianluca Pastori	
Energy policies: interests, challenges and opportunities	47
International conferences, climate change and energy transition	
Simone Pasquazzi	
Challenges and unconventional threats	51
Increase of threats in cyberspace	
Claudio Bertolotti	

Osservatorio Strategico - Part Two

Index

The Balkans and the Black Sea	55
Vaccine's geopolitics in the Western Balkans: consequences and impact on EU action	
Matteo Bressan	
Mashreq, Gran Maghreb, Egypt and Israel	58
The Tunisian's conundrum	
Andrea Beccaro	
Sahel, Gulf of Guinea, sub-Saharan Africa and Horn of Africa	60
The Russian increased presence in the sub-Saharan African security sector: peculiarities, limits and future scenarios	
Federico Donelli	
China, Southern and Eastern Asia and Pacific	64
The international consequences of the coup d'état in Myanmar	
Matteo Dian	
Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus	69
Migration crisis as Lukashenko's tool of hybrid warfare against the Baltic countries and Poland, in the shadow of the Zapad 2021 exercise	
Sylvia Zawadzka	
Persian Gulf	72
Iraq: the US combat troops' exit	
Francesca Citossi	
Euro/Atlantic (USA-NATO-Partners)	74
NATO and the end of the Afghan experience: a new challenge to the Alliance's cohesion?	
Gianluca Pastori	
Energy policies: interests, challenges and opportunities	77
Risks and counter-trends of ecological and energy transitions	
Simone Pasquazzi	
Acronyms list	81

Osservatorio Strategico

Part One

The road to Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and the Slovenian Presidency of the EU Council

The latest discussions on territorial reorganization in the Balkans have shaken the region, once again, highlighting deep ethnic and political divisions, as well as unresolved tensions.

In these debates - triggered by the publication at the beginning of April of a non-paper, allegedly produced and/or distributed by Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa - regional leaders, major media and influential commentators have questioned, even in heated tones, whether such changes may be peacefully achieved or not.

Some have taken the opportunity to blame EU capitals for enabling what appears to be the ultimate demise of the region's enlargement prospects.

Most, however, ignored the fact that it is the depth of the Balkan crisis, as well as the hypocrisy and corruption of local politicians throughout the region, that have weakened society by undermining their institutions and prospects.

The "non-paper" identified Bosnia and Herzegovina as the region's biggest problem, declaring its European perspective "completely excluded" and proposing solutions that include its peaceful dissolution.

According to this paper, parts of Bosnia, but perhaps also North Macedonia and Montenegro would become part of a larger Croatia and Serbia, Albania and Kosovo would merge into a larger Albania, resulting in an accelerated EU enlargement process for the new nation states.

In a context where neither local nor international actors have any idea anymore what to do with the Balkans' difficulties and unresolved dossiers, the controversial "non-paper" seems only the latest in a series of tests of regional leaders' willingness to consider alternatives, such as territorial changes, to European integration.

As expected, the paper unleashed a wave of stances, consensus, and war drum rolls throughout the Balkans, as politicians, academics, and the media heatedly debated whether or not such a realignment would lead to new ethnic conflicts in the region.

Yet, the one thing most pundits agree on, with respect to the non-paper, is the assertion that European enlargement is effectively dead - at least for the Balkans - and that the disappearance of this prospect is opening the space to new, dangerous scenarios. The uproar over the alleged "non-paper" began last April 12, when politicki.ba broke the news with the first of a series of indiscretions on the subject.

The article quoted unnamed Slovenian diplomatic sources as saying that a "non-paper" had been circulated among EU officials in late February or early March, proposing a major reorganization of the Balkans that would effectively complete the unfinished breakup of the former Yugoslavia.

Some Western diplomats and experts have leaked to Balkan Insight that the timing of the story's publication may have been linked to internal power struggles in Slovenia ahead of elections scheduled for late this or early next year, and that Bosnian and regional media were used as part of this struggle. This story has, in fact, led to a heated exchange between Jansa and Slovenian MP Tanja Fajon, whom Jansa has accused of distributing fake maps of territorial reorganizations in the Balkans.

However, the possibility that this story was used as part of Slovenian power struggles does not diminish the importance of such a document being distributed and discussed among European and regional officials.

The timing of the non-paper coincides with the deepening crisis in Bosnia and the rest of the Balkans, where many fear that perpetual crises and increasingly tough stances by local leaders could cause possible new conflicts. The same tension between NATO and Russia has led to a series of skirmishes in Bosnia and Herzegovina between NATO and the Russian Embassy in Bosnia about the approach undertaken by the latter to join the Atlantic Alliance¹. Reactions in the region to the non-paper only highlighted the depth of the political crisis in the Balkans, with most officials in the region blaming each other and threatening new violence.

As expected, Bosnian officials warned that any new attempt to fragment Bosnia would trigger a new conflict. But their reactions have only revealed the deep political divisions and increased tensions between the country's ethnic leaders, which have already led to a stalemate in the functioning of the administrative and governmental system over the past year.

The leader of the main Bosnian Democratic Action Party, SDA, Bakir Izetbegovic, on April 16 wrote to David Sassoli, president of the European Parliament, and Donald Tusk, president of the main European People's Party, EPP, calling for EU protection against the ideas outlined in the non-paper.

"Any attempt to violate the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina would trigger destabilization and war not only in our country, but, through a chain reaction, conflicts would spread from one country to another in the region," Izetbegovic wrote, warning that "several EU countries will not be spared in this new spiral of separatism." As expected, however, the Bosnian Serb leader, Milorad Dodik, used the debate to reiterate his separatist views, which seem fully in line with those outlined in the non-paper.

"The discussion is being conducted as if someone had declared war on Bosnia and Herzegovina, when in fact the debate is about the possibility of a peaceful dissolution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is the only option that will certainly be implemented in the coming period," Dodik said in Belgrade on April 17.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic denied any knowledge or role in the drafting of the non-paper, stressing that Serbia respects Bosnia's territorial integrity and also rejecting any talk of a merger between Albania and Kosovo. Vucic told the media that he was "observing all this with great caution and fear, because I know the price of peace."

However, Albania's premier, Edi Rama, said he was not only aware of the controversial non-paper, but had seen it - as well as maps of possible territorial changes in the region.



Ipotesi di scambio di territori tra Serbia e Kosovo

¹ Kovacevic D., *NATO Dismisses Russian Warning to Bosnia Against 'Hostile Step'*, Balkan Insight, 19 marzo 2021 <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/19/nato-dismisses-russian-warning-to-bosnia-against-hostile-step/>

Kosovo President Vjosa Osmani, commenting on the speculation circulating in the non-paper, said that "if there is one thing that the entire political spectrum in Kosovo agrees on, it is that redrawing the borders is completely unacceptable"². Several officials and experts from the rest of the region, including Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, also warned that any attempt to change the borders in the Balkans could trigger new conflicts.

At the same time, some of them admitted that all of the Balkan countries are in a deep political, economic, and social crisis, partly because of the fading EU presence in the region, but much more because of their own corrupt politicians.

While U.S. and EU officials have mostly ignored the controversy sparked by the controversial non-paper, in Bosnia, the EU delegation, EU ambassadors, and the commander of the EU-led peacekeeping force, EUFOR, issued a joint statement on April 15, emphasizing that "the EU is unequivocally committed to the sovereignty unity and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina", adding that "the EU and its member states fully and firmly support Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU perspective", and calling on Bosnian politicians to take advantage of 2021, "to accelerate reforms as identified in the European Commission's 14 key priorities in order to move forward on the EU path".

This statement, however, rang hollow in the ears of local politicians, intellectuals and media, most of whom believe that EU enlargement is no longer a realistic option for Bosnia, nor probably for the rest of the Balkans.

Without the internal capacity to solve its problems and abandoned by their EU and US allies, many fear that the old nationalist dreams in the Balkans may indeed, sooner or later, lead to territorial redefinitions and the recreation of enlarged nation states, as proposed in the non-paper.

Instead of discussing why the Balkan countries have come to discuss redefining territorial borders on an ethnic-nationalist basis and what should be done about it, most politicians, academics and media in the region continue with blame-shifting and endless discussions about whether this process will happen peacefully or whether it will lead to more bloodshed³.

Analysis, evaluations and forecasts

During the conference organized in early July by the Prespa Forum Dialogue, a forum established by the government of the Republic of North Macedonia, on the topic *The road to the EU: what to expect when expecting*, the participants highlighted the difficulties of the state of enlargement in the Western Balkans.

The event was opened by the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European integration, Nikola Dimitrov, who pointed out that "for the second time, Bulgaria has vetoed accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania". For Dimitrov, the struggle for the Macedonian identity, whose accession to the European Union has been discussed for more than a few years, is also a struggle for the European identity and, hoping for more support from the European Union, he said that "if the EU cannot make a difference in the region, in its backyard, the consequence in the medium term will be the weakening of those who believe in the process of transformation and enlargement and in European values".

Johns Hopkins Institute professor Edward P. Joseph said, "The EU cannot be a world leader without taking the Balkans seriously. And the EU is not being taken seriously. I say this with sadness as an American, because the EU is our ally."

² Delauney G., *Mystery plans to redraw Balkan borders alarm leaders*, BBC, 28 maggio 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57251677>

³ Latal S., *Disputed Non-Paper is Stirring Dangerous Dreams in the Balkans*, Balkan Insight, 21 Aprile 2021 <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/04/21/disputed-non-paper-is-stirring-dangerous-dreams-in-the-balkans/>

According to the academic, "not honoring what North Macedonia did is a historic mistake. When you do it for the second time, it is a betrayal." For Joseph, "if the EU aspires to strategic autonomy from the US, it must first solve the Balkan problem."

Corina Stratulat, Senior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Center, said that the fact that enlargement was in the hands of member states created unpredictability. "All of this makes what happens with enlargement depend on the internal politics of the member states".

Jacques Maire, a member of the French National Assembly, said that "we will do everything we can to help the Slovenian Presidency achieve this goal," recalling that after the Slovenian one will come the French Presidency⁴.

Just days before the start of Slovenia's presidency, Slovenian Foreign Minister Anže Logar said in an interview with EUROACTIV. That "in recent years, the EU's strategy towards the Western Balkans has had a wait-and-see approach".

"If we [the EU] don't fill the vacuum in the Western Balkans, someone else will. [...] In this sense, it is in our best strategic interest to act as soon as possible and integrate these countries into the EU", he added.

Logar stressed that the enlargement process "must be feasible, so as to reassure those countries that, once certain goals are achieved, the next step will be enlargement", adding that this would concern the candidate countries Albania and North Macedonia.

Both countries' hopes for membership hit a wall in 2019 after France and the Netherlands vetoed the start of accession talks due to a lack of progress on reforms to improve democracy and fight corruption.

Skopje's start of accession talks was then blocked by EU member Bulgaria in 2020 due to identity-history and language disputes. Essentially, Bulgaria does not recognize either the existence of a Macedonian nation distinct from the Bulgarian nation or the Macedonian language, which is considered a Bulgarian dialect.

Bulgaria's decision was supported by all political parties in the country, and the current interim government has not changed this position so far.

In May, EU Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi had proposed separating the dossiers and moving forward only with Albania, but Logar said Slovenia is "firmly against decoupling".

"We also want to include the voice of fellow citizens of the Western Balkan countries in the debate on the future of Europe", Logar said. Earlier this year, a series of unofficial diplomatic notes floated speculation about border redrawing in the Balkans, which shook the region and raised fears about renewed ethnic tensions.

Responding on the so-called non-paper, Logar reiterated that Slovenia firmly supports the territorial integrity of the Western Balkans, an issue that was also discussed with the Foreign Minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina during a recent meeting. Logar underlined that the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina will represent the most challenging issue in the region and, for this reason, he will place "great hope" in the work of the new EU High Representative, Christian Schmidt, who recently succeeded Valentin Inzko in the role.

Logar explained that before tackling the Bosnia issue, "we should resolve some other regional issues to show that we can get results".

"If we start with North Macedonia and Albania, and if there is progress in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, these elements will certainly represent a very positive message to the region, and eventually we could approach Bosnia more effectively".

⁴ *Lack of EU's decision on North Macedonia weakens the proponents of enlargement in the region*, European Western Balkans, 1 luglio 2021 <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/07/01/lack-of-eus-decision-on-north-macedonia-weakens-the-proponents-of-enlargement-in-the-region/>

Asked about the prospects he sees for Serbia-Kosovo relations, Logar said that "it is difficult to say where the path in the negotiations will go," but the appointment of EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajčak has shown that the EU has not put the issue on the back burner⁵.

Slovenia assumed the presidency of the Council of the European Union on July 1 for the second time in its history since becoming a member of the European Union. "The presidency is an opportunity to strengthen integration within the EU and its institutions and to direct development towards an innovative and creative community based on sustainable development," said Slovenian Foreign Minister Anze Logar.

The Slovenian presidency's six-month program is based on four priorities, under the slogan "Together. Resilient. Europe".

The Slovenian presidency will be based on four pillars: resilience, recovery and strategic autonomy of the European Union; Conference on the Future of Europe; Union of the European way of life, rule of law and equality criteria for all; and credible and secure European Union, able to ensure security and stability in its neighborhood.

Among the key pillars of the Slovenian presidency is the "strengthening of the Union's resilience, recovery and strategic autonomy", with particular attention to the Recovery Fund and the Next Generation EU package, designed in particular for the "green" and digital transition, the government explained⁶.

"Special attention will be paid to the countries of the Western Balkans, their future in Europe and the credible continuation of the EU enlargement process," the Ljubljana government said, adding that "we will strive for the economic recovery of the countries in the region". The Slovenian presidency's program states that "to ensure sustainable development, we want to work with them to achieve green and digital transition and improve connectivity within the region and with the European Union".

One of the main events of the Slovenian presidency will be the EU-Western Balkans Summit, which will be held in Slovenia in October. One of the goals of the meeting will be to overcome vetoes by EU members, including Bulgaria, France, the Netherlands and Denmark, who are holding back the start of negotiations with Tirana and Skopje. "Albania and North Macedonia can move forward by the next summit in October if we all focus on this", said Slovenian conservative Prime Minister Janez Jansa, who is very close to the populist and nationalist positions of Hungary and Poland. The EU is not complete without enlargement to include all the Western Balkans and the Union should speed up the accession process, echoed Slovenian President Borut Pahor⁷.

⁵ Brzozowski A., Slovenian FM: EU inaction in Western Balkans 'strategically dangerous', EURACTIV, 22 giugno 2021 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/interview/slovenian-fm-eu-inaction-in-western-balkans-strategically-dangerous/>

⁶ A Slovenia la presidenza Ue, allargamento e ripresa priorità, ANSA, 29 giugno 2021 https://www.ansa.it/nuova_europa/it/notizie/rubriche/altrenews/2021/06/29/a-slovenia-la-presidenza-ue-allargamento-e-ripresa-priorita_cbbd8d8d-5765-4ea4-ad9a-77b891fc2700.html

⁷ Slovenia assumes the EU Presidency, pushes for EU enlargement, Strategic Balkans Press Reviews – NATO Defense College Foundation, July 2021 <https://www.natofoundation.org/strategic-balkans-press-reviews/>

Libya between stability and divisions

The political and security situation in Libya remains very volatile and unstable even though the local security situation has rather improved since the end of the siege of Tripoli by General Haftar in April 2020. The problems in Libya remain enormous, grave and serious and are closely related to external actors who are also operating in the country using local militias, foreign fighters and contractors.

One important event related to the Libyan situation has been the Berlin Conference in June. On June 23rd Germany and the United Nations brought together representatives of Libya with powers that have interests in the country at a conference. Among them: Algeria, China, Egypt, France, Italy, Russia, Tunisia, Turkey, UAE, the UK, the US, the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, and the League of Arab States. The aim of the conference was to discuss progress toward securing elections scheduled for December 2021.

The meeting at the foreign ministry in Berlin was a follow up to the January 2020 conference. At that meeting, leaders agreed to respect the arms embargo and to push the country's warring parties to reach a full cease-fire. The general idea has been to establish and consolidate stability in Libya paving the way for holding credible transparent and national elections in December¹. In the Libyan context this is easier said than done, however.

The main concern for the international community remains the presence of foreign fighters in Libya. Their withdraw is seen as the only possible solution for setting the conditions for the election in December and Libya stability. Currently the presence of foreign troops that support different local actors is one of the major Libyan issues. Despite the fact that it seems that Turkey and Russia have reached an initial understanding to withdraw 300 Syrian mercenaries from each side, this issue appears to remain fundamentally unresolved. The main problem is that these two international actors obtained key political and economic positions in Libya, clearly not intending to retreat without compensation or the safety that their interest will be defended in the new Libya².

The Berlin conference stressed the point that all foreign forces in Libya must be retreated. However, Russia and Turkey do not seem to move in that direction. Mainly because the international calls for the withdrawal of foreign fighters from the country were echoed in the final text of the meeting, but accepted with Turkey's reservations. It has been reported that Turkey sought to use "all mercenaries" instead of "all foreign forces" in the wording of the text in a bid to secure the presence of Turkish troops on the ground. This is a crucial aspect of the current Turkish influence on Libya because while Libyan Foreign Minister Najla al-Mangoush has kept a firm stance on the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the country, the head of the unity government, Abdulhamid Dbeibe, in close contact with Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu during the conference, has made a distinction between foreign fighters and mercenaries. According to Ankara, the Turkish presence in the country is based on agreements reached with the country's legitimate government and is aimed at training the Libyan forces and is a deterrent against Haftar to reignite the war. A possible solution to this impasse may be an agreement between Turkey and Russia for a gradual withdrawal. However, in this way Ankara may be able to prolong the presence of its troops in the country and to gain more political advantages³.

One of the events following the Berlin conference was the 28th June visit in Rome of the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu to join the anti-Daesh coalition meeting. Speaking about Libya,

¹ https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2021_berlin_2_conclusions_final_-_eng.pdf

² <https://formiche.net/2021/06/libia-cosa-aspettarsi-dalla-conferenza-di-berlino-intervista-a-varvelli/?fbclid=IwAR0ZfZPzIUQZom5Z602Xmmm8yi0AOwq8Eko3QSMV87kOdEQbz5uglFASgl0>

³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/turkey-stalls-withdrawal-foreign-forces-libya>

he said that Italy is a strategic partner and ally. Moreover, he reaffirmed the need for a cooperation between Turkey and Italy in the Eastern Mediterranean for the region's security and stability⁴.

An important milestone of the conference could be related to the diplomatic scene confirming the US re-engagement in Libya, as evidenced by the US Acting Assistant Secretary of State Joey Hood's latest visit to Tripoli, when he met his counterpart Najala al-Mangoush, Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh and by Presidency Council chief Mohamed al-Menfi/Secretary Blinken's presence in Berlin. Washington's involvement might be crucial in mediating between Ankara and other international actors such as Egypt and the UAE⁵. Moreover, ambassador Richard Norland, who has been the United States' ambassador to the North African country since August 2019, will now double as a special envoy. Out of the US Embassy in Tunis, Norland has been vocal on Libyan affairs, regularly visiting the country. During the last years of the Trump administration, he was one of the few American diplomats closely following the Libyan conflict⁶.

In addition to security issues, influence of external actors, fight between local militias, Libya has to fix another huge problem related to the December election. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is unable to provide an exact number of stateless individuals in the country and the percentage of undocumented people remains very high. Many are unable to acquire citizenship or other forms of documentation that would allow them to vote. By the time of Libya's independence in 1951, numerous nomadic non-Arab communities had settled in the country. But unlike Arab Libyans, many of these ethnic minorities suffered from discriminatory laws that sidelined them from society⁷.

Concurrently, the Spanish Embassy in Libya reopened June 3. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez also visited Libya to reopen its embassy and resume bilateral relations between the two countries. France reopened its embassy in Libya in March. Tunisian President Kais Said visited the same month.

Security Situation

Notwithstanding these positive political steps, the security situation in Libya remains volatile. For instance, on May 7, armed militiamen stormed the Corinthia Hotel compound, one of the headquarters for the interim government in the Libyan capital of Tripoli. The militants were aligned with Burkan al-Ghadab (Volcano of Rage), a coalition of militias tasked by the previous Tripoli-based government, the Government of National Accord (GNA), to defend Tripoli from the assault launched by the eastern Libyan-based Libya National Army (LNA) in April 2019. While the GNA has now been disbanded in Tripoli, the domestic militia groups aligned with and sponsored by the GNA, remain. The GNA had used militia groups to provide law and order in Tripoli and in exchange, militias penetrated the Tripoli-based state infrastructure. However, this assault represented Turkey's success in turning the militia group into a *de facto* Turkish proxy. Turkey has huge economic interests in Libya, including almost \$35 billion in Libyan contracts and a 2019 maritime border delineation agreement and has strengthened links to the GNA militias from increased Turkish financial support, arms supplies, and coordination with Turkish military advisors and foreign fighters from Syria.

Moreover, Ankara also ideologically attached itself to the more Islamist-leaning militias by housing in Turkey influential Mufti Sadiq al-Ghariani. Now with the replacement of GNA with the *interim* unity government, Turkey has become the main patron of several once nominally GNA-aligned militias. Such militias are cornerstone of Turkish influence in Libya, because would a new Libyan executive power or mounting international pressure force Turkey to withdraw either its own troop presence or the portion of the roughly 13,000 Syrian militants that it sent to fight in Libya, Ankara could still wield leverage in the country through its domestic militia groups. However, it is fair

⁴ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210629-turkey-will-work-with-italy-for-stable-peace-in-libya-fm-says/>

⁵ <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/after-berlin-ii-whats-next-future-libya-31010>

⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/united-states-ramps-libyan-engagement>

⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/28/libyas-stateless-ethnic-minorities-and-an-upcoming-election>

to remember that Turkey simply does not have the soft power to attract support from all of Tripoli's militias, several of which have contrasting ideological orientations and loyalties⁸. Moreover, Turkish involvement in Libya is seen as absolutely negative in Cyrenaica where, for instance, on 06 July in Tobruk, the Turkish flag was attacked. Consequently, the Turkish presence in the country cannot be seen as a positive factor able to stabilize the entire Libya, quite the contrary it can result in a very divisive presence and influence.

As far as the security situation is concerned, on Sunday 06th June an Islamic State (IS) suicide bombing left two people dead in Libya. The explosion occurred at a checkpoint in the southwest city of Sabha, killing a police officer and one other person. IS claimed that one of its fighters carried out the attack with an explosives-landed vehicle, and this attack demonstrates the continuing ability of IS to impact security in the country. Moreover, this incident is just the last of a series of IS operation in the Fezzan region, where the militia has regain part of its operational capabilities⁹.

Just before the Berlin Conference on 19th June, Libya's presidential council banned any military movement across the country after forces loyal to renegade military commander Khalifa Haftar took control of a border crossing with Algeria. Images showed dozens of armoured vehicles positioned in and around the crossing, which has been closed for several years due to the conflict in the country. The move came after Haftar announced an operation in the area *"to track down the terrorists and expel African mercenary gangs which threaten security and stability"*¹⁰.

In the same day an important step toward the normalization of the political and economic situation was taken when the head of Libya's unity government reopened the main coastal road across the frozen front line, a gesture of progress in the fragile peace process not shared by eastern forces confirming its closure until the end of July. Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh's move on Sunday 20 to reopen the road is in line with a ceasefire deal agreed last year as part of efforts to resolve Libya's decade of chaos and violence¹¹. The coastal road connects Misrata in western Libya to the Mediterranean city of Sirte and is a crucial economic way for the country that also connects the two side of the country.

Another international meeting on Libya was held at the beginning of July in Geneva and it highlighted the differences between delegates over the possibility of Khalifa Haftar's standing as a candidate in December's presidential election. Haftar is surely a very divisive figure in Libyan political landscape, but this situation is important also because it underlines an issue related to the elections.

Some political factions demand no conditions to be placed on presidential candidates, especially with regard to dual nationality or military rank, and Haftar holds US citizenship.

The situation in Libya is an Italian security issue and therefore Italian Camera dei Deputati (Lower House) approved the funding of international missions, mainly the support and training of Libyan Coast Guard. The current situation and instability are not positive for our security and economic interests. The increasing Turkish role in Tripoli is worrying for at least two reasons: it limits our ability to operate in Tripolitania, second it supports a government related to the Muslim Brotherhood that cannot be seen positively for Western influence and interests. It is fair to say the Turkish role in Libya, and generally speaking the entire North Africa, may be sidelined or limited by recent events. The crisis in Tunisia has ousted the main party Ennahda that is supported by Muslim Brotherhood, a close ally of Ankara; second, in a recent meeting, Algeria and Egypt are said to be planning a boost in their coordination over the situation in neighboring Libya. For different reasons and on different extent, both countries oppose the Turkish influence in the area.

⁸ <https://jamestown.org/program/burkan-al-ghadab-militants-display-of-force-highlights-deepening-turkish-influence-in-libya/>

⁹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/islamic-state-suicide-bombing-kills-two-libya>

¹⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/20/libya-haftars-lma-says-it-seized-control-of-border-with-algeria>

¹¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/20/libya-pm-says-key-coastal-road-reopened-ahead-of-peace-talks>

Main Events in the Maghreb and Mashreq Area

Algeria

Three important events have to be listed. First, on June 12th parliamentary election was held and it was marked by a low turnout and no majority winner after two years of mass protests and political turmoil¹². The National Liberation Front (FLN), Algeria's biggest political party, was the winner of the general election, gaining 98 seats in the 407-seat parliament. Algeria's president has named Finance Minister Ayman Benabderrahmane as prime minister, asking him to form a new government as the country seeks to curb a deep socioeconomic crisis. Second, the crisis about the Western Sahara is becoming an important issue with Morocco. The Algerian foreign ministry has recalled its ambassador to Morocco and hinted at possible further measures in the latest flareup of tension between the North African neighbors. Third, Algeria's Chief of Staff, General Said Chengriha, has visited Moscow in order to discuss the arms deal that Algeria is expected to sign with Russia. This meeting was important both because the deal may include Sukhoi 57, which Russia has not sold to any country so far, and Sukhoi 34 aircraft, and Algeria can be Russia's gateway to the Sahel region.

Egypt

One of the main political issues in Egypt in the last weeks and months has been related to the Ethiopian decision to begin the second phase of filling the dam on the Nile. The downstream states Egypt and Sudan have been locked into a dispute with Ethiopia for almost ten years now, maintaining that filling the dam will diminish their water supply. The Nile Water Treaties, colonial-era agreements between the British, Sudan and Egypt, maintain that upstream countries cannot use Nile water without the downstream countries' consent. Recently, Egypt has tried to involve and find allies in this dispute both in Moscow and in Beijing.

A very important military and strategic event has been the opening on 3rd July of a strategic naval base on the Mediterranean Sea. The base lies some 255 kilometers west of Alexandria, towards the border with Libya and includes an airstrip and a long pier. It is the latest Egyptian military base on the Mediterranean, and will be focused on securing the country's northern and western front. This new base is part of a network of military and naval bases that includes Ras Banas, Port Said, Gargoub¹³.

Israel

The tensions between Israel and Hamas remain very high after the conflict in May. In June and July Israel has struck different targets in the Gaza Strip as a retaliation for Palestinians incendiary balloons into the south of the country. However, Israel is also to give more than 1 million vaccine doses to Palestinians.

From a military perspective, it is noteworthy that Israel has used an airborne laser to shoot down drones in a series of tests. During the tests a prototype of the high-power laser system carried on a small civilian plane successfully intercepted several UAVs. The system could down any flying object, including drones, mortars, rockets, ballistic missiles.¹⁴ Another interesting event related to the use of drones is the fact that the Israeli Air Force (IAF) has conducted in July its first international unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) exercise with military pilots from five other countries (Germany, Italy,

¹² https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/84830?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss

¹³ https://www.cesi-italia.org/articoli/1400/cesi-update-la-nuova-base-navale-egiziana-mostra-lintento-del-cairo-nel-voler-potenziare-il-proprio-comparto-militare-per-proiettarsi-a-livello-regionale?fbclid=IwAR2_EhJAKAjRvmqw8QyGr4gYReeeGFbmQ4RMGfIZKYBbzvJuTS-QrBUInvk

¹⁴ https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/06/22/israel-airborne-laser-down-drones/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=israel-airborne-laser-down-drones

France, the US, and the UK). Teams simulated scenarios such as ground troop support, reconnaissance, intelligence collections missions, and cooperation with various forces in the air¹⁵.

The *Washington Post* and 16 media partners reported that Pegasus, a spyware developed by the Israeli cyberarms firm NSO Group that can be covertly installed on mobile phones (and other devices), has been used in attempted and successful hacks of several smartphones belonging to journalists, human rights activists, business executives. The phones appeared on a list of more than 50,000 numbers that are concentrated in countries known to engage in surveillance of their citizens and also known to have been clients of the Israeli firm. Such a targeting would appear to conflict with the stated purpose of NSO's licensing of the Pegasus spyware, which the company says is intended only for use in surveilling terrorists and major criminals. However, the evidence of the recent investigation calls into question pledges by the Israeli company to police its clients for human rights abuses¹⁶.

On 29th July a petroleum products tanker managed by Israeli-owned Zodiac Maritime came under attack off Oman's coast and two crew members were killed. The US, Israel and others have blamed the attacks on Iran amid the unraveling of Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers. This is the last of a series of similar incidents presumably carried out by drones.

The incident also heightened tensions between Israel and Hezbollah because, after seven years, on 5 August, the Israeli air force carried out its first air strike on neighboring Lebanon following a second day of rocket fire across the border. The UN peacekeeping force UNIFIL and the Italian Major General Stefano Del Col was in immediate contact with the parties.

Lebanon

The country has been without a full-fledged government for almost a year since Prime Minister Hassan Diab resigned following the Beirut Port explosion last August. Lebanon continues to struggle from a crippling financial crisis that has rendered half its population into poverty and devalued the Lebanese pound by more than 90 percent. This situation is favoring surely Hezbollah that is able to use its resources to help the local population with basic services. The international community has repeatedly called on Lebanon to form a government committed to enact structural reforms, unlock development loans and aid to restructure and recover its economy.

At the end of July Parliament nominated Najib al-Miqati to head a new government; however, he must now assemble a cabinet and win approval from President Michel Aoun, a task at which the previous two prime ministerial nominees failed.

Morocco

On 2nd July The UN chief urged Morocco and the Polisario Front to accept his next candidate for the post of UN special envoy for the disputed region of Western Sahara, after rejecting all the previous candidates. The position has been vacant since May 2019 when former German President Horst Kohler stepped down, officially for health reasons. A ceasefire was signed in 1991, but hostilities resumed in November 2020 when the Polisario, which is backed by Algeria, declared the ceasefire to be over after Morocco sent troops into a UN-patrolled buffer zone to reopen a key road.

Tunisia

Social, political and economic situation in Tunisia is very volatile. Violent clashes erupted in June and July and led to a very profound political crisis that ends the last remaining of the so called Arab Spring. Moreover, the health situation in the country is one of the worst in the world: the country

¹⁵ https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/07/23/israel-international-drone-exercise/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=israel-international-drone-exercise

¹⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/nso-spyware-pegasus-cellphones/>

has seen 18,600 deaths and 573,394 cases in a population of just under 12 million. Less than 10% population is fully vaccinated.

Syria

The Russian Ministry of Defense is currently working on expanding the capacities of Syria's Khmeimim air base in Latakia countryside. The extension would allow the base to support more regular deployments of larger and more heavily laden aircraft, including heavy airlifters and even potentially strategic bombers. Long-range Tu-22M3 bombers along with other combat aircraft were first deployed to Syria in May in a demonstration of an increased Russian military foothold in the Mediterranean.

Russia's service members tested more than 320 types of weapons during their operations in Syria since 2015, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said. In 2019 and 2018, Russia received weapons orders worth \$51.1 billion and \$55 billion respectively from Middle Eastern countries, according to Chief Executive of Russian arms giant Rostec, Sergei Chemezov. Such weapons have been tested in Syria which represents an important aspect of Russian arms deals in the region. In 2019, Russia and Egypt signed an arms deal worth at least \$2 billion. It involved the purchase of over 20 Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets¹⁷.

The United States carried out another round of air raids against Iran-backed armed groups in Iraq and Syria. On 27 June the US military targeted operational and weapons storage facilities at two locations in Syria and one location in Iraq.

Since the end of June Syrian armed forces are conducting a major offensive against the city of Daraa. The fighting is intense and shows that the Syrian government has not a full control of the area that, according to previous cease-fires, should have been liberated by militias and opposition fighters.

¹⁷ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210715-russia-tested-320-types-of-weapons-in-syria/>

The Tigray conflict: implications and pitfalls for the Ethiopian and regional stability

The report examines recent developments in Ethiopia's internal conflict in the regional state of Tigray. Begun last November, the Tigray's conflict has experienced a new phase since June. The offensive launched by the Tigray forces surprised the Addis Ababa security forces and quickly affected other regional states such as Amhara and Afar. The upcoming conflict developments in Tigray will be crucial for both the future of Ethiopia and the security and stability of the whole region. Addis Ababa, indeed, has historically played a key role in ensuring stability in the entire Horn of Africa.

Following years of relative peace, Ethiopia is going through a precarious period. The increasing number of challenges that Addis Ababa is facing risk of generate instability throughout the whole region. The normalization of Addis' relations with Asmara in 2018 seemed to open a new era in the Horn of Africa. However, the alliance between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Aferweki created the right conditions so that the former would be able to promote his domestic reform project within the country. Over the last three years, Abiy's government has promoted both administrative centralizations and revived nationalism¹. The Prime Minister's reforms aim to overcome the domestic ethnic divisions, considered a constraint to Ethiopia's regional ambitions. Among these is the rise of sentiments of irredentism and independence in some of the regional states and the increase of discrimination against those who oppose the government's project. Moreover, the government coalition (Prosperity Party) that backs Abiy has progressively sidelined the Tigrayans, who for two decades constituted the country's political and economic elite through the TPLF. During the fall of 2020, tensions between the Abiy Ahmed government and Tigray elites deflagrated into an armed conflict that affected the regional state of Tigray. The Ethiopian armed forces (ENDF) launched a large-scale military operation to take control of the region. Several regional armies (Amhara and Oromo) and the new Eritrean ally (EDF) have deployed in support of the ENDF. In a few weeks, Addis Ababa seized the capital Mekelle and the main provinces without being able to reduce the offensive capabilities of the Tigrayan's army (TDF)². The TDF took refuge in the region's high plains, where it conducted guerrilla actions for several months.

The situation has experienced a period of stalemate characterized by ethnic violence against Tigray's population and the deep humanitarian crisis that has affected almost five million people in the region. In June, following the umpteenth refusal by Addis Ababa to allow access to international humanitarian convoys, the TDF launched a counter-offensive called "Alula Abanega". The TDF began the operation on the eve of the controversial national vote in Ethiopia (June 21) to exploit the redeployment of Ethiopian forces, which until then stationed in outposts in Tigray, to other areas of the country. The results achieved exceeded the expectations. In a few weeks, the TDF overwhelmed the ENDF and EDF by forcing them to seek shelter in the neighboring regional states (Amhara and Afar). In front of the Tigrayan advance, Abiy Ahmed retreated by declaring a

¹ Mokaddem S. (2019). Abiy Ahmed's 'Medemer' reforms: Can it ensure sustainable growth for Ethiopia and what are the challenges facing the new government?, Policy Center for the New South, PB-19/08. URL: <https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/Policy%20brief%20Sara%20Mokaddem%20Anglais.pdf> [accessed 3/8/2021]

² Reuters (2020). Ethiopian military operation in Tigray is complete, prime minister says, Reuters, 28/11/2020. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN28809E> [accessed 3/8/2021]

unilateral ceasefire³ However, the Tigray regional government embodied by President Debretsion Gebremichael continued the offensive, choosing to exploit the positive trend of operations. Since the takeover of the regional capital Mekelle, the Tigrayan forces' primary goal has become to hurt the opponents' fighting capabilities.

The TDF has repeatedly stated that the operation aims to regain full control of the regional territories and expel all foreign forces (EDF) from them. To this end, on July 12, the TDF launched a new offensive called Operation Tigrayan Mothers. The operation aims to retake full control of the Raya Valley in the southeast of the Tigray region. The area is geo-strategically significant because of the communication lines that run through it. Historically, the Raya Valley has very fragile demographic balances between the Tigray and the Amhara people. Both ethnic groups claim the area as part of their historic nation. For this reason, since last November Amhara forces have assumed control of some important towns that for over twenty years had remained under Tigrinyan authority. The TDF military breakthrough beyond the Tekezé River has prompted the Amhara National Movement (ANM) to change its strategy from defensive to counter-offensive. A shift confirmed by the general mobilization of regular and irregular troops, known as Fano. Despite the resistance of Amhara and ENDF forces, the TDF has soon crossed the Tigray borders and entered the Afar and Amhara regions, threatening the connecting lines between Addis Ababa and Djibouti.

According to the Ethiopian Prime Minister, TDF operations pose a threat to the sovereignty of the whole country. However, the Ethiopian reaction has appeared confused and still hard to decode. Abiy Ahmed initially proclaimed a unilateral ceasefire. A choice officially dictated by the need to allow humanitarian intervention for the people of Tigray. In reality, however, the ceasefire, never accepted by the Tigray's political leadership, has not allowed the transit of any humanitarian convoy. On the contrary, the last weeks have been instrumental for Addis to reorganize its troops in the forecast of a new counter-offensive. As it has been happening since the beginning of the conflict last November, the military actions would be carried on by the ENDF and several militias from the regional states of the country (Oromo, Amhara, and Sidama). Abiy Ahmed, regardless of the numerous criticisms coming from the international community, has tried to take advantage of the defeat on the ground, seeking to recompose the anti-Tigray front and rethink the military strategy. The three ethnic groups, Oromo, Amhara, and Sidama, which share a long history of conflict, now seem to be rallying against a common enemy⁴ To consolidate this front, Abiy has likely promised gains both in terms of territories and control of national economic assets, which are still in Tigrinyan hands.

Tigray is now locked in a state of total isolation. Besides the access restrictions for humanitarian organizations, there is also the communication black-out imposed by Addis in many areas of the region. A complete state of siege has further worsened the humanitarian crisis. The Ethiopian military strategy seems to be aimed at exacerbating the already precarious living conditions of the Tigrayan before launching a new offensive at the end of the rainy season. The Ethiopian military forces would orchestrate an offensive on several fronts: from the south, deploying troops in the area of Alamat; from the northeastern region of Afar, where many ENDF troops have taken refuge after the overthrow of Mekelle; from the southwest, where Amara's troops have long taken control of the city of Humera, a crossing point to Sudan; and finally from the north, with the direct intervention of the EDF. The encirclement operation promoted by Addis Ababa would have significant consequences for the population of Tigray, already strained by conflict and famine. Moreover, on the ground, the number of irregular militias answering to small-scale warlords

³ Quinn C. (2021). *Ethiopia Declares Cease-Fire as TPLF Retakes Tigray's Capital*, Foreign Policy, 29/6/2021. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/29/ethiopia-tigray-tplf-mekele-abiy/> [accessed 3/8/2021]

⁴ Getachew S. (2021). *Ethiopia faces more Tigray fighting as famine looms*. The National, 17/7/2021. URL: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/2021/07/17/ethiopia-faces-more-tigray-fighting-as-famine-looms/> [accessed 3/8/2021]

is increasing. The increasing involvement of these non-state actors would lead to greater privatization of warfare, opening up asymmetrical conflict dynamics. These groups champion ethnically motivated feelings of hatred and revenge. The risk, therefore, is that ethnic-based violence and even ethnic cleansing could further increase.

Analysis, Assessment and Forecasting

Addis Abeba's possible offensive will be far from an easy one. If the Tigrayan forces were to succeed in consolidating their footholds, any Ethiopian counter-offensive would be more complicated than Addis Ababa expected. Furthermore, the TDF has already proved its ability to pursue resistance and guerrilla warfare. At the same time, although Abiy has created a united anti-Tigrayan front, this block remains volatile and vulnerable to developments in the conflict. So far, it seems rather unlikely that the Abiy Ahmed government would be able to re-establish full authority over Tigray. Therefore, if the Ethiopian counter-offensive were to fail, it would open unthinkable scenarios until a few months ago. Foremost, it is hard to believe that the Tigrayan leadership would attempt to gain further ground towards the Ethiopian capital and try to overthrow the regime. It is foreseeable that an eventual win on the ground could give further impetus to Tigray's secession motion. The Tigrayan people, hurt by three years of abuse and discrimination - plus nine months of conflict - are pressuring the regional authorities (TPLF) to outline the path towards independence.

If the TPLF were to follow such a path, it would signal the end of Ethiopia as we have known it since 1991. Indeed, the Tigrayan pressure towards secession could trigger a domino effect. The authorities of other regional states would receive pressure from their people to gain greater autonomy, if not independence from the central government in Addis. The two major country's ethnic groups, the Oromo and the Amhara, are representative cases. The former shows a deep polarization generated by the policies of the Prime Minister, who is himself an Oromo. In several parts of the regional state, there have been insurgencies organized by the Oromo separatist group Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). From the Amhara's perspective, the conflict in Tigray is considered an opportunity to seize areas claimed as part of their historical nation. The main danger is the quick balkanization of Ethiopia with the inevitable outbreak of new internal conflicts driven by the struggle for borders. Given the current trend, it is not to be excluded that political and territorial rivalries may assume the ethnic strife dimension. In the scenario depicted above, indeed, the situation has become even tenser due to the proliferation of ethnically motivated violence throughout the country. Tigrayan communities living in Addis Ababa are the main targets. These communities, the backbone of the Ethiopian elite from 1991 to 2018, have become the object of discrimination, settlements, and abuse. The international community, with the exception of Russia and China, has condemned Ethiopia's obstruction of direct humanitarian aid access to the people of Tigray⁵. The pressure on Addis comes not only from abroad but also from the country's economics accounts. The cost of the conflict is estimated to have reached about \$2.3 billion, or 20% of the state's annual budget⁶. In the coming months, there is the possibility that Ethiopia's leading donors, the US, the EU, and the UK, may reconsider their aid plans and develop investments in the country, worsening the precarious state of the economy.

The recent weeks' developments in Tigray will have implications for Ethiopia's future and regional balances. The fragmentation of Ethiopia, or simply Addis's gradual weakening, would change the Horn of Africa's balance of power. As a result, some of the disputes in which Addis Ababa plays a role would be affected, such as the dispute over the management of the Blue Nile

⁵ Rettman A. (2021). *Ethiopia creating 'famine' in Tigray, EU warns*, EUObservers, 7/7/2021. URL: <https://euobserver.com/world/152370> [accessed 4/8/2021]

⁶ Al-Jazeera (2021). *How the conflict in Tigray is fraying Ethiopia's finances*, Al-Jazeera, 17/7/2021. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/counting-the-cost/2021/7/17/how-the-conflict-in-tigray-is-fraying-ethiopias-finances> [accessed 5/8/2021]

waters (GERD)⁷. The further impact of the crisis within Ethiopia would be the spillover effect. The possible outcome would include the risk that Ethiopian instability could contaminate more fragile neighbors such as Somalia and Sudan. In the case of Somalia, the implication is likely to be a decrease in the number of military contingents operating in the country under the umbrella of the African Union (AMISOM). The security of the Mogadishu government depends largely on foreign forces. Therefore, their reduction would encourage an escalation of actions by the Al-Shabaab terrorist group. These developments combined with Somalia's domestic political instability could precipitate the country into chaos and a new civil conflict.

Instead, the conflict in Tigray has already had several fallouts in Sudan. First of all, it is necessary to consider a large number of Ethiopians - mostly Tigrayans - who since last November have found refuge across the border. The growing migration flow has generated tensions with the local population, erupting in a few cases of violence. The most worrying matter for the future stability of the area is the territorial dispute between Ethiopia and Sudan in the contested area of al-Fashaga. The 260 km long border strip stretches across the regional state of Gedaref, located at the crossroads between Sudan, Ethiopia (including Tigray), and Eritrea. Although it dates back to the early 20th century, Ethiopia's recent internal conflict in the Tigray region and the two countries' divergent positions on the GERD issue have refueled the scramble to assert sovereignty over the area. At the outbreak of the operations, many of the Amhara regional state soldiers left their positions along the Sudanese border to join the ENDF. Sudan has exploited the moment to launch a large-scale military operation aimed at regaining control of territories that have remained for many years under the control of Ethiopian farmers protected by Amhara paramilitary groups.⁸ Since then, clashes along the border have increased as well as the tension between Addis Ababa and Khartoum. The quarrel assumed a regional dimension with the involvement of Egypt. The military agreement between Sudan and Egypt uncovered the regional dimension of the crisis by tying the al-Fashaga dispute to the Nile waters issue. The most likely scenario is that Sudan and Ethiopia follow the path taken in the past, feeding proxy actors, thereby unleashing a new cycle of mutual destabilization.

Further, the crisis in Tigray could affect the stability of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's main regional ally: Isaias Afwerki. The greatest danger for Eritrea comes from the possibility that the conflict in Tigray could spill over into Eritrean territory. This eventuality could increase the pressure on the fault lines of the Afwerki regime opening up an eventual change in power. Currently, however, the conflict seems to have produced the opposite effect for the Eritrean strongman. The fear of a Tigrayan encroachment has recompact the Eritrean elites and people to face their historical enemy.

Finally, the Ethiopian recent developments have alarmed the international community both for the ongoing humanitarian crisis and the potential consequences of the conflict. The European Union and Italy are particularly concerned with mid-term developments. The growing vulnerability of Ethiopia and the rise of violence in the area would generate instability in a fragile region such as the Horn of Africa, where more than 250 million people live. Accordingly, the main European concern is that the worsening of the crisis could trigger new migratory flows towards the northern shores of the Mediterranean.

⁷ DW (2021). *Ethiopia: Tigray conflict and dam dispute dent Abiy's image*, DW News. URL: <https://www.dw.com/en/ethiopia-tigray-conflict-and-dam-dispute-dent-abiys-image/a-58215285> [accessed 4/8/2021]

⁸ Bearak M. (2021). A border war looms between Sudan and Ethiopia as Tigray conflict sends ripples through region, *The Washington Post*, 19/3/2021. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/03/19/sudan-ethiopia-border-conflict/> [accessed 5/8/2021]

The Korean peninsula and the Biden Administration

Introduction

In early May 2021, the Biden administration announced that the comprehensive policy review on North Korea policy has been completed. This means that the different agencies of the US administration involved in elaborating the US policy towards North Korea, as the National Security Council, State Department, the Department of Defence and the various intelligence agencies, carried out a comprehensive re-assessment of the nature of the threat posed by North Korea and of the legacy of Trump's policies. The review also introduces new measures aimed at consolidating the US extended deterrence towards Pyongyang as well as several ideas to re-start the process of negotiations with the North Korean regime, stalled after the failure of the Hanoi summit in March 2018.

The details remain classified. However, the Biden administration publicly announced the main principles and concepts characterizing the policy review. Administration officials have described the new policy "calibrated, practical, gradual and flexible". This new strategy is the result of a will to create a substantial discontinuity with the past, while preserving some of the key achievements of 2018-2019, such as the Singapore Joint Statement and the North Korean moratorium on long range missile tests. The policy review also seeks to locate more effectively Washington's North Korea policy with the overall US strategy in the Indo-Pacific. This means that any policy towards Pyongyang should be aligned with US priorities in the region, such as consolidating the US led network of alliances in the region, maintaining the security of US allies through extended deterrence, and upholding the main material and normative pillars of the regional order (Dian and Meijer; Dian, 2020).

The rest of this article will describe the main features of the period of negotiations promoted by the Trump administration in 2018-19, the key components of the policy review and the results of the bilateral summit between President Biden and the South Korean President Moon Jae-in. Moreover, it will explore the possibilities and the limits for a new strategy of engagement in the short and medium term. While the COVID-19 pandemic and the great power competition between US and China do not favour any progress towards a long-lasting solution of the North Korean problem, the Biden administration might shift to a arms control policy, that could deliver significant progresses, while falling short of achieving a complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

North Korea and Trump's legacy

Trump's legacy for the US relationship with North Korea, and more broadly Washington's role in the Korean peninsula, is complex and multifaceted. During the first year of his presidency, Trump responded to North Korean missile tests¹ with the policy of maximum pressure, characterized by threats of a military strike against Pyongyang and bellicose rhetoric. At the time Trump famously stated that "North Korea will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen before".

In early 2018, the Trump administration promoted a U turn, starting a process of negotiations that led to three bilateral meetings between the US President and the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un: in Singapore in June 2018, in Hanoi in February 2019 at the village of Panmunjom in the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea in June 2019. During the same period, South Korea, led by the progressive president Moon Jae-in, promoted a parallel process of engagement that led to several bilateral summits as well as to Moon's visit to Pyongyang in September 2019.

Trump's approach was unprecedented in terms of style, method and substance. In terms of style, Trump went from the "fire and fury" rhetoric to the "love letters" with Kim Jong-un (Jackson,

¹ In 2017 North Korea carried out its six nuclear test detonating an hydrogen bomb with a yield of about 150 kilotons; during the same year it launched 3 ICBMs and several IRBMs

2019 a). In terms of method, Trump largely bypassed the State Department, Department of Defence and the intelligence agencies, centralizing the policy process in the White House and adopting a unique and peculiar personal diplomacy. Trump thought he could achieve a diplomatic breakthrough negotiating directly with Kim Jong-un, while reducing at the minimum preparatory work on policy details before the summit. This approach was also characterized by reduced consultation with regional allies, in a period in which alliances with Seoul and Tokyo were experiencing a political rift due to the tariffs imposed by Washington and by Trump's own transactional alliance management (Dian, 2018).

Trump's strategy did not deliver a comprehensive solution to the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and ballistic programme. In particular, the two sides could not find a compromise on fundamental differences such as the meaning of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula² and the lifting of sanctions. Moreover, it created several problems for the US strategy on the peninsula and in the region. The meetings with Kim Jong-un contributed to legitimize the North Korean dictator domestically and internationally. The lack of consultation with US allies and unilateral concessions, such as the suspension of joint military exercises with South Korea created problems of credibility for the US overall role in the region.

The negotiations did not stop the North Korean progress on the technological front. Pyongyang showcased its last achievements during the military parades of 2020, including new intercontinental ballistic missiles such as Hwasong-16 (ICBM) e il Pukgukson-4 (SLBM)³. Moreover, it has continued to produce nuclear materials needed to produce nuclear weapons.

With the end of the process of negotiation in mid-2019 and particularly with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea has severed all its contacts with the rest of the world, further complicating any meaningful progress in the relations with Washington and Seoul.

Despite all these limits, Biden inherited from Trump two results that can constitute meaningful starting points for future negotiations: the Singapore Joint Statement and the *de facto* moratorium on testing of nuclear weapons and ICBMs. The first, signed by Trump and Kim in June 2018 provides an important starting point for future negotiations, namely the commitment to "build a lasting peace regime" and "work towards the complete denuclearization of the peninsula". This wording represents a significant point of departure because it implies a bargaining process rather than a demand to North Korea to unilaterally surrender its nuclear and ballistic arsenal. The moratorium on nuclear and ICBM testing represents another significant starting point, on which the parts could build upon, working towards a more comprehensive moratorium on all missile tests.

The North Korea policy review

Beyond the possibility of using the Singapore Declaration and the moratorium as focal points for future negotiations, the North Korea policy review promoted by the Biden administration has underlined primarily the need for discontinuity both with Trump's personal diplomacy and the strategic patience adopted by the Obama administration, considered too reactive and conservative.

The White House, through the Press Secretary Jen Psaki has defined the new strategy "calibrated, practical and measured", "a combination of diplomacy and stern deterrence", designed to "make practical progress that increases security of the United States, their allies and deployed forces" (Reuters, 2021). Officially, the Biden administration remains committed to the objective of achieving complete, verifiable, irreversible, denuclearization (or CVID), despite the significant

² For North Korea denuclearization of the Korean peninsula means the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea, the end of the US commitment to provide extended deterrence to South Korea and a significant reduction of US military presence in the region. For the US, it means the dismantlement of the North Korean nuclear and ballistic programme

³ The Hwasong-16 is a MIRVed ICBM, namely and Intercontinental ballistic missile equipped with multiple warheads that can re-enter in the atmosphere and aim at different targets; The Pukgukson-4 is a Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile, designed to be fitted into a ballistic submarine. Both systems are meant to enhance the credibility of nuclear deterrence

advances made by Pyongyang in the nuclear and ballistic realm and the recognition that at the moment progress can be only incremental.

From the few information publicly available it is possible to describe the main features of the new approach stemming from the policy review. Firstly, Biden will reverse the method of the personal diplomacy promoted by Trump, returning to a much more orthodox diplomatic style. Rather than seeking a comprehensive agreement negotiated at the top, he will entrust his diplomats and negotiators to achieve gradual but significant steps at the working level, before agreeing to a summit meeting. Moreover, Biden will not make major unilateral concessions or other sizeable goodwill gestures in order to restart the process of engagement. Secondly and most importantly, the North Korea policy must be coherent with the overall US strategy in the Indo-Pacific region. This means that the US wants to preserve its own hegemonic role in the region, to consolidate the regional order and its main strategic and normative pillars, and increasingly operate in the context of great power competition with China. In turn this means that the North Korea policy should go hand in hand with the consolidation of the US extended deterrence in the region and it should contribute to the solidity of the alliances with South Korea and Japan. Consequently, consultation and coordination with the allies are deemed as essential.

The Biden-Moon summit and progress for the alliance

The summit between President Biden and President Moon held in Washington on the 21 May, can be considered the consequence of the policy review. Analysts and observers feared that the summit could expose the differences between the two sides on not only how to deal with North Korea, but also with China. These differences emerge from distinct time constraints and partially divergent strategic priorities. While Biden is in the first six month of his mandate, Moon's presidency will end with the next elections in March 2022. Since Korean presidents are constitutionally banned from running for re-election, Moon's time to secure his legacy is rapidly running out. Furthermore, Biden's emphasis on deterrence, the role of the alliance, and gradual steps appears at odds with Moon's will to promote a lasting process of reconciliation with North Korea (Sign, 2021).

Despite these premises, the summit can be considered a success for both sides, for several reasons. Firstly, Moon was the second Head of State to pay an official visit to Biden's White House, after the Japanese Prime Minister Suga, but before other key allies such as the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. This can be considered a signal of the centrality of the region for contemporary US foreign policy. Secondly and most importantly, the summit successfully signalled the good health of the alliance, definitively putting the "amoral transactionalism" and the turbulence that characterized the Trump period in the past. Moreover, the renewed centrality of the US-ROK alliance has led Washington to solve policy problems that plagued the relationship with Seoul in the Trump period, such as the controversy over the host nation support funds⁴.

The summit produced a comprehensive statement, including a long and significant list of deliverables both on North Korea as well as on economic and security cooperation. The statement, building on the *Joint Vision for the Alliance* signed by Obama and Lee in 2009 (Obama White House, 2009), defines the alliance as the "linchpin of stability and security for the region". Biden and Moon reaffirmed their commitment to the alliance and claimed that Seoul and Washington will "coordinate in lockstep" their policies toward North Korea. The US restated its role as provider of extended deterrence against the North Korean threat. The statement also includes the possible expansion of the alliance cooperation in new domains such as space and cyber (The White House, 2021). Furthermore, US and South Korea have agreed to terminate the Revised Missile Guidelines, which limited the range of South Korean ballistic missiles to 800 km.

⁴ The previous host nation support agreement, that regulated the contribution South Korea offered to pay for the stationing of US troops in the country had expired in 2019. The Trump administration had demanded to increase the amount paid by Seoul from 1 billion USD to 5 billion. The Biden administration concluded a new six year agreement that includes a 19% increase of the South Korean contribution

The document also underlines that the two sides will build on the Singapore Joint Statement and Panmunjom Declarations to promote further dialogue with North Korea and to aim at the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. This wording signals how the Biden administration has been willing to embrace Moon's preference for building upon the most significant diplomatic achievements of the 2018-19 period. Furthermore, it highlights a process of convergence that goes beyond the Peninsula and denotes a significant convergence of the Moon administration towards the US priorities in the region, in terms of regional order, the role of China, human rights, and freedom of navigation. This means that in the final year of its mandate Moon will probably abandon the "strategic ambiguity" toward China and he will cooperate with the United States, promoting policies aimed at consolidating the US led regional order and its key normative and material pillars (Nilsson-Wright and Yu, 2021).

In practical terms Moon's New Southern Policy is considered a form of support of the US vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, that leads both to a more intensive participation to bilateral and minilateral forms of security cooperation with regional allies and to a renewed emphasis on values and human rights as foundations of the regional order. While South Korea will not join the QUAD⁵, it is considering joining initiatives it promotes, if they are not presented as directly compromising its own relationship with China, or if they regard "soft issues" such as vaccine diplomacy and humanitarian activities.

The statement also underlines that the two sides will cooperate for preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait as well as the importance of multilateral cooperation and coordination on critical issues for regional stability, such as freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. These positions represent major deviations from the traditional South Korean caution on matters that could create frictions with China.

The summit paved the way for "new frontiers of cooperation" for the two allies, in sectors such as supply chain resilience, vaccines diplomacy, climate change and artificial intelligence. Several South Korean companies committed to invest to develop and produce in the US in innovative sectors such as AI, 5G, electric vehicles, chips and semi-conductors. This commitment is significant since it displays the South Korean will to reduce its economic dependency from China. Moreover, it constitutes an attempt to create new constituencies for the alliance, encouraging new economic sectors to develop a stake in the bilateral relationship.

Limits and hypotheses for the future

How likely is Biden's calibrated, practical and measured approach to succeed in making progress with North Korea, while avoiding compromises on the overall US position in the region? On the one hand the new strategy is unlikely to produce major crises or major debacles for the US. The Biden administration will not rush to meet Kim Jong-un for a summit with very little possibility to deliver major results. Moreover, it will not make any problematic unilateral concessions, such as the cancellation of the joint military exercises (decided by Trump) or any sharp reduction of the US troops in the peninsula (repeatedly threatened by Trump). Nor is Biden likely to replicate anything close to the escalation of the "fire and fury" period. On the other hand, Biden and Moon face significant limits. Domestic politics in Seoul is probably the most significant. With Moon's mandate expiring in March 2022, the South Korean government needs to accelerate if it wants to secure any progress. Biden's gradualism suggests that no meaningful breakthrough is likely to materialize before a new President is elected in Seoul.

The pandemic of Covid-19 has created further constraints. Since mid-2020 North Korea has severed all contacts with the rest of the world, to reduce the impact of the pandemic. The regime has cut trade with China and announced that North Korean athletes will not participate in the Tokyo Olympics. Despite this self-imposed isolation, Kim Jong-un himself has admitted that the virus has

⁵ The Quad is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue composed by US, Australia, Japan and India, launched firstly in 2007 and resumed in 2017

generated a great crisis in the country and he has also criticized members of the politburo for failing to implement measures to contain the virus (Smith, 2021). While the pandemic could provide an occasion for cooperation, offering North Korea access to vaccines, after the collapse of the negotiations in Hanoi in 2019, Pyongyang is unlikely to accept offers that are not associated with sanction relief, or any progress on the nuclear and ballistic front. Finally, the accelerating competition between the US and China contributes to creating an inhospitable environment for negotiations with North Korea. China is a necessary partner for any long-term solution of the North Korean problem and the partition of the Peninsula, starting from the necessary step of signing a treaty declaring the termination of the Korean War.

Despite the significance of these constraints, the policy review might open some possibility for progress in the medium term. While the official position of the Biden administration maintains the CVID as the long-term US objective, the “calibrated, practical, gradual and flexible approach” might lead to shifting the focus on negotiations to arms control. A shift from de-nuclearization to arms control would entail a radical change for negotiations and for the US bargaining position. This would mean recognizing, at least implicitly, that CVID is unrealistic and unobtainable, that North Korea is a *de facto* nuclear weapon state, and that it will not completely dismantle its nuclear and ballistic arsenal in the foreseeable future.

This shift has been advocated in the last years by several analysts and scholars. The most notable examples are the article, *An Engagement Strategy for Hawks*, by Sue Mi Terry and Eric Brewer on *Foreign Affairs* and the report *Risk Realism, The Arms Control Endgame for North Korea Policy* by Van Jackson, published by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) (Jackson, 2019b). Other examples are the proposals by Jeffrey Lewis (Lewis, 2018), Ankit Panda and Vipin Narang (Panda and Narang, 2018).

The US could work towards more realistic and achievable objectives, such as negotiating limitations or even cuts to the production, testing and the deployment of delivery systems such as MIRVed ICBMs, SLBMs, low yield IRBMs or limiting the production of nuclear materials such as uranium, plutonium and tritium. These forms of arm control could create positive incentives for North Korea to limit provocations and aggressive behaviours, helping to stabilize the peninsula and the region.

Concessions from North Korea should be reciprocated by the US that could lift some of the sanctions, limit military exercises, especially those including nuclear capable bombers, sign a treaty that declares the end of the Korean War, and institutionalize a forum for security consultation.

The shift towards arms control has generally been criticized with four main arguments. Though it might help legitimize North Korea’s regime domestically and internationally, it presents problems of verifiability and credibility. It also might undermine the non-proliferation regime and create fear of abandonment for US allies.

The first criticism could be considered valid before 2018, when Trump contributed to elevate Kim Jong-un’s standing, opting for a strategy based on personal diplomacy and bilateral summits. The second criticism does not recognize that the non-proliferation regime has already been undermined by North Korea being a *de facto* nuclear power, even if it is not formally recognized by the international community. Problems of credibility and verifiability would be present and significant in any arms reduction negotiations. However, these problems would be more severe for negotiations aiming at achieving denuclearization. The fourth criticism is probably the most significant. The emphasis on consultation and coordination with allies reflects the need to achieve progress while avoiding major problems of alliance management, with allies feeling “abandoned” by the US.

The shift towards arms control negotiations could either be public or covert. The Biden administration, under the rubric of the calibrated, practical, gradual and flexible approach could start negotiations aimed at reducing instability through incremental steps, without explicitly renouncing denuclearization as the ultimate long-term goal. This would help break the deadlock that has followed the Hanoi Summit and help the South Korean government lay the foundations for a long and

sustainable process. This would probably be an acceptable compromise for President Moon, even if it does not resemble the fast-paced pathway to “reunification” envisaged by South Korean progressives in 2018.

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Implications of the NATO and US forces withdrawal from Afghanistan: reaction and interests of the Russian Federation and the gravitating countries

"[...] After the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan, the most important thing for us is to ensure the safety of our allies, the states of Central Asia [...]. The security of the southern borders of the Russian Federation directly depends on this. I truly hope that together we will be able to agree on these foreign policy steps, which will help create the conditions for the formation of a true national leadership within Afghanistan. We are now actively working in this direction",

said September 1st the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergej Viktorovič Lavrov, during his speech for the inauguration of the academic year at the Moscow State Institute for International Relations (MGIMO)¹. These few words are nothing more than the expression of the never-ending interest, as well as of the concern, towards the area that was part of the former Soviet Union and still falls within the Russian sphere of influence. The risk of seeing events precipitate and the spillage of terrorist groups in the countries bordering Afghanistan - and consequently, in the Russian Federation - is tangible. Aware of this danger, Russia nevertheless reacts with thoughtfulness to the change of power in Afghanistan (also because it has never shared the illusion of the West about the possibility of building an Afghan state, with the same type of democracy and women's rights as the Western ones, which is why contacts with the Taliban have never ceased)² Moscow is in fact ready to collaborate with the Taliban but under certain conditions, first of which is the security of Central Asia. Moreover, Russia, together with China, Iran, India and Pakistan, is one of the countries that has long been trying to maintain "good relations" with the Taliban³, although not always with great success. In fact, the organization is guilty of collaborating with Chechen terrorists.

Bilateral relations

In 2000 the Taliban movement recognized the independence of the Republic of Ichkeria on the territory of Chechnya, also establishing diplomatic relations with the government of Aslan Alievich Maskhadov. According to Russian intelligence, Chechen militants had reached an agreement to be stationed in the Afghan area of Mazar-i-Sharif, on the border with Uzbekistan, offering to provide refuge to the Chechen government in exile. In the same year, the Taliban called on the Muslim world to declare holy war on Russia to force it to end its counter-terrorism operation in Chechnya⁴: *"Islamic countries should allow the faithful to participate in the jihad in Chechnya. If we do not defend Chechnya today, tomorrow Muslims in some other country or region will suffer the same fate"*, read the report of the daily Shariat. Therefore, with a view to proselytizing, in March 2000, the Taliban

¹ "После выхода натовских войск из Афганистана для нас самое главное - обеспечить безопасность наших союзников, центральноазиатских государств <...>. От этого зависит напрямую безопасность южных рубежей Российской Федерации. Очень надеюсь, что вместе мы сможем договориться о таких внешних шагах, которые будут способствовать созданию внутри Афганистана условий для формирования настоящего общенационального руководства. Мы в этом направлении сейчас активно работаем". Full speech (min. 11:25) on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1w48mNco_40

² Источник сообщил о визите делегации движения "Талибан" в Москву (A source reported on the visit of the Taliban delegation to Moscow) dated July 8, 2021 <https://www.interfax.ru/moscow/777048>; Представители "Талибана" сообщили, что прилетели в Москву для обсуждения ситуации в Афганистане – СМИ ("Taliban officials said they flew to Moscow to discuss the situation in Afghanistan - media") dated July 8, 2021 <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/v-moskvu-prileteli-predstaviteli-taliban/31349051.html>

³ Кабулов заявил, что Россия будет налаживать контакты с талибами ("Kabulov said that Russia will establish contacts with the Taliban") <https://tass.ru/politika/12251183>

⁴ Талибы объявили России священную войну ("Talibans declared the Holy War to Russia") dated February 15, 2000 <https://lenta.ru/news/2000/02/15/taliban/>

radio "Voice of Sharia" began broadcasting in Russian. A month later, the then Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov announced Moscow's readiness, should the need arise, to bomb Chechen terror camps in Afghanistan. In response, the Taliban warned that the Uzbekistan and Tajikistan would suffer the consequences of any attacks on Afghan territory⁵. However, the Taliban attitude was revealed in all its ambiguity in 2001. As stated in the same year by the then Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov in an interview with the BBC⁶, the Afghan Taliban, on behalf of their spiritual leader Mullah Omar, would offer Moscow to join in a joint struggle with the US. The Kremlin rejected the offer. However, the Russian response came in March 2003 with the recognition of the Taliban by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation⁷ as a terrorist organization, a condition that still remains today.

Relations began to improve in 2018. In November of that year, representatives of the Taliban participated for the first time in the talks on Afghanistan in Moscow⁸: the meeting took place behind closed doors, and was chaired on the Russian side by Lavrov. "Russia has not tried to hide contacts with the Taliban, as they are part of Afghan society," said the minister, adding that such contacts represent an attempt to persuade the Islamists to abandon the armed struggle and start a national dialogue with the government. The following year, in February 2019, a Taliban delegation participated in the forum of inter-Afghan dialogue in Moscow⁹, a conference convened by the Afghan diaspora (the foreign ministry, however, provided for the logistical aspects). The official meeting, on the other hand, took place a few months later (May 2019) when Minister Lavrov received a Taliban delegation in Moscow¹⁰ to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Speaking at the opening ceremony, Lavrov said the events within the Moscow format and the inter-Afghan dialogue meetings would make an important contribution in solving the problems in Afghanistan. Their implementation would have meant the beginning of a new stage on the way to the start of the peace process and its maximum legitimacy, thanks to the involvement of all social and political forces, including the opposition. In response to criticism, the minister reiterated that the arrival in Moscow of representatives of the political office of the Taliban movement confirmed Russia's active role in the Afghan settlement process.

It is therefore not surprising, with these premises, the failure to close the Russian embassy in Kabul (a move that could actually be a sort of test useful for evaluating the reaction and attitude that the Taliban will take in the near future), despite the fact, since August 16, that the Afghan government has passed the diplomatic seat under the protection of the Taliban¹¹ who, moreover, have not hindered the evacuation of Russian citizens and a hundred Ukrainian citizens¹².

However, Russia will not be in a hurry to recognize the Taliban and the decision will depend on the fact that, after the first "inclusive" and temperance-permeated declarations, they will return to brutal methods of government, so Moscow could switch to diplomatic collaboration rather than full recognition. How could it justify to its citizens that those who have been called terrorists for years,

⁵ *Талибы издали декларацию о победе над Британской империей, СССР и США* ("Taliban issue declaration of victory over British Empire, USSR and USA") dated August 19, 2021 <https://storm100.livejournal.com/9748081.html>

⁶ *"Сергей Иванов: Талибы предлагали вместе напасть на США"* ("Sergey Ivanov: Taliban offered to attack the USA together") dated January 19, 2012 – https://www.bbc.com/russian/rolling_news/2012/01/120119_rn_ivanov_taliban

⁷ *Решение Верховного Суда РФ от 14 февраля 2003 г. N ГКПИ 03-116* <http://nac.gov.ru/zakonodatelstvo/sudebnye-resheniya/reshenie-verhovnogo-suda-rf-ot-14-fevralya.html>

⁸ *Лавров заявил о важности участия талибов* во встрече по Афганистану* ("Lavrov spoke about the importance of the Taliban * participation in the meeting on Afghanistan") dated November 9, 2018 <https://ria.ru/20181109/1532435419.html>

⁹ *Делегация движения "Талибан" прибыла на межафганскую встречу в Москве* ("Taliban delegation arrives for inter-Afghan meeting in Moscow") del 05.02.2019 <https://ria.ru/20190205/1550404965.html>

¹⁰ *Талибы встретились с Лавровым в Москве* ("Talibans met Lavrov in Moscow") dated May 19, 2019 <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1303125>

¹¹ *"Посольство России в Кабуле перешло под охрану талибов"* ("Russian Embassy in Kabul comes under Taliban protection") del 16.08.2021. <https://iz.ru/1207904/2021-08-16/posolstvo-rossii-v-kabule-pereshlo-pod-okhranu-talibov>

¹² *"Опубликовано видео эвакуации россиян из Кабула"* ("The video of the evacuation of Russians from Kabul has been published") dated August 25, 2021 <https://iz.ru/1212177/2021-08-25/opublikovano-video-evakuatcii-rossii-iz-kabula>

and have taken full control of Afghanistan with violence and with no respect for human rights so beloved in the West, could potentially become "good administrators and governors" of a country? Such an operation, worthy of Orwell himself, would require too much time and effort in terms of STRATCOM and would not necessarily produce the desired result.

A possible solution was formulated by the president's special envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, during his interview on the Rossiya-24 channel: "The removal of the Taliban from the list of terrorists in Russia is only possible after this occurs at the level of the UN Security Council, and for this the Taliban should demonstrate to behave in a "civil" manner¹³.

Defence within the Collective Security Treaty Organization

On a political-military level, Moscow has made it clear that, given the Soviet experience which proved to be unsuccessful, it will not send troops to Afghanistan, but at the same time it is preparing to defend the borders of the Central Asian countries, some of which - particularly Tajikistan - are it linked through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). "For this, exercises have been carried out and various scenarios developed to prevent the infiltration of individual terrorist groups across borders," says Kazancev¹⁴, professor at the Higher School of Economics and lead researcher at MGIMO.

The withdrawal of US / NATO troops from Afghanistan presents "Russian NATO" with new challenges. The potential threats force Russia and other members of the organization to carry out some preventive movements aimed at strengthening military cooperation in the region and increasing the collective defence potential along the Afghan border. In this context, the threat from Afghanistan represents an important factor of regional destabilization, which was addressed by Moscow in two directions: through the strengthening of the 201st base in Tajikistan¹⁵ and the carrying out of a significant number of military exercises in the summer. / autumn of the current year (about 10)¹⁶. The latter are aimed not only at demonstrating the collective strength of the CSTO in the region and the availability of the Armed Forces of the RF for a possible intervention (support) of one of the members of the alliance, or at strengthening military cooperation, including the increase the degree of interoperability of selected tactical units of the Russian, Tajik, Kyrgyz and Kazakh armies, as well as training in the field of counter-terrorism high in the mountains. Most of these exercises, despite having a routine character, represent an important training moment since it is not possible to predict the threat, even theoretical, represented by the Taliban.

Obviously, the potential of the CSTO in the Central Asian region rests mainly on the shoulders of the armed forces of the RF or the 201st base in Tajikistan, therefore one can expect its further activation, including an accelerated modernization and an intensification of the process of training in the event of a threat to allies. With this in mind, the first tactical group has already been transferred from the 201st base in Dushanbe to the Harb-Maidon training camp, where joint Russian-Uzbek-Tajik

¹³ Interview with Zamir Kabulov dated August 16, 2021 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MI6w4S0K5gs>

¹⁴ *Ракет и наркотики. Какой будет экономика Афганистана при талибах* и чего ждать России* ("Racket and drugs. What will the economy of Afghanistan be like under the Taliban and what to expect for Russia") dated August 23, 2021 <https://secretmag.ru/news/reket-i-narkotiki-kakoi-budet-ekonomika-afganistana-pri-talibakh-i-chego-zhdad-rossii.htm>

¹⁵ Tajikistan is currently home to one of the most important Russian military bases outside of Russia itself. The 201st military base is located in two cities: Dushanbe and Bochtar. It houses infantry, tanks, artillery, but also intelligence structures responsible for the communication of the Russian forces. That is why the question of strengthening air defence units is now crucial. It should be remembered that the Russian side has extensive experience in the field of new challenges in the field of protecting military bases from air attacks, including, for example, drones (see operations in Syria). Vladimir Šamanov, chairman of the defence commission of the Duma and delegate of the parliament to the meeting of the CSTO countries said that it is already necessary to think about providing new opportunities for action in the context of the 201st military base, but also in terms of a more broad border protection against terrorist threats.

¹⁶ *"Завершились совместные учения России, Узбекистана и Таджикистана"* ("Joint exercises of Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan completed") dated August 1, 2021 <https://iz.ru/1205060/2021-08-10/zavershilis-sovmestnye-ucheniia-rossii-uzbekistana-i-tadzhikistana>; *"Трехсторонние военные учения в Таджикистане успешно завершились"* ("Trilateral military exercises in Tajikistan successfully completed"), dated August, 12 2021 <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/08/12/training/>

exercises were held from 5 to 10 August, with the involvement of about 1,500 military with heavy equipment (tanks, IFVs, artillery, EW vehicles, etc.).

At the moment, Tajikistan is potentially the most threatened, as it has large border troops, but in fact has a weak army.

In September, the exercises of the CSTO rapid reaction force, "Rubezh-2021" with the participation of the 55th Mechanized Brigade of the FR, took place at the "Edelweis" shooting range, while in August, at the Termez training range. Russian-Uzbek military exercises were held with the participation of elements of the Russian 15th Brigade, destined for stabilization missions, and the Spetsnaz Groups (*Спецназ - Формирования специального назначения* - Special Forces Training). The scenario of the exercise obviously presupposes counter-terrorism operations, that is the fight against the so-called illegal armed formations. Traditionally, this type of collective counter-terrorism exercise will culminate in the maneuvers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) "Mirnaya Missiya-2021" (Peace Mission) scheduled for 11-25 September this year.

Given the approaching Taliban danger, the countries that are part of the organization are still seeking support even outside of it. It can thus be seen that the Dushanbe authorities are striving to obtain broader guarantees for the future when it comes to regional security. An example of this is the visit by the Turkish defence minister, who met the country's president in Tajikistan¹⁷. President Emomali Rahmon and Hulusi Akar were to discuss the issues of improving security and defence cooperation of both countries, as well as cooperation in the formation process of the armed forces and the development of the armaments industry. The president of Tajikistan also sent an invitation to Turkish president Erdoğan to visit the country. At the same time, the US State Department hosted Tajikistan Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin and a delegation from Tajikistan¹⁸. The eighth annual bilateral consultation between the United States and Tajikistan¹⁹ took place. The US side was represented by a team of diplomats led by Assistant Secretary of the Office for South and Central Asia Dean Thompson. During the talks, according to the official statement, the commitment of the United States to the independence and sovereignty of Tajikistan was reaffirmed. The parties participating to the talks also agreed that their common goal is a lasting solution to the problems highlighted in Afghanistan. It was noted that delegations discussed issues related to security and law enforcement, human rights and energy policy and the economy. The State Department noted that participants reaffirmed their countries' commitment to jointly address regional security threats, to cooperate in efforts to combat terrorism and professionalize security services.

Further interests of Moscow: the energy sector

Interest in Afghanistan is not limited to stabilizing the area and stemming the spread of terrorism, Russia has other projects related, mainly, to the energy sector. In fact, in 2010 a framework agreement was signed for the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI)²⁰ gas pipeline with a length of 1.7 thousand kilometres and a capacity of 33 billion m3. The construction cost was estimated at around US \$ 10 billion and the pipe supply contract was won by the Chelyabinsk tube rolling plant. For the next nine years the parties met constantly, signing

¹⁷ *После Бишкека. Эмомали Рахмон встретился с министром национальной обороны Турции* ("After Bishkek. Emomali Rahmon met with the Minister of National Defense of Turkey") dated August 1, 2021 <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/politics/20210701/posle-bishkeka-emomali-rahmon-vstretilsya-s-ministrom-natsionalnoi-oboroni-turtsii>

¹⁸ "Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III's Meeting With the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan Sirojiddin Muhriddin", dated July 2, 2021 <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2681734/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iiis-meeting-with-the-minister-of->

¹⁹ *Secretary Blinken's Meeting with Tajikistan Foreign Minister Muhriddin*, dated July 1, 2021 <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-meeting-with-tajikistan-foreign-minister-muhriddin/>

²⁰ *Leaders Mark Start Of Work On Afghan Section Of TAPI Pipeline*, dated February 23, 2018 https://www.rferl.org/a/tapi-pipeline-afghanistan-pakistan-turkmenistan-india-taliban-herat/29058473.html?utm_content=buffer8ef3&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

increasingly detailed agreements²¹. To date, given the high political instability, the protracted fighting and the lack of control by the government of the peripheral provinces, the construction of the pipeline has not yet begun. A possible stabilization of the Afghan situation could lead Russia not only to be the main supplier of pipes but also help increase fuel supplies by redirecting at least the five and a half billion cubic meters of Turkmen gas purchased annually to the south.

Another element of interest is the shortage of electricity in Afghanistan and where, to cover the energy needs of 38 million people, there are 7 power plants with a combined installed capacity of 3.1 gigawatts. For more than a decade, Moscow has had an energy bridge project between Azerbaijan and Iran in its drawer, which, after the recent consolidation of the situation in Karabakh, is more likely to be implemented. In case of interest from the Afghan side, the energy bridge could be extended further east. Furthermore, despite all the difficulties of the case, two hydroelectric plants operate in Afghanistan, Darunta and Pol-e Khomri, and in recent years Russia has gained a great deal of experience both in the modernization and in the construction of new generation hydroelectric plants, also built in particular geographical conditions (such as high altitude).

Conclusions

Finally, drawing attention to Moscow's reaction to the events in Afghanistan, one cannot fail to mention the progressive deterioration of the image of the West in Russia. The victory of the Taliban, which the Russian media describe as a historic defeat for the West (understood as NATO-USA), not failing to underline the short-sightedness of the US, its willingness to impose models that poorly adapt to the local reality in the attempt to westernize a reality to make it similar to his own, has generated a narrative for the domestic public, (proof of the accelerated decline of American world domination) and one for the foreign one, where Washington appears as an unreliable ally (the latter message could be addressed to the 'Ukraine which is heavily relying on US support for joining NATO and above all for funding).

The emergence of the Tajik or Russian Taliban as a possible model is very real, in fact a new myth is being born that still no one has the means to fight and which sees in the retreat of NATO forces – mainly the American ones - a real victory of the fundamentalists, carried on with perseverance and achieved thanks to an unshakable faith.

Summing up the last 20 years, Moscow has nevertheless found that the presence of the US Army in Afghanistan has brought more benefits than harm, however, it has not prevented it from accusing the United States of the fact that, with their connivance, the drug production and trade have flourished in the country. Conversely, Russia acknowledged that the presence of US troops prevented extremists from taking over the country and threatening Russia's neighbours in Central Asia.

The departure of the Americans was well expected, as was the consequent takeover of power by the Taliban, yet many in Russia were surprised at how quickly the Afghan government and army collapsed. By comparison, after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989, the friendly government of Moscow remained in power for two and a half years and would have lasted even longer if, after the collapse of the USSR, the new Russian leadership had not decided to "cut funds" in Kabul.

America's defeat certainly doesn't mean Russia's victory. The takeover of Kabul by the Islamic radicals has encouraged many extremists, who may begin to threaten Russia and its neighbours in Central Asia. Precisely to neutralize this threat - in 2015 - Moscow intervened to help the Damascus government in the Syrian conflict, embarking on a very expensive operation for the state coffers.

²¹ *Taliban Visit Turkmenistan, Promise (Again) to Protect TAPI. TAPI has long been hailed as a monumentally important project – but it's unclear whether it will ever be built.* Dated July 6, 2021 <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/taliban-visit-turkmenistan-promise-again-to-protect-tapi/>

Iran: Ebrahim Raisi' presidential victory and the JCPOA future

The election of the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei¹ as president of a faithful acolyte might facilitate the relations with the West due to the more homogeneous power structure in Tehran, but Ebrahim Raisi tough positions could be problematic². Raisi's election victory signals another cyclical change that Iranian politics went through since 1979³.

Due to a historically very low turnout and the absence of a serious rival Raisi, an extremist who was the country's head of justice⁴, won⁵ with 30% of eligible votes, about the same proportion with which he lost his presidential candidacy in 2017 (he was little known at the time). The large share of null ballots, 3.7 million - almost 13%, compared to the average 2% of the previous elections - highlighted the disenchantment of the Iranians⁶ towards the electoral competition⁷.

Raisi and his hardliners do not care about low popular legitimacy⁸: they celebrate their success in marginalizing reformists and moderates to tighten their grip on the entire body of the state. This could be the first step towards the succession to Ali Khamenei as supreme leader⁹, but the path is likely to be less easy than imagined.

Raisi is not a charismatic political leader and many extremists did not even consider him the "fairest" - religious term used to evaluate candidates - to be president. Unlike his seven predecessors, Raisi is not an eloquent public speaker. Since the starting of his career at the age of twenty in post-revolutionary Iran, he always operated in the shadows as part of the security apparatus¹⁰. Moreover, he takes office as the first Iranian president sanctioned by the United States under a presidential executive order regarding the violation of human rights¹¹. He was also accused of playing a key role as a prosecutor in a commission that sentenced to death thousands of prisoners in 1988¹², which Amnesty International described as a crime against humanity¹³. As head of the judiciary in the past two years he has also been accused by human rights groups of

¹ M. Motamedi, "Hardliner Ebrahim Raisi elected Iran's new president", AlJazeera 19 June 2021; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/19/raisi-wins-irans-presidential-election-amid-low-turnout>

² "Raisi to clarify, but also complicate West's dealings with Iran", France24, 24 June 2021; <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210624-raisi-to-clarify-but-also-complicate-west-s-dealings-with-iran>

³ A. R. Eshraghi, "A familiar victory: Iran's divides under a new president", European Council on Foreign Relations, 21 June 2021; <https://ecfr.eu/article/a-familiar-victory-irans-divides-under-a-new-president/>

⁴ "Iran's Ebrahim Raisi: The hardline cleric set to become president", BBC, 21 June 2021; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57421235>

⁵ P. Afezi, "Khamenei protege wins Iran election amid low turnout", Reuters, 20 June 2021; <https://rb.gy/g41hkf>

⁶ "Why Iranians won't vote: new survey reveals massive political disenchantment", The Conversation, June 10, 2021; <https://theconversation.com/why-iranians-wont-vote-new-survey-reveals-massive-political-disenchantment-162374>

⁷ M. Lipin, "Iranians Vote in Presidential Election Marked by Low Turnout", VOA, 18 June 2021; <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/voa-news-iran/iranians-vote-presidential-election-marked-low-turnout>

⁸ S. Toossi, "Iran—and Ebrahim Raisi—have a legitimacy crisis", The business standard, 25 June 2021; <https://www.tbsnews.net/thoughts/iran-and-ebrahim-raisi-have-legitimacy-crisis-265921>

⁹ N. Bozorgmehr, "Ebrahim Raisi, the hardliner poised to take power in Iran", Financial Times, June 25, 2021; <https://www.ft.com/content/4be9cc3d-c2f3-4238-a9b7-88916835f8e3>

¹⁰ J. Walsh, "Who Is Ebrahim Raisi? Meet Iran's Controversial New Hardline President", Forbes, 19 June 2021; <https://rb.gy/m2wyrd>

¹¹ Presidential Documents, Executive Order 13876 of June 24, 2019, "Imposing Sanctions With Respect to Iran", Federal Register, Vol. 84 No. 123, June 26, 2019; <https://rb.gy/1yst25>

¹² S. Nebehay, "U.N. expert backs probe into Iran's 1988 killings, Raisi's role", June 29 2021, Reuters; <https://rb.gy/y3qmx6>

¹³ Amnesty International, "Iran: Ebrahim Raisi must be investigated for crimes against humanity", 19 June 2021; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/06/iran-ebrahim-raisi-must-be-investigated-for-crimes-against-humanity/>

presiding over a system that allows the execution of minors¹⁴ as well as the detention of Western citizens as hostages. This setting will certainly complicate the dialogue between Iran and the West in the years to come, even if this administration will probably support the restoration of the JCPOA - Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – the nuclear agreement which is now the top priority for the country's economy.

On social media, extremists have celebrated what they call a new effort to "purify" the revolution¹⁵: these groups are likely to look at Raisi to consolidate revolutionary control over the state. In his victory speech, the new president announced that he would serve the entire republic, even those who refused to vote. During the election campaign he was careful not to adopt a too extremist narrative: he met reformist-press leaders promising that he would be open to criticism in exchange for their tacit endorsement.

In what is perhaps the biggest shift of grassroots political alliances in many years, the religious and civil leaders of Iran's Sunni minority, including leading figure Molavi Abdolhamid, have endorsed Raisi as president, ending two decades of unwavering support for reformists: disappointed by the inability to guarantee basic social and political rights, Iran's Sunni leaders took the strategic decision to support those most likely to have the power to really make the difference.

Raisi's tactics indicate that he is relying on co-optation as much as coercion, with many of the country's elites now focused on avoiding further oppression or trying to maintain patronage relationships granting them access to state revenues and resources. The reformist movement is extremely weak after the presidential vote and the Rouhani presidency failure. Raisi will have to go beyond the hard line to address the immense political, economic, health and social challenges that the country is facing.

This victory is another cyclical change: after the elections to the Majlis (Parliament) in 1992, Khamenei political area - then known as 'the Right' - forced rivals to leave all three branches of the government. Then as now, the Guardians Council engineered an election victory by disqualifying unwelcome candidates¹⁶. This consolidation of power led to a rift within the conservatives and a profound ideological metamorphosis within the reformists, who then returned at the 1997 presidential election. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Mir-Hossein Mousavi - whose feud over the outcome of the 2009 presidential elections sparked protests by the Green Wave movement repressed by the IRGC¹⁷ - did not take part in the presidential elections. Given the instability of the Iranian political environment, it would be premature to assume that Raisi's victory represents a definitive shift towards the total control of the state apparatus. New divisions are already opening up within Raisi "principalist" camp¹⁸ indeed. During his tenure as head of justice, the two main corruption trials conducted under his leadership involved his predecessor, Sadegh Larijani, and his internal rival and current Majlis spokesman, Muhammad Bagher Ghalibaf: the growing disappointment of a significant number of voters became tangible. In 2020 a group of principalist personalities and former members of the Basij force wrote a public letter to the supreme leader

¹⁴ US Department of the Treasury press release, "Treasury Designates Supreme Leader of Iran's Inner Circle Responsible for Advancing Regime's Domestic and Foreign Oppression", 4 November 2019; <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm824>

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, "Engaging Iran Remains Vital after Presidential Election", 21 June 2021; <https://rb.gy/k8euml>

¹⁶ D. Jafari, B. E. Leib, "Iran's Raisi was Selected, not Elected", Iran International, 6 July 2021; <https://rb.gy/bmdgxz>

¹⁷ M. Ayatollahi Tabaar, "Iran's War Within", Foreign Affairs, September/October 2021; <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2021-08-05/irans-war-within-ebrahim-raisi>

¹⁸ Principalists or conservatives, politically set on the right, opposed to the reformists, they dominate the Assembly of Experts and the Council of the Guardians of the Constitution in S. A. Arjomand e N. J. Brown, "The Rule of Law, Islam, and Constitutional Politics in Egypt and Iran", SUNY Press, 2013, p. 150: "*Conservative* is no longer a preferred term in Iranian political discourse. *Usulgara*, which can be clumsily translated as "*principlist*" is the term now used to refer to an array of forces that previously identified themselves as conservative, fundamentalist, neo-fundamentalist, or traditionalist. It developed to counter the term *eslahgara*, or reformist, and is applied to a camp of not necessarily congruous groups and individuals"

calling for profound political reforms in the regime structure. According to the recurring post-1979 pattern, the rising radical camp splits as some of its members become moderate after experiencing the system's ideological limitations and operational errors, but they are ultimately ousted by the more radical wing. Raisi won these presidential elections for the hard line, but the notorious cycle of political protests seems to continue.

Under pressure to revive an economy paralyzed by US sanctions, his hostility towards the US means that Raisi is unlikely to respond to Western calls for a broader deal covering Iran's ballistics agenda, meddling in neighboring countries and Western citizens' detentions.

Khamenei ruled Iran since revolutionary leader Khomeini's death in 1989 and has the final say on all foreign policy matters¹⁹. Raisi, like Khamenei, is suspicious and skeptical of Western intentions towards Iran and will be cautious about future Western engagement. This foreshadows a continuing pattern of anti-American resistance, economic nationalism and internal repression, punctuated by moments of pragmatism.

Raisi's electoral success was highly anticipated considering the decision of the Council of the Guardians to exclude from the electoral race²⁰ potential major rivals that added to low turnout recorded. For the first time Iran will have a president in complete harmony with Khamenei: this should help clarify the Western policy towards Iran that had been complicated by internal disputes between outgoing President Hassan Rouhani's team - including Foreign Affairs Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif - and extremists loyal to Khamenei. This internal struggle was exemplified by an audio recording attributed to Zarif - emerged in April 2021 - in which the Minister complained of the interference of the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) that respond to Khamenei. A more monolithic power structure will be less weakened by the infighting, which has often hampered Rouhani's agenda.

The president will have to address several issues: a difficult economic situation, in particular unemployment²¹, a stunted vaccination campaign and a problematic foreign policy²² focused on re-establishing diplomatic dialogue with other countries in the region, primarily Saudi Arabia, and on JCPOA relaunching.

The choice of Raisi as president can only be understood in the light of what has happened in recent years and what may happen. The US maximum pressure campaign and the sabotage campaign²³ attributed to Israel²⁴ have alerted the Iranian leadership. The supreme leader feels the urge to cement his legacy and to prepare for the transition²⁵. These factors contribute to explaining the need for Khamenei that all the institutions of the Islamic Republic follow a homogeneous political vision, so as to protect the system interests in this crucial moment. Internal stability will continue to be challenged by re-emerging protests, driven by a combination of socio-economic and political grievances. Increasingly deprived of legitimacy and in the impossibility of any reform, the Islamic Republic will continue to heavily contain popular disaffection.

The Iranian economy is now growing, even if slowly, after nearly three years of contraction²⁶, albeit with 40% of inflation and 30% of absolute poverty in 2019. Inflation is falling and the Iranian

¹⁹ "Iran: How a unique system runs the country", BBC, 18 June 2021; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57260831>

²⁰ ISPI, "Beyond Iran's elections: making sense of Raisi's Islamic Republic", 23 June 2021; <https://rb.gy/eatmrb>

²¹ M. Motamedi, "Can Iran's new President Raisi fix a deeply troubled economy?", AlJazeera, 2 August 2021; <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/8/2/iran-president-raisi-fix-economy>

²² Y. Rizka, "Iran faces a hostile coalition", Middle East Monitor, August 3, 2021; <https://rb.gy/9qq1wa>

²³ "Iran claims arrest of spy group linked to Israel's Mossad", AP, July 27, 2021; <https://rb.gy/j1c5vh>

²⁴ In 2018, Mossad stole thousands of documents on the Iranian nuclear program from a warehouse in Tehran. In 2020 it was accused of various attacks and explosions on missile and nuclear sites, including Natanz, and of two murders: Muhammad al Masri, an Al Qaeda agent, and Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a nuclear scientist; J. Gambrell, "Ex-Mossad chief signals Israel attacked Iran nuclear assets", AP, June 12, 2021; <https://rb.gy/c0ccg7>

²⁵ ISPI, "L'Iran di Raisi: alla ricerca di nuovi equilibri", 24 giugno 2021; <https://rb.gy/mbce9u>

²⁶ World Bank, "Iran's Economic Update — April 2021"; <https://rb.gy/t9arxp>.

currency has regained around 1/3 of its value since it hit an all-time low of the exchange rate in October 2020, but the standard of living is unlikely to return to pre-crisis levels. Raisi will be looking at restoring the nuclear deal and lifting sanctions for an economic boost - this should help further reducing inflation as the imports cost falls. The restoration of the JCPOA is unlikely to lead to new foreign investments in the short term as companies, hit by secondary sanctions following the US withdrawal from the deal, hesitate to place bets on the Iranian market. In particular, this hesitation will hamper job creation prospects: Raisi's success will be judged primarily on his ability to create a major shift in the country's economy.

There will be continuity in the underlying strategy of Iranian foreign policy. This will apply with regard to Iran's stance on nuclear talks, ongoing security talks with Saudi Arabia and regional neighbors, strained relations with Israel²⁷ as well as for strategic relations with China. These policies were designed and shaped by the Supreme National Security Council, of which Raisi was a member as head of the judiciary. The rhetoric towards the United States and Europe has sharpened in recent years and is likely to continue. Economic and security ties with Russia and China will deepen. Raisi's election will likely lead to a relaunch of the strategy towards east as the conservative camp is historically the most inclined to accept a shift towards that center of gravity. While moderates and reformists have traditionally been more cautious and skeptical about China, conservatives have shown a receptive attitude to a friendship between civilizations steeped in historical and political significance²⁸. Iran has heavily invested in the ballistic missile program and tries to compensate its sense of encirclement and relative conventional military weakness with asymmetrical confrontation. It has built a network of proxies with the aim of deterring external threats. For Tehran this is "advanced defense" policy: the exploitation of weak states, such as Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Iraq after 2003²⁹, where it faces its enemies through proxies without direct damage to Iran. Raisi's impact on Iran's foreign policy strategy will reflect an acceleration of pre-existing dynamics rather than a radical change.

Since April 2021 the parties of the JCPOA - P4 + 1 (UK, France, Russia, China and Germany) with the exception of the US - have been meeting in Vienna to restore the agreement and the talks made progress, but any hope of a completely new agreement, not to mention one covering broader issues, does not seem realistic for now.

Tehran informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that the ongoing nuclear development process involved developing fuel for a research reactor³⁰, but metallic uranium could also be used to make a nuclear bomb core. The European powers declared that Iran's move violated the agreement and threatened the reviving talks, the United States called it an "unfortunate step backwards"³¹.

In December 2020, the Iranian parliament passed a law requiring the government to put the uranium metal factory into operation at the Isfahan fuel manufacturing plant within five months. The law also provides for the production of uranium enriched with a concentration of 20% of the isotope most suitable for nuclear fission, known as U-235. Uranium enriched to that level can be used in research reactors, while uranium for military use is enriched to 90% or more. The production of uranium enriched by 20% started in January 2021 and the following month the one of metallic uranium. Iranian officials said on that occasion that metallic uranium was needed to produce an advanced fuel for the Tehran research reactor, which is mainly dedicated to the production of radioisotopes for medical purposes.

²⁷ "Will an attack on Iran derail efforts to revive the nuclear deal?", *The Economist*, April 17, 2021; <https://rb.gy/id4dsj>

²⁸ H. Azizi, "Iran Looking East: A Shifting Balance of Power in Tehran's Foreign Policy", *ISPI*, 15 giugno 2021; <https://rb.gy/qgeq2u>

²⁹ R. Mansour, "Networks of power", *Chatham House*, 26 February 2021; <https://rb.gy/bftm5k>

³⁰ "European powers warn Iran over enriched uranium metal production", *BBC*, 7 July 2021; <https://rb.gy/nxk77l>.

³¹ ICG, *Crisis Watch*, July 2021; <https://rb.gy/bieedg>

IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi informed member states that Iran intended to use 20% enriched uranium to produce fuel for Tehran's research reactor³². British, French and German foreign ministers expressed grave concern over Iran's decision. The parties in Vienna are however trying to negotiate a compromise that would see the United States rejoin the agreement, lift the sanctions and possibly Iran could return to full compliance with the JCPOA, especially to revive the economy³³. Hossein Amirabdollahian' appointment as Foreign Affairs Minister, an ultra-conservative veteran diplomat with anti-West positions close to the IRGC³⁴, will not facilitate the dialogue.

³² C. McFall, D. Karni, "Iran says it has further enriched its uranium, drawing widespread condemnation", Fox News, July 6, 2021; <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/iran-informs-un-nuclear-watchdog-of-increased-uranium-production>

³³ France24, "Iran : Ebrahim Raïssi, investi président, entend lever "les sanctions tyranniques" des États-Unis", 03/08/2021; <https://rb.gy/oqtgww>

³⁴ G. Motevalli, "Iran President Picks Hawkish Diplomat to Lead Nuclear Talks", Bloomberg, August 11, 2021; <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-11/iran-s-raisi-nominates-amir-abdollahian-foreign-minister-isna>

The Biden administration six months after the inauguration: an assessment

On July 20, the Biden administration reached six months in office. It has been a difficult period, with several ups and downs, some foreseeable, others partly unexpected. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted these months and will still affect the administration's policy for several months to come. However, the attention that this state of thing forced the administration to devote to the domestic dimension did not limit its activism at the international level. Here, the last months witnessed a deep – although largely expected – revision of the guidelines that inspired Donald Trump's foreign policy. The White House engaged in relaunching the US role in the United Nations and the other multilateral fora; it reaffirmed NATO's centrality in the dealings with the European allies and revived the dialogue with the European Union, which stalled in the last years. At the bilateral level, one of the first acts was the agreement with Russia to extend for five more years the provisions of the 'New START' treaty (2010) "*on measures for the further reduction and limitation of strategic offensive arms*". The agreement removed what had been a relevant stumbling block in the US-Russia dialogue during the last year of the Trump presidency. However, it does not mean the return to friendly US-Russia relations. Between the two countries, several contentious issues remain. However, the 'New START' deal shed light on room existing for a pragmatic collaboration and the possibility to promote the two countries' mutual interests, as President Biden pointed out in the press conference at the end of his summit with President Putin on June 16, 2021¹.

COVID-19 and the priorities of the domestic agenda

In the last months, contrasting the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of public health and social and economic consequences has been one of the top priorities of the Biden administration. As a presidential candidate, Joe Biden heavily criticised Donald Trump's uncertainties and decisions in this field. In its electoral program, he also pledged to act "*swiftly and aggressively to help protect and support our families, small businesses, first responders and caregivers essential to help us face this challenge, those who are most vulnerable to health and economic impacts, and our broader communities*"². After the inauguration, the President scaled up the vaccination campaign started in December 2020 and adopted new measures to contain and mitigate the impact of the pandemic, presented in the *National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness* of January 2021. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in early August, 58.5 per cent of the US population had received at least one dose of vaccine, and 50.1 per cent (166.203.176 people) was fully vaccinated. However, in July, the spreading of the Delta variant led to a dramatic increase in the contagions (124,928 on August 6 according to the CDC, compared to 15,057 on July 6 and 12,103 on June 6). In its turn, this impacted the approval rate of the President's handling of the pandemic, which, according to a Quinnipiac University poll, while remaining largely positive, is now around 53 per cent compared to 65 per cent in May. The same source also shows a similar – although smaller in quantitative terms – decline in the general approval rate (46 per cent compared to 49 per cent in May) and in the approval rate of the President's handling of the economy

¹ *Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference, Hôtel du Parc des Eaux-Vives, Geneva, Switzerland, June 16, 2021.* Online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/16/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-4> [accessed: August 11, 2021]

² *The Biden Plan to Combat Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Prepare for Future Global Health Threats.* Online: <https://joebiden.com/covid-plan> [accessed: August 11, 2021]

(43 per cent compared to 48 per cent in May)³.

Relaunching the economy and reducing unemployment have been two other areas to which the Biden administration devoted special attention. In this field, the primary effort has been the adoption of a 1.9-trillion-dollars 'stimulus' package ('American Rescue Plan') that Congress passed in March and of a 1.2-trillion-dollars Bipartisan Infrastructure Package on which the Democratic and Republican congressmen agreed at the end of June. On the quantitative aspect of these measures, there are few doubts. As a comparison, the package that the Obama administration promoted as a response to the 2007-2008 economic and financial crisis ('American Recovery and Reinvestment Act') was 'just' 789 billion dollars. More difficult is to assess their potential impact on the economy and occupation. In mid-July, Biden announced the creation of three million jobs in the previous six months, comparing the 600,000 new jobs per month created with Donald Trump's 60,000 new jobs per month. However, on the same occasion, the President also remarked that the recovery would be "amid ups and downs" (Ziegler, 2021). The sharp rise of inflation -- +4.5 per cent year-over-year in June (+5.4 per cent if we consider oil and gas), the highest value since November 1991 -- is another source of concern. The fear is that growing consumer prices could force the Federal Reserve to change the strategy adopted since the pandemic outbreak and reduce the credit supply, negatively affecting the recovery process. Finally, concerns remain about the dynamics of the labour market that in April did not react as expected to the adoption of the American Rescue Plan and that -- despite a better performance in the following months -- accounts for 7.6 million people unemployed more than the pre-pandemic levels (Ewall-Wice, 2021).

In this perspective, the measures to support the economy will, thus, remain on top of the White House's domestic agenda. After Congress passed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Package agreement, the President expressed his willingness to launch a new 3.5-trillion-dollars 'human infrastructure' package. According to the administration, this package aims to drastically reshape the social security system, addressing the weaknesses that the pandemic has highlighted. However, the human infrastructure issue has already proved divisive, fuelling the conflict between the President and the Republic minority in both Houses of Congress. The delation of the clauses more affecting the social security system has been a vital part of the deal that Republicans and Democrats stroke over the Bipartisan Infrastructure Package⁴. The Republican establishment already announced that the party would carry out a staunch opposition to any human infrastructure package and the tax increase that the adoption of such a package would carry with it. Such a position could benefit from the support of some portions of the Democratic Party (Greve, 2021). The majority that the Democrats currently enjoy in both Houses of Congress is slim: on July 30, 220 on 212 in the House of Representatives; 50 on 50 in the Senate, with Vice President Kamala Harris' vote breaking the stalemate. Against this background, the main risk is that the bill (which the White House deems a fundamental one) could be stuck in Congress or passed with amendments that drastically affect its provisions and spirit: an outcome that could be extremely dangerous for the image of the Democratic Party, especially in the light of the upcoming 2022 midterm general elections.

Relaunching multilateralism

At the international level, Joe Biden's elections raised great expectations. The general hope was that the White House could abandon the unilateralist approach that marked Donald Trump's

³ *Biden Loses Ground On His Handling Of COVID-19 Response, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; Infrastructure Bill Gets A Thumbs Up By A 2 To 1 Margin.* Quinnipiac University, Hamden, CT, August 4, 2021. Online: <https://poll.qu.edu/poll-release?releaseid=3814> [accessed: August 11, 2021]

⁴ On the Bipartisan Infrastructure Package see the White House synthesis: *Fact Sheet: Historic Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal*, July 28, 2021. Online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/07/28/fact-sheet-historic-bipartisan-infrastructure-deal> [accessed: August 11, 2021]. The Senate started discussing the Package in early August (Finn, Stelloh and Kapur, 2021)

presidency and adopt a more 'relaxed' mood, especially in relations with the traditional partners. In the electoral campaign, Biden announced – among the first measures he would have enforced as the new US President – the US return into the Paris climate change agreement. He also announced a new US activism in the UN and better relations with the US allies in Europe and the Pacific. In the last months, the administration largely fulfilled these promises. The US re-entered not only the Paris agreement but also the Human Rights Council (which they left in June 2018) and the World Health Organization (which they left in 2020). They restart funding the UN Population Fund (which they stopped funding in 2017), the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA, which they stopped funding in 2018) and several other agencies such as UNAIDS, committing to pay their arrears. However, this new attitude did not lack ambiguity, as the posture that the US assumed last May, during the Palestine-Israeli crisis on Gaza attested. On this occasion, the US Permanent Representative's rigid position did not allow the UN Security Council to adopt a declaration inviting the parties to a ceasefire. The consequence was the sharp criticisms raised on Washington's 'selective multilateralism', criticism that had been already raised in February, when the Biden administration contested the decision of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate possible war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated in the West Bank and Gaza Strip by Israeli and Palestinian personnel alike (Bashi, 2021).

Even in other multilateral fora, the Biden presidency seems to have led to better internal relations. At the G7 summit held in Carbis Bay on June 13-14, the President formally conveyed the message that the US were back on the international stage, supporting his words with a high-mediatic-impact-proposal such as the worldwide adoption of a global minimum corporate tax. According to the administration, the tax (actively supported by the Secretary of the Treasury, Janet Yellen) should be part of a more comprehensive common agenda aimed at strengthening global governance, enhancing health security, speeding up economic recovery, fighting climate change, fostering trade and digital cooperation, and promoting freedom and democracy. These goals have been included in the G7 summit final declaration, together with a shared pledge to multilateralism and a commitment to keep the agenda open to any possible partner. According to the declaration, the agenda's aims should be reached "in collaboration with other countries and within the multilateral rules-based system", "working alongside our G20 partners and with all relevant International Organisations to secure a cleaner, greener, freer, fairer and safer future for our people and planet"⁵. Within this framework, the success that the global minimum corporate tax has met seems to be a clue of Washington's renewed international influence. By early July, 130 states or jurisdictions on the 139 belonging to OECD's Inclusive Framework on BEPS (Base Erosion and Profit Shifting) had already accepted the project of a 15 per cent global minimum corporate tax. The only dissenting members were the three EU countries (Estonia, Ireland, and Hungary), Barbados, Kenya, Nigeria, Peru, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Sri Lanka⁶.

NATO's situation is similar. Before the elections of November 3, 2020, NATO's Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, already announced the Alliance's willingness to start a dialogue with the new potential President. After Joe Biden's victory, the willingness was reaffirmed. The general mood during the NATO Brussels summit on June 14 was, thus, far more relaxed than in the last four years. The consensus on the provisional measures accompanying the allies' withdrawal from Afghanistan was welcomed as a sign of the new internal cohesion (Liptak and Sullivan, 2021). However, some grey areas remain. Not debated in the summit, one of the most critical topics is the uneven financial contribution that the US and Europe provide to the Alliance. This issue is deemed to become more

⁵ *Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué*, June 13, 2021. Online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/13/carbis-bay-g7-summit-communique> [accessed: August 11, 2021]

⁶ *130 countries and jurisdictions join bold new framework for international tax reform*, July 1, 2021. Online: <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/130-countries-and-jurisdictions-join-bold-new-framework-for-international-tax-reform.htm> [accessed: August 11, 2021]

and more relevant approaching 2024, viz. the deadline to meet the Celtic Manor targets. NATO-China relations and the problem NATO global profile, too, will be increasingly important in the future. In this perspective, the end of the Afghan experience seems to strengthen the countries that look at Europe as NATO's main operational theatre, either to protect the members from a threat coming from the East or to project security in the Alliance's proximity. In its turn, this problem reverberates on Europe's search for greater strategic autonomy. The issue raised a special interest during Donald Trump's presidency, but it is since at least the mid-1990s that it is one of the most critical bones of contention between the two shores of the Atlantic. A recent report from the Center for American Progress think-tank remarked how it should be in the US interest to promote greater European military autonomy (Bergmann, Lamond and Cicarelli, 2021). However, such a change seems hardly feasible in the short time due to the traditional resistances of the NATO establishment and the deeply entrenched divisions existing among the European allies.

Russia, China, and Joe Biden's 'two tracks' strategy

At the bilateral level, the main interest regarded how the new US administration would have dealt with Russia and China, two countries with which relations badly deteriorated under the Trump presidency. In both cases, Joe Biden's arrival in the White House did not lead to striking changes. Especially in its dealings with China, the administration seems to follow the same guideline as the previous one. The bipartisan support that the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations gave to the Strategic Competition Act of 2021 is a clear sign in this direction and risks contributing to the further deterioration of Washington-Beijing relations. In the same direction seems moving the renewal of the ban placed on the US companies, forbidding them to trade with Chinese partners included in the 'Entity List' without Washington's preliminary approval. US-China tensions also emerged in their first high-level summit held in Anchorage on March 18. At the summit, some collaboration opportunities emerged in fields like the fight against climate change and the relations with Iran, North Korea, Myanmar, and Afghanistan. However, on Beijing's actions on Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan, and the cyber realm, the two countries were "fundamentally at odds"⁷. Similar tensions emerged in July, during the meeting between the Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, after Sherman's state visit to Japan, South Korea, and Mongolia (Tian e Munroe, 2021). However, the meeting – which had been formalised at the very last minute – could also express the US and China's willingness to keep open some communication channels and consolidate their cooperation in the fields where it is possible, in line with the 'two tracks' diplomacy that the White House seems to follow (Ni, 2021; Wong, 2021).

From many points of view, it is the same strategy followed in dealing with Russia. The Biden-Putin summit on June 16 highlighted the gap dividing Moscow from Washington on a long list of topics. At the same time, it led to the restoration of formal diplomatic relations after the retaliatory expulsions of the first month of the year. It also pointed out the willingness of the two parties to open a dialogue on issues of mutual interest, such as strategic stability, which has been the subject of a joint declaration at the end of the summit⁸. It does not mean a 'return to normal' in US-Russia relations, neither the end of the structural rivalry existing between the two countries. Instead, the 'two tracks' strategy of dialogue and confrontation seems to reflect a growing awareness, in the White House, about the uselessness of a new 'reset' after the ones started, since the early 2000s, by the George W. Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations. Just like with China, the outlying assumption

⁷ Secretary Antony J. Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan Statements to the Press, Hotel Captain Cook, Anchorage, Alaska, March 19, 2021. Online: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-statements-to-the-press> [accessed: August 11, 2021]

⁸ U.S.-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability, June 16, 2021. Online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/16/u-s-russia-presidential-joint-statement-on-strategic-stability> [accessed: August 11, 2021]

is that US-Russia relations are deemed to remain antagonistic in the foreseeable future and that – as a consequence – a new way of living must be found to deal with this state of things in a mutually acceptable way. In this perspective, the beginning, in early July, of a first round of talks on strategic stability is an important signed, welcomed, among others, by the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, the Democratic Robert ‘Bob’ Menendez⁹. The US and Russian positions remain distant. However, it is noteworthy that a new round of talks has already been scheduled in late September and that, in the meantime, the two delegations will work informally to set the agenda of the different working groups (Gaouette and Atwood, 2021).

The main question is about the attitude of the US allies. The meetings that preceded the Biden-Putin summit were instrumental in confirming the US leadership within both G7 and NATO, but the strength of this leadership is still to assess. In the same way, it is still to assess if President Biden will be able to ‘keep together’ the strategic interests of Washington and its allies. The end of the tug-of-war on the *Nord Stream* pipeline somehow eased the tensions with Germany but has been heavily contested in the US and by the US Central and Eastern European allies (Skinner and Berman, 2021). In the Asia-Pacific, differences remain between the White House and the regional powers about the best way to deal with China. The emphasis that President Biden places on values can be a source of concern for several countries in the region. Another source of weakness could be the US’s attitude to take for granted the support to its China policy and not consider the solid economic ties linking Beijing and several countries in the region (Grossman, 2021). In front of these contrasting elements, the message “America is back” could be insufficient to give the White House the long-term support it needs to rely on its ‘two tracks’ strategy, especially if new cleavages should appear in the same US. In the past years, on Russia and China, Congress was often more ‘hawkish’ than the President; a fact that pushed some authors to argue that Capitol Hill somehow “captured” the US’s Russia policy (Cullinane and Courtney, 2020). Something similar seems now emerging and could negatively affect the President’s decisions, in light also of the contrasts existing between Biden and the ‘liberal’ wing of the Democratic Party on some topics of the domestic agenda.

Analysis, evaluation, and forecasts

Six months after the inauguration, the Biden administration mostly confirmed the assumptions that accompanied the President’s election. At the domestic level, the campaign against the COVID-19 pandemic provided the opportunity to adopt a wide array of measures in the social and economic realm. At the international level, the relaunch of multilateralism led to renewed activism that, in its turn, impacted the system of US-Russia and US-China relations. Overall, the assessment is mixed. The 2020 elections led to a divided Congress, which fully reflects a divided country. For the White House, this is a source of weakness. Another source of weakness are the cleavages existing within the Democratic majority. The President is still living the honeymoon in his dealings with the allies. However, doubts have already emerged on the nature of US-Russia relations and Washington’s willingness to stick to a genuinely multilateral foreign policy. In the coming months, it will be possible to see if these trends will consolidate. A key element will be the outcome of elections scheduled in Germany and France between September 2021 and April 2022, which will mark the end of Angela Merkel’s Chancellorship (2005-21). Another key element will be how the US political system will approach the 2022 midterm elections. The need to be re-elected could push several congressmen to shift their focus from the international to the domestic agenda (perceived as more politically ‘rewarding’) or stiffen their position on specific points, thus weakening the administration, which looks for a bipartisan consensus both as choice and a need.

⁹ *Statement from Chairman Menendez on Biden-Putin Summit*, June 16, 2021. Online: <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/chair/release/statement-from-chairman-menendez-on-biden-putin-summit> [accessed: August 11, 2021]. In the past Menendez heavily criticized Donald Trump’s approach in dealing with Russia’s nuclear ambitions and was one of the most active supporters of the renewal of the ‘New START’ treaty

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International conferences, climate change and energy transition

During the first seven months of 2021, in view of the UN Climate Conference (COP 26) the UK will host in Glasgow with the partnership of Italy (November, 2021), several international summits were held on the ecological transition related to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015). These summits reaffirmed the main goals of the Paris Agreement, that is to limit global temperature rise to 2 ° Celsius (preferably to 1.5 ° C) through a progressive cut of greenhouse gas emissions ("mitigation") aimed at 'climate neutrality' (i.e. net-zero emissions) by 2050¹. In line with the principle of "adaptation", to address the effects of climate change both domestically and at the international level, world leaders have announced the adoption of sustainable economic and energy policies, as well as an increase in international cooperation.

On March 23, 2021, China, the European Commission and Canada convened the 5th session of the Ministerial on Climate Action (MoCA), which brought together, among other stakeholders, the countries of the Group of 20 (G-20). Discussions focused on how to improve global economic-political cooperation, and the challenges to be faced in order to adopt a resilient and sustainable exit strategy to end COVID-19 crisis. The UN Secretary General, António Guterres, urged countries, companies, cities and financial institutions to aim at climate neutrality with clear and credible plans, and to increase the use of renewable sources of energy².

On April 22-23, 2021, 40 world leaders met at the Leaders Summit on Climate, chaired by the President of the US, Joe Biden, whose administration last february decided to rejoin the Paris Agreement (from which Donald Trump had decided to leave in 2020). The event brought together 40 world leaders, as well as stakeholders from international organizations, businesses, subnational governments and various civil society associations. The actors reaffirmed the goals of the Paris Agreement. They committed themselves to create new jobs, particularly in the clean energy sector, and to keep on allocating public and private funds to help less advanced countries to deal with environmental and socio-economic problems related to climate change. The President of the EU Commission, Ursula Von der Layen, joined the summit supported by a long list of EU measures and documents on environment and energy, among which the EU Climate Law, specifically aimed at fighting climate change. It makes formally binding the goals of the UE Green Deal plan, that is 55% reduction in carbon emissions compared to 1990 levels, 32.5% increase in energy efficiency and + 32% in renewables consumption within 2030, as well as net-zero emissions by 2050. The EU pro-transition position, which is evident also in its «Next Generation EU» Recovery Plan, has been supported by evidence related to the progress made by its member countries in strengthening the use of renewable sources of energy³. According to data published in 2020, starting from 2009, due to contractions in fossil fuel reserves and/or in their exploitation profitability, EU energy production decreased by about 9%, while renewable energy output increased, becoming larger than any other

¹ Climate neutrality means for each ton of CO₂eq – carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gas – released into the atmosphere, the same amount can be removed. To contain global warming within the thresholds indicated by the Paris Agreement, the overall accumulation of CO₂eq emissions will have to be less than 600 gigatonnes (600 billion). From 28 September to 2 October 2021, Italy will host in Milan the preparatory events for the Glasgow days (1-12 November). Prepared in December 2015 as part of the 21st Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21), the Paris Agreement was signed by almost all the sovereign states of the world in New York on April 22, 2016; it entered into force in November 2016. The Agreement aims for a global acceleration towards a free carbon and climate-resilient society, in line with one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN Agenda 2030, adopted in 2015 and entered into force on 1 January 2016. The Paris Agreement replaced the Kyoto Protocol (1997).

² https://ec.europa.eu/clima/events/ministerial-climate-action_en

³ On the EU Climate Law and the Green Deal see, respectively: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/european-green-deal-communication_en.pdf ; https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/eu-climate-action/law_en ; see also: https://europa.eu/next-generation-eu/index_it ; on EU Recovery Plan refer to the following webpage: https://europa.eu/next-generation-eu/index_en

kind of energy production (i.e. coal, oil, gas, nuclear, etc.). The share of renewables in EU energy consumption is very close to 20%, against a world average of 10%, while in production is 34%, compared to a world average of 26%. In the EU, renewable sources fuel 19% of heating (the respective global average is 10%), and, despite this figure is less than how required by the Renewable Energy Directive, about 8% transports (the world average is 3%)⁴. Even if this was partly due to asymmetric effects of the pandemics on the energy market, in Europe's 2020 electricity generation the share of renewables was higher than that of fossil fuels (the first rose to 38%, the second fell to 37%). Also due to all these data, the EU is considering to rise the share of renewables in energy consumption up to 40% by 2030⁵. Decreasing the use of coal (phase out expected in 2025) and increasing, albeit to a different extent, hydroelectricity, solar photovoltaic/thermal, wind, bioenergy and geothermal energy, Italy too contributed to this process. Inasmuch as the Italian Integrated Plan for Energy and Climate and the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience provide for a general increase in green energy, this trend is expected to continue till 2030. Over 65% (higher than the EU average) about 25% of Italy's energy production comes from renewable sources, which supply 20% Italy's energy consumption⁶. President Joe Biden announced new investments in the green energy sector; he also declared the US will reduce emissions by 50-52% from 2005 levels in 2030, that is almost twice the cut previously announced by Barack Obama. Moreover, Biden stated the US will reinforce its National Determined Contribution (NDC), which is the plan each member State of the Paris Agreement has to adopt and review on a 5-year basis to address the goals of ecological transition⁷. After all, with the election of Joe Biden to the White House, Washington's environmental and energy plans dramatically changed from the Trump administration years. The US already took some measures aimed at limiting, among others, polluting activities such a *shale oil fracking*⁸. China declared that it will join the Kigali Amendment (Montreal Protocol) for reducing hydrofluorocarbons, strengthen the control of non-CO₂ greenhouse gases, strictly control coal-fired power generation projects and slow down coal consumption. Beijing in recent years also invested heavily in renewable sources, assuming a world leadership position in the field; it plans to address more than 20% of its energy needs from renewables by 2025⁹. Russia noted the relevance of carbon capture and storage from all sources, as well as atmospheric carbon removals. Moscow also stressed the importance of a broad and effective international cooperation in the calculation and monitoring of polluting emissions into the atmosphere. India reiterated its target of 450 GW of renewable energy by 2030 and announced the launch of the US-India 2030 Climate and Clean Energy Agenda 2030 Partnership to mobilise finance and speed clean energy innovation and deployment this decade. In addition, other important countries proclaimed very relevant commitments. Japan will cut emissions 46-50% below 2013 levels by 2030, with strong efforts

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Energy_production_and_imports

⁵ <https://ember-climate.org/project/eu-power-sector-2020/> ; https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2013_it.pdf

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/commission-presents-renewable-energy-directive-revision-2021-jul-14_en

⁷ For the data concerning the EU and Italy please refer to the following webistes:

https://dgsaie.mise.gov.it/pub/sen/relazioni/relazione_annuale_situazione_energetica_nazionale_dati_2020.pdf

https://www.gse.it/documenti_site/Documenti%20GSE/Rapporti%20delle%20attivit%C3%A0/RA%202020.pdf

http://documenti.camera.it/leg18/dossier/pdf/ES0266.pdf?_1626156885554

https://www.mise.gov.it/images/stories/documenti/PNIEC_finale_17012020.pdf

<https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/PNRR.pdf>

⁸ EU countries have adopted a common (N)DC. Funding allocated by industrialized states for less advanced countries amounted to around USD 100 billion until 2020.

⁹ On the data concerning the US see these links: <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2021/02/04/u-s-rejoins-paris-agreement/>

<https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063730925>

<https://www.petro-online.com/news/analytical-instrumentation/11/breaking-news/how-will-joe-biden-change-the-shale-industry/54241>

https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/petrolio-biden-shale-oil-perde-anche-stampella-politica-ADCF6gEB?refresh_ce=1

<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/vertice-sul-clima-dove-lambizione-30200>

⁹ See also: https://www.ren21.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/REN21_GSR2021_Factsheet_China_EN.pdf
https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2013_it.pdf ; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/vertice-sul-clima-dove-lambizione-30200>

toward achieving a 50% reduction, a significant improvement from its existing 26% reduction goal¹⁰. Canada will strengthen its NDC to a 40-45% reduction from 2005 levels by 2030, which is a significant increase compared to its previous target to reduce emissions 30% below 2005 levels by 2030. Argentina will reinforce its NDC, deploy more renewables, reduce methane emissions and increase the fight to illegal deforestation. The United Kingdom will embed in law a 78% greenhouse gas reduction below 1990 levels by 2035. South Korea will end new financing for overseas coal projects and strengthen its NDC this year to meet its 2050 net zero goal. Brazil committed to achieve net zero by 2050, end illegal deforestation by 2030 and double funding for related law enforcement. South Africa announced to strengthen its NDC and shift its planned emissions peak year ten years earlier, that is to 2025¹¹.

On May 6 and 7, 2021, more than 40 ministers from around the world participated, via video-conference, in the 12th Petersberg Climate Dialogue. Focusing on the preparations for the Glasgow Conference of next november, the participants launched an appeal to make it a success and to conclude new negotiations for the timely implementation of the Paris Agreement¹². The P4G summit, held in Seoul on 30 and 31 May, 2021, was focused on the issue *Green and inclusive recovery towards climate neutrality*¹³. The summit fixed the guidelines of the next "Decade of action". From 23 to 25 June, 2021, the World Sustainable Energy Days and European Energy Efficiency Conference was held in Vienna, with the participation of 600 delegates from over 60 countries; the aim was discussing how to reinforce sustainable development, decarbonization and climate neutrality strategies¹⁴. A few days earlier, in Brussels, the North Atlantic Council held a meeting during which NATO members defined climate change a «threat multiplier», agreed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the Alliance's military activities and installations and considered of «critical importance» to integrate renewables in NATO's energy supply¹⁵. Ecological and energy transition issues were also discussed at the economic G-20 held in Venice, on July 19 and 20, 2021, where world leaders reaffirmed the urgent need for emission cuts and efficient and sustainable energy policies, as well as systematic inclusion of "climate risk" within the risk frameworks of banks and financial institutions. As testified by its final document, the G-20 on Environment, Climate and Energy held in Naples, on 22 and 23 July, 2021, reaffirmed these programs, despite, contrary to some expectations, it did not reach a new agreement on the 2050 limit of global warming and the deadline for the phase out of coal (the US, EU, Canada and Japan asked these goals to be fixed, respectively, at 1.5 ° C. and 2025, but China, India, Russia and Brazil did not agree with such proposals, so the issue will be discussed at the Glasgow Conference on Climate Change next November)¹⁶.

Assessment and forecasting

The international conferences on climate change show ecological and energy transitions to be now fully recognized by States and international organizations as strategic issues. These transitions are receiving growing attention both at the national and international levels, so that they have been taken seriously into consideration even by NATO and the defense departments of several global and regional powers¹⁷.

¹⁰ Japan is the 6th Ghg emission producers in the world, preceded by China (1), US (2), EU (3), India (4), Russia (5); see also: <https://climate.selectra.com/en/carbon-footprint/most-polluting-countries>

¹¹ For a summary of the Leaders Summit on Climate see also: <https://earth.org/leaders-summit-on-climate-2021-a-summary/>

¹² <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/petersberg-climate-dialogue-keeps-momentum-towards-cop-26/>

¹³ P4G: Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030: <https://p4gpartnerships.org/>

¹⁴ <https://www.buildup.eu/en/events/world-sustainable-energy-days-2021-european-energy-efficiency-conference>

¹⁵ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm?selectedLocale=en

¹⁶ For the summit final communiqué see: https://www.g20.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/2021_07_22_ITG20_ENV_Final.pdf

¹⁷ After all, the Defence sector is among the main consumers of energy worldwide. Italy does periodically elaborate not only the «National Energy Strategy» (published by the Ministry of Economic Development and the Ministry of Ecological Transition), but also the «Defense Energy Strategy», published by the Department of Defense, in which a specific task

After all, despite politicians and scientists, as well, may still have partially contrasting views on the subject, empirical evidence and public awareness on the environmental, economic and social damages produced by CO₂ and other green house gas emissions significantly increased. Environmental protection is nowadays a political agenda issue not only for green parties and the related epistemic communities; indeed, in addition to ecological consequences, it may have strategic impacts also for economics and national security. More or less consistently with the international conferences on climate change and the Paris Agreement, several of the world's major countries are taking initiatives to reduce emissions and improve efficiency and energy transformation (even if the Paris Agreement does not provide for sanctions vs. non-compliant parties, which in the long run could be a weakness). Furthermore, as a result of innovations and technological advances raising their competitiveness, during the last 15 years the exploitation of renewable energy sources dramatically increased. In 2009, an intergovernmental agency (IRENA) on renewables was created. In 2020, the latter were the only energy sources to grow, whereas a global decline in the energy sector was registered (largely due to the economic contractions related to Covid 19 diffusion)¹⁸. Compared to an overall decrease of about 4.5%, the world energy consumption from renewables grew by at least 3%. Moreover, for 2021, expectations are for further growth (in electricity the expectation is + 8%), also brought by an overall recovery of the whole energy sector (+ 4.6%). After all, from 2009 to 2019, largely driven by important developments in China, the US, the EU, Japan, South Korea and India, the use of renewables grew at an annual rate of 13%. In 2020, 29% of global electricity came from renewables. In the private sector, *green energy* companies and *clean energy* majors arose, while several large *oil & gas* companies are transforming their business, by enlarging the share of renewables in their portfolios even if their profitability margin is generally less than that of investments related to oil & gas projects (this could also be seen as an encouraging trend in view of the complex job market transformation related to ecological and energy transitions). British Petroleum, for instance, recently announced a ten-year program to reduce its *oil & gas* output by almost 40% within 2030, as well as a huge investment plan in the green energy sector¹⁹.

Lastly, by affecting the choices and behaviors of public bodies, companies and citizens, in recent times greater awareness on sustainability and energy savings may have been induced by the restrictions linked to the global spread of Covid 19 (though these possible effects, if not adequately supported in terms of policy, might decline with the end of the pandemics).

Certainly, some empirical data do not support the ecological transition process, especially in relation to its timeline. These data concern both the use of fossil sources and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, as well as political and economic risks coming from a greater use of renewable sources (the next contribution on energy, on this same issue of the Strategic Observatory, deals with some of these aspects). In any case, at least in the short term, and partly even apart from the specific outcomes of the COP26 Conference, it is very likely ecological and energy transition issues will continue receiving political impulse; this will come from international initiatives and conferences promoted by the UN and the EU, national policies supporting renewable energy and growing attention for environmental protection within public opinion.

force deals with environment and energy issues:

https://www.difesa.it/Content/Struttura_progetto_energia/Pagine/default.aspx

¹⁸ <https://www.irena.org/> <https://www.enerdata.net/publications/reports-presentations/world-energy-trends.html>
<https://www.iea.org/reports/global-energy-review-2021/renewables>
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/rpapier/2020/08/02/renewable-energy-growth-continues-at-a-blistering-pace/?sh=22ea437f76b6>

¹⁹ <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/news-and-insights/press-releases/from-international-oil-company-to-integrated-energy-company-bp-sets-out-strategy-for-decade-of-delivery-towards-net-zero-ambition.html>

Increase of threats in cyberspace

Will the information revolution lead to war?

As evidenced by Jacquelyn Schneider (2019), the proliferation of digital technology has created a new terrain of war fighting. As digitally-enabled militaries increase their dependency on information, so also do the vulnerabilities of information proliferate. Indeed, what makes offensive cyber-weaponry (or any other cross-domain warfare that targets digital capabilities) a potential game changer for modern conflict is the connection that states have built between digital capabilities and conventional warfare¹. As Richard Danzig (2014) points out:

«Digital technologies... are a security paradox: even as they grant unprecedented powers, they also make users less secure... their concentration of data and manipulative power vastly improves the efficiency and scale of operations, but this concentration in turn exponentially increases the amount that can be stolen or subverted by a successful attack. The complexity of their hardware and software creates great capability, but this complexity spawns»².

Where do cyber threats rise from?

According to Uri Tor (2017), cyber threats may be generated by at least three distinct classes of actors³.

The first is 'the lone hacker,' which may sound a bit of a cliché, and usually in reality includes several individuals working in some sort of coordination. Today, single individuals are very limited in their ability to inflict damage of strategic national impact through cyberattacks⁴.

The second class of actors includes non-state groups ranging from 'Hacktivists' to organized crime and terrorist groups. These groups can inflict substantial economic damage and public fear, for instance, by targeting banks or taking down government websites, but they lack the capability to target a specific high-value target, break into its core and damage it. Typically, the level of attacks these actors can generate ranges from Denial of Service attacks to cyber fraud and identity theft. This type of actor usually lacks the capabilities to identify and exploit complex code vulnerabilities, and would therefore seek to exploit human errors instead, by using 'spear-fishing' tactics, typically by sending malware via widespread social-engineered emails. Their attacks can be costly, but do not pose a strategic national threat⁵.

The third class of actors is typically identified in nation states with extensive human, scientific, and economic resources. Such actors are capable of maintaining a long term, multi-stage cyber campaign against a variety of targets, over a vast geographical area. Actors of this kind are often referred to as Advanced Persistent Threats (APT), and usually aim at high-value targets requiring complex degrees of covertness over a long period of time, sophisticated intelligence gathering, exploitation of code and technical vulnerabilities, and penetration of air-gaped networks not attached to the internet⁶.

¹ Schneider Jacquelyn (2019) *The capability/vulnerability paradox and military revolutions: Implications for computing, cyber, and the onset of war*, Journal of Strategic Studies, 42:6, 841-863, DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2019.1627209. In: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1627209>

² Danzig Richard (2014) *'Surviving on a Diet of Poisoned Fruit: Reducing the National Security Risks of America's Cyber Dependencies'*, Center for a New American Security

³ Tor Uri (2017) *'Cumulative Deterrence' as a New Paradigm for Cyber Deterrence*, Journal of Strategic Studies, 40:1-2, 92-117, DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2015.1115975. In: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1115975>

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

According to Uri Tor (2017)

*"When dealing with the level of threat posed by this third class of actors in cyberspace, one can distinguish between attacks on information technology (IT) systems and databases on the one hand, and attacks on industrial control systems (ICS) on the other. Although both types of attacks may have significant consequences, the distinction between them remains useful. Indeed, the spectrum of the threat on IT systems ranges from mere annoyance, through psychological warfare (e.g., defacing Internet sites or interfering with their time schedule), to functional and economic damage extensive enough to be considered a strategic threat. Yet in recent years, cyber-attacks have begun to pose another threat, which may be even more destructive than the one they pose to IT infrastructure. This is the threat of a takeover of, or severe damage to, industrial control systems, with the aim of causing an actual kinetic impact"*⁷.

From "WannaCry" to the "Pegasus case"

Four years ago (May 2017), over 200,000 computers in 150 countries were simultaneously affected by a ransomware virus called "WannaCry", which, exploiting a vulnerability in the Windows operating system, was able to infect computers and encrypt all files on the hard drive. Only by paying a ransom (in bitcoins) data return would be possible. The paradox is that Windows had made available to users a software update capable of resolving the vulnerability of the system one month before the spread of the virus; but most users, ignoring the update, exposed themselves to large-scale contamination. But there is more: four years later, more than 1,700,000 terminals are still vulnerable, of which almost 7,000 in Italy, and "Wannacry" continues to spread occasionally.

The "Wannacry" case is just one of the examples from which it clearly emerges how the data security issue and, by extension, of computer network one is underestimated⁸.

Furthermore, as reported by *The Washington Post*, military spyware licensed by an Israeli firm to governments for tracking terrorists and criminals was used in attempted and successful hacks of smartphones belonging to journalists, politicians, policy-makers, influencers, human rights activists. The phones appeared on a list of more than 50,000 numbers that are concentrated in countries known to engage in surveillance of their citizens and also known to have been clients of the world-leading Israeli firm NSO Group⁹. What in the Project Pegasus? As reported by Mazoomdaar Jay (2021), the Israeli spyware, revealed to have been used to target thousands of phones, has grown less reliant on clicks. Pegasus can infect a device without the target's engagement or knowledge. It is a world-leading cyber intelligence solution that enables law enforcement and intelligence agencies to remotely and covertly extract data from virtually any mobile devices. Until early 2018, NSO Group clients primarily relied on SMS and WhatsApp messages to trick targets into opening a malicious link, which would lead to infection of their mobile devices. When a malicious link packaged as Enhanced Social Engineering Message (ESEM) is clicked, the phone is directed to a server that checks the operating system and delivers the suitable remote exploit¹⁰.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ Basileo Deborah (2020), *Tra Cyberterrorism e guerra dell'informazione. Scarsa consapevolezza e limiti normativi*, in #ReaCT2020, 1° rapporto sul terrorismo e il fondamentalismo in Europa, ed. START InSight

⁹ Priest Dana, Timberg Craig, Mekhennet Souad (2021), *Private Israeli spyware used to hack cellphones of journalists, activists worldwide*, *The Washington Post*, July 18

¹⁰ Mazoomdaar Jay (2021), *Explained: Here's how NSO Group's spyware Pegasus infects your device*, *The Indian express* July 22, New Delhi

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Tor Uri (2017) '*Cumulative Deterrence*' as a New Paradigm for Cyber Deterrence, Journal of Strategic Studies, 40:1-2, 92-117, DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2015.1115975. In: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1115975>

Osservatorio Strategico

Part Two

Vaccine's geopolitics in the Western Balkans: consequences and impact on EU action

The coronavirus pandemic has contributed to undermining not only democracy around the world, but also the credibility of the EU in the Western Balkans. This has added to the problems that already emerged with the EU's enlargement policy at a time when increasing geopolitical competition is becoming increasingly evident. In addition, the pandemic has reaffirmed global shifts in power and tested the EU's foreign policy once again. Vaccine diplomacy, or vaccine and medical supplies as a means of soft power projection, has fully entered the lexicon of geopolitics. In a world where Covid-19 had a devastating human and financial impact, vaccine supplies promise relief and interact with foreign policy and priorities. Asia, Africa, South America but also the Balkans are hotbeds for Chinese and Russian vaccines. This has raised concerns on the side of the European Union, so much so that on March 9 the President of the European Council Charles Michel highlighted how Chinese and Russian initiatives are, in practice, relatively limited but highly publicized in terms of narrative and propaganda.

Michel pointed out that, along with the United States, Europe is the largest vaccine producer worldwide and has a technological advantage in mRNA vaccines that can be flexibly adapted to future virus mutations. In this context, the President of the European Council recalled the COVAX multilateral initiative aiming to provide 20% of the world's population with affordable vaccines and praised the EU's role in promoting and financing this initiative: about a quarter of its nearly 3 billion euros funding comes from the EU and its member states.

Under these circumstances, the EU-supported COVAX multilateral initiative, which the United States has also joined under the Biden administration, looks promising.

Although the EU's achievements in vaccine development are laudable in principle and can play a significant role in balanced access to vaccines in the region and beyond, the relationship of a whole range of countries with Russia and China might emerge stronger in the post-pandemic world¹.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Western Balkans. There, global powers like China and Russia have used vaccine diplomacy to strengthen their geopolitical roles in the region at the expense of Western powers like the United States and the EU.

In the first quarter of 2021, while Washington had a ban on vaccine exports, EU member states initially struggled to inoculate their populations with doses and largely failed to provide vaccines to Western Balkan countries, leading to reputational damage in terms of soft power.

Subsequently, while most Central and Southeastern European countries negotiated agreements to obtain Western-made Covid-19 vaccines, Turkey, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia also opted for Chinese and Russian vaccine supplies, despite concerns about their reliability.

Some health experts warned about the efficacy of these vaccines also pointing out that their distribution, in terms of delivery, was still uncertain. Thus, with the start of vaccination campaigns between the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021, certain choices have emerged, in terms of supply, partly due to the needs and urgency of the pandemic, and partly as a result of particular geopolitical choices. This trend is partly due to a perceived lack of solidarity on the part of the EU and its member states, both in the early stages of the crisis and in the subsequent launch of the vaccine. The latter factors have provided a new impetus for Beijing and Moscow.

¹ Woertz E., Yellinek R., *Vaccine diplomacy in the MENA region*, Middle East Institute, 14 Aprile 2021 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/vaccine-diplomacy-mena-region>

While waiting for Western vaccines to become available, Turkey has received about 3 million doses of Coronavac, which, as of December 31, had not yet passed the third phase of testing. Serbia is using the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine and a vaccine from another Chinese company, Sinopharm, in addition to U.S. Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines. Bosnia and Herzegovina, in parallel with its attempt to procure vaccines through the WHO-led COVAX and EU programs, has decided to initiate forms of vaccine procurement directly with manufacturers.

Zoran Tegeltija, chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Bosnian state government, has announced negotiations with Pfizer, the Russian manufacturer and the Chinese vaccine producer. Milorad Dodik, a Serbian member of the Bosnia-Herzegovina presidency, also negotiated the supply of 10,000 doses of Sputnik vaccine for Republika Srpska at the beginning of the year.

Despite misgivings from the Hungarian Medicines Agency (Ogyéi) and the Hungarian Medical Association (Mok), Hungary issued an emergency license for the use of the Sputnik V vaccine, as it was not yet authorized by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), thus becoming the first European country to give the green light to both the Russian and Chinese vaccines, produced by Sinopharm².

Already in the last months of last year the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán had assured his compatriots the commitment of the executive to bring the Chinese or Russian product home despite the EU had not given its approval to the spread of these vaccines because their testing had not been completed. Orbán stated that "there are no vaccines from East or West, but only good or not so good vaccines, and that people's lives are above any political consideration³".

The coronavirus pandemic had a threefold negative impact on the EU's efforts to promote democracy in the Western Balkans. First, the crisis eroded liberal democracy in the region as national governments took restrictive measures to deal with the health emergency. Second, it further undermined the EU's credibility, which was already low before the pandemic, as the Union struggled to contain the crisis within its borders failing to extend its solidarity to neighboring countries. Third, the pandemic provided fertile ground for authoritarian powers to fill the void left by the EU and strengthen their influence in the region by increasing support for alternative political models.

During the coronavirus crisis, the EU's enlargement policy continued to disappoint those who hoped that the prospect of membership would counteract the impact of authoritarian forces and geopolitical competition in the region. Despite the EU's launch of a new enlargement methodology in February 2020 and a decision to open accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in June, negotiations with these two countries have been stalled since December by a Bulgarian veto over a linguistic and historical dispute. At its June 2021 meeting, the EU Council failed once again to formally open negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, dealing another blow to the lack of credibility of the EU's enlargement policy. Elsewhere in the region, progress has also stalled, as in the case of the negotiations to grant visa liberalization to Kosovo, despite the European Commission's repeated confirmation that Kosovo meets all the required parameters. The EU continued to support the Western Balkans in their fight against the coronavirus, but most of these efforts went unnoticed by public opinion in the countries. Together with the European Investment Bank, the EU helped mobilize more than €3.3 billion (\$4 billion) to support responses to the health crisis and its socioeconomic effects. This package included €762 million (\$924 million) for socioeconomic recovery and €70 million (\$85 million) to help Western Balkan countries access vaccines purchased by EU member states. The European Union also supported the launch of the COVAX initiative, which is expected to provide more than 5 million vaccine doses to Western

² Congiu M., *Sui vaccini i Paesi di Visegrád guardano a Mosca e Pechino*, Affari Internazionali, 3 marzo 2021 <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/2021/03/sui-vaccini-i-paesi-di-visegrad-guardano-a-mosca-e-pechino/>

³ Ibidem

Balkan countries. Together with its member states, the EU is a major donor to the mechanism. However, the EU's lack of a positive narrative or effective communication strategy has undermined the EU's soft power, not only in the Western Balkans, but also globally. Only a concerted effort among EU member states, with support from Washington, to support the democracy, economy, and health sectors of the Western Balkans will revive the compromised credibility of the EU's enlargement policy and help address the geopolitical challenges the Union will encounter in the region⁴.

⁴ Juncos A.E., *Vaccine Geopolitics and the EU's Ailing Credibility in the Western Balkans*, Carnegie Europe, 8 Luglio 2021 <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/07/08/vaccine-geopolitics-and-eu-s-ailing-credibility-in-western-balkans-pub-84900>

The Tunisian's conundrum

The situation in Tunisia is on the verge of collapsing¹ due to different and interlinked issues: health situation, because Tunisia is experiencing one of the worst scenarios in the world related to Covid; economy, because unemployment is increasing; politics, because the government has not been able to tackle such problems.

On 25th July, following demonstrations with reports of looting, President Kais Said invoked an emergency situation, “froze” parliament for 30 days, revoked legislators’ parliamentary immunity and seized control of the public prosecutor’s office. The next day he dismissed Hichem Mechichi, the prime minister and interim interior minister whose nearly one-year tenure was characterized by increasing paralysis as the country grew more polarised, as well as the defence, justice and civil service ministers.

These events marked the end of a long series of problems and protests. Said’s decision came after months of a power struggle that included the president, the prime minister, and the speaker of parliament. Disagreement over a partial government reshuffle, announced by Mechichi and opposed by the president, had resulted in a constitutional stalemate since last January. For instance, the June protests against police abuse² in Tunis spread to several working-class districts more than a week after the video, shared on social media, about the violence in the Sidi Hassine neighbourhood over the death of a man in police custody. The protesters gathered in Ettadhamen and Intilaka, among the capital’s poorest districts, blocked roads, burned tyres and threw stones at police, as officers chased demonstrators and fired tear gas. While Tunisia’s Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi dismissed the charges, the United Nations human rights office in Tunisia said it was concerned about repeated allegations of serious violations by the Tunisian police amid violent protests³. In the capital and in other cities the protests continued in July with different levels of violence and with the Police using tear and pepper gas to control the situation.

Said is expected to appoint a new prime minister who will be in charge of forming a caretaker government to address Tunisia’s health and economic emergencies. Said’s challenge will be to secure legitimacy for his road map toward international support and the creation of a presidential system. In order to do this, Said needs to involve social and political forces into his efforts.

One of the main concern, is related to the Covid situation. According to the World Health Organization figures⁴, Tunisia has almost 570.000 cases and 18.600 total deaths related to the Covid-19, one of the worst rates in the world if compared with a population of nearly 12 million people. Moreover, just 7% of the population has been fully vaccinated. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Tunisia government has changed the Minister of Health several time and so negatively impacting the ability of the government to develop an effective strategy. As a consequence, in mid-July President Kais Said decided that the armed forces, in coordination with civilian medical staff, would survey the entire country to vaccinate citizens against COVID-19 in light of the virus’s rapid spread⁵.

In order to help Tunisia and improve the health situation, UAE sent a plane carrying 500,000 vaccine doses⁶; however, it is not clear which vaccine has been sent. The UAE is currently using four vaccines: Pfizer/BioNTech, AstraZeneca, Sputnik V and SinoPharm. It is fair to say that people vaccinated with the Chinese vaccine can be also vaccinated with Pfizer-BioNTech due to concerns

¹ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/tunisias-leap-unknown>

² <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/protests-erupt-after-tunisia-police-beat-strip-drag-young-boy-after-arrest>

³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/17/rally-against-police-brutality-spreads-across-tunis>

⁴ <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/tn>

⁵ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210710-tunisia-army-takes-charge-of-covid-19-vaccination-operations/>

⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/uae-sends-vaccines-tunisia>

about the SinoPharm's effectiveness. Tunisia also has used multiple COVID-19 vaccines so far. In March, the country received 93,600 Pfizer-BioNTech doses through the World Health Organization. In April, Russia sent 30,000 doses of its Sputnik V vaccine. Tunisia has also received multiple batches of the AstraZeneca vaccine through the WHO, as well as CoronaVac doses from China.

The UAE is not the only country that has tried to help Tunisia sending vaccine. For example, in July, three Moroccan military planes brought supplies for a field hospital. Four Egyptian military planes delivered unspecified medical equipment and supplies to Tunis. Three Saudi planes also brought medical equipment and supplies. Some European states also sent similar aid⁷. For instance, Italy has sent 1,5 million doses⁸.

The pandemic situation has also impacted the Tunisian economy, greatly depending on tourism. This created increased unemployment and related economic problems especially among the youths. In recent years, Turkey and China have grown their commercial networks into Tunisian markets using the rise in maritime corridors that have compensated for the slowdown of goods-flow through land corridors. The dynamism of Tunisia's maritime corridors owes much to the emergence of entrepreneurs who informally operate through trade networks connecting Tunisian and Asian ports. The rise of these informal networks reflects a growing trend, namely the progressive shift of Tunisia's trade away from Europe and the rise of Turkey and China as new trading partners. This process has two main consequences. First, those who imported goods by sea could trade higher volumes of goods than by land, with opportunities to pay fewer taxes through misinvoicing. Second, maritime networks could benefit from overinvoicing imports as this facilitated capital flight in foreign currencies. Acts of terrorism in border regions led to the increased stigmatization of smugglers and cross-border traders, leading to a tightening of the security situation and controls on cross-border networks. The crackdown on land corridors benefited maritime corridors⁹.

This situation has two main consequences. The first is that the influence of Europe is decreasing, at least in the economic sector; the second is that due to this informal maritime network the State is losing important revenues that consequently worsens the economic crisis in Tunisia.

The ongoing political crisis has also important international consequences. First of all, the main Tunisian political party, Ennahda, is known for its links with the Muslim Brotherhood supported by Turkey and Qatar. It is not coincidence that on Wednesday 28th, the party has been under investigation for obtaining foreign funding for its electoral campaigns. Ennahda has been a controversial player in Tunisian politics since ascending in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution that toppled long-time ruler Zine El Abidine Ben Ali¹⁰.

This political situation can hinder the Turkish attempt to extent its influence in the North Africa limiting also its ability to operate in Libya. At the same time, this move toward an anti-Islamist and strong presidential system can benefit Egypt offering a possibility to create an arch in North Africa against political Islam¹¹. Consequently, this would have a profound influence on the situation Libya with the government in Tripoli supported by Ankara that may find itself isolated in the region, as the only government linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, and, on the other hand, the Haftar militia supported by Egypt and Russia improving its own political situation.

⁷ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/tunisia-receives-medical-aid-regional-states-virus-cases-rise>

⁸ <https://formiche.net/2021/08/vaccini-covid-italia-tunisia/>

⁹ https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/84658?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss

¹⁰ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/leading-tunisian-islamist-party-under-investigation-alleged-foreign-funding>

¹¹ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/experts-react-whats-next-after-tunisian-presidents-parliamentary-freeze/?fbclid=IwAR2h3AqiliEXiNCuee-G9QUltg58P67pAqTMQIVtHqzc7N04cvaOT9ICK3M>

The Russian increased presence in the sub-Saharan African security sector: peculiarities, limits and future scenarios

On the sidelines of the 9th edition of the Conference on International Security organized by the Russian Federation, the Deputy Minister of Defense Col. Alexander Fomin and the representative of Mauritania Hanena Ould Sidi signed an agreement on military cooperation. This agreement follows those signed by Moscow on security and defense with several Sahel countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The enhanced relationship in the security field will allow Russia to increase its presence in the region. The signature of the Russian-Mauritanian deal occurred just a few days after the announcement by French President Emmanuel Macron of the end of Operation Barkhane. The French mission is scheduled to be completed in the first half of 2022, nevertheless the gradual withdrawal of troops from the area has already begun (Roger, 2021). Paris plans to replace the deployment of its troops with the enhancement of the multilateral operation Takuba, which aims to regulate migratory flows, control illegal trafficking and fight jihadism. However, the possibility of downsizing the European presence in the area is becoming more plausible by the day. The power vacuum generated firstly by the United States' lack of interest and, then, by the more recent revision of the French African agenda, has increased interest in the Sahel by other extra-regional powers such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, and Russia. The rise of Russian influence in a context that has been considered strategic for Italian/European security and stability represents a new issue with which Rome and its allies must learn to deal with in years to come.

Over the two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian interest in Sub-Saharan Africa drastically decreased. Only during the last decade, Moscow has gradually restored relations with the African continent. The recent Russian-African summit held in Sochi in 2019 marked a turning point in Russia's renewed projection towards Africa. The Sochi summit highlighted the two sectors where Moscow intends to invest the most in Africa:

- a) natural resources;
- b) security and defense.

Furthermore, the meeting highlighted the overall attitude of the African countries towards Russia. These view Moscow as an alternative to both the dependence relationship with the West and Beijing's debt trap strategy. The most significant point of complementarity that emerged in Sochi consists in the fact that many African countries consider Moscow an ideal partner in the two sectors of highest Russian interest (The Standard, 2019). In the first field (energy and natural resources), Russia is one of the world leaders. Thanks to leading companies in the hydrocarbon - Lukoil, Gazprom - and in the mining sector - Rusal, Nord Gold, Uralchen - Moscow can rely on know-how and expertise that can be extremely useful for African countries to reach production efficiency. In these sectors, the relationship can be a win-win. Russia intends to consolidate its weight in the energy field through the granting of licenses (Mozambique, Nigeria). In addition, Moscow has a great interest in some resources it lacks at home such as bauxite, manganese, and chrome (Baobab, 2019).

In the second area of strategic investment and cooperation, Russia has resumed a policy that had already been tested during the Cold War. Moscow has exploited the defense and security sector as a vector to increase its influence in Africa and to gain African countries' support within various international organizations. In line with the international stance adopted over the last decade in other contexts, the Russian approach to the continent aims to avoid involvement in long-

term crisis, use its resources sustainably, and outsource to non-state actors the engagement in situations deemed risky or excessively expensive. Within this framework, Russia's strategy towards Africa has been organized around three main tools:

- a) security agreements;
- b) arms sales;
- c) use of private military companies.

The new Russian interest in Africa has led to the brokering of some security agreements to counter religion-based terrorism, piracy, and illegal trafficking. In addition, Moscow has upgraded the level of information sharing in recent years, strengthening intelligence partnerships. The interchange between Russian and African security services is justified as necessary for international security aims. In concrete terms, the agreements have given Russia access to information regarding the activities in the region of its international competitors. Likewise, the intelligence partnerships have provided the African countries with consulting services of Russian specialists in the field of information and media control and propaganda development (Stronski, 2019). Over twenty countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have signed security cooperation agreements with Russia, including Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Ghana.

Another tool widely used by Moscow in the effort to strengthen relations with African countries is the arms trade. The sale of Russian weapons is made easier by three main factors. Firstly, the lack of conditionalities in terms of human rights; secondly, a system of financing and low-interest loans; and last, the compatibility of Russian military components with old Soviet-made equipment already used by the armed forces of many African countries. Russian weapons are considered cheaper than the Western ones, but at the same time they are perceived as more reliable than the Chinese ones. As the Soviet Union did in the past, the Russian Federation has also exploited crises to increase its presence in Africa. Moscow has supplied arms at discounted prices (Mali, Nigeria) or even free of charge (Cameroon) to countries struggling with domestic unrest and/or external threats. These strategies have led to Russia being the leading supplier of arms to the African continent. The SIPRI 2020 report (Wezeman et. al., 2021) showed that Russian supplies represent almost half (49%) of total African imports in the defense sector. They are more than double of China's (13%) and the United States' (14%) export to the continent. In addition to light weapons, sales of combat aircraft such as SU-30K fighters (Angola), anti-tank missiles (Mali), and MI-35 (Nigeria) and Mi-171Sh (Burkina Faso) helicopters are also growing. In addition, some countries (Cameroon) have demanded to purchase the Russian Pantsir-S1 defense system designed to protect military and industrial targets (Defense World, 2020).

Finally, the most interesting aspect of the Russian approach to Africa in terms of security is the externalization of security services to semi-private agencies. For several years, Russia has undertaken talks with some East African countries (Sudan, Eritrea, Somaliland) to establish a military base that would allow the expansion of its operations on the continent. However, due to the many difficulties encountered, Moscow has replaced the use of military outposts in Africa with broadening the presence and the role of private security. There are currently twelve companies in Russia with a 'hybrid' legal status. These are engaged in providing services such as technical support, defense, and training to African security forces. Among these, the most famous and active one is the Wagner Group, a paramilitary organization linked to the Russian intelligence services and very close to the Kremlin through the figure of Yevgeny Prigozhin. Private military companies such as Wagner are not legally recognized nor are their activities legally accepted on Russian soil. Further, Russian security companies do not adhere to the regulations or international standards regarding Security Consultancy (Mackinnon, 2021). However, the Wagner Group operates in third-party contexts as a true Russian proxy actor, an extension of Moscow's security establishment. Moscow has a lot to gain from their activity on foreign soil. Among the many advantages is the low

international accountability. The cases of the Central African Republic (CAR) and Libya, show that the involvement of private agencies allows Russia to increase its political influence at low political and economic costs. The presence of fighters and instructors, military and civilian, belonging to the Wagner group or other Russian agencies is increasing throughout the continent. In addition to CAR and Libya, Russian nationals belonging to such organizations have been reported in Sudan, Chad, Mali, and Mozambique. However, in the coming months, the Russian official and unofficial involvement in the area could likely increase due to the interests in the energy sector (off-shore) off Cabo Delgado.

Overall, Russia's growing multi-layered involvement in security matters constitutes a new feature in the African context and a challenge for future Italian and European policies. Although Africa is not a priority on Moscow's international agenda, Russian strategic opportunism tends to capitalize as much as possible the vacuum created by the United States' and Europeans' disengagement. For this reason, it is likely that in the short-medium run, the number of African countries approaching Russia would increase. The shift of African countries towards Russia will result in the emergence of new balances within international governance (Adibe, 2019). The strengthening of a new Moscow-aligned front of countries will generate anti-Western positions on multiple issues, slowing down in some cases and blocking in others the US and its allies' initiatives. Moreover, would the trend of strengthening security relations between Moscow and the G-5 group be confirmed, the Sahel could soon become a new arena of competition and friction between the Russian Federation and NATO. For Italy, the Russian presence is a challenge on two fronts. Firstly, the country's energy interests can collide with Russian's game of power in arenas such as Nigeria and Mozambique. Moscow's greater grip on local governments could favor the takeover by Russian companies of hydrocarbon licenses at the expense of ENI. Secondly, the renewed interest of Russia in the continent could have an impact on migration flows directed to the Mediterranean as a consequence of the destabilizing role of Russian policies in the area. Russia could exploit the increased control of transit areas as a leverage against the European Union to achieve greater concessions in other scenarios such as Ukraine and the Baltic Sea.

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The international consequences of the coup d'état in Myanmar

Introduction

On 1 February 2021, the Tatmadaw, or the armed forces of Myanmar, carried out a coup against the democratically elected government of the country, led by the National League for Democracy, President U Win Myint and Aung San Suu Kyi. The armed forces declared the election results invalid and proclaimed a state of emergency, suspending the Constitution and civil and political rights. The Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, Min Aung Hlaing, assumed the role of *de facto* head of state. The coup took place the day before the inauguration of the new legislature and led to the arrest of members of the government and the Parliament.

In the following months, the armed forces violently repressed the demonstrations of dissent in various areas of the country. This has led to a humanitarian crisis. Several international press agencies have claimed that the repression has caused about a thousand victims, tens of thousands of arrests for political reasons, and about 200,000 refugees fleeing to other areas of the country or abroad. In addition, the coup has caused a deterioration in the health situation and a collapse of the measures in place against the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the coup has reignited the conflict between the army and the separatist military groups of the Shan, Kachin and Karen minorities.

The rest of this article briefly summarizes the evolution of the country's internal and foreign policy up to 2021 and highlights the causes of the coup and the consequences for Myanmar's foreign policy.

The political opening

For much of the post-independence period Myanmar was ruled by a military dictatorship. On several occasions, such as the 1988 demonstrations and the 2007 "Saffron Revolution", the regime violently repressed the pro-democracy demonstrations. In 2008, the regime initiated a top-down process of opening and transition that also favoured a series of economic reforms aimed at encouraging the entry of foreign capital in the country. Also in 2008, a new constitution which provided for a guided path towards a "disciplined democracy" was approved. It established political system defined by a bicameral Parliament and a President freely elected by the citizens. The constitution, however, preserved a strong role for the military, which retained the ministries of home affairs and defence, as well as the vice president and 25% of the seats in parliament (Stokke and Aung, 2020).

The first elections, largely controlled by the military junta, were held in 2010. The Party supported by the junta declared victory obtaining 80% of the seats. In the following by-elections held in 2012, the National League for Democracy won an absolute majority of the seats. In 2015 new general elections were held in an essentially free and competitive way, leading the NLD to obtain an absolute majority in Parliament and to elect the first non-military president since the first coup in 1962.

Analysts and observers in the period after 2015 highlighted how, despite the significant progress, Myanmar was not to be considered a real democracy, but a hybrid regime. The role of the military, the violations of civil and political rights, the repression of ethnic and religious minorities, and corruption remained important obstacles to full democratization even before the 2021 coup (Bünter, 2016; Ganesan, 2017).

Myanmar's foreign policy before 2021

The process of political opening was strongly intertwined with the evolution of the country's international role. The regime was subject to international sanctions by both the United Nations, the United States and the European Union. Isolation from the West increased political and economic dependence on China. The Chinese government always considered the country a significant partner as a source raw materials, such as gas and hydroelectric power, and as a potential strategic bridge to the Indian Ocean (Huang, 2020).

The need to reduce dependence on China is seen as one of the reasons that pushed the armed forces to accept the opening process. The political opening was, in fact, accompanied by a rapprochement with the United States, culminating in the visits of Secretary of State Clinton in 2011 and President Obama in 2012. The regime thus promoted a strategy of differentiation or *hedging*, aimed at replacing dependence on Beijing with a multidirectional foreign policy, cultivating new political and economic relations with the United States, Great Britain, the European Union, Japan, Australia, as well as with other ASEAN members (Fiori e Passeri, 2015).

The period after 2016 marked a further turning point. On the one hand, with the Trump administration, American attention waned. On the other hand, the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya minority led to a new period of isolation from the West. Furthermore, the oppression of the Rohingya eroded the image of Aung San Suu Kyi internationally. This has allowed China to act as a defender of Myanmar's sovereignty and to increase its economic influence, particularly through investments in the infrastructure sector. Xi Jinping's visit to Naypyidaw in May 2020 highlighted the opening of the new course in the country's foreign policy (International Crisis Group, 2020).

The causes of the coup

The possible causes that pushed the armed forces to take power are manifold. The November 2020 elections recorded a significant defeat for the military-backed party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which obtained only 7 out of 224 seats in the upper house and 26 out of 440 in the lower house. The National League for Democracy won an absolute majority with 138 and 258 seats in the two chambers. This clear victory further expanded the control of parliament by the NLD. In 2019 the party led by Aung San Suu Kyi had already attempted to pass a constitutional reform to abolish seats reserved for the armed forces. The representatives of the military in parliament had blocked the approval of the reform. The results of the 2020 elections gave the NLD a new opportunity to reduce the role of the military.

The direct role of Min Aung Hlaing is another important aspect. In recent years, General Hlaing took a more direct political role and made no secret of his ambition to become president after the 2020 general elections, in the event of a favourable outcome for the USDP. Min Aung Hlaing in the past had refused to cooperate with the government in the peace process with the independence militias Karen, Shan and Kachin and is also considered one of the main perpetrators of the Rohingya genocide. The attempt by the government and Aung San Suu Kyi to force him to retire upon reaching the age limit, to compel him to give up his political power, may have been one of the decisive factors in the decision to execute the coup.

The international consequences

The international consequences of the coup are complex and non-linear. After the heartfelt appeal of Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun for an intervention against the coup leaders and to protect democracy and human rights in the country, the United Nations General Assembly approved a resolution condemning the junta, calling for a return to democracy and asking the international community to stop selling weapons to the regime (UN General Assembly, 2021). The European Union, the United States and other Western countries such as Canada and Australia immediately

imposed sanctions and cut diplomatic relations with Myanmar¹. Firms that had invested in the country, which often formed joint ventures with military-controlled state firms, such as Norway's Telenor, energy giants Chevron and Total, or Japan's Kirin, withdrew their investments.

This might suggest that China, which has always made non-interference and respect for sovereignty its principles of foreign policy, could immediately become the first beneficiary of the authoritarian turn. While China may gain influence in the long run, the situation appears much more complex today. First, Beijing had diplomatically invested in its relationship with Aung San Suu Kyi and her government, particularly after the repression of the Rohingya. Furthermore, the relationship between Tatmadaw's leaders and the Chinese government is one of mistrust and suspicion, particularly after the military opened up to the West in an anti-Chinese function. General Hlaing himself, now head of state, had led the repression against an ethnic minority of Chinese origin, generating a wave of refugees towards the province of Yunnan in southwestern China (McLaughlin, 2021; Tower and Clapp, 2021). Finally, political instability and the resumption of fighting with separatist groups endangers the implementation of the infrastructure investments planned for the China-Myanmar corridor, one of the most important development axes of the Belt and Road Initiative.

ASEAN, as often happens in the event of a coup, was unable to adopt a unified and decisive response. This is consistent with both the enormous internal political and economic differences and with the principles of non-interference and self-determination promoted by ASEAN (Acharya, 2021). ASEAN invited General Hlaing to attend the April summit, effectively recognizing his rule as legitimate. Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand did not respond except with references to the principle of sovereignty and non-interference. For the first three, the situation in Myanmar helps shift the spotlight away from their own human rights violations. Thailand is in no position to criticize either, since it is currently ruled by a military junta that took power in 2014. Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, on the contrary, have taken a stand in defence of democracy against the military, through a series of official statements.

Japan's approach has occupied an intermediate position between the condemnation of Western countries and the wait-and-see position of some ASEAN countries. Since the 1980s, Tokyo has cultivated an intense economic and diplomatic relationship with Myanmar. It has helped the opening process through the cancellation of foreign debt and the influx of large investments in the infrastructure and the construction sectors, as well as providing large amounts of development aid. In February 2021, the government suspended development aid and the Diet, the Japanese parliament, passed a motion condemning the coup. Nevertheless, Tokyo has not introduced economic sanctions. Japan hopes to use existing economic, social and political ties to find a mediating role both between the military and the NLD, as well as between the military junta and the international community. Furthermore, the Japanese government considers a complete cut in relations with Myanmar as a net loss of influence in the region, benefiting the expansion of Chinese influence (Kuhn, 2021; Akimoto, 2021).

India, which shares a thousand kilometres long border with Myanmar, has opted for a conciliatory approach with the military junta for a variety of reasons. New Delhi wants to limit the influx of refugees, even though regional governments, motivated by the ethnic kinship between Eastern Indians and people of Western Myanmar, have indicated their willingness to help them. Furthermore, like Japan, India fears international isolation will lead to an increase in Chinese influence in the region.

In conclusion, the competition for influence between major regional powers and the divisions within ASEAN, where there is no shortage of countries with a significant political role of the military, make an effective response to the coup d'état more difficult. The deterioration of the health situation,

¹ Considering the country's economic problems and the consequences of the pandemic, Western countries have opted for targeted sanctions against the military elite avoiding sanctions against the population.

with the increase in Covid-19 infections, pushes neighbouring countries to an even more conciliatory approach to prevent waves of refugees from leading to an increase in infections in their countries.

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Migration crisis as Lukashenko's tool of hybrid warfare against the Baltic countries and Poland, in the shadow of the Zapad 2021 exercise

Little over a year ago, Minsk was very busy in quelling the countless protests unleashed throughout the country. The reason for the protest was the presidential elections (August 9, 2020) with unclear results¹ thus not recognized by the European Union². As fluctuating as they were, until that date relations with Western Europe were marked by a "peaceful coexistence". Lukashenko had even gained the role of a "balanced and pragmatic partner" capable of maintaining regional stability, against the backdrop of an aggressive Russia. During the last year, due to the fraudulent conduct of the aforementioned elections, the following repression of the demonstrations, the detention of journalists, and – last but not least - the forced landing of the Ryanair passenger flight³, the EU has applied four packets of sanctions⁴ to Belarus. The EU was obviously not the only one. On the anniversary of the start of the protests, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom also imposed new sanctions on Minsk. Canadian and British restrictions have moved closer to European one; London also hit Lukashenko's longtime friend, the Russian oligarch Mikhail Gutseriev, whose family has assets in the United Kingdom. The US sanctions, on the other hand, are potentially the most painful since, in addition to the recent restrictions against a significant part of the Belarusian petrochemical industry (Belaruskali)⁵ and the Neman tobacco factory⁶, businessmen close to Lukašénka were attacked, as well as their oil companies.

In particular, among the countries that have become champions of the Belarusian cause is Lithuania. Here the main opponent of Lukashenko, Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, wife of the blogger and youtuber Sergei Tikhonovsky - the candidate in the elections in which he could not participate given the arrest of May 2020 - found political asylum and a diplomatic status⁷ was conferred on his post in Vilnius. It is therefore easy to imagine that the current migration crisis on the borders with the EU was created *ad hoc* by Minsk in response to Western support for the opposition and the imposed sanctions. However, the attitude of all parties involved contributes to deteriorate the situation which could easily get out of control (see the sending back of migrants by the Lithuanian border authorities and the Belarusian accusations of violation of human rights). In such a context, Minsk does not hide that it has deliberately opened a gateway to Lithuania and, subsequently to

¹ Sylwia Zawadzka, *Foreign policy of the Russian Federation. The importance of White Russia and Russian interests in the area*. In Osservatorio Strategico n. 3, 2020. https://www.difesa.it/SMD/_CASD/IM/CeMiSS/Documenti/Vis/Osservatorio_Strategico_2020/03_OS_Num_3_2020/08_Zawadzka_OS_3_2020.pdf

² EU relations with Belarus. Sanctions following the presidential elections in August 2020. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/policies/eastern-partnership/belarus/>

³ *Ryanair flight hijacked to Minsk, dissident arrested. Italy, Germany and the EU convene the Belarusian ambassador*, dated May 23, 2021

<https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/la-bielorussia-dirotta-minsk-volo-ryanair-arrestare-giornalista-AExTpOL>

⁴ Background - EU restrictive measures against Belarus <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-following-the-2020-belarus-presidential-elections/belarus-timeline/> If the migration crisis is not resolved quickly, Brussels will react by probably accepting the Lithuanian proposals providing for an enlargement of the EU sectoral sanctions against Minsk. The new Vilnius proposals are more radical than those already in the pipeline: a complete blockade of the transit of Belarusian potassium through the Lithuanian port of Klaipėda. Potassium fertilizers (US \$ 2.5 billion in revenue in 2020). Unlike oil, potassium cannot be quickly transferred to alternative Russian ports, because there are no suitable infrastructure and free terminals.

⁵ Belaruskali is one of the largest Belarusian state companies, one of the largest potash fertilizer producers in the world (20% of global supply as of 2019) <https://kali.by/by/>.

⁶ <http://www.tabak.by/en/>

⁷ *Lithuania's ForMin accredits Tsikhanouskaya's team as Belarusian Democratic Representation*. https://www.baltictimes.com/lithuania_s_formin_accredits_tsikhanouskaya_s_team_as_belarusian_democratic_representation/ del 5.07.2021

Poland, for refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern countries, declaring that up to now it has protected the EU from migratory flows but, in the light of sanctions and a hostile Western attitude, it now makes no sense for Belarus to pursue this policy.

Vilnius welcomed migrants for several months⁸, until some problems began to arise at the border: riots in refugee camps and protests by local residents. In early August, the Lithuanian border guards changed their tactics and started sending migrants to Belarus. There is a further venial aspect that leads the Minsk government to favor air carrier flows. In fact, the immigration business suits the Belarusian coffers, since migrants receive a Belarusian tourist visa, for which, at times, they have to pay intermediaries in their countries for an amount that is around US \$ 10-15,000. Thus every "tourist" from Iraq brings US \$ 3,000 to the Belarusian treasure in the form of a deposit, which remains in the budget if the guest who has become illegal does not return.

At the moment, thanks to the efforts of international diplomacy, it has been possible to persuade Iraq to cancel flights to Minsk and begin the repatriation of compatriots stranded in Belarus⁹. The flow of migrants to Lithuania has stopped. But the crisis did not end there. The increase in the number of illegal border crossings began to be registered in Poland (about 3,000 attempts in August alone), where the government - pushed also by the Zapad-2021¹⁰ military drill - proclaimed the state of emergency on September 3rd in the border areas (Podlasie - 115 places - and Lublin - 68 places - voivodships)¹¹, which will last for 30 days. The concern is, in fact, that the present migrants crisis would be one of the phases¹² of the joint Russian-Belarusian exercise which began on September 9th¹³, as stated by the Polish Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Marcin Przydacz¹⁴. However, contrary to what the two countries attempted to sell¹⁵, Western concern about the exercise should be reduced.

Formally, the timing of the Zapad-2021 exercise may actually be worrying. The active phase of these maneuvers was initially carried out on fourteen training ranges in Belarus, western Russia and in the Kaliningrad district. According to the official statement of the Russian Defense Ministry, operations started simultaneously in 9 polygons: "Kirilovsky" (Leningrad Oblast), "Strugi Krasnye" (Pskov Oblast), "Mulino" (Nizhny Novgorod Oblast), "Pogonovo", "Khmelevka", "Pravdinski", "Dobrovolski" (Kaliningrad district), "Dorogobuzh" (Smolensk district) and "Volsky" (Saratov district), in the Baltic Sea polygons, as well as in a further 5 Belarusian training areas ("Obuz-Lesnovski", "Brenski", "Topolski", "Domanovski" and "Ruzanski")¹⁶. In the weeks leading up to the exercise,

⁸ From January to August 2021, more than 4,000 migrants illegally entered Lithuania via Belarus. In 2020, 74 illegal migrants crossed this border while in 2019 - only 36. Monitoring of illegal immigration <https://ls-osp-sdg.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/9b0a008b1fff41a88c5efcc61a876be2>

⁹ *Ирак готовит эвакуацию своих граждан из Беларуси (Iraq is preparing to evacuate its citizens from Belarus)* dated August 7, 2021 <https://www.dw.com/ru/irak-gotovit-jevakuciju-svoih-grazhdan-iz-belarusi/a-58794741>

¹⁰ Russian Ministry of Defence home page <https://structure.mil.ru/mission/practice/all/west-2021.htm>

¹¹ *Bezpieczeństwo Polski na pierwszym miejscu – stan wyjątkowy przy granicy z Białorusią (Security of Poland in the first place - state of emergency at the border with Belarus)* dated September 3, 2021 <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/bezpieczenstwo-polski-na-pierwszym-miejscu--stan-wyjatkowy-przy-granicy-z-bialorusia>

¹² *Nielegalna migracja elementem ćwiczeń „Zapad-2021”? (Is the illegal immigration as part of the “Zapad-2021” military drill?)* <https://www.defence24.pl/nielegalna-migracja-elementem-cwiczen-zapad-2021>

¹³ *В Калининградской области прошла церемония открытия совместного стратегического учения «Запад-2021» (The opening ceremony of the joint strategic exercise “Zapad-2021” was held in the Kaliningrad region)* https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12383110@egNews

¹⁴ *Przydacz: Nielegalna migracja może być elementem manewrów „Zapad-2021” (Przydacz: the illegal immigration could be an element of “Zapad-2021” exercise)*, dated August 25, 2021 <https://www.tvp.info/55525704/przydacz-nielegalna-migracja-moze-byc-elementem-manewrow-zapad-2021>

¹⁵ *Навстречу совместному стратегическому учению «Запад-2021». В Москве прошёл брифинг для военных атташе иностранных государств с участием заместителя начальника Главного управления международного военного сотрудничества Министерства обороны РФ генерал-майора Евгения Ильина. (Towards the West-2021 Joint Strategic Exercise. A briefing for military attachés of foreign states was held in Moscow with the participation of Major General Yevgeny Ilyin, Deputy Head of the Main Directorate for International Military Cooperation of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation).* dated August 23, 2021 <http://redstar.ru/navstrechu-sovmestnomu-strategicheskomu-uchenyu-zapad-2021/>

¹⁶ <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2021/09/14/otlichitelnye-osobennosti-zapada2021.html>

further actions saw the involvement of naval forces in the southern part of the Baltic Sea and in the Gulf of Finland.

The result is an extremely "diluted" map, with training areas over 2,000 km deep (for example, the "Volski" training area alone is located over 1000 km from the Polish border as well as "Mulino" more of 730 km to the North, it is about 930 km from Latvia and over 1260 km from Poland).

Even the number of military personnel employed should be exaggerated in context, in fact, despite what is touted by, 200,000 people take part in the Zapad-2021 maneuvers which, with such a number of polygons, implies an average of 1,500 soldiers on each of them. In essence, only 5% of these 200,000 units were practiced in Belarus¹⁷. The Belarusians only assigned just over 10,000 soldiers to their territory for operations in Zapad-2021, which saw the participation of a group of 2,500 Russians (the equivalent of a mechanized regiment) and about 2,000 soldiers from the countries, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Shanghai Cooperation Organization and "other friendly countries" (Armenia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Serbia and Sri Lanka).

In terms of quantity and type of military equipment used by Russians and Belarusians, up to 15 ships, 80 planes and helicopters were used (i.e. only 4 more than in this year's "Victory Parade") and over 760 vehicles / materials (including over 290 tanks and 240 artillery systems - salvos sets, howitzers and mortars). All this, however, was distributed throughout western Russia (even in the far east of Moscow).

The large-scale Belarusian-Russian exercises "Zapad-2021" therefore added to the general late summer nervousness. As always happens, around these military exercises, which are a pure instrument (see Vostok-2018) of internal and external propaganda (projection of one's own potential strength abroad), arise great phobias mainly linked to a possible attack by neighboring countries or to an encroachment aimed at verify the operational readiness of NATO countries. In such a case, Russia wouldn't bear the responsibility - but Belarus - Moscow would indeed take the opportunity to mediate between the parties.

Unlike in the past and relatively tense-free years of the EU-Russian Federation-Belorussia, the exercises now overlap with the Minsk conflict with its neighbors and Lukashenko's internal political interest to keep that tension high in exchange for a possible counterpart.

For the first time, a situation has arisen around Belarus which presents a real risk of accidental armed incidents at the border but due to the expectation of mutual provocations and the interpretation of each other.

¹⁷ The Russians tried to act in accordance with the provisions of the Vienna Document on Confidence-Building and Security-Building Measures of 2011. The document indicates that the maximum number of personnel involved in military exercises under operational command in Russia cannot exceed the 6,400 units.

Iraq: the US combat troops' exit

On the occasion of the Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's visit to the White House in July 2021, it was announced that all remaining US combat troops will be out of Iraq by the end of the year, as a result of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue¹ (in April at the end of the previous SD meeting the combat troops withdrawal had already been announced). The US forces will keep training and advising the Iraqi army². Since the Islamic State defeat, the United States and Great Britain have put a lot of resources into the training of Iraqi anti-insurgency forces, this will continue with the support of NATO's training mission³ - NMI - starting May 2022 under Italian command, and the units will rise to 4,000.

The number of US troops is likely to remain unchanged, but the announcement is an attempt to help the Iraqi Prime Minister at a time of serious health, economic and political hardship⁴ ahead of the October 2021 elections⁵. Political parties aligned with Iran have long called for the withdrawal of all Coalition forces against IS⁶, led by the United States, especially after the killing in January 2020 of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards commander of the Quds Force, General Qasem Soleimani, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, commander of the Iraqi Shiite militia Kataib Hezbollah at the Baghdad airport. Shiite militias are accused by the United States of carrying out hundreds of attacks against Iraqi military bases hosting Coalition forces with Iranian-made missiles, mortars and drones⁷, in an attempt to press for their exit from the country⁸.

U.S. combat troops withdrew in 2011, coming back three years later at the request of the Iraqi government, when IS militants took control of 1/3 of the country, partly because the West had diverted its attention. It then took a coalition of 80 nations, 5 years and billions of dollars to defeat it. IS had capitalized on the massive discontent of Iraqi Sunnis⁹ against Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki's Shiite governments that ruled the country from 2006 to 2014 systematically excluding them¹⁰.

After the IS military defeat in late 2017, US forces remained in Iraq to prevent a resurgence of the group¹¹. Eighteen years after the Iraq invasion, Washington still has about 2,500 regular soldiers in Iraq, plus a small and unspecified number of special operations forces concentrated in three bases: a small fraction of the 160,000 force of 2008¹².

Even non-aligned Iraqis would like to see their country free from foreign forces: the notion of foreign occupation is highly emotional. Washington has long tried to extricate itself from the middle

¹ F. Gardner, "How US military pullback in Iraq could benefit Iran", BBC, 27 July 2021; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57976007>

² "US combat forces to leave Iraq by end of year", BBC, 27 July 2021; <https://rb.gy/uuldvv>

³ K. B. Williams, "Is Iraq's Military Good Enough for US Troops to Leave?", Defence One, October 28, 2020; <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2020/10/iraqs-military-good-enough-us-troops-leave/169621/>

⁴ H. Al Shakeri, "The Al-Kadhimi Government and the Future of Iraq's Protests", ISPI, 4 settembre 2020; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/al-kadhimi-government-and-future-iraqs-protests-27272>

⁵ International Crisis Group, "Iraq: Protests, Iran's Role and an End to U.S. Combat Operations" podcast episode 46, 30 July 2021; <https://rb.gy/npiacp>

⁶ A. Ibrahim, "Iraqi parliament calls for expulsion of foreign troops", AlJazeera, 5 January 2020; <https://rb.gy/tigoll>

⁷ S. al-Salhy, "Attack of the drones: The true power of Iraqi paramilitaries' aircraft revealed", Middle East Eye, 4 August 2021; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-paramilitaries-drone-attacks-true-power-homemade>

⁸ E. Yeranian, "Pro-Iranian Militia Commander Threatens Attacks Against US Forces Unless They Leave Iraq", VOA, July 24, 2021; <https://rb.gy/qfy26b>

⁹ Crisis Group Middle East Report no. 150, "Iraq: Falluja's Faustian Bargain", 28 April 2014; Crisis Group Middle East Briefing no. 38, "Iraq's Jihadi Jack-in-the-Box", 20 June 2014

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, "Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State", 14 March 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state>

¹¹ United States Institute of Peace, "Iraq Timeline: Since the 2003 War", May 29, 2020; <https://rb.gy/q09x0p>

¹² "U.S. set to formalize readjustment of troop role in Iraq –officials", Reuters, July 22, 2021; <https://rb.gy/xpzb0l>

eastern “forever wars”, since with its allies the attention has increasingly turned to the Asia-Pacific region and the South China Sea. This epilogue is considered acceptable even if not at the cost of handing Iraq over to Iran¹³.

Today's political equation, while far from perfect, is more tolerable for the competing ethnic groups sharing the administration of the country. The lack of full control of the territory by Baghdad¹⁴ is propitious for IS and any other jihadist group that intends to use the country as operational base, although the group's strategic leadership appears to be more focused on exploiting ungoverned spaces in the Sahel¹⁵ and Afghanistan.

The immediate problem for Iraq is the presence of the Shiite militias: as members of the PMF, Popular Mobilization Forces, despite being regularly settled and having access to the federal budget of 2 billion dollars¹⁶, they escape the state control and pursue their own agenda by evolving into a parallel structure. They are a fluid and adaptive network¹⁷ of between 60,000 and 140,000 fighters divided into 60-70 groups¹⁸ seeking greater space of autonomy from Tehran.

The long-term picture favors Iran. Since the 1979 revolution, Tehran has sought to evict US forces from the area and become the leading regional power. It had little success with the Gulf states that harbor mistrust and hostility¹⁹. In addition, Washington has infrastructures and troops in six Gulf countries, including the US Navy 5th Fleet headquarters in Bahrain. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime had removed the most effective obstacle to Iranian expansion. Tehran has not missed the opportunity ever since²⁰ successfully inserting its militias into the fabric of the Iraqi security establishment²¹ and taking advantage of the powerful voice that its political allies have in parliament²²: out of 329 seats, Fatah²³ (48) is the second group after Muqtada al-Sadr (54).

¹³ J. Arraf, “Iraq Is Caught in the Middle as U.S. and Iran Spar on Its Soil”, The New York Times, June 28, 2021; <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/world/middleeast/iraq-us-airstrikes-militias-iran.html>

¹⁴ R. Aladdin, “Treat Iraq's Iran-aligned militias like ISIS”, Brookings Institution, 30 July 2021; <https://rb.gy/sgkwwx>

¹⁵ J. Naranjo, “El yihadismo se adueña de las zonas rurales del Sahel”, El País, 02 May 2021; <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-05-02/el-yihadismo-se-aduena-de-las-zonas-rurales-del-sahel.html>

¹⁶ O. Al-Nidawi, “The growing economic and political role of Iraq's PMF”, Middle East Institute, 21 May 2019; <https://www.mei.edu/publications/growing-economic-and-political-role-iraqs-pmf>

¹⁷ R. Mansour, “Networks of power”, Chatham House, 26 February 2021; <https://rb.gy/bftm5k>

¹⁸ European Asylum Support Office, “Country Guidance Iraq 2021”, January 2021; <https://rb.gy/csvfgl>: “Since 2016, under the Popular Mobilisation Law, the PMU are formally and legally part of the State's security apparatus. They are defined as an ‘independent military formation’ and not part of the Ministry of Defence or the Ministry of Interior. They are not subordinate to the ISF and nominally report to the Prime Minister as the Commander in Chief, through the PMF Commission and the National Security Council. Although PMU are legally a State institution, in practice they retain autonomous control and influence, some of them with close links to the most important political parties. Therefore, government control over the militias is limited and PMU often act outside of the State's command and control structures”

¹⁹ Y. Rizka, “Iran faces a hostile coalition”, Middle East Monitor, August 3, 2021; <https://rb.gy/9qq1wa>

²⁰ Critical Threats, “Iran File: Iranian Proxies Increase Attacks on US Forces to Catalyze a US Withdrawal from Iraq”, July 09 2021; <https://rb.gy/npmhbt>

²¹ H. Malik, “Iran's game plan for Iraq's militias”, Middle East Institute, April 19, 2021; <https://rb.gy/4dagwa>

²² “Sadiqoun's tactical growth”, Nas News, 11 October 2018; <https://www.nasnews.com/view.php?cat=8>

²³ A. Majidyar, “Iran-backed Fateh Alliance seeks to win or play kingmaker in upcoming Iraqi elections”, Middle East Institute, May 3, 2018; <https://rb.gy/rdh7it>

NATO and the end of the Afghan experience: a new challenge to the Alliance's cohesion?

The decision that the Biden administration took to start the withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan and the NATO decision to follow the same path mark the end of a twenty-year-long commitment and raise questions affecting not only Afghanistan's future but also that of the Atlantic Alliance. From August 2003 to December 2014, ISAF (*International Security Assistance Force*) was NATO's main operational engagement and a testbed of the Alliance's capability to project its strength in a remote and complex theatre. Over the years, ISAF also shed light on NATO's internal tensions, which typically found their expression in the proliferation of the so-called 'national caveats' (Saideman and Auerswald, 2012; Mello, 2019). After ISAF's end, the beginning of Operation Resolute Support (ORS) confirmed the Alliance's engagement in the Asian country, highlighting the political commitment enshrined in the 'Enduring Partnership' agreement signed in 2010, during the NATO Lisbon summit¹. In terms of internal dynamics, ISAF and ORS supported the idea of a 'NATO deployed'. This idea offset the vision of some 'newly admitted' members, which conceived the collective security guarantee provided by article 5 of the North Atlantic treaty 'simply' in terms of '*physical* defence of the territory under the 'Atlantic umbrella'. By the end of the Afghan experience, the situation has changed. Today, the focus is on the future of a structure where tensions have grown since mid-2010 and that, with the #NATO2030 initiative, has started a difficult process of reflection and redefinition of its tasks.

The debate between the supporters of a 'NATO deployed' and a 'NATO prepared' is not new. The transformations that NATO witnessed since the end of the Cold War is essentially a product of this interplay. However, the two components have never found a proper balance. The vision behind the 2010 Strategic Concept² was that of a NATO with global outreach, acting as a security organization. However, the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and the following Russian annexation of Crimea challenged it. In the coming years, the renewed attention towards the European theatre led to the gradual strengthening of the Central and Eastern European allies, a strengthening that active defence expenditure policies enhanced. In their turn, these developments increased their political weight and their influence in defining NATO's common aims, along a path already started in the early 2000s, at the time of the US military intervention in Iraq. Since 2014, the issue of NATO's internal balance has grown more and more prominent. In that year, the focus of the Celtic Manor summit (September 4-5) was that of burden-sharing and adopting a "*coherent and comprehensive package of necessary measures to respond [...] to the challenges posed by Russia and their strategic implications*"³. Two years later, at the Warsaw summit (July 8-9, 2016), the critical point was finding a credible and sustainable balance between the needs of the Central and Eastern European allies and the southern front (Mattelaer, 2016; Lesser, 2016).

¹ *Declaration by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on an Enduring Partnership signed at the NATO Summit in Lisbon, Portugal, November 20, 2010.* Online: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2010_11/20101120_101120-declaration.pdf [accessed: August 11, 2021]

² *Active Engagement, Modern Defence. Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Lisbon 19-20 November 2010.* Online: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_publications/20120214_strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf [accessed: August 11, 2021]

³ *Wales Summit Declaration. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, September 5, 2014.* Online: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm [accessed: August 11, 2021]

The measures adopted in Warsaw to rebalance the different positions have been only partially successful. Some countries considered them just a way to dilute the tensions triggered by the end of ISAF and the adoption of a new posture that they considered too much retrenched. The negative attitude of the Trump administration and its explicit lack of interest in NATO's internal dynamics worsened the problem. The same did its policy of strengthening bilateral ties with certain Central and Eastern European countries. Now, the end of the military engagement in Afghanistan risks fuelling the same process. Despite the pledge of the US, the European Union, and several European countries to support Kabul's authorities, at NATO level, the end of the Afghan experience marks the possible end of the phase of the '*NATO deployed*' and the return to a more '*territorial*' vision of its function. This change will affect different aspects, such as the allied force structure and its chain of command. Between 2016 and 2017, these aspects have been already dealt with. However, the measures adopted have been criticized due to the long time scheduled for their implementation (Hurt, 2021). The territorial deployment will be probably another affected area, with NATO's centre of gravity possibly shifting eastward. However, several factors seem to conjure against a large-scale increase in NATO's regional presence, although the US engagement dates back to 2014 with the beginning of Operation Allied Resolve.

The background of these events is the strategic reorientation process sketched in the report of the Reflection Group that the Secretary-General appointed as part of the #NATO2030 initiative⁴. In this framework, the '*NATO deployed*' that the end of the Afghan experience 'pushed out of the door' could 're-enter through the window' due to the Alliance's new attention to China's growing international profile. Of course, it will not be copy carbon of what NATO did in the last twenty years. However, the emphasis that the report places on topics like the Alliance's ability to project security beyond its borders, to integrate a global network of partners, and to operate into a '360-degree-security' perspective outlines a future that is more complex and articulated than the 'simple' return to the core business of collective security. This process will produce winners and losers. Its careful handling will, thus, will be essential to avoid tensions rising at a dangerous level. The multi-level, multi-stakeholder engagement strategy that supports #NATO2030 partly aims at reaching this goal. However, the outcome will largely depend on the posture that the US will assume. In the past years, Washington's role was often important – for better or worse – in shaping the European response to NATO's evolution. In this perspective, its contribution to a post-Afghanistan NATO will be helpful to guess the current administration's profile and ambitions and understand if, at least in the transatlantic realm, Joe Biden's America is really back.

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⁴ NATO 2030: *United for a New Era. Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General*, November 25, 2020. Online: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf [accessed: August 11, 2021]

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Risks and counter-trends of ecological and energy transitions

This article deals with some data that seem to be in contrast with the roadmap outlined by the UN and the EU on the fight against climate change, as well as some risks concerning the related ecological and energy transitions. As established by the Paris Agreement (2015) and the several international conferences on climate change held in the following years, including the G-20 in Naples in July 2021, future global warming has to be limited to 1.5°/2° C., while states shall reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 ('climate neutrality').

Now, regardless of the opinions that doubting the 'removal' capacity of accumulated emissions consider this goal insufficient¹, it is necessary to focus on the dynamics of CO₂ emissions. Between 1990 and 2019, they increased from 20.5 to 33.4 Gigatonnes (with 2015 value equal to 32.2 Gt); in 2020, they fell by about 2 Gt, or 5.8% (the highest decline since the Second World War), but this happened during the year of the global contraction in energy production linked to the Covid 19 pandemic². Even assuming, plausibly and hopefully, that emissions will continue to decline in the coming years, at present it is quite difficult to expect an average reduction of over 10 Gt per decade.

The CO₂ emissions level of China, the highest in the world, is about 10 billion tons per year, that is close to a third of the world total; it will not decrease until 2030. After all, Beijing declared China cannot and will not reach climate neutrality before 2060. The People's Republic of China still bases 50% of its energy consumption on coal, of which it is a great producer (after oil and before gas, coal is the main source for energy consumption globally; coal, oil and gas account for about 80% of energy production and 87% of CO₂ emissions³). In addition, the energy supply of Beijing is still heavily fueled by oil and natural gas, largely coming from the Persian Gulf, Africa, Russia and Central Asia (the Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure project is also related to China's imports of oil & gas)⁴.

The US shows a decreasing CO₂ emissions trend; from 1990 to 2020, emissions decreased from about 5.5 to just over 4.5 billion tons. However, regardless of the future effects of recent measures announced or already taken by President Biden about CO₂ emissions, investments in renewables and the limitation of shale *oil & gas* production, the country has not even reached half of the cuts already announced for 2020 by Barack Obama. It still produces one of the world highest levels CO₂ emissions per capita, that is more than 15 tons. To be achieved, government's goals will require legislative plans whose approval will require some support from the Republican party. Many members of the latter could oppose government plans by considering the energy policy of the White House very hostile to the oil sector (of which, moreover, precisely shale productions have greatly contributed to make the US a net exporter of energy, significantly reducing its need for supply from

¹ See the following link: <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2020/12/11/10-myths-net-zero-targets-carbon-offsetting-busted/>

² <https://www.iea.org/articles/global-energy-review-co2-emissions-in-2020>

³ According to 'Our World in Data' (2020), albeit significantly declining, coal still contributes to almost 27% of total energy consumption; of the latter, oil represents about 33%, while natural gas, in continuous growth and less polluting than oil and coal, is over 24%, while the rest is shared between nuclear energy (4.3%) and, rapidly growing, renewable sources (11.4%) - hydroelectric (6.4%), wind (2.2%), solar (1.1%), biofuels and others (geothermal energy, biomass, wave motion and tides, etc). See articles by H. Ritchie e M. Roser: <https://ourworldindata.org/energy-mix> <https://ourworldindata.org/cheap-renewables-growth>

⁴ China's emissions have been growing since 1990, when they stood at around 3.4 billion tons. By referring to the provisions of the the Paris agreement, China claims to have a developing economy, not a developed one: that is why Beijing wants to decarbonise in 2060 instead of 2050 (as the advanced industrialised countries). For the data given on China see also L. Franza, M. Bianchi e L. Bergamaschi, *Geopolitica e politica estera nell'era delle rinnovabili*, Roma, IAI: <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/geopolitica-e-politica-estera-italiana-nellera-delle-energie-rinnovabili> see also the links below:
<https://www.irena.org/newsroom/pressreleases/2021/Jun/China-and-IRENA-Boost-Ties-as-Leading-Renewables-Market-Eyes-Net-Zero-Goals> ; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/vertice-sul-clima-dove-lambizione-30200>

the Middle East). Furthermore, a possible change between Democrats and Republicans in the White House after the first Biden term could reverse the pro-environmentalist attitude of the current US energy policy⁵.

Among the great powers, the EU progressed the most in reducing emissions. Since 1990, when they stood at 4.6 billion tons, the emissions decreased by 24%. However, although in the last two decades there were overall increases in the domestic energy production of important member countries (including Italy), as well as significant measures to make the EU energy market more diversified, integrated, sustainable and resilient, the Union and its member states are still net energy importers; at the beginning of 2020, the EU energy dependency rate, which has been growing since 2000, was close to 60%. The great majority of imported energy is obtained from fossil sources: oil (almost 2/3 of imports), especially from Russia, Iraq and Saudi Arabia; natural gas (just under 1/3), primarily from Russia, Norway and Algeria; to a lesser extent, coal from Russia, the USA and Colombia. With the exception of Norway, these countries are moving significantly slower than the EU in both limiting emissions and the production and consumption of renewable sources⁶.

Russia, which also joined the Paris Agreement and took some initiatives to reduce emissions and enhance solar energy and other renewables, has not yet begun to implement a holistic and specific plan for decarbonisation and energy transition. After all, given the contribution provided to the country's economy by coal, and even more by oil and gas (>20% of GDP, >50% of exports and 40% of state revenues), as well as the related diplomatic pressure capacity, it is likely Moscow will not change its energy policy for at least a decade⁷. A more or less similar path could concern a large number of countries whose growth is still rather linked to CO₂ emissions, such as India or several states in Latin America. Some countries in Africa and the Middle East, although already engaged in green energy projects and climate-energy issues, still largely rely on fossil sources for economic growth and domestic consent. The rent coming from the exploitation of such sources is also connected to strong revenues gained by oil and gas exports to Europe (to mention just on example, North Africa's 60% of crude oil and 80% of gas exports supply European energy needs⁸). Lacking a compensation process, these countries could suffer from destabilizing economic and socio-political effects coming from the loss of their hydrocarbon rents.

This does not mean these states should not diversify their economic and energy systems. However, precise plans should be devised on how to bridge the existing international gaps on the actual will and abilities to reduce emissions and develop renewable energy. Because of the high level of experience reached in these fields, the EU and Italy could devise and launch new forms of international cooperation and interdependence, although they could face some troubles to fully respect the commitments of the European Law on Climate, the Green Deal and the Recovery Plan. This occurs not only because of differences concerning how member-states, social actors and

⁵ For the data on the US see the following links: <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2021/02/04/u-s-rejoins-paris-agreement/>; <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1063730925>; <https://www.petro-online.com/news/analytical-instrumentation/11/breaking-news/how-will-joe-biden-change-the-shale-industry/54241>; https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/petrolio-biden-shale-oil-perde-anche-stampella-politica-ADCF6gEB?refresh_ce=1; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/vertice-sul-clima-dove-lambizione-30200>

⁶ On the EU and Italy see *Ibid*, and the reports available at the links below: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Energy_production_and_imports; <https://dgsaie.mise.gov.it/situazione-energetica-nazionale>; <https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/PNRR.pdf>; https://www.mise.gov.it/images/stories/documenti/PNIEC_finale_17012020.pdf; http://documenti.camera.it/leg18/dossier/pdf/ES0266.pdf?_1626156885554; <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/geopolitica-e-politica-estera-italiana-nellera-delle-energie-rinnovabili>; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/vertice-sul-clima-dove-lambizione-30200>

⁷ For the data on Russia see: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/bof/bitstream/handle/123456789/17970/bpb0721.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>; <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/decarbonization-and-energy-transition-need-diversify-russias-economy-29949>; <https://group.atradius.com/publications/country-report-eastern-europe-russia-2021.html>

⁸ <https://rienergia.staffettaonline.com/articolo/34613/Idrogeno:+l%E2%80%99ipotesi+di+una+joint+strategy+tra+Europa+Nord+Africa/Lombardini>

productive players do engage with decarbonization and renewables, but also due to difficult challenges related to emission cut plans⁹.

That said, it is also true Italy and the EU will have to stay partially linked, for a few decades, to imported fossil sources such as oil and overall natural gas; after all, to do the contrary, without a greater level of energy autonomy, could bring the risk of a partial international energy isolation.

The progressive phase out of hydrocarbon sources, while decreasing the energy dependence of the EU (and Italy) on potentially unstable areas, as well as mitigating the risk of conflicts through the greater availability and diffusion of renewables, could bring new forms of instability and competition. More than to control of energy sources or pipelines and sea lines, these would be linked to technology, minerals (lithium, cobalt, rare earths, etc.) and the know-how related to plants and processes aimed at renewable sources effective exploitation, as well as the digitization and security of electric and cybernetic networks. Furthermore, even if potentially unlimited, and despite recent technological advancements for their storage, renewables are not entirely free from risks linked to their intermittency, or their geographic diffusion. The latter, although higher than that of hydrocarbon sources, is affected by asymmetries which could bring geopolitical confrontation in potentially rich clean energy areas¹⁰. Energy regionalization, which on the one hand could be favored by poorly concentrated sources, could on the other be challenged in some areas by nationalism, poor governance and weak intergovernmental action.

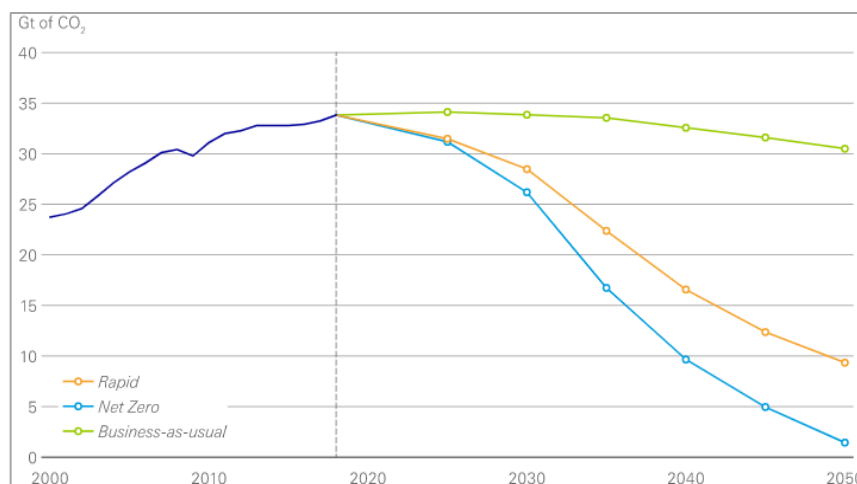
In conclusion, because of delicate asymmetries and possible unexpected/unintended consequences at both the international and domestic levels, the ecological and energy transitions could be less rapid, linear and coherent than how desirable according to the related programs of the UN and the EU. Also through the Climate Conference of Glasgow in autumn 2021, the international community should provide for specific policy actions to address the future risks of the transition. After all, if not doing enough for this process could compromise its long-term goals, a lack of strategic pragmatism in its implementation could bring destabilising effects in the short and medium terms.

See graph on next page

⁹ Let's consider, for instance, Italy: 'the 2030 CO₂eq emissions quota', based on the EU's goal (i.e. – 55% compared to 1990) included in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, more ambitious than the previous goal of the Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan, is set at 230 million tons of CO₂eq: in just a decade, Italy should reduce emissions by 147 Mt CO₂eq, whereas between 1990 and 2020 they fell, also helped by a dramatic decline linked to Covid effects, by 142 Mt CO₂eq. See also the data in: <https://www.isprambiente.gov.it/it/news/emissioni-gas-serra-nel-2020-stimata-riduzione-del-9-8-rispetto-al-2019> ; F. Suman, La transizione energetica nel PNRR, 'Bo Live' - Università di Padova, 2021: <https://ilbolive.unipd.it/it/news/transizione-energetica-PNRR>

¹⁰ Such as Africa, a potential basin of solar energy but also wind power in certain coastal areas; it does not seem by chance the region received in the last decade a growing attention from China and other major international geoeconomic players (Beijing in recent years also made significant progress and investments in solar energy, while still partly depending on OECD technologies and infrastructures for the production of labor-intensive solar panels). On the nexus between minerals and renewables see: https://www.iea.org/reports/the-role-of-critical-minerals-in-clean-energy-transitions/executive-summary?utm_content=buffer6e9a6&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

CO₂ emissions from energy use and its possible future evolutions *



* In the *Rapid* scenario a series of policy measures, led by a significant rise in carbon prices and supported by more-targeted sector specific measures, bring emissions to fall significantly by 2050. The *Net Zero* scenario assumes that radical shifts in societal behaviour and preferences can add to and strengthen the policy measures embodied in the *Rapid* scenario, so that CO₂ emissions fall dramatically within 2050. The *Business-as-usual* scenario assumes that government policies, technologies and social preferences continue to evolve quite slowly, similar to the trend seen over the recent past; carbon emissions peak in the mid-2020s and then begin to very gradually decrease. *Business-as-usual* also assumes the increase in energy demand is higher than how expected in the other scenarios. For more details see the following link:

<https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/energy-economics/energy-outlook/introduction/overview.html>

Acronyms list

AMISOM: African Union Mission in Somalia

ANM: Amhara National Movement

EDF: Eritrean Defence Forces

ENDF: Ethiopian National Defense Force

EPRDF: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

GERD: Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

OLF: Oromo Liberation Front

TDF: Tigray Defence Forces

TPLF: Tigray People's Liberation Front

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The areas of interest monitored in 2021 are:

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

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