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Osservatorio Strategico

Part One

The HMS Defender incident and the NATO Sea Breeze 2021 exercise: the Black Sea at the center of tensions between the West and Russia

Last June 23 Great Britain was at the center of a diplomatic and military dispute with Russia after the Royal Navy destroyer HMS Defender briefly crossed territorial waters off the coast of the disputed territory of Crimea. The warship sailed for about an hour in the morning within the 12-mile limit off Cape Fiolent on a direct route between the Ukrainian port of Odessa and Georgia, prompting protests and a Russian reaction that, according to an initial reconstruction, reportedly fired warning shots and dropped four bombs in the vicinity of the destroyer.

The British plan was to assert navigation rights in the Black Sea in support of Ukraine, which has lost control of Crimea since 2014 after Russia annexed the peninsula, an action the latter condemned and not recognized by the West. Ben Wallace, the U.K. defense secretary, said the HMS Defender was carrying out "routine transit from Odessa to Georgia through the Black Sea," a position reiterated by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who said the naval unit was acting under international law¹. Warships are allowed to undertake harmless transit through territorial waters as long as it does not jeopardize the peace or security of the coastal state, but the UK would have been aware that sending a destroyer near Crimea would provoke a response from the Kremlin. British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab also announced that Royal Navy warships would continue to enter Ukrainian territorial waters in the Black Sea².

The Russian Defense Ministry initially said that the Black Sea Fleet and the Federal Security Service (FSB) border control service foiled a Russian border violation by HMS Defender near Cape Fiolent in Crimea. The Russian Defense Ministry reported that the destroyer reportedly traveled 3 kilometers into Russia's territorial waters.



A ship then reportedly fired warning shots, followed by several bombs dropped by a Su-24M aircraft in front of the Defender, after which the destroyer left Russian waters. The Russian Defense Ministry considered the destroyer's actions a blatant violation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and called on London to investigate the crew's actions³. In a

¹ Caffio F., *Dal Mar Nero al Mediterraneo: la nuova Guerra Fredda navale*, Affari Internazionali, 5 luglio 2021 <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/2021/07/mar-nero-mediterraneo-guerra-fredda-navale/>

² London's comments on UK naval presence in Black Sea raise concerns, says Kremlin, TASS, 7 luglio 2021 <https://tass.com/defense/1311491>

³ UK Ambassador leaves Russian Foreign Ministry without comments after Black Sea incident, TASS, 24 giugno 2021 <https://tass.com/politics/1306891>

statement to journalists, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko said that "Russia hopes that the West will learn from the incident with the British destroyer HMS Defender in the Black Sea. In this case, we have shown by our military and political actions that we will guarantee our interests 100 percent"⁴. Russia also warned Britain that it would in future bomb British naval vessels in the Black Sea in case of any further provocative actions off the coast of Russia-annexed Crimea⁵. The British Ministry of Defense denied the incident, stating that "no warning shots were fired," and the Prime Minister Boris Johnson's spokesman said that "it is incorrect to say that it was fired or that the ship was in Russian waters"⁶.

A BBC journalist, Jonathan Beale, who was aboard the destroyer, recounted how Russian forces harassed the ship, posting a video in which a Russian Coast Guard unit can be seen closely following the HMS Defender as it passed near Crimea⁷. Two Coast Guard ships sailed behind the destroyer, approaching at a distance of about 100 meters, while about 20 aircraft flew over the area. Andrei Kelin, Russia's ambassador to the U.K., said in an interview with Channel 4 News that the HMS Defender "did not respond to several warnings, issued every 10 minutes," and described the warship's maneuver as having "gone deep, about three kilometers from, or deep into, the territorial waters over there". The ambassador denied that the Kremlin engaged in an "overtly aggressive" act and said that Russia has the right to defend its territory. Kelin added that "the British ship was not only in the Black Sea, which is a sea adjacent to Russia, but in the territorial waters of the Russian Federation".

A likely episode was repeated on June 24, when the Dutch frigate Eversten was overflown by armed Russian planes that simulated fake attacks, provoking the reaction of the UK with a note from the Ministry of Defense stated that it "considers freedom of navigation in international waters a fundamental right"⁸. Military experts said that regardless of whether the details of the Russian or British reports were accurate, the incident appears to represent an escalation in the confrontation between the West and Russia over disputed sea routes.

The incident came just days after the government of Ukraine and the UK's Rosyth Royal Dockyard Ltd signed a memorandum on the rearmament of the Ukrainian Navy. As part of broader military-technical cooperation, the UK has pledged to supply Ukraine with two Sandown-class minesweepers, help it produce brand-new patrol boats, restore Ukraine's aging shipyards and build two new naval bases in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. In total, Kiev will receive a £1.25 billion loan to upgrade its naval capabilities. Although Ukraine's military spending is on the rise (in 2020, Ukraine ranked 34th among nations, spending £5.9 billion), the U.K. loan, part of which will go to fund the contract with Rosyth Royal Dockyard Ltd. is the most significant deal to rearrange the Ukrainian Navy since 2014. However, the rearmament of the Ukrainian Navy is unlikely to pose a threat of military conflict between Russia and Ukraine in the Black Sea that could lead to the involvement of NATO member states. The nature of the weapons provided to the Ukrainian Navy suggests that the Navy will be used as an instrument of coercive diplomacy, but is not expected to participate in an open sea war against Russia⁹.

⁴ *Russia hopes West will learn from incident with British destroyer in Black Sea*, TASS, 24 giugno 2021 <https://tass.com/politics/1306905>

⁵ Faulconbridge G., Golubkova K., *Russia warns Britain it will bomb ships next time*, Reuters, 25 giugno 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-says-dont-get-carried-away-by-warship-spat-with-russia-2021-06-24/>

⁶ Kiselyova M. and Macaskill A., *Russia says it chases British destroyer out of Crimea waters with warning shots, bombs*, Reuters, 23 giugno 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-forces-fire-warning-shots-british-destroyer-black-sea-interfax-cites-2021-06-23/>

⁷ Gardner F., *HMS Defender: What will be the fallout from Black Sea incident?*, BBC, 23 giugno 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57589366>

⁸ *UK comments on incident with Dutch frigate in Black Sea*, TASS, 1 luglio 2021 <https://tass.com/world/1309281>

⁹ Malyarenko T. & Kormych B., *Symbolism of Military Diplomacy: Growing Tensions between NATO and Russia in the Black Sea*, Wilson Center, 28 giugno 2021 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/symbolism-military-diplomacy-growing-tensions-between-nato-and-russia-black-sea>

Dmytro Kuleba, the country's Foreign Minister, said that Russia's action showed an aggressive and provocative policy posing a threat to Ukraine and its allies and reiterated the need for new level of cooperation between Ukraine and NATO allies in the Black Sea¹⁰.

Just from June 28 to July 10, NATO countries conducted the Sea Breeze 2021 naval exercise. Jointly hosted by the Ukrainian Navy and the U.S. Navy's Sixth Fleet, the annual exercise, which dates back to 1996, aims to strengthen maritime security in the Black Sea region. This year, two of NATO's four fleets - Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2) and Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group Two (SNMCMG2) - participated.¹¹ The exercise spanned a variety of warfare modes, including amphibious warfare, land maneuver warfare, dive operations, maritime interdiction operations, air defense, special operations integration, anti-submarine warfare, and search and rescue operations.

NATO warships regularly operate in the Black Sea, consistent with international law, patrolling the waters for about two-thirds of the year. NATO ships also regularly participate in both NATO and national exercises in the Black Sea to improve interoperability, demonstrate presence, and assure allies of their maritime commitment to collective defense. This year's exercise hosted the largest number of participants in history, with the 30 NATO countries providing 5,000 troops, 32 ships and 40 aircraft¹².

Italy participated with the Frigate *Virginio Fasan*, Flagship of the Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2). The activities carried out by the Italian FREMM are part of the normal activities carried out under the control of the NATO Response Force (NRF) that operates under the Command of the Allied Maritime Component (MARCOM Northwood). Confirming the tension and the nervousness of Russia, just in the days of the Sea Breeze exercise, the Russian National Defense Control Center made it known, last July 1, to monitor, through the Black Sea Fleet, the missile frigate of the Navy, *Virginio Fasan*¹³.

Analysis, evaluations and forecasts

Gustav Gressel, Senior Policy Fellow at the Wider Europe Program of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), told Euronews that Russia's recent actions were a way to assert its sovereignty over Crimea. Russia, Gressel said, considers Crimea to be Russian and wants the West to recognize Crimea as such. The second thing is that Russia does not want to have any NATO military presence in the Black Sea and is aggressively harassing any Western ship, not only near Crimea, but also in international waters. Another element highlighted by Gressel is that "when they invaded Crimea, the Russians took over a lot of oil platforms and gas drilling rigs in the Black Sea, which reach all the way to the Romanian coast, and they are controlling them very aggressively. This allows Russia to be able to completely cut off Ukraine from maritime traffic, should it wish to do so".

For Kiev, achieving safety and freedom of navigation for Ukrainian ships in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, along with the possibility of exploiting at least part of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Black Sea, are important tactical goals. In 2014, Russia took control of the territorial waters around the Crimean Peninsula and with them a significant part of the Ukrainian EEZ in the vicinity. Russia, on several occasions, has also blocked trade routes in the Black Sea

¹⁰ Sabbagh D., Royal Navy ship off Crimea sparks diplomatic row between Russia and UK, The Guardian, 23 giugno 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/23/russian-ship-fired-warning-shots-at-royal-navy-destroyer-hms-defender-moscow-says>

¹¹ NATO ships exercise in the Black Sea, NATO, 19 luglio 2021 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185879.htm

¹² NATO Allies and Partners Ready for Exercise SEA BREEZE 21, SHAPE NATO, 25 giugno 2021 <https://shape.nato.int/news-archive/2021/nato-allies-and-partners-ready-for-exercise-sea-breeze-21>

¹³ Russian Navy keeping close watch on Italian warship in Black Sea, TASS, 1 luglio 2021 <https://tass.com/defense/1309395>

and the Sea of Azov without warning, citing security reasons or under the pretext of conducting military exercises. As a result, the Mariupol seaport, which connects eastern Ukrainian industry with Ukraine's foreign trading partners, has experienced economic losses of about 30 percent¹⁴.

In April of this year, Russia declared exclusion zones off Crimea for six months, closing the area to foreign military vessels. The decision drew strong complaints from Ukraine and Western nations, but Moscow dismissed the criticism and said the restrictions would not interfere with commercial shipping. The incident with the British navy vessel occurred in one of the exclusion zones, as the Dutch ship was approaching one of them. In all of these incidents, Gressel told Euronews: "You can see how the Russians are always pushing the envelope, to see how we react. And if there is no serious reaction, they push further and become more aggressive. In the face of limited notes of protests, in recent years Russians have become more confident that these behaviors will go completely or partially unnoticed". Based on this reasoning, NATO's continued exercises with the Ukrainians continue to be a valuable signal of deterrence to Moscow. It is interesting to point out that, commenting on the episode, Vladimir Putin ruled out the possibility that, in case the British ship had been sunk, the world would have found itself on the brink of a world war, the outcome of which would have had no winners. According to Gressel, the possibility that further incidents between naval vessels could aggravate the situation will depend greatly on the Navy involved. If incident management arrangements with the Russians still work for the US Navy, different scenarios could open up if other navies are involved and the Russians feel bolder about taking more intimidating actions¹⁵.

Against this consideration, a further reading of the Royal Navy's action in the Black Sea can be given. The incident off the Crimea highlights Britain's new role in the international system. It presents the newly formed "Global Britain" as a proactive member of the U.S.-led coalition that seeks to reassert the West's global leadership against the challenge of China and the actions of Russia. In doing so, London is willing to go to the limit and take non-negligible risks.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, the UK was the first to respond to U.S. calls for joint action. Now, Britain has shown that it can lead the way in some cases. Until this week, Russian sovereignty in Crimea had only been directly challenged in 2018 by Ukrainian navy ships sent by then-President Petro Poroshenko from Odessa to the Sea of Azov. Now, the message of non-recognition of Russia's incorporation of Crimea has been delivered by the HMS Defender, which sailed into 12-mile territorial waters not far from Sevastopol. This potentially portends a new, riskier level of confrontation.

No one in Moscow expects the West to accept Russia's sovereignty over Crimea in the near future. However, ignoring reality comes at a price that should be understood before running the risk of actually having to fight.

Britain has fewer reservations about confronting Russia than other European NATO member states. The UK's recent national security strategy is sincere in naming Russia as the main security threat to Britain and the West. Therefore, U.K.-Russian relations, which have been increasingly cool over the past decade, may be overheating¹⁶.

¹⁴ Malyarenko T. & Kormych B., Symbolism of Military Diplomacy: Growing Tensions between NATO and Russia in the Black Sea, Wilson Center, 28 giugno 2021 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/symbolism-military-diplomacy-growing-tensions-between-nato-and-russia-black-sea>

¹⁵ Amiel S., *What is behind recent confrontations between Russia and the West in the Black Sea?*, Euronews, 7 luglio 2021 <https://www.euronews.com/2021/07/07/what-is-behind-recent-confrontations-between-russia-and-the-west-in-the-black-sea>

¹⁶ Trenin D., *Sailing Into Troubled Waters. Russia Counters Britain in the Black Sea*, The Moscow Times, 28 giugno 2021 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/06/28/sailing-into-troubled-waters-russia-counters-britain-in-the-black-sea-a74355>

What the Afghanistan's Situation means for the Area Mashreq

In the last weeks the security situation in Afghanistan has significantly and dramatically worsened due to the rapid and, to some extent, disorganized withdrawal of US and NATO troops that during the last two decades managed the security in the country. Although Afghanistan is outside the scope of this research, its stability and security situation has far-reaching important consequences¹ for the area that we focus on.

First, the so called state-building operations and similar concepts such as regime change and so on have to be completely re-thought. They could not represent a valid and effective tool for international politics. After investing \$2 trillion over two decades, Washington watched the Afghan national government and army collapse in a matter of days. This could not be surprising looking at the latest, and equally disastrous operations in Iraq, Syria and Libya. These examples are very different from each other due to their geopolitical framework, kind of military operations and U.S./Western involvement; however, they share the fact that the strategy and the idea to re-build the country completely failed. The criticism against this approach and strategy is not new, but looking at the recent Afghan failure, it needs to be taken seriously into account in order to re-shape our strategy and approach to international relations. Humanitarian interventions are possible, but under the assumption of minimal costs. The issues linked to such operations is that the U.S., and Western allies, share the belief “that a foreign entity can parachute into a country and build a state that is both legitimate and loyal”². This is not possible: local culture, society, religion play a central role and have to be taken into account. This is an important lesson that we should start to apply in Libya with the upcoming election seen as the most important turning point in the recent history of the country. Moreover, the so called “Western way of war” also needs to be discussed, because the situation in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and so on cannot be resolved by modern technology alone. Technology is just a tool, maybe very modern and advanced, but a tool needing a strategy and political goals to be used for. Related to the state-building issue is what the military calls “security force assistance,” “building partner capacity,” or “train-and-equip operations” that clearly failed in Afghanistan like in Iraq and before in Vietnam. In Afghanistan, the U.S. military spent 20 years and \$83 billion building up a force that melted away in a matter of weeks. This is a very crucial problem because, setting Afghanistan and Iraq aside, the United States spends billions of dollars every year and deploys thousands of personnel to train and assist foreign militaries from countries all over the world. The main goal of these operations is to increase the capacity of partner militaries either to shoulder local security burdens or to shape local environment, as it was the case of supporting local militias in Syria. The problem, however, is that the United States’ partners are often uninterested in building militaries that can fight, because in failed states leaders often prioritize their personal and political survival over strengthening their nations’ militaries that eventually could threaten their own power³. In other unstable and volatile situations like Libya, Lebanon or Syria this issue has to be addressed.

Second, the failure in Afghanistan can also impact on the MENA region and undermine the U.S. and Western influence there. Since Obama presidency the U.S. credibility in the region has been weakened mainly due to Washington support to the Arab Spring that toppled traditional allies, Mubarak in Egypt, and spread instability in the region, Libya and Syria. Yet the so called pivot to Asia, the American military and diplomatic re-balance toward Asia, signaled that Washington was less

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/19/what-will-the-taliban-victory-mean-for-the-middle-east>. For a different viewpoint in which the Biden administration is seen to support allies, mainly Western allies: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-19/failure-afghanistan-wont-weaken-americas-alliances>; <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/569530-afghanistan-what-bidens-critics-get-wrong-and-the-debt-owed-afghan?rl=1>.

² <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2021/08/17/why-statebuilding-didnt-work-in-afghanistan/>.

³ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-26/why-america-cant-build-allied-armies>.

willing to be involved directly in the MENA region. Not only has this strategy left local allies puzzled, but it also created new opportunities for different actors: Russia, Iran and Turkey among the others.

The Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria as well as the central government in Baghdad are undoubtedly questioning the US commitment to supporting them. While Iraq is a more stable country than Afghanistan, the Kurdish situation in Syria appears to be far less stabilized. Here, the U.S. footprint is less significant than in Iraq and, therefore, its ability to influence other actors is very limited. This situation can only push the Kurd to search different political approaches. Although the cost of US operations in Syria and Iraq is smaller than in Afghanistan and Kurdish forces are better prepared to hold ground against an insurgency, compared with the Afghan security forces, they still feel uncertain about their future and some most probably have contingency plans ready.

The events in Afghanistan also add to the apprehension US allies in Lebanon and Iraq have felt for their future if Washington and Tehran renewed the Iran nuclear agreement. Such a deal might mean easing US pressure on Iran which would reinforce the already strong influence of Tehran's allies in Iraq and Lebanon. Moreover, a new balance between Washington and Tehran may also mean more political space for Iran allies in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon with a reduced ability for Western countries to exert influence. This situation highlights the issue linked to the concept of reliability. US reliability has been reduced in the past years in the Middle East, but the disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan may reinforce this perception among US allies in the region that feels that Washington is willing to cut a deal with the enemy if it serves its interests. This issue is in part the consequence of a policy based on the dichotomy between "good and bad guys". The fact is that international relations are based on power and when operating in different contexts a more balanced and pragmatic approach is needed. Other analysts⁴ have said that the issue related to the reliability is not so important because the Afghan situation is the result of a political process that after 20 years has changed the strategic priorities of U.S. and NATO. This is correct, however, from the point of view of the allies what can assure them that similar strategic shifts do not affect them today or tomorrow? The problem is not changing strategic priorities or goals, which is a normal attitude in international politics, even though each country should maintain fundamental pillars, but the fact that such a change brings consequences to be taken into account in other operational theaters.

Fourth, the return of the Taliban is seen as a form of vindication by Islamist armed groups in the Arab world and may inspire them to consolidate their power and seek international legitimacy. Hamas has congratulated the Taliban for the "victory". In Lebanon, Hezbollah is probably considering that it may be able to produce an internationally recognized government. In Yemen, the Houthis might feel more encouraged to continue their fight to dominate the country. Moreover, some local dictators, who in the past may have been isolated, may hope for a comeback on the international political scene. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, for example, may be thinking that if the Taliban can get to direct negotiate with the US and earn international legitimacy, they too are worth of it.

Furthermore, the security issue related to international Islamic terrorism can find a renewed boost due to Afghan situation. Terrorist groups continue to operate in the entire region and spread instability in different theaters of operations, therefore the "victory" of Taliban in Afghanistan may represent an example to follow. For instance, the security situation in Sinai remains very volatile due to the presence of Islamic State cells. On 02 August, eight Egyptian army soldiers have been killed in anti-terrorism operations, eighty-nine terrorist were killed and Egyptian air force, in coordination with border guards, destroyed 200 vehicles while trying to penetrate the western and southern borders of the country⁵. Some days later on 13, a roadside bomb exploded in the restive northern part of the Sinai Peninsula, killing eight members of Egypt's security forces in a town on the border with the Gaza Strip. The armed group ISIL (ISIS) claimed responsibility for the attack⁶. More recently even Libya witnessed a suicide attack when on 22 August a suicide bomber attacked a checkpoint in the town of Zella, a small oasis town in the desert south of Sirte located near an oilfield. The attack

⁴ <https://formiche.net/2021/08/afghanistan-non-sconfitta-andrea-gilli-mauro-gilli/?fbclid=IwAR31-zq1PHRhkSXXd58TIBzQwJj2xKwrxOmXI7yqQEAmM-v3FBSuGWE29hE>.

⁵ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/sinai-militants-launch-sporadic-attacks-against-egyptian-army>.

⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/13/egypt-officials-say-militant-attack-kills-8-troops-in-sinai>.

resulted in no casualties. In order to better understand the problem of contemporary jihadism, it is fair to mention a new book, *Global Jihad: A Brief History*, by Glenn E. Robinson, Associate Professor at the Naval Postgraduate School and expert of Middle East. The book is a synthetic and comprehensive account of the evolution of political jihad since the 1980s. The author divides this evolution in four waves: the international call to expel the Soviets from Afghanistan during the 1980s, the anti-American focus of al-Qaeda, the rejection by Islamic State of the international system, and the proliferation of "lone wolf" actions fueled by radicalization on the Internet⁷. The Taliban rise in Afghanistan may continue to help the diffusion of this last wave not with online propaganda, as ISIS did in the past, but mainly with its example.

Sixth, in international politics vacuum does not exist, consequently China, Russia, Turkey and Iran are already working to fill the US vacuum in Afghanistan and this will increase their clout in the Middle East as alternative forces to the US. This is the same dynamics already witnessed after the Arab Spring in Syria and Libya, for example. As far as the Arab Peninsula is concerned, the situation is even more complicated as described by Cinzia Bianco. In the past the United Arab Emirates, which now protects Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, was among the countries that had given availability to the Taliban to open a diplomatic office outside Afghanistan, but in the end such diplomatic office was opened in Qatar. This decision shows the conflict between the two Gulf countries, which, historically speaking, have always been very interested and involved in Afghanistan. Taliban designated leader, Abdul Ghani Baradar arrived in Kabul via a Qatar Emiri Air Force transport plane after living in Doha, protected as a head of state. The Saudi approach toward Afghanistan is also complex and complicated. From an historical perspective, Saudi Arabia had a profound impact on Afghan instability due to its support to the mujihaidin movement against the Soviet invasion. Today, Saudi Arabia is more interested in supporting the Taliban in order to transform them in a local ally against Teheran. However, Riad has yet to create elements of contact with the group since Saudi Arabia has not had relations with the Afghan insurgents for years and therefore has no relations with the new generation of the group⁸.

Main Events in the Maghreb and Mashreq Area

Morocco

On 11 August, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid arrived in Rabat for a two-day visit. It was the first official visit by an Israeli foreign minister since 2003 and it signals the attempt of King Mohammed to normalize the relationship with the two countries. The visit was part of the great upswing in economic and commercial ties between the two nations. In addition to cooperation agreements in the fields of culture, sports, aviation and tourism, the two countries signed an agreement for cooperation in the field of cyberdefense establishing cooperation in the fields of operation, research and development, defense information sharing, and more⁹. Morocco also wishes to continue operating the Maghreb Europe Gas Pipeline, which connects Algeria to Spain via Morocco, which receives royalties worth 0.5 billion cubic metres of gas, and whose contract will expire on 31 October. However, Algeria no longer needs this pipeline after having inaugurated a second gas pipeline that connects it directly to southern Spain. This situation may increase the tensions, already high due to security and diplomatic concerns, between the two countries.

Algeria

In August, Algeria, like several other Mediterranean countries, has greatly suffered from the wildfires ravaging forests and villages east of the capital and France, Spain and Switzerland sent over firefighting aircraft to help.

⁷ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2021-04-20/global-jihad-brief-history>.

⁸ <https://formiche.net/2021/08/come-kabul-vista-dal-golfo-conversazione-con-cinzia-bianco/>.

⁹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/israels-lapid-morocco-cement-diplomatic-economic-ties#ixzz73sHMvfcq>.

In the light of the increasing tensions with Morocco, on 24 August Algeria announced that it cut diplomatic relations with Morocco, accusing its neighbor of “hostile actions” but consulates in each country will remain open. The reasons behind this decision are several. First, Algeria accused Morocco of practicing “continuous hostile acts” referring to both the situation in the Western Sahara and the visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid in Morocco. As a consequence, Algeria militarised its border with Morocco and the possibility of closing the airspace has not been ruled out. Second, Algerian authorities have pointed the finger for some of the wildfires to groups backed by Morocco, like the Movement for Self-determination of Kabylie (MAK)¹⁰.

The Algeria’s involvement in the Libya crisis is increasing. On 30-31 August, Algeria hosted a ministerial meeting in the presence of the foreign ministers of Libya’s neighboring countries (Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan, Chad, and Niger along with representatives of the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the African Union). The summit probably aims: at trying to exert pressure on the National Unity Government (GNU) and the Libyan Presidential Council to hold the elections on time; at restoring Algerian role in Libya balancing the increasing weight taken by Egypt.

Tunisia

The situation in Tunisia remains very volatile and uncertain. While Ennahda has welcomed the possibility of dialogue with Tunisia’s President Kais Saied, it is also doing a profound reshaping of the movement. Moreover, the Tunisian President Kais Saied has extended the suspension of parliament until further notice, and he also extended the suspension of the immunity of members of parliament. A month after Saied’s sudden intervention, he has not yet a new prime minister or announced a road map demanded by Western allies and key players in Tunisia. The move against the Muslim Brotherhood has probably paved the way to new political actors like Saudi Arabia that has sent oxygen tanks and other medical aid to help Tunisia fighting Covid-19. It is not coincidence that on 22 President Kais Saied received a Saudi delegation led by the Saudi Minister of State for African Affairs, Ahmed Qattan¹¹.

Relations between Libya and Tunisia have become tense due to the rumor circulated by pro-Haftar media about terrorist infiltration in Tunisia from Al-Watiya Air Base in Libya. The interior ministry in Tripoli is said to have confirmed an attempt by 100 terrorists to sneak into Tunisia via the base, but he has denied that they were able to realize their plan.

Libya

A BBC investigation revealed the scale of operations by Russian contractor group in Libya. In fact BBC had the opportunity to analyze a Samsung tablet left by a fighter of the Wagner group and containing maps of the frontline, giving confirmation of Wagner’s significant presence and an unprecedented insight into the group’s operations¹². The BBC was also able to gain access to two former fighters who revealed the kind of operations and conduct these contractors did in Libya. The security situation in Libya remains very volatile. The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) has expressed deep concern over the kidnapping and disappearance of the Director of the Office of the First Deputy Prime Minister in the Government of National Unity (GNU), and more generally over the exposure of individuals who had a role in supporting the democratic transition in Libya signaling the tensions and stability issues in the country.

On the diplomatic side, on 11 August 75 delegates gathered for the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum trying to agree on a constitutional framework to govern the crucial parliamentary and presidential elections in December. During the same days US Ambassador to Libya, Richard Norland, met with Libyan National Army (LNA) commander Khalifa Hifter in Cairo. Norland said that Hifter could play a role in forming a unified Libyan army confirming the fault line existing in Libya and the crucial role that Hifter continues to play¹³.

¹⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/24/algeria-cuts-diplomatic-ties-with-morocco>.

¹¹ See also: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/saudi-arabia-sends-oxygen-tanks-tunisia>.

¹² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58009514>.

¹³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/egypt-weighs-hifters-role-libyan-transitionbelieve-in-them-either>.

Egypt

Russian flights in the Egyptian resorts of Sharm el-Sheikh and Hurghada resumed after a Metrojet plane taking Russian holidaymakers back from Sharm el-Sheikh to St Petersburg was destroyed by a terrorist attack over the Sinai Peninsula in October 2015, killing all 224 people on board. This is a very important news for Egyptian tourism that suffered from the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the decision to resume flights between Moscow and Cairo sparked controversy in Egypt, amid accusations that the government allowed Russian experts to be present in the Egyptian airports, in exchange for flights to resume. It has been said that Russian observers will be permanently stationed at Hurghada Airport to ensure that the Russian travel procedures (metal detectors, a safe route from the airport to resorts, random screening of passengers, security rooms, surveillance cameras for passengers and luggage storage facilities, as well as assigning a boarding gate for Russian flight) continue to be enforced¹⁴. Another interesting element that highlights the good relationship between Cairo and Moscow is the fact that Egypt has stepped up its support for Russia in the fight against extremist ideologies and groups, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt's Dar al-Ifta (the Egyptian authority responsible for issuing religious edicts) announced the graduation of 21 imams from Russia from a training camp on the issuance of fatwas against extremist ideologies¹⁵. In light of this confront with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian presidency said that it completely supports the Tunisian president and everything that would maintain stability in Tunisia¹⁶.

Israel

Michael Herzog, a retired brigadier general in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), has been appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Mr Herzog is an Israeli officer who made his mark in the military's intelligence and planning divisions and subsequently served as chief-of-staff and military aide to several defense ministers. He is also a leading expert in diplomacy with Arab states having participated in all diplomatic negotiations between Israel and Arab states over the past two decades. He also expressed undiplomatic criticism of US policies during Obama's second term, demonstrating his deep and complete understanding of Middle East policy and balance.

While the Israel air force has conducted operations in Lebanon and Syria, the navy received the third of four Sa'ar 6-class warship from Germany, and it will be operational in the coming months. This class of warships is mainly tasked to protect Israel's exclusive economic waters.

Lebanon

Lebanon's economic and political crisis is worsening. One of the major issue is related to oil and energy in general. Customers spend hours at gas stations and at the end they may not be able to fill up their vehicles' tanks. This fuel shortage has provoked public anger and several incidents in the past weeks. Moreover, the Lebanese pound has lost more than 90% of its value since 2019 and many Lebanese cannot withdraw their savings from banks. Electricity is only on for a few hours a day, and there are also bread, medicine and public water shortages. As a consequence, Hezbollah and Iran are trying to help in order to extend their influence in the country. On 19, a shipment of Iranian fuel oil sailed for Lebanon, and Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said that further ships would follow.

Syria

The situation in Syria remains volatile. Idlib and Danaa, where a rift between the Syrian regime and Moscow occurred regarding the way to handle the renewed uprising there, are the two theaters of operation where the fighting is more intense and fiercer. On August 24, a group of former rebel fighters left the besieged parts of Daraa in line with what seems to be a preliminary agreement brokered by Russia. It stipulated the reentry of the regime's security, military, and civilian institutions,

¹⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/russian-observers-set-egypts-airports>.

¹⁵ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/egypt-enrolls-russian-imams-fatwa-training-program-combat-brotherhood>.

¹⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/cairo-backs-tunisian-presidents-actions-against-brotherhood>.

a handover of weapons by the rebels, and an evacuation of those who refused to live under the regime's writ¹⁷. In the North, near the village of Tal Tamar, sitting on the strategic M4 highway connecting the eastern part of the country to the west, Turkish air strike killed four Kurdish militants of the Syrian Democratic Forces. This was just one of several drones attack that Anakra carried out in the last weeks targeting Kurdish leader and bases. It seems that Turkey has increased its drone operations in the area in return for the support it has offered the United States in Afghanistan.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Israel continues to conduct occasional air strikes to target Hezbollah weapon depots in the Damascus countryside. On 21, the military coalition led by the United States in Syria has shot down a suspected Iranian drone in the skies over eastern Syria. Moreover, leaders of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the powerful extremist Sunni group that rules over broad swathes of the northwestern province of Idlib and used to pay fealty to al-Qaeda has hailed the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan as a major victory for global jihad. On the one hand this is not surprising. However, on the other hand, this is a strange move since the leader of the group, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, has been seeking to refashion himself as a statesman-like figure, a moderate harboring no ill feelings toward the West in order to position himself and his group in a better position in the eyes of the West.

Arabian Peninsula

UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg will assume his duties from 5 September and will brief the UN Security Council for the first time next month. Grundberg is a Swedish diplomat and he is going to replace Martin Griffiths, who became the UN aid chief. Meanwhile, on 29 August at least 30 pro-government fighters have been killed in an attack with armed drones and missiles on an airbase in southern Yemen. Saudi Arabia and India have started their first ever joint naval exercise. With Saudi Arabia being a vital source of oil for India, its second largest supplier after Iraq, the two countries have long enjoyed strong economic ties. The Indian Navy's flagship, guided-missile destroyer INS Kochi reached Saudi Arabia on Monday 09 for the exercise codenamed "Al-Mohed Al-Hindi 2021". Before, the same warship carried out an exercise with the UAE Navy off the coast of Abu Dhabi. Saudi Arabia has also taken part on 28 August at The Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership, along with regional and international players such as Iran, France, Egypt, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Despite the fact that the conference is unlikely to achieve its ultimate goal, it should certainly contribute to the continuing efforts to change Iraq's role from being a battleground toward being a bridge of cooperation and partnership and it is an opportunity to foster dialogue between regional rivals. One potential breakthrough that Baghdad can facilitate, and that Kadhimi will shoot for, is an Iran-Saudi rapprochement deal to end their open confrontation, whose fallout has helped destabilize Iraq. In July, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) inaugurated its embassy in Israel, less than a year after the two countries announced they would establish formal diplomatic relations under the "Abraham Accords" crafted by the administration of then-US President Donald Trump. The embassy is situated in the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange in the heart of Israel's financial district highlighted the central role the economic cooperation is playing¹⁹.

This was just one of several signals that mark improving relationships between Israel and Gulf countries. For instance, on 10 August the Bahrain's Foreign Ministry, Sheikh Abdulla bin Ahmed bin Abdulla Al Khalifa, visited the Peres Center for Peace and Innovation. A communique issued after the visit quoted Khalifa as saying, "We have been building this peace for 11 months and this is only the beginning. We have much in common and there is plenty of potential for further close cooperation". Khalifa arrived in Israel for a four-day work visit. It was his third visit to Israel since November 2020 testifying the willingness to cooperate²⁰. On 25 August, Qatar has received its first batch of the new generation F-15 combat aircraft, which have better combat specifications and are faster than the older F-15s.

¹⁷ https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/85200?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss.

¹⁸ Here the list of the most recent Turkish drone attacks in Syria: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/turkeys-targeted-killings-signal-new-strategy-against-syrian-kurdish-forces>.

¹⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/14/uae-inaugurates-israel-embassy-after-normalisation-deal>.

²⁰ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/israel-rolls-out-red-carpet-senior-bahraini-officials-third-visit>.

The delicate transitional phase in Chad. Domestic implications and the threats to regional stability

Five months after the killing of Idriss Déby Itno, whom ruled Chad for over thirty years, the political situation in the country shows signs of increasing precariousness. The official report states that the death of former President Déby occurred during a firefight between national security forces and the rebel group Front for Change and Unity in Chad (FACT). His murder has opened a delicate transitional phase led by the army. The challenges for one of the world's poorest countries are multiple and stem from inside and outside the country. The growing instability in Chad is likely to have implications at the regional level. The country is of high strategic value due to its geographical position as a crossroads between Western and Central Africa and the Maghreb. Therefore, Chadian insecurity and instability are likely to have spillover effects for a plethora of unresolved crises related to the country such as those in Darfur, Central Africa Republic, and Libya.

Idriss Déby Itno was killed on April 20, just a few days after being re-elected as President of Chad for the sixth time since 1990. Although the official statement released by the army explained the death as a consequence of a firefight with FACT rebels, there are still many doubts about the real circumstances of the event. Over the last few months, speculations have increased. Sources claim that Déby was in the desert region of Tibesti, in the north of the country, to open talks with the group headed by Mahamat Mahdi Ali. If confirmed, this option would be in line with the political decisions made in the past when Déby chose to co-opt some components of the armed opposition in order to fragment it. FACT is a political and military force founded in 2016 by Mahamat Mahdi Ali, one of the main opponents and critics of Déby's regime. Although FACT is a member of the umbrella organization that gathers the Chadian armed opposition, the UFDD, it shows some peculiarities. One of the most distinctive traits is a significant ethnic identification. The majority of FACT's fighters belong to the Daza ethnic group, which is well established in the border areas between Chad and Libya. Therefore, the group has found fertile ground to establish its headquarters and shelters on the mountains in Libyan soil (Al-Jazeera, 2021). The post-Gaddafi Libyan issue has been a critical variable for Chad's stability. Since 2010, all four rebel groups – FACT, CCMSR, UFR and FNDJT - have exploited the Libyan anarchy to find sanctuary and to proliferate. FACT increased its offensive capacity by exploiting the Libyan civil war. In Libya FACT has operated as a mercenary force while keeping a pragmatic but ambiguous stance. Initially, it was aligned with a pro-GNA Misrata militia. In 2017, following a series of clashes with LNA, the group established a non-aggression pact with Haftar. Subsequently, the FACT-LNA relationship strengthened. While FACT did not take part in the offensive launched by the Haftar's forces, the Chadian group played a role in the protection of some military facilities in south-central Libya. Despite Haftar's denial of ties in order not to ruin relations with Déby, the FACT now enjoys greater firepower than other rebel groups thanks to the weapons accumulated by the alliance with LNA and its sponsors. Nowadays, the group, which counts between 1200 and 1500 units, holds a prominent role among the four Chadian rebel groups that have threatened the regime's endurance in recent years.

By April, FACT, with the support of other rebel factions such as UFR, launched a series of targeted attacks on the Chadian region of Tibesti. The timing of the offensive was due to both domestic and external factors. Primarily, the desire to exploit the atmosphere of tension that preceded the national elections. In the months preceding the vote, the regime had increased

repression against the oppositions. Many leading political figures were arrested, including presidential candidate Yaya Dillo Djourou. Mahamad Ali hoped that the military offensive would have encouraged the mobilization of civil society. However, at the outbreak of the hostilities, civil society groups have immediately distanced themselves from the rebel groups. Besides the domestic factors, regional developments have also been crucial to the rebels' decision to launch an attack. The Déby's regime rejected any proposal of mediation promoted by Togo. Furthermore, once again, Libyan political developments were decisive. The GNA-LNA agreement in March, for the establishment of an interim government, includes as a condition the withdrawal from Libyan soil of all armed groups used as proxy forces. Although Libyan authorities have softly implemented the agreement, Chadian rebels fear that pressure could increase in the coming months.

The major clashes between the rebels and the cadre army were in the north of Mao, in the country's central Kanem region. The fighting ended with the rebels' factions retreating. Although FACT describes it as a tactical retreat, more than 300 fighters died or were captured by the Chadian army. In that scenario, Déby lost his life, thereby opening a delicate phase of transition. After seizing power through a coup in 1990, the Chadian President used his military credits to consolidate political power. Several times he had fought at the head of the national army against rebel attacks. The most notable one was in 2008, when Déby's army pushed back the armed rebel groups at the gates of the presidential palace. Following the death of Idriss Déby, the army established a new Transitional Military Council (TMC), led by the former President's 37-year-old son, General Mahamat Idriss Déby, also known by his nickname "Kaka" (grandmother). For nearly a decade, Idriss was his father's eyes and ears within the army, where he quickly climbed the ranks. He was appointed by his father to the head of an elite body of the Chadian army: the General Directorate of Security Services for State Institutions (DGSSIE) (Olivier, 2021). His prestige increased internationally thanks to his involvement in several operations in the Sahel, where he strengthened relations with the French ally. The council is formed by 15 members belonging to the top of the Chadian security services and aims to lead the country to new elections, scheduled not earlier than eighteen months from the establishment of the TMC. The Council's composition reflects the role of family ties, but also ethnic-religious relevance. Of the 15 members, 10 belong to the Zaghawa ethnic group, the same as Déby's, and 13 are Muslims like the former President. The most powerful figure within the Council is the Director-General of Military Intelligence, Tahir Erda Tairo.

The army has chosen to take direct control of power. Since appointing Idriss as the head of state, the Council dissolved the National Assembly, suspended the Constitution, and imposed a curfew. The TMC explained the decision as being driven by national security concerns. The army, indeed, has seen the measures as needed to secure the country's stability. FACT reacted by declaring the TMC illegitimate and by announcing a new offensive, which is expected in the coming months. This one is very likely to be supported by a growing number of rebels' factions. The armed opposition to the regime is not alone in challenging what many define as a military coup. Opposition parties and civil society have criticized the military's move. They are correctly saying it is against the Constitution. According to the provisions of the Constitutional Charter - drafted by Déby and his political allies - in the case of a power vacuum, the speaker of the National Assembly becomes the interim President. The latter has to lead the country to new elections within 90 days. These provisions are part of Déby's latest amendment to the Constitution. The 2018 constitutional changes, which were approved excluding opposition parties, extended the mandate term and raised the age for candidacy to 45. This last constraint was introduced to limit the challenge to the Presidency and exclude young and emerging political figures. The former President, like other regional leaders, during his thirty years of government, promoted a variety of institutional manoeuvres aimed at consolidating his power (The Conversation, 2021).

The timeframe for the transition process remains unclear. Since April, there have been several contradicting statements from TMC members concerning the next political and institutional steps. The army has consistently stressed the willingness to launch a national dialogue open to all democratic opposition components (Assignon, 2021). To prove its intentions, the TMC has appointed a civilian government headed by Albert Pahimi Padacke who served as prime minister from 2016 to 2018 and was seen as an ally of Déby. However, more than one TMC member expressed the intention to extend the direct control of power beyond the eighteen months that were planned at the closure of the National Assembly. In practical terms, the army and Déby's network of patronage and family ties still wield full power. In this environment, the democratic oppositions are unable to protest or mobilize civil society.

Analysis, assessment and forecasts

Even though Chad is largely associated with the Sahel due to its security integration, it has many political affinities with Central African countries. Chad's current domestic fragility shares some traits with the political patterns of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) members. Central Africa is home to some of the longest-serving leaders on the continent. These state leaders rule by removing constitutional constraints and, in their place, creating models of informal governance sustained by abundant natural resources. The result is an extreme weakening of institutional checks and balances and the establishment of autocratic dynasties (Handy & Djilo, 2021). In those contexts, power transitions occur through intra-family transfer, unfair elections, and camouflaged power takeovers by the army. The volatility of the Déby regime in Chad is cyclical and contingent on the authoritarian way to rule the country. Political violence, murders, disappearances, underdevelopment, and coup attempts over the past three decades prove that the country's stability was apparent. Déby's death highlighted the vulnerability of an autocratic regime. Regardless of the authorities' repression, a variety of civil society associations has denounced the military's seizure of power, appealing to the international community to intervene (RFI, 2021). However, like in the past, the international players have a greater interest in ensuring the stability of the country than in complying with the constitution. The geostrategic centrality of the country has ensured the survival of the regime in these years. Chad is a key country in African balances. Its geographical position means that it is involved in a wide range of areas of crisis stretching from East Africa to the Mediterranean through the Lake Chad Basin. Déby's regime exploited this geostrategic relevance to gain international legitimacy. Over the past few years, Chad has actively contributed to the fight against terrorism in the Sahel and beyond. The Chadian army has intervened several times since 2014 upon the request of its Nigerian neighbor to counter Boko Haram activities (Eizenga, 2020). The latest time was in 2020 when Déby himself led the regular troops. Further, Chadian troops have taken part in several peacekeeping operations under the UN umbrella and have been one of the pillars of the French operation Barkhane. In the wake of last April's events, Chad's international partners also acted to ensure the country's stability. France, the main European ally, quickly recognized Idriss Déby and the TMC as the legitimate government of Chad. The French support was confirmed by the meeting between Idriss and President Macron, who promised new loans to support the Chad budget (Africa News, 2021). The Chadian army capitalized on its participation in several French-led operations in the Sahel and Paris' political urge to end Operation Barkhane. The French goal is to replace French troops with a multilateral coalition made up primarily of African armies. Chad troops would play a primary role in this plan. Despite demands to include civilians in the transition process, neither France nor the African Union (AU) have condemned the military coup in any way. The international community's endorsement for the TMC threatens to exacerbate tensions between civilians and the military. The military junta could feel legitimated to use force against any form of

political dissent, reiterating the autocratic dynamics. The country's stability in the coming months will rely on the balance between civilians and the army. The ongoing authoritarian policies of the TMC are likely to further alienate the population already tested by poverty and infighting. The chances that protests and riots erupt are very high. This would lead to more disorder as well as the spread of armed opposition groups. Civil society anger and the army's repression of political movements will encourage many Chadians to join armed opposition groups. Chad is regularly listed as one of the poorest countries in the world, despite its vast mineral wealth – gold, bauxite, quartz - and growing oil sector. Thanks to the Chinese investments (CNPCIC), the country is a leading producer of crude oil in Central Africa. In spite of the revenues generated by the sector's exports since 2003, these have not been reinvested in development. As a result, the population lives in a state of extreme poverty with a life expectancy (53 years) among the lowest in the world. Moreover, there are 330 thousand internally displaced people (IDP) stationed in the Lake Chad area, where they are regular victims of Boko Haram raids. Such conditions make Chad a time bomb ready to go off.

The cohesion of the Chadian security forces is another factor that is likely to determine the direction of the political transition. The TMC constitution, and the popularity enjoyed by Idriss Déby among the army, project the image of a monolithic and compact block. However, different groups have coexisted within the army, including former rebel groups integrated by Déby, who aimed to neutralize them. The fragmented composition of the Chadian armed forces could prove to be an element of weakness (Crisis Group, 2021). Over the years, some units and their commanders have benefited from greater power thanks to their ties with Déby. This is particularly true for the DGSSIE - the special forces led by Idriss - which have benefited from the best equipment and training. Nowadays, these units are considered to be a sort of praetorian guards of the head of state. Other army branches, however, have benefited less from resources. These have established patronage and ethnoreligious connections with the regions in which they are based. Chad's future will be inevitably dependent on Idriss' ability to secure the loyalty of these units, especially in the event of widespread conflict. So far, however, there are opposite signals. During these months, the rivalries that the former president had been able to manage are resurfacing. Sources believe that TMC members would be ready to exploit the escalating domestic turmoil to challenge Idriss' leadership.

Finally, a further threat comes from the consequences that the domestic instability in Chad would generate at the regional level. Déby's death and the growth of domestic instability would be a blow to the resilience of the G-5S. At the same time, the rise of insurgent faction strikes would force Chad to recall the troops currently deployed in peacekeeping operations (i.e. Mali). Therefore, the political transition in Chad would affect the security and stability of a region that is of primary concern to European and Italian interests.

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The 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party and China's collective memory

Introduction

In July 2021 China celebrated the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The celebrations and Xi's speeches on the occasion help to understand the complex relationship between the country's collective memory and its vision of the international order. Xi's speech, coherently with the broader narrative proposed by the Chinese Communist Party, reflects a selective adaptation of ideas and concepts drawn from three distinct traditions: Marxism-Leninism, Post-Colonial Nationalism and Neo-Confucianism. These three traditions help Xi and the CCP elite make sense of both China's troubled past and its current political and economic rise. Moreover, they contribute to producing an alternative vision of the international order, largely alternative to the current liberal order, based on the principles of sovereignty and self-determination. In this context, however, China does not see itself as a revisionist state, but as a great power able to promote stability, "harmony" and development, building on its own historical experience.

Ultimately, knowledge of the complex and evolving relationship between China's collective memory and the country's foreign policy is necessary to understand Beijing's present and future policy choices.

Collective memory in contemporary China

The CCP promotes a narrative based on three main political traditions: Marxism-Leninism, post-colonial nationalism and neo-Confucianism. These three traditions help leaders making sense of the country's past, legitimizing the current leadership and its policies, and promoting a coherent understanding of China's role in the world (Dian, 2017).

In the era of Reform and Opening, China abandoned the Maoist ideology, based on ideas such as class struggle and permanent revolution. However, this does not mean that Marxism, and above all Leninism, have been completely neglected. The CCP still maintains that history is shaped by a struggle between forces of progress and oppression. The Communist Party sees itself as firmly positioned in the first camp, keeping up the morally righteous struggle of the Chinese people, towards a future of collective justice and prosperity.

Even more important, the Leninist element is crucial for contemporary China. The unity of the Party and the maintenance of the monopoly of political power are deemed as essential to preserve the autonomy and the independence of the nation. As such, the Four Cardinal Principles, upholding the Socialist path, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the leadership of the CCP, and Mao Zedong Thought, have never been put into doubt. Aside from these constant elements, the Chinese leadership considers Socialism as an "evolving science" that must adapt to the changing needs of the Chinese people, China's unique national conditions and the different stages of economic and political development.

The second key tradition can be defined as "post-colonial nationalism". This tradition emerged as a key ideational resource in the 1980s and it assumed a central role in legitimizing the Party's rule in the early 1990s. The key concept of post-colonial nationalism is the need to "remember the century of humiliation". In the long century between the Opium Wars¹ and the end of the Chinese Civil War, China was militarily defeated, colonized and divided internally. Consequently, the historical mission of the Party became protecting China from hostile forces ready to return to subjugate and humiliate it. Even today, foreign powers are presented as eager to derail China's rise with security

¹ The First Opium War was fought by Great Britain against China in 1839-42; the second by Great Britain and France against China in 1856-60.

and economic policies aimed at containing it or through attempts to impose their own ideology. This has several consequences. Firstly, the CCP presents itself as the “Patriot Party”, indispensable to “save China” from a hostile international environment. Secondly, the experience of humiliation and colonization allegedly helps China understand the needs and the interests of other developing countries. This leads Beijing to consider the preservation of sovereign and political self-determination as essential and to harshly react against any perceived violations of these principles (Wang, 2014).

The third tradition is Neo-Confucianism. The return of Confucian principles and ideas is at the heart of the Chinese historical narrative and political discourse represents another measure of the ideological distance between contemporary China and the Maoist period. Mao Zedong as well as the founder of the Party Chen Duxiu considered Confucianism as the embodiment of the decline of the Qing Empire, since it symbolized stability, order, hierarchy and passivity. On the contrary, Mao’s Communist Party preferred instability, egalitarianism and permanent revolution (Schell & Delury, 2013). Since the 2010s the CCP has returned to using the Confucian ideas and virtues as ideational resources to legitimize its authority domestically as well as to describe China’s role internationally.

Under the leadership of Hu Jintao, the CCP proposed the concept of Harmonious society, in which there is cooperation between different social forces, respect for authority, and order and emphasis on competence and merit. Neo-Confucianism also represents an important element for China’s foreign policy. In the Imperial Era, before Western colonialism, Beijing stood at the centre of the Sino-centric system, considered able to ensure stability and “harmony”, namely conciliation of differences and mutual respect. This system was highly unequal, since other countries recognized China’s superiority and centrality (Nordin, 2016; Zhang, 2015).

Xi’s speech and the 100th anniversary

Xi Jinping’s speech during the celebrations of 1st July, attracted a lot of attention from Western media and analysts. Nevertheless, the attention has largely been focused on the most aggressive tones of the speech, often interpreting them as a signal of an increasingly aggressive stance in foreign affairs (Xi, 2021). Western media were very impressed by the sentence: “We will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us. Anyone who tries to do so will find their head broken and blood flowing against a great wall of steel built with the flesh and blood of more than 1.4 billion Chinese people”² (ibidem, p. 5).

Beyond headline grabbing nationalist sentences, Xi’s speech paints a more complex picture of China’s understanding of its own past, the legitimacy of the CCP and the country’s role in the contemporary international order. In the speech delivered in Tiananmen Square on 1st July, it is possible to identify the most important themes of the Chinese narrative on collective memory and national identity.

The idea of national humiliation is central in the speech. Xi stated that “After the Opium War of 1840, China was gradually reduced to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society and suffered greater ravages than ever before. The country endured intense humiliation, the people were subjected to great pain” (ibidem, p. 3). In this context, the Party guided the people in a long struggle against the forces of imperialism and feudalism. The Taiping rebellion, the Reform Movement of 1898, and the Revolution of 1911 are presented as necessary preliminary events to the long struggle for liberation and emancipation. However, the founding of the Party in 1921 is portrayed as a crucial historical event. Xi argued: “The founding of a communist party in China was an epoch-making event, which profoundly changed the course of Chinese history in modern times” (p.2).

In this description Xi blends the Marxist and the post-colonial nationalist components. The Party is both the protagonist of a dialectic struggle against the forces of imperialism and oppression and the saviour of China and its people. Key events that led to the Chinese revolutions,

² The second part of the sentence was later translated in the official English version as “Anyone who would attempt to do so will find themselves on a collision course with a great wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people”.

such as “the Northern Expedition, the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, and the War of Liberation”, are the “chosen glories” of this vision of history as well as the key episodes in the epic struggle between forces, historical liberation and oppression. Xi also mentions the main heroes of the Chinese pantheon directly, listing “Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De, Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun, and other veteran revolutionaries who contributed greatly to China’s revolution” (ibidem, p. 3). Interestingly, the speech is not centred on the central figure of Mao, but highlights the role of several key revolutionary leaders, including those who were purged by the “Great Helmsman”, and later rehabilitated by Deng Xiaoping. While this runs counter to Xi’s own tendencies towards centralization of power, it implies an implicit political position towards the Mao period that emerges through the speech.

The Civil War and the Revolution are portrayed as defining moments in China’s history, but the Mao period constitutes a different era of China’s history. Therefore, the policies promoted at the time, including the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, never mentioned explicitly, should be considered as the expression of “primary stage of socialism” (ibidem, p. 4). China is now in a different stage of development, inaugurated with the period of Reform and Opening under Deng’s leadership. Consequently, while Marxism remains “the fundamental guiding ideology”, the Party will adapt it to the evolving “needs and contexts of our time”, continuing to “seek truth from facts”.³

Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, Jiang’s Theory of Three Represents, and Hu’s Scientific Outlook on Development are presented as historically necessary steps in the process of adaptation of Socialism to China’s unique need and historical experience, as well as key phases of China’s rejuvenation. The people are no longer just formed by peasants and workers, but also by intellectuals and active productive forces, namely middle class and entrepreneurs.

This process culminates with the 18th Congress, that inaugurated Xi’s rule and the Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, namely Xi’s Thought, are presented as the last stage of this historical process aimed at saving the Chinese people and promoting the Nation’s wealth and power.

In the speech, coherently with the ideological evolution of CCP after the 1980s, the Leninist element is somehow distinct from the Marxist component. The Marxist element can be considered the product of “a science in evolution”, that morphed from the Maoist emphasis on class struggle to the modern stage of Socialism and the need of representing many social forces. The Leninist element remains constant and central for the CCP. The Party’s rule is considered the prerequisite of the country’s strength and power. As Xi argued, “We must uphold the firm leadership of the Party. China’s success hinges on the Party, the 100-year-long history of the Party, and the more than 70-year-long history of the People’s Republic of China all provide ample evidence that without the Communist Party of China, there would be no new China and no national rejuvenation” (ibidem, p. 5).

Xi described science and technology as well as military power as crucial, underlining how the PLA of the future should be a “world class military”, and fully loyal to the Party. Economic wealth and military power are deemed as essential for preserving the country’s independence and sovereignty, and to oppose those forces that try to derail its rise or to impose their own values.

Despite being a celebration of the Party and its role, Xi’s speech also includes neo-Confucian elements, often blended with other themes. Xi’s vision of history is characterized by a sense of pride that stems from recent achievements as well as from China’s historical civilization and five thousand years of history. According to the Chinese leader, “China through its long history has always pursued peace, concord and harmony, while it has never sought hegemony” (ibidem, p. 3). Here Xi blends the post-colonial nationalist and the Confucian elements. On the one hand, China respects other

³ The motto “seeking truth from facts” was used by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1970s and early 1980s to promote economic reforms and oppose the radical policies favoured by the Gang of Four that advocated a continuation of Mao’s collectivism.

nations' sovereignty and self-determination, and understands the perspective of the developing world, due to its own history of humiliation and colonization. On the other hand, it presents itself as a returning great power, able to promote a just, harmonious, inclusive and stable international order. From Xi's perspective, Beijing aims at building a community of common destiny for humankind and works "to safeguard world peace, contribute to global development, and preserve international order" (ibidem, p. 7).

China narrative and the international order

It would be easy to dismiss Xi's words, and more broadly the CCP use of history as a mere attempt to signal an aggressive stance and to legitimize its rule domestically (Chen Weiss 2014). On the contrary, understanding how the Chinese leadership makes sense of the country's history, and how this contributes to shaping its vision of the international order and its own role within it is very important.

The celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party gave some important indications in this regard.

The country's extraordinary economic development in the last four decades has contributed to legitimize the CCP and to create a sense of pride of being Chinese that was largely absent in the previous decades. This is often associated with a sense of hostility towards real or alleged foreign attempts to contain the country's development. Moreover, Xi's vision sees China as exceptional, morally just and as a progressive force. The unicity of the Chinese history and the "virtue" of its governing elite enable Beijing to promote harmony, prosperity and stability. The experience of humiliation and colonization allow to understand the interests and the ideas of countries that shared the same experiences (Kaufman, 2015).

Contrarily to what many academic analyses⁴ argue (Mearsheimer 2010, Allison 2018), China does not see itself as a revisionist, but rather as a country that operates within the current international order, and seeks to reform it, promoting its own values and its own solutions. In turn these solutions are considered as rooted in its historical experience, its national characteristics and its own culture (Rolland, 2020). Nevertheless, the emphasis on humiliation and victimization tends to create a perception of a Hobbesian international order, that exacerbates tensions with other states, in particular the West and Japan, and increases the sensitivity about real or alleged infringements of Chinese sovereignty and self-determination (Wang, 2014).

Some of the elements of the current Chinese narrative have had a certain degree of success internationally. While academics and policy makers tend to underestimate this aspect (US State Department, 2020), considering China's influence as a mere consequence of coercion or economic relations, this aspect is very significant. Many states around the world, especially in Asia, share some of the principles promoted by China, especially those associated with post-colonial nationalism. Virtually all ASEAN states have similar positions on sovereignty and non-interference, legacies of colonialism, as well as a similar resistance to Western concepts of human rights and liberal democracy (Dian, 2021). Other elements of the current Chinese narrative will probably work less with foreign audiences. Some of the neo-Confucian elements, which imply a centrality or even a natural superiority of China over other nations, will probably find more resistance. Nevertheless, as recent studies have documented, Chinese concepts as a community of common destiny, harmony, win-win relations, have already been included in the rhetoric of the United Nations. This indicates that China's ideological proposal cannot be dismissed as mere propaganda (Foot, 2020; Fung, 2019). On the contrary, it represents an alternative model of the international order, which is largely different from the liberal international order emerged from the end of the Cold War. The degree of success that China has had so far, testified by the participation of many Asian, African, and even

⁴ Realist theories of international relations portray China, as a rising power, as necessarily revisionist. For a literature review on China's rise and IR theory see Dian, 2021 (chapter 1).

European states to initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative or the Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank, is not the mere expression of China's material resources. It is also a consequence of the political and ideological consent China has received.

In conclusion, any policy aimed at dealing with China should be based on the awareness that the Chinese ideological proposal can attract consent, especially among developing countries, despite the profound differences with Western ideas and values.

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The US withdrawal from Afghanistan: its possible impacts on the Biden administration and Washington's international role

The collapse of Ashraf Ghani's government after the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan and the rebirth of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate pose to the US and its European allies a string of hardly manageable challenges. The speed of the collapse and the first decisions of the country's new leaders give these challenges a further sense of urgency. From the US perspective, the withdrawal stems from the failure of Barack Obama's 'surge' of 2009-12. In February 2020, the dialogue that the Trump administration started with the Taliban's representatives led to the signing of the Doha agreements, which bound the United States to evacuate its troops by May 31, 2021; a deadline later postponed to September 11 and – finally – to August 31. On the Taliban's side, the commitment was not to allow territory under their control to be used to carry out terrorist attacks against the US and start a dialogue (quickly aborted) with the Kabul government on Afghanistan's future¹. In this sense, President Biden's decision was, to a large extent, a judgment call. However, how the withdrawal was carried out – at both political and operational levels – raised many criticisms. The future security scenario is another source of concern. The Taliban's territorial control seems to be not complete. In the same way, their grip on the levers of power may not be as firm as it appears. In this perspective, the IS-KP's (Islamic State - Khorasan Province) claim of responsibility for the attack on the Kabul airport on August 26, 2021 – if confirmed – could be a telling sign and an additional element of complexity in an already complex regional landscape.

The origins of the current fragility

The Western involvement in Afghanistan stratified during the years in a multifaceted way and not lacking contradictions. Framed in the context of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) that President George W. Bush announced after the 9/11 attacks, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was, until December 31, 2014, the pivot of the US presence. Originally conceived as an effort against al-Qaeda and the Taliban authorities supporting it, after the fall of the first Islamic Emirate and the beginning of the institutional transition, its tasks gradually evolved toward the repression of the existing pockets of resistance and - together with ISAF - the creation of the security conditions needed for a regular transfer of power to the new Afghan government. In its turn, ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) started operating under the UN mandate in December 2001 as a multinational mission, with command rotating among the different contributing countries, and an area of responsibility limited to Kabul and its vicinity (UN Security Council Resolution 1386/2001). In August 2003, it passed under NATO command, and its area of responsibility gradually expanded to the whole country (UN Security Council Resolution 1510/2003). In parallel, its tasks expanded, too, to include the support to the Afghan government in creating a stable and safe environment, promoting reconstruction and development, laying the foundations for better governance, creating a favourable environment for its improvement, and supporting the several Afghan and non-Afghan structures involved in security and counterterrorism activities. These multifaceted tasks were only partially overlapping with OEF's ones and sometimes conflicted with them, which led to several coordination problems worsened by the existence of two separated chains of command.

¹ Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America, February 29, 2020, which corresponds to Rajab 5, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 10, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar. Online: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf> [accessed: September 1, 2021].

Despite the efforts made to balance the different needs, such tension never lessened (Ringsmose and Thruelsen, 2010). On the contrary, it fuelled an often-lively debate around the nature and aims of counterinsurgency (COIN), culminating in adopting the so-called 'McChrystal doctrine' in 2009². In its turn, this doctrine heavily impacts ISAF's activity that, in the same year, shifts toward a 'Shape, Clear, Hold, and Build' approach (Battisti, 2015). In the same period, Afghanistan's weight in NATO's strategies constantly increased, with an 'enduring partnership' agreement signed during NATO's Lisbon summit in 2010³. In 2011-14, the control over the country gradually returned to the Afghan government: a process labelled *inteqal*. In this perspective, after the ISAF end, NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM) started as a non-combat, TAA mission to train, advise, and assist the Afghan national security forces (ANSF). On the US side, OEF officially ended in December 2014 and was replaced by Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS) that – although in better coordination with the allies' action – followed the same OEF's 'double track' of fighting the Taliban insurgency while at the same time supporting the Kabul's government in consolidating its authority. Finally, to increase the Afghan political and military responsibilities, the transition from OEF/ISAF to OFS/RSM led to a sharp decline in Western military presence and footprint. For NATO and the partner countries, it meant passing from some 132,000 troops deployed in 2011, when ISAF reached its maximum strength, to some 12,000 during the early stages of RSM.

The auspice was that, in this way, it would have been possible both to enhance the ANSF's military capabilities and start a dialogue to pave the way to national reconciliation. In the previous years, the Obama administration had already tried to negotiate with the most moderate elements of the Taliban movement to weaken the insurgency front and consolidate the Kabul government (DeYoung, 2013). However, its efforts had led to nothing, above all, due to the divisions existing among the Taliban factions and the declining credibility of the central authorities. The outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in late 2013/2014, relaunching the Russian challenge and refocusing Washington's attention on Europe, contributed to further weakening the US engagement. It would have been the Trump administration to relaunch the dialogue to reduce the US presence in supposedly marginal theatres. Unfortunately, the path leading to the Doha agreements sidelined the Afghan government (in its turn engaged in a 'parallel' dialogue since the second term of the Karzai presidency) and posed on the Taliban counterpart quite a small burden (Saikal, 2020): a strategy that, on the one hand, delegitimised President Ghani in the eyes of the same Afghan population, on the other conveyed the message that the US were ready to disengage 'whatever it takes'. The ambiguities of the dialogue with the Afghan government did not make things simpler. On the contrary, they strengthened the idea that the White House was 'playing on two tables' a game where the country's stability and the same ally's political survival had limited value.

Some open questions

The uncertainties behind the actual withdrawal seemed to confirm such impressions. Since the first official declarations, in early July, it seemed that the White House had just a limited vision of what was happening on the field. In the following weeks, its reactions to the melting of the ANSF and the unexpectedly unopposed Taliban's advance conveyed the same message. The fall of Kabul, the

² ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance, [Kabul, 2009]. Online: https://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/counterinsurgency_guidance.pdf [accessed: September 1, 2021]. On the limits of the McChrystal doctrine see Eikenberry, 2013.

³ 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 10, 2010. Online: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68724.htm [accessed: September 1, 2021]. In May 2012, the Afghan and US governments signed a similar agreement: Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Kabul, May 2, 2012. Online: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistanspasignedtext.pdf> [accessed: September 1, 2021].

dissolution of the official government and the contemporary proclamation of the new Islamic Emirate (August 15) transformed what – in President Biden's announcement – should have been an orderly disengagement in what many observers perceived as an uncoordinated route, made even more chaotic by the need to evacuate not only the national personnel but also the Afghan citizens who collaborated with them during their twenty-years-long presence in the country. The parallel with the withdrawal from Saigon in 1975 has been repeatedly drawn. Against this background, the first question regards how much this parallel will impact the President's action and its perception both within and outside the United States. The Republican minority in Congress has already raised the point of Biden's fitness to be the Commander-in-Chief and lead the country in times of crisis, asking, in some cases, his resignation. The President's strategy came under attack from the Democratic side, too, with Congressmen pointing out its lack of interest in the fate of the Afghan personnel, the possible humanitarian consequence of the US withdrawal, and the potential security threat for the US security stemming from the Taliban's return to power.

Similar considerations apply to the US allies. Although NATO's official position pointed out that the withdrawal was "inevitable", Secretary-general Jen Stoltenberg also remarked that the way it was conducted raised "serious and hard questions" (Ng, 2021). The leaders of many US allies share this vision. After the fall of Kabul and the quick deterioration of the security conditions in town, a special G7 meeting was held on August 24 upon British and French initiatives to deal with, among else, the humanitarian emergency that the events of the previous days had triggered. However, the meeting also highlighted the different visions of Washington and its European allies. The European request to postpone the withdrawal's deadline met the largely foreseeable opposition of the White House. In the same way, the US administration placed scant attention on the European fears that further degradation of the Afghan socio-political situation could lead -- in the coming months -- to a new influx of immigrants in the Old Continent. Not even on the line to adopt vis a vis the Taliban regime, a shared position emerged. On this issue, the meeting's final declaration simply affirms that "[t]he legitimacy of any future [Afghan] government depends on the approach it now takes to uphold its international obligations and commitments to ensure a stable Afghanistan"⁴. Unsurprisingly, after the display of solidarity of the past months and the widespread expectation that the Biden administration could lead to a relaunch of US-Europe relations, these somehow disappointing outcomes marked the first real cleavage between the two shores of the Atlantic.

In this context, the potential consequences are relevant but must not be overestimated. In the United States, the doubts about the different 'technical' aspects of the withdrawal go hand in hand with a widespread favour towards the withdrawal 'in itself'. In August, the President's approval rate markedly declined (47.3 per cent on August 30 compared to 50.5 on July 30, according to the aggregate figures provided by [fivethirtyeight.com](https://www.fivethirtyeight.com)⁵), but this was due only partially to his difficulties in dealing with the Afghan dossier. The problems that Joe Biden is facing seem related more to a mix of elements (most of them affecting the domestic realm) than to the 'simple' effect of Kabul's events (Wilkie, 2021; Enten, 2021). Instead, at the end of July, a Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey highlighted that some 70.0 per cent of the respondents supported the US disengagement (Smeltz and Sullivan, 2021). In Europe, discontent is higher, with reactions ranging from disbelief to a strong sense of betrayal (Karnitschnig, 2021). However, although different positions exist among countries, the words of NATO's Secretary-General Stoltenberg seem to point out that here, too, disagreement regarded more how the withdrawal was conducted than its opportunity (Erlanger, 2021). Moreover, Afghanistan is just one topic in the broader system of the US-Europe relations; a

⁴ G7 Leaders Statement on Afghanistan, August 24, 2021. Online: <https://www.g7uk.org/g7-leaders-statement-on-afghanistan> [accessed: September 1, 2021].

⁵ <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/biden-approval-rating>. On June 30, the index was 52.1 per cent; on inauguration, it was 53.0 per cent.

system where collaboration between the two partners is essential both to play a meaningful role on global issues such as the struggle against climate change (also in the light of the upcoming COP26 conference) and to compose the existing bilateral divergences.

The logic of a risky decision

The domestic balance of the 'new Afghanistan' and its international posture will play a pivotal role in shaping these dynamics. The Taliban's conquest of Kabul and the (re)birth of the Islamic Emirate imply neither complete territorial control nor the possibility to create a stable political system. The revival of the anti-Taliban resistance in the Panjshir valley cast doubts on the country's future and is, potentially, a key element of instability. In the region, there have been clashes but also initiatives to reach a more or less stable *modus vivendi*. Until now, the anti-Taliban forces have rejected Kabul's offers, claiming for the region substantial political autonomy (Shah and Amiri, 2021); however, the same existence of some form of dialogue is a sign of a fluid situation. The same things can be said about the presence of terrorist cells. One of the pillars of the Doha agreements is the Taliban's engagement to avoid the emergence, into Afghanistan, of terrorists' 'safe havens' and the use of the country as a basis for terrorist attacks against the United States. It is not sure that the current Afghan government is actually able to comply with this provision. August 26 attack on Kabul airport raised many doubts, anticipating – in the worst-case scenario – a possible clash between the Taliban and an entity like IS-KP, which is largely unconnected to the Afghan context. In its turn, such a scenario could lead to an unexpected convergence between Kabul and the US; in the long run, it could also pave the way to forms of collaboration like the ones that emerged after August 15 to provide safety to the evacuation activities (Shear and Barnes, 2021).

The international alignment of the 'new Afghanistan' is equally fluid. After the US withdrawal, many observers remarked that the power vacuum it created could open the door to Russia and China's large-scale penetration in the country. Unsurprisingly, both countries are actively monitoring the Afghan events. Economic and strategic considerations would support their moves. Beijing shares interest in a stable Afghanistan with the West to keep its western borders' unstable situation under control. On the other hand, it was pointed out that several reasons go against Afghanistan's possible integration in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, at least until its domestic situation does not credibly stabilize. As it has been remarked: "It would not be surprising if China announced billions of dollars in new infrastructure commitments in Afghanistan in the coming months. This would further the narrative China is attempting to build that it is the best bet for providing economic prosperity, while the United States is a has-been power. It might also lend the Taliban international legitimacy and help it build support domestically, as it can demonstrate that it is interested in governing the country and delivering economic development to Afghans" (Sacks, 2021). For Russia, too, several elements contrast its possible large-scale involvement in Afghan affairs; among them, Afghanistan's current instability and the risk of spillovers in the territories of the former Soviet Central Asian republics, where Moscow already deploys a massive military presence, officially to cooperate in discharging anti-terrorism duties and in the struggle against the organized crime.

Despite the 'war of words' that the US withdrawal has triggered, its impacts on Afghanistan's domestic and international positions are, thus, still to assess. It must also be kept in mind that the end of the US presence on the field does not necessarily mean the end of Washington interest in the region. In the last weeks, the US administration repeatedly affirmed that the United States possesses "counterterrorism over-the-horizon capability that will allow [it] to keep [its] eyes firmly fixed on any direct threats to the United States in the region, and act quickly and decisively if

needed”⁶. Doubts have been cast on the possibility that this capability could be a real deterrence instrument. Doubts have also been cast on the possibility that the US retains this capability lacking a physical presence on the field. However, the drone strikes after the August 26 attack clearly show that Washington keeps a relevant weight in the Afghan theatre, at the same time emphasising a change in the nature – than in the aims – of the US military engagement (Quinn, 2021). If this new posture should prove rewarding, it could strengthen the White House's position in the eyes of both domestic public opinion and foreign allies. It is a risky strategy; its success could be assessed only after the end of the evacuation, and it could profoundly affect the administration's future. On the other hand, its benefits could be equally relevant, in light also of the dynamics currently existing between the President and the Democratic majority in Congress and how these dynamics could evolve with the approaching of the midterm elections of November 2022.

Analysis, evaluation, and forecasts

There are many different reasons behind the decision of the Biden administration to withdraw the US troops from Afghanistan; among them, the will to end a commitment perceived as less and less rewarding plays a central role. Central is also the willingness to meet public opinion's requests on an issue that has grown increasingly sensitive. The President's decision was heavily criticised, both at home and abroad. The European countries have been among the most vocal critics of both the humanitarian impact of the withdrawal and how it was conducted. The charge of unilateralism levied on the White House revived the debate on the need for greater European strategic autonomy. However, it is too early to talk about a 'new transatlantic drift' or a dangerous decline of the US international role. Instead, the stabilisation of the Afghan scenario – even under Taliban rule – could strengthen Washington's position. Following the same path of the Trump administration, the White House seems to have bet on the possibility that the new Afghan authorities could be somehow 'engaged', giving them political legitimisation. Asking the Taliban to provide security outside the Kabul airport during the US evacuation can be seen as the first sign in this direction. The decision not to reschedule the timing of the withdrawal despite the pressures of the European allies can be seen in the same light. It is a risky bet. However, it is a bet that – if successful – could relaunch the US international role and, at the same time, strengthen the President's position vis à vis both the Republican opposition and its reluctant Democratic supporters.

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⁶ Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, July 8, 2021. Online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan> [accessed: September 1, 2021].

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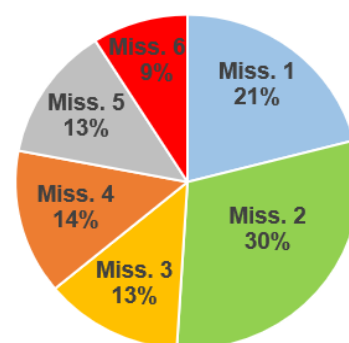
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The energy goals of the Italian National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (NPRR)

In July 2021, the Economic and Financial Affairs Council of the EU officially accepted the first 12 National Plans for Recovery and Resilience (NPRR) of the Post-Pandemic Recovery Plan *Next Generation EU*, including that of Italy (already approved by the Commission last June). Thanks to the Ecofin's approval, Italy and other 11 member-states have the possibility to conclude grant and loan agreements for a pre-financing up to 13% of the total amount of their national plan (that is, for Italy, 25 billion euros)¹. The Italian NPRR, entitled «Italia Domani», consists of 6 main missions (see table below), with respect to which Italy, the main beneficiary of the EU funding program provided by the EU Recovery Plan, will have to manage more than 235 billion euros. This budget is composed of 191.5 billion euros in loans and grants from the Next Generation EU, 13 billion coming from the EU React program and just over 30 allocated at national level. The Plan of Italy includes over 130 projects, investments in 15 different areas of intervention and more than 50 legislative measures for reforms requiring an intense activity for the Government and the Parliament. These reforms do concern several strategic state sectors, among which public administration, justice, regulatory simplification and competition². As for energy, the Plan contains a very important specific section, that is «Rivoluzione Verde e Transizione Ecologica», which aims to contribute to a decrease in climate-changing emissions consistent with their decline of 55% in 2030 (compared to 1990) and with the goal of zero net emissions in 2050 (i.e., with the commitments Italy took at the national, European and international levels³).

Italian NPRR: funds per mission (in billion euros)

1. Digitisation, innovation, competitiveness, culture and tourism	49.86
2. Green revolution and ecological transition	69.94
3. Infrastructure for sustainable mobility	31.46
4. Education and research	33.81
5. Cohesion and inclusion	29.83
6. Health	20.23



Source: author's elaboration on NPRR data

¹ In July 2021, Ecofin accepted the NPRR of the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain.
<http://www.funzionepubblica.gov.it/articolo/ministro/13-07-2021/PNRR-libera-dell%E2%80%99ecofin-al-piano-nazionale-di-ripresa-e-resilienza>

² For Italy, the EU Recovery Plan related loans amount to 122.6 billion, while grants to 68.9. Net of the funds allocated at the national level and those coming from the Recovery Assistance Program for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (React EU), the quota of the NPRRs of Spain, France and Germany are respectively 69.5 billion, 41 billion and 27.9 billion (ISPI data, 2021). The reforms planned by the Italian NPRR are divided into: 'horizontal', that is transversal/important to all the missions of the Plan; enabling, i.e. functional to the implementation of one or more aspects of the Plan; sectoral, that is referring to very specific areas of intervention; concurrent, i.e. not strictly linked to the Plan missions, but in any case necessary to modernize the country. Slightly more than half of the regulatory measures related to the NPRR will be adopted by ordinary law, the rest by: decree-laws, delegated laws, legislative decrees; some of these measures are associated with the Italian public finance law. See the following website: <https://www.openpolis.it/parole/cose-il-PNRR-piano-nazionale-ripresa-e-resilienza/>

³ Among others: Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015), EU Green Deal (2019), EU Climate Law (2021), National Integrated Plan on Energy and Climate (2020, currently under revision), Italian Long Term Strategy on the Reduction of Greenhouse Gases (2021), etc.; for the Italian NPRR, and its connection to the above mentioned sources, please refer to the following link: <https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/PNRR.pdf>

The mission concerning energy ranks third for planned reforms and first in terms of budget; as shown below, it is divided into 4 components.

Italy's NPRR mission 2: components and their budgets (tot. 59.47 billion)

Green Business and Circular Economy	5.27	9%
Energy Transition and Sustainable Local Mobility	23.78	40%
Energy Efficiency and Requalification of Buildings	15.36	26%
Protection and Enhancement of Land and Water Resources	15.06	25%

Notwithstanding the importance of all the four components listed above, here we focus on the most significant in terms of budget and energy implications, namely Energy Transition and Sustainable Local Mobility. The latter provides for actions, investments and reforms to achieve 5 different but related goals, which we briefly summarize below.

1) **Increase the share of energy from renewable sources.** The Plan establishes that by 2030 Italy will rely on hydroelectric, wind, solar photovoltaic / thermal, biomass and geothermal energy at least 30% of its energy consumption. In order to achieve this goal Italy will exploit its high clean energy potential, as well as a series of related technologies. The Plan provides for investment opportunities in the aerovoltaic sector, as well as the enhancement of medium and large-sized renewable energy plants that can be connected to the electricity grid (utility scale). Indeed, the latter can in many cases be as competitive as the systems based on fossil sources, but they are still penalized in terms of authorization mechanisms and market rules; this is shown by their relative decline in 2020, in contrast to the trend of self-consumption residential installations. In addition, the Plan provides for an acceleration in the development of energy communities, smart grid interventions and 'distributed' electricity generation systems⁴; this is also needed to compensate for some shortcomings in the availability and use of large lands for energy purposes. Finally, the Plan intends to expand and enhance the use of biomethane⁵, as well as energy consumption based on innovative solutions such as integrated and off-shore plants⁶. Consistently with these goals, the Plan indicates investments for a total of 6 billion euros in agriculture, municipalities and plants, networks and tools for the agricultural, domestic and industrial use of biomethane, as well as in technologies for renewable energy exploitation. As for the latter, the aim is also to attract foreign investors interested in on-shore plants but also in off shore systems combining high development potential technologies with more experimental systems (e.g., those that exploit wave motion energy). In order to carry out these interventions timely and effectively, the Plan envisages two reforms, aimed respectively at simplifying and encouraging, at both the regulatory-procedural and fiscal levels, the production and

⁴ That is based on several small production units, dispersed or located in several points of the territory and connected directly to consumers, whereas the centralized model is based instead on energy generation concentrated in large power plants and connected to an extensive network of cables. The centralized model is based on bidirectional 'transmission' lines concerning large distances and high voltages, which transmit energy from the power stations to the 'substations', from where then the 'distribution' lines, unidirectional and over shorter distances and lower voltages, carry energy to end users passively, i.e. without being actively managed by operators or computer programs. By bringing several interconnected power plants closer to the places of consumption, distributed systems would be able to avoid or lower the costs typically coming from long centralized networks in terms of power loss, edification and service related to the plants, as well as the risks of blackouts. The implementation of distributed systems requires the transformation of the grids from 'passive' to 'active' (smart grids), that is capable of managing and regulating multiple power flows, even when intermittent (e.g. from renewables) and bidirectional, hence the need for devices useful to protect, interconnect and control electrical loads. See also F. Franchetto, *La generazione distribuita di energia*: <https://www.nextville.it/approfondimenti/5>

⁵ Biomethane is a renewable energy source coming from agricultural biomass (dedicated crops, agricultural by-products and waste, animal manure), agro-industrial biomass (waste from food processing chain) and the organic fraction of municipal-solid waste. It is obtained in two phases: production of raw biogas, mainly with anaerobic digestion of biomass; subsequent removal of CO₂ emissions. Also employable as a fuel, bio-methane can be used through the existing gas transport and storage network, and it can contribute to make more green agriculture not only with the reduction of climate-altering emissions, but also as an effective alternative to fossil fuel derived fertilizers. See also the following link: https://www.snam.it/it/transizione_energetica/biometano/biometano/

⁶ Systems that can be integrated into residential, public and commercial buildings, which can be aimed at providing for both electricity and heating.

management of renewable energy plants and the production and consumption of biomethane in industrial, tertiary and residential sectors.

- 2) **Strengthen and digitize grid infrastructure.** This is needed to adapt the latter to an increase in electricity production from renewable sources, and to increase its resilience to extreme climate events. The related investments amount to 4.11 billion euros; they are divided along three main lines, namely: increase in the network capacity to host and integrate further distributed generation from renewable sources for 4.000 MW (also through smart grid interventions on over 100 substations and the related network); raise in capacity and power for almost 2.000.000 users, so as to favor energy electrification (e.g. electric mobility, heating with heat pumps, etc.) and the connection capacity of distributed power generation in large urban centers; decrease in the probability, duration and extent of power outages linked to extreme climate events, for a total of approximately 4.000 km in the national electrical network.
- 3) **Promote the hydrogen production, distribution and exploitation** . This has to be done through related research and development activities and projects dealing with transports and hard to abate sectors (i.e. highly energy-intensive activities showing high costs for reducing emissions and no options for electrification). In line with these objectives, the Plan envisages 3.19 billion euros investments to enhance the use of hydrogen in the steel, chemical, cement, glass and paper sectors, to transform abandoned industrial areas into productive poles with hydrogen based economics (*hydrogen valleys*). In addition, the Plan provides for the edification of a network of recharging stations to test hydrogen both in heavy road transport and non-electrifiable railways in Italian regions with high passenger traffic (in the north as well as the center and the south of the country). It should be noted this process will be very gradual and based on specific measures for green hydrogen⁷. In order to facilitate the implementation of the program, the Plan provides for legislative measures aimed at bringing a set of rules favoring the use, transport and distribution of hydrogen, as well as a fiscal framework stimulating its production and consumption (in line with the EU Strategy on hydrogen and the Red II Directive⁸).
- 4) **Increase the sustainability of transport and travel.** This goal is necessary in order to increase the so called soft mobility (e.g. bicycles) and electric cars, as well as to ecologically upgrade the public transport system. The related investments amount to 8.58 billion euros, destined among other things to gain: 3360 ecological buses and 53 electric trains (+ 100 carriages made of recyclable materials and photovoltaic panels); new electric and gas institutional vehicles, for a total of 3600 units, and 200 hybrid vehicles (electric-endothermic) in airports; new cycle paths (for a total of 1830 km); new electric charging points (7500 on the motorway, 13755 in urban centers and over 100 of experimental type, with energy storage technologies); 240 new kilometers of network for rapid mass transit (metro, trams, railways, cable cars and trolleybuses), which should be able to absorb 10% of the current total private car fluxes. A reform is also

⁷ Coming from renewable sources, green hydrogen has no carbon dioxide emissions (like purple hydrogen, which derives from nuclear energy). Therefore, it has a lower environmental impact than black/brown and gray hydrogens, which are obtained from hydrocarbons and with the release of CO₂; from an ecological viewpoint, green hydrogen is even better than the blue one, produced from hydrocarbons but with the trapping of residual emissions (underground or in other materials). The EU Commission asked Italy to ensure a minimum share (set at 10%) of green hydrogen in energy projects requiring large amounts and mixing of hydrogens, while Rome has planned to use exclusively green hydrogen in projects for about 400 million euros. See: <https://www.mite.gov.it/comunicati/PNRR-nessuna-p pressione-o-rimodulazione-ma-solo-normali-interlocuzioni-eu-mite>

For a very recent study on blue hydrogen, which argues the latter is less green than is commonly believed, see the following link: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ese3.956>

⁸ The first document (2020) foresees a growth of green hydrogen up to at least 13-14% in the European energy mix by 2050 (with a new installed capacity of electrolyzers equal to 40 GW). The Red II Directive (2018) aims at bringing to 32% the share of EU renewable energy consumption by 2030 (moreover this target was raised to 38-40% in the most recent proposal of revision of the Directive, included in the Fit for 55 or 'Climate Package' project presented by the Commission on July 14, 2021). Among the Italian institutional actors more involved in the regulatory aspects we find the Ministry of Ecological Transition, the Ministry of the Interior, the Regulatory Authority for Energy, Network and Environment (ARERA), the GSE - Energy Services Manager (joint stock company owned by the Ministry of Economy and Finance), the Ministry of Economic Development and the Ministry of Sustainable Infrastructures and Mobility.

envisaged to speed up and simplify the procedures for evaluating and implementing projects related to public transport.

- 5) **To achieve an international leadership in industrial and research & development activities related to the ecological transition.** This is also needed to reduce the Italian reliance on foreign technologies, while trying to strengthen its domestic energy technology production. The planned investments, which should also serve as a tool for economic growth and employment, amount to about 2 billion euros; they will fund research projects in the fields of renewables (e.g. solar and onshore wind), electrochemical storage (e.g. batteries for electric transport), hydrogen, electric buses and, also through a specific fund called Green Transition Fund, start-ups and venture capitals⁹ concerning activities related to the ecological and energy transitions.

Assessment and forecasting

Like in other sectors, in the energy domain the Italian NPRR deals with very complex challenges, starting from the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. The latter decreased by 19% in thirty years, that is from 519 tons of CO₂ million tons equivalent in 1990 to 418 in 2019, bringing the respective quota per capita of Italy to 7.2 tons Mt CO_{2eq} (value below the EU average). In 2020, emissions decreased by a value included between 9.8% and 12%, whereas the national index of ecological transition increased by 38%, although these results were primarily caused by the contraction in energy consumption due to the Covid-19 crisis¹⁰. To reach the value of Ghg emissions planned for 2030, which is about 230 Mt CO_{2eq} (- 55% compared to 1990), the country's emissions should decrease by 147 Mt CO_{2eq} in a decade, which is more than how they declined in the last three decades (142 Mt CO_{2eq}); subtracting the 2020 value from the calculation, the decline would be even more challenging. Even considering the vast program of the Plan to enhance alternative forms of energy to fossil sources, emissions reduction could proceed more slowly than it was planned, also because of the economic recovery expected in the post-Covid-19 phase, which presumably will bring emissions back to pre-2020 levels. Moreover, emissions could decrease more slowly than planned due to external supply, notoriously higher than 70% of Italian energy demand and consisting largely of oil and natural gas (without considering the NPRR does not seem to include specific investment plans for the technologies needed to remove or capture emissions, despite Italy already use them to create blue hydrogen). Italy shows encouraging indicators as for the production and consumption of renewables¹¹, but in recent years the Italian clean energy market was affected by not exactly exciting signs. Looking for example at electricity, from 2015 to 2020 the new installed power through plants for renewable sources grew from 51.5 to 56.3 GW, on average about 1GW more per year (when to get the targets for 2030 it would take 6-7 GW per year). Compared to 2019, when the Italian electricity consumption from renewables was aligned with the EU level (37/38%), the installation of new plants for electricity from renewables decreased by more than 30% (from about 1.2 GW to 0.8 GW)¹² in 2020, essentially because of issues related to authorizations and land occupations¹³.

⁹ Institutional investment activity, concerning capitals of unlisted companies in the start-up phase, whose main features are on the one hand a high development potential, on the other a high risk of failure.
<https://www.borsaitaliana.it/borsa/glossario/venture-capital.html>

¹⁰ F. Suman, *La transizione energetica nel PNRR*, 'Bo Live' - Università di Padova, 2021:
<https://ilbolive.unipd.it/it/news/transizione-energetica-PNRR> ; see also the links below:

<https://www.isprambiente.gov.it/it/news/emissioni-gas-serra-nel-2020-stimata-riduzione-del-9-8-rispetto-al-2019> ;

<https://www.enea.it/it/Stampa/comunicati/energia-analisi-enea-calo-record-di-consumi-10-ed-emissioni-12-nel-2020>

¹¹ In Italy, renewable sources of energy contribute to 20% of the total energy consumption, while little more than two thirds of the energy produced domestically (supplying 26% of the Italian demand) comes from renewables (that is higher than the EU average). For these and other in-depth data on energy in Italy please refer to the following sources:
https://www.gse.it/documenti_site/Documenti%20GSE/Rapporti%20delle%20attivit%C3%A0/RA%202020.pdf ;
<https://dgsaie.mise.gov.it/situazione-energetica-nazionale>

¹² E. Ronchi, *La stagnazione delle rinnovabili in Italia*, Fondazione Sviluppo Sostenibile, August 2021.

¹³ Licenses are essential for access to auctions and registers, and more generally for investments in new plants or repowering actions. The problem of land occupation mainly concerns (medium-)large plants, which in some regions are limited by partially inadequate regulations (concerning for example the possibility to install power plants on farmlands). The Ministerial Decree FER 1 on renewables (2019) provides for an explicit and direct incentive, but the

The pace of the Italian ecological transition could also slow due to protests and oppositions by local administrations and/or social groups against new energy plants; this was the case, for example, of the delays concerning the edification of a part of the Transadriatic Pipeline in Puglia, but also episodes specifically related to renewable plants, especially but not only wind turbines (where aesthetic-landscape criticism can overlap or replace ecological-environmentalist protests).

Other potential critical points of the Plan, with respect to its energy related aspects, do concern eco-sustainable mobility, e.g. in relation to the numerical ratio between new dedicated infrastructure, resident population and extension of the national territory, which could be partially insufficient, as well as electric vehicles (including hydrogen powered ones). After all, in the field of alternative solutions to diesel and petrol, Italy made significantly more progress in GPL and biofuels (e.g. biomethane) than electric vehicles¹⁴. Finally, among the more challenging aspects of the Plan we can mention the various legislative measures that will be indispensable for its timely implementation, which due to some features of the Italian socio-political system could in some cases be obstructed and delayed by a highly polarized political dynamics, also linked to possible veto players with particularistic interests, or administrative resistance to streamlining processes and bureaucratic simplifications. That said, it seems clear the NPRR represents an undoubted strategic opportunity for Italy beyond the environmental and energy fields. After all, at a very general level, it is quite clear how the ecological-energy goals of the Plan can very much contribute to the protection of the Italian ecosystem, particularly rich in terms of natural and agricultural heritage and biodiversity, but notoriously exposed, also by geographical configuration and peculiarities of the territory, to climate change risks and hydrogeological instability.

Furthermore, tough not excluding possible increases in inflation levels, several studies on the impacts of the NPRR on Italian economics estimated positive effects both on growth and employment. A recent study by consultancies and business associations of the hard-to-abate sectors argued a gradual de-carbonization of their activities could have, at least under certain conditions, positive returns on their production trends¹⁵. A significant driver of growth linked to the PNRR could be the foreign investments that it foresees to attract in the energy field, more precisely in the development of advanced renewable energy plants¹⁶. In this sense, with no foreclosures towards any actor, Italy could think of capitals and players coming not only from countries belonging to EU and NATO, but also to investors of non-European countries having a quite advanced know-how (for example South Korea). This, at least, provided they are linked to Italy by friendly relations, whose dynamics cannot be affected by sensitive geopolitical and geoeconomic factors. After all, the leadership in research and development the Plan wants Italy to achieve in the ecological transition sphere may serve to attract capitals and investments in the clean energy sector; this could bring the country possible important returns in terms of soft power, as well as spill over effects in fields variously linked to environment and energy, such as cybernetics.

Not only in the long term, the Plan could give a strong impulse to Italian energy supply and diversification. After all, if on the one hand Italy has structural shortages in fossil fuels, on the other

auctions' results were below expectations (also because of this, FER 1 is currently under review). In 2020, in the clean energy sector only solar photovoltaics did not suffer significant drops (especially thanks to an increase in residential applications, while utility scale plants decreased). Please also refer to G. Torchiani, *Rinnovabili: obiettivi 2030*, in «Lumi for Innovation», 2021: <https://www.lumi4innovation.it/rinnovabili-obiettivi-2030-rischio/>

¹⁴ See M. Lombardini, *Italy's Energy and Climate Policies in the Post-COVID-19 Recovery*, Italy Center for Energy & Climate, 2021. Electric vehicles circulating in Italy amount to around 100.000 units, whereas the target set in the National Integrated Plan on Energy and Climate, to which the NPRR is linked, is 4.000.000 vehicles by 2030.

¹⁵ For the related simulations of the Government and the Italian National Institute of Statistics, which after the collapse of 2020 (-8.9%) said last July Italy's GDP will rise 4.7% in 2021 and 4.4% in 2022, please refer to: https://www.istat.it/storage/rapporto-annuale/2021/Capitolo_5.pdf ; on the possible effects of the NPRR on inflation see: <https://formiche.net/2021/05/visco-PNRR-italia-bce-debito-tasse-governo-draghi/> ; for the study on the hard to abate sectors see the following link: <http://www.alternativasostenibile.it/articolo/decarbonizzazione-dei-settori-energetici-impatto-positivo-sul-pil-italiano>

¹⁶ After all, according to recent empirical studies, in developed countries foreign direct investments are one of the 5 main determinants of economic growth - to an extent more or less similar to human capital, quality of economic institutions and taxes and after the primary growth determinant, that is per capita income (like taxes, the latter is negatively correlated with GDP). See for example L. Ricolfi, *L'Enigma della crescita*, Mondadori, Milan, 2020, *passim*.

it has considerable comparative advantages in renewable sources, whose potential is higher than that of several other countries. For example, the South of Italy can count up to 30-40% more solar irradiation than the EU average, and consequently the whole country could benefit from potentially lower production costs¹⁷. Though very progressively, by emancipating Italy from the supply of fossil sources renewables could increase Italian energy autonomy in the medium-long term, allowing Rome a potentially wider room of maneuver in its foreign and defense policies¹⁸. In this sense, the energy component of the NPRR seems to implicate for Italy new possible international policy windows in the Greater Mediterranean area, also its southern shore and states located in renewables rich areas such as the Middle East and Africa. To several countries in Sub-saharian Africa for example, where in recent years relevant projects concerning renewables were launched (especially in the solar and wind energy sectors), Italy could offer its know-how on the development of related technologies and installations, while the former could benefit from the partnership with Rome, assuming a well-managed and balanced relation, as a possible driving force for economic growth, exports and employment, therefore also for the diversification of their economic systems. Indeed the latter are often still unbalanced in favor of the hydrocarbon sector, and especially the oil and gas industry (see for example the focus on the Gulf of Guinea in this same issue of the Strategic Observatory)¹⁹. Furthermore, in this framework it is possible to forecast, though not without possible technological, economic and political problems, important strategic developments concerning the cleanest form of hydrogen, that is 'green' hydrogen. Indeed, it should be noted that recently, also in the wake of successful hydrogen related projects regarding Italy and other countries (e.g. Australia, Chile, the Netherlands, etc.), new possible future Euro-Mediterranean partnerships were hypothesized, where Italy could become a strategic bridge for the transport of green hydrogen from Africa to the Old Continent²⁰. In strategic terms, hydrogen seems to be relevant also for its possible applications in the military field, where in some cases it can even increase the operational and tactical capabilities of structures and combat vehicles²¹. After all, alternative energies seems to have a significant dual use value, which among other things can bring growing joint programs and partnerships among private companies, academic-scientific institutes and the public sector, as well as within the latter, e.g. in terms of inter-agency cooperation²².

In conclusion, it is likely that despite possible/probable delays in their implementation, the energy aspects of the Italian NPRR will continue to receive a high level of attention both nationally and at the European and international levels; the hope, in terms of policy, is that the Italian decision-makers will be fully aware of how the 'green component' of the NPRR can have very important implications not only in the environment and energy dimensions, but also in a wider geo-economic and geopolitical perspective.

¹⁷ See: <https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/PNRR.pdf> (p. 117).

¹⁸ The Italian Ministry of Defense deals with sustainable energy issues in terms of strategic thinking and at the operational level as well; please see the following link: https://www.difesa.it/Content/Struttura_progetto Energia/Pagine/default.aspx

¹⁹ Most of revenues of the states of North Africa come from natural gas and crude oil exports to Europe (that is 80% and 60% of the respective export totals).

²⁰ Also because the adaptation of existing gas pipelines to transport hydrogen could cost less than building new hydrogen pipelines. See M. Lombardini, *Hydrogen: the hypothesis of a joint strategy between Europe and North Africa*, *RiEnergia*, 2020: <https://rienergia.staffettaonline.com/articolo/34613/Idrogeno:+l%E2%80%99ipotesi+di+una+joint+strategy+tra+Europa+e+Nord+Africa/Lombardini> See also: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-italy-hydrogen-idUKKBN25W0KY>

²¹ For relevant examples and critical reflections, linked to possible greater efficiency of electric hydrogen vehicles compared to those powered with traditional fuels, but also to stealth capabilities of the latter (hydrogen fuel cell technology bring vehicles to significantly lower noise, smoke, odor or thermal signature), see the following links: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/21/by-land-sea-and-air-gm-to-expand-fuel-cell-business-beyond-evs.html> ; <https://fuelcellworks.com/news/u-s-army-develops-stealthy-hydrogen-fuel-cell-powered-tanks/> ; https://www.hydrogen.energy.gov/pdfs/htac_mar19_07_centeck.pdf https://www.difesa.it/SMD/CASD/IM/CeMiSS/Documenti/Vis/Rcerche_da_pubblicare/Pubblicate_nel_2020/AP_SME_02.pdf <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2021/01/07/need-green-hydrogen/>

²² On the issue in question, illuminating examples come from the US; see the report available at the following website: <https://www2.itif.org/2019-clean-energy-dividend.pdf>

Twenty years after 9/11: who are the “new” Taliban and other groups in Afghanistan?

A conflict shaped by two fronts

The twenty-year war in Afghanistan (2001 to 2021) has come to an end. This latest conflict was shaped by two fronts: a more explicit one, pitting a long-lasting Taliban insurgency against foreign armies and a national government which the fundamentalist movement deemed illegitimate; and another, less noticeable, embodied in the struggle to counter jihadist terrorism which has taken root in the country and which is pursued by different groups and acronyms.

Today, the world must find a way to deal with a victorious Taliban who not only gained the upper hand on the battlefield, yet also learned how to efficiently exploit the digital ecosystem with a view to influencing public opinion within and outside Afghanistan. However, the group now faces the hurdle of running a country and the outcome of this latest endeavor is still uncertain. One of the main difficulties lays in the movement's heterogeneous make-up. With Kabul under Taliban nominal control, internal divisions are becoming more evident, with factions competing over a power-sharing deal which is expected to accommodate personal and group ambitions. A further question-mark hovers over the Taliban's ability to acknowledge a profoundly changed Afghan civil society and the extent to which the Taliban political arm will be able to curb a younger generation of fighters who have been exposed to global jihadist ideologies, brands, objectives and tactics¹. Their ranks could swell with a Taliban diaspora, depending on Taliban choices in matters of politics and security² – i.e., as pertains to preservation of women's rights and roles, ethnic and religious inclusiveness, overt or covert alliances with former enemies in the war against the so-called Islamic State.

However, the Taliban – who have not shied away from crushing dissent within their own ranks³ – essentially hold the characteristics of a coherent and internally collaborative movement. A characteristic which stands in stark contrast to a galaxy of other jihadist groups enlisting an increasing number of veteran foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq.

In practical terms, the insurrectional front is estimated to include about forty different militant groups, some organized into political factions, others based on tribal or ethnic affiliations. Hence, the difficulty in being able to evaluate how many mujahideen actually operate on the battlefield. In 2007, military intelligence sources provided a figure ranging from 5,000 to 7,000 elements – swelling to 15,000 as per Pakistani sources, who included Pashtun tribal militias in their calculations. In February 2009, the Afghan Ministry of Interior estimated that overall, anti-government and jihadi groups' fighters could number 10-15,000⁴.

According to U.S. intelligence, prior to the final offensive which led to the fall of Kabul, the figure stood at around 60,000 active militants out of about 200,000 total elements. A number thought to have increased by a few tens of thousands over the months preceding the Taliban conquest, through the recruitment of new mujahideen among both Pashtun and non-Pashtun communities and thanks to an efficient, de-centralized organization based on an autonomous, "compartmentalized" and tactically flexible approach.

¹ CBC, *Can a divided Taliban rule a modern Afghanistan? Time will tell, says journalist*, 20 agosto 2021

² France24, *Afghanistan: Do Islamic State group jihadists pose a real challenge to the Taliban?* 31 agosto 2021

³ Watkins, A. *Taliban fragmentation: a figment of your imagination?*, War on the Rocks, 4 settembre 2019

⁴ Xinhua, *Number of Afghan Insurgent Grow Rapidly Since 2006*, in Daily outlook Afghanistan, 11 ottobre 2009.

The Taliban's DNA: supra-tribal ideology and tradition

The Taliban is a predominantly Pashtun movement yet; thanks to ties and agreements at the local level, it has managed to involve other ethnic groups as well. Based on a dense network of affiliations, rooted in a form of Islamism steeped in tribal tradition and with a generic reference to the experience of Islamic jihad against the Soviets, the Taliban movement has fought with the objective of returning to power in Afghanistan.

According to experts Thomas Ruttig⁵ and Antonio Giustozzi⁶, the Taliban movement rests on a dualistic nature: that is, structural and ideological. It can be described as an organization characterized by a vertical structure, which over the years morphed into a central "shadow" state, defined by a supra-tribal and supra-ethnic ideology which can accommodate "nationalistic" aspirations. But the movement is also defined by a horizontal network structure deeply rooted in the segmented Pashtun tribal society.

The movement can be viewed as a 'network of networks'⁷; religious, tribal and regional factors merge with the organizational principles of the Taliban who, politically, aim at building a state which overcomes tribal limitations in favour of a "national" outreach and the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate (the official name by which they always went by). If the Taliban share a nationalist drive, they are, however, no irredentist Pashtuns seeking re-unification of Pashtun areas: their supra-tribal ideology leaves room for inclusion of non-Pashtun communities, an approach which has helped them win "hearts and minds" of non-Pashtun peoples, such as those living in the Northern and Western provinces.

For the Taliban, unlike for other jihadist groups whose progressive growth represents a forthcoming challenge for Afghanistan- Islam is an umbrella accommodating different communities; the combination of vertical (religious / ideological) and horizontal (tribal) structures is likely supposed to have given the Taliban a high level of cohesion and strong organizational effectiveness⁸.

Al-Qaeda, Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) and other terror groups operating in Afghanistan⁹

Afghanistan risks becoming a haven for extremist groups, including Pakistani Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba, which carried out the devastating 2008 Mumbai terror attacks and could continue their offensive against Indian targets in Afghanistan. Other terror groups are or will likely be operating in and from the country, above all the so-called Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and al-Qaeda, the latter relying on its regional franchise, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent.

Al-Qaeda (AQ)

As periodically reported by the U.S. Congressional Research Service, the top echelon or "core" AQ leadership has been a primary U.S. target in Afghanistan since 2001. This includes AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and his deputies. In September 2019, the White House announced that U.S. forces had killed Hamza bin Laden, son of AQ founder Osama bin Laden and a rising leader in the group, "in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region." U.S. officials have argued that U.S. raids and airstrikes on AQ targets, including a large training camp uncovered in Kandahar province in 2015, have reduced AQ presence in Afghanistan. An April 2021 report from the Department of Defense (DoD)

⁵ Ruttig T., *How tribal are the Taleban*, AAN, Kabul 2012.

⁶ Giustozzi A., *Decoding the New Taleban*, C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd, London 2009.

⁷ Ruttig T., *How tribal are the Taleban*, in Bashir S. and Crews R.D., "Under the Drones. Modern Lives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands", Harvard 2012.

⁸ Ruttig T., *How tribal are the Taleban?*, cit.

⁹ *Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan*, Congressional Research service, In Focus 7-5700, 23 agosto 2018; and *Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan*, Congressional Research service, In Focus IF10604, 17 agosto 2021

estimated that AQ core leaders in Afghanistan “pose a limited threat”, because they “focus primarily on survival.”

The U.S.-Taliban agreement commits the Taliban to preventing any group, including al-Qaeda, from using Afghan soil to threaten the security of the United States or its allies. Taliban-AQ links have been reinforced by their shared battle against international forces in Afghanistan as well as through intermarriage and other personal bonds among members of the two groups. As reported in a United Nations (UN) report in April 2021, AQ and the Taliban “remain closely aligned and show no indication of breaking ties.” The Taliban reportedly issued orders in February 2021, barring their members from sheltering foreign fighters, but do not otherwise appear to have taken tangible steps in the direction of severing ties with AQ.

AQ reacted positively to the agreement with the U.S., with statements from its acolytes celebrating it as a victory for the Taliban’s cause and consequently, for global militancy; AQ sympathizers celebrated the Taliban’s takeover, while the Taliban reportedly freed prisoners, including AQ members. Following the fall of Kabul, the al-Qaeda leadership issued a dense, two-page statement on Afghanistan, congratulating the Islamic Emirate and framing it as an achievement for Afghans and the ‘umma’ (the global Muslim community); a result which, according to their propaganda, “proves” jihad is the right strategy to pursue, while “predicting” more victories ahead. What emerges from AQ affiliates’ statements all over the world is the belief that the establishment of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan heralds wider triumphs and a new era of Islamic rule, validating jihad as the way forward and exposing the “democracy game” and peaceful means as illusory.

In addition, with the return of the Taliban in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal, it is assessed that al-Qaeda could exploit the situation to regroup, enhancing the risk that Afghanistan will once again turn into a recruitment and training ground for jihadi terror groups. A fear which is corroborated by the recent return of Amin-ul-Haq, a major al-Qaeda leader in Afghanistan and former aide of Osama bin Laden, to his native Nangarhar province.

Last but not least, relations between the Taliban -especially the Haqqani Network (HQN, see below) - and AQ remain close, based on friendship, a history of shared struggle, ideological sympathy and intermarriage.

Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)

Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent has reportedly solidified its presence in Afghanistan by embedding fighters in the Taliban. In September 2014, AQ leader al-Zawahiri announced the creation of this formal, separate AQ affiliate in South Asia.

According to the Congressional Research Service, differentiating between AQ and AQIS is a difficult task, but some key distinctions do exist. Essentially AQIS, in compliance with the ‘franchise’ model, establishes itself as an attempt by AQ to maintain a more durable presence in the region by enhancing links with local actors, prompted in part by the relocation of some AQ leaders to Syria. Former AQIS leader Asim Umar, who was being “sheltered” by Taliban forces when he was killed in a joint U.S.-Afghan operation in Afghanistan (September 2019), was an Indian national with deep roots in Pakistan; AQ core leaders are predominantly Arab.

According to the April 2021 U.S. DoD report, AQIS threatened U.S. forces in Afghanistan, a reflection of the group’s cooperation with the Taliban, but likely lacked the means to conduct attacks outside the region.

Islamic State - Khorasan Province (IS-K, IS-KP)

The Islamic State announced the creation of its Afghan affiliate in January 2015, but steps in this direction had already been taken in late 2014. IS-KP once concentrated in Nangarhar, an Eastern Afghanistan province bordering Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. There, IS-KP was mostly

comprised of former Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, see below) militants who fled Pakistani army operations in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after mid-2014. Arguably one of the Islamic State's most successful affiliates, IS-K was "nearly eradicated" from its main base in Eastern Afghanistan in late 2019 by U.S. and Afghan military offensives and, separately, the Taliban. An IS-K contingent in Northern Afghanistan was similarly defeated in 2018. These territorial losses have forced the group to "de-centralize" according to UN sanctions' monitors, who assess the group has around 2,000 fighters located primarily in the East but also in Northern Afghanistan. A number of IS-K leaders were killed in U.S. strikes or captured by Afghan forces since 2016. IS-K remains a threat, and recent attacks attributed to the group, in particular the Kabul airport attacks in late August 2021, indicate a high level of operational resilience and capabilities. In addition to attacks against civilians, U.S. and Taliban during the US withdrawal from Kabul, IS-K has claimed previous large-scale bombings, mainly targeting Afghanistan's Shia minority.

IS-KP and Taliban forces have sometimes fought over control of territory or due to political and other differences; currently, the two groups oppose each other both on the ideological level and on the battlefield. Upon taking power, in August 2021 the Taliban reportedly executed an imprisoned former IS-K leader. It is assessed that Taliban hardliners – in particular, elements belonging to the HQN and young radicals – might defect to IS-KP if Taliban leaders compromise on certain issues as they transition to governance.

Haqqani Network (HQN)

The Haqqani Network is an official, semi-autonomous branch of the Afghan Taliban with solid ties to AQ. It was founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani (who died in 2018), a leading anti-Soviet Islamist commander who became a prominent Taliban official and a key leader in the post-2001 insurgency.

The group's current leader is Sirajuddin Haqqani (son of Jalaluddin) who also served as deputy leader of the Taliban since 2015. Sirajuddin's appointment to lead the network likely strengthened cooperation between the Taliban and AQ; the HQN is thought to be a "primary liaison" between the Taliban and AQ and according to reports, there might have been some recent form of cooperation between the HQN and IS-K elements in conducting complex suicide attacks in Kabul. It should be borne in mind that the HQN was the main driving force behind the deadliest attacks which took place during the war in Afghanistan.

Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban, has distinctive anti-Pakistan objectives. As confirmed by the Congressional Research Service, TTP is reportedly operating in and from Afghanistan, with thousands of fighters, alongside the Afghan Taliban. In 2014, some TTP members pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and subsequently relocated to Eastern Afghanistan in response to Pakistani army operations that mostly drove the group from its safe havens in the Pakistani Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Reunification between core TTP and some former splinter groups (possibly facilitated by AQ) since 2020, has swelled the group's ranks; some TTP members operating in Syria under the IS-K umbrella returned to Afghanistan together with Arab jihadist elements: this possibly substantiates the risk that Afghan soil might turn into a safe haven for global jihadi groups. It is assessed that the TTP may further benefit from the Taliban takeover and release of TTP prisoners held in Afghanistan.

Other minor groups

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was once a prominent ally of AQ. Formed by Uzbeks who fought with Islamist forces in the Tajikistan 1992-1997 civil war, IMU allied with the Taliban and launched attacks into other Central Asian states. After U.S. operations began in 2001, the group's focus shifted to Afghanistan and Pakistan. IMU forces operate in Northern Afghanistan under the control of the Taliban. In 2014, some IMU members pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and, similarly to former TTP members, started operating in Afghanistan and Syria under the IS-KP: some veterans returned to Afghanistan with other Arab jihadist elements.

East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)

The Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) aims to establish an independent Islamic State for the Uyghur Muslim minority, the Turkic-speaking people in Western China. The group has ties to AQ. As recently reported, as a result of the China-Taliban talks and agreements, the latter has committed to eliminating ETIM from Afghanistan. At present, the group is still operating with hundreds of fighters in the Northeast of Afghanistan and it maintains a larger presence in Idlib, Syria, moving its fighters between the two areas. ETIM in Afghanistan is reportedly focused on China; the Syrian contingent has “a more global outlook,” in line with IS-K global vision of jihad. It is assessed that, if the Taliban breaks off relations with ETIM (in accordance with the agreement with China), ETIM fighters will likely switch to IS-K.

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Osservatorio Strategico

Part Two

Digital Silk Road, infrastructure and "debt trap": the role of the People's Republic of China

Serbia strategic partner of the Digital Silk Road

The Western Balkans has become an increasingly prominent hub of the Digital Silk Road, a central aspect of the Silk Road promoted by Xi Jinping in 2013. Initially, it was presented as an initiative to "promote the construction of cross-border optical cable and other communication line networks, improve international communications connectivity, and create an Information Silk Road." China has focused on building cross-border optical cable networks, planning transcontinental submarine optical cable projects, and improving satellite information handoffs to expand information exchanges and cooperation.

The Digital Silk Road presupposes the global expansion of Chinese technologies to markets previously dominated by local or Western companies, or to developing countries that are only now undergoing technological development. These range from telecommunications networks and smart cities to e-commerce and China's satellite system. The initiative is often seen as a joint effort by the Chinese government and Chinese digital giants, but not all projects within the Digital Silk Road receive strong support from the state.

Serbia is China's closest partner in the Western Balkans, and this is reflected in the country's approach to Chinese technology. Although Serbia and NATO have agreed on an individual partnership action plan, Serbia does not aspire to membership anytime soon. In addition, although Serbia still maintains that membership in the European Union is its main foreign policy goal, uncertainty about the future accession process has opened the door to influence from extra-regional powers, particularly China.

Over the past decade, China has strengthened its penetration into Serbia's political and business elites. In 2016, Serbia and China signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement. Leading Serbian politicians and the country's pro-government media have promoted a narrative of "steely friendship" between the two countries. Also in 2016, a Telekom Srbija general manager announced that the company had signed a \$150 million contract with Huawei to develop optical networks and fast internet. Data from 2020 shows that the amount of contracts signed with Chinese banks for upgrading Serbian infrastructure exceeded \$7 billion.

The strategic and economic ties between Belgrade and Beijing have enabled greater cooperation in the digital and telecommunications sectors. Huawei has built its regional headquarters in Belgrade and is a longtime partner of the state-owned telecommunications company, Telekom Srbija.

Despite some setbacks, including Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's September 2020 signing of the Washington Agreement, which included an article dedicated to prohibiting future involvement and removing "untrusted providers" from the 5G network, companies close to Beijing remain a significant element in Serbia's digital infrastructure. In 2019, Belgrade introduced the Safe City project, implemented in partnership with Huawei that includes the installation of 1,000 security surveillance cameras equipped with AI software for facial recognition. Serbia has also expressed interest in the Smart City project, an initiative with respect to which Bosnia and Herzegovina has signed a memorandum with Huawei. While Smart City represents a tool for local authorities to provide better public services to their citizens globally, the goal of the Safe City program is to increase the safety and security of citizens in local communities. Both projects raise many concerns about digital privacy, human rights, and potential misuse by the Serbian government.

China's efforts in the region are countered by other geopolitical players, the United States and the European Union, who are pressuring Western Balkan countries to limit China's presence in their digital infrastructure. North Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania and Bulgaria have decided to limit or ban Chinese technology, aligning themselves with the U.S. Clean Network. The Clean Network program was launched during the Trump administration to safeguard the nation's assets, including citizens' privacy and companies' most sensitive information, from aggressive intrusion by malicious actors, such as the Chinese Communist Party. The program represents the execution of a multi-year, whole-of-government strategy built on a coalition of trusted partners and based on technology and the rapidly changing economics of global markets¹.

Kiev offers to be Beijing's "bridge to Europe"

Earlier in July, Ukrainian Minister of Infrastructure Oleksandr Kubrakov and Minister of Commerce of the People's Republic of China Wang Wentao signed an intergovernmental agreement on expanding cooperation between Ukraine and China to implement joint projects in the field of infrastructure construction.

According to the report, priorities for cooperation include rail transit, airports, ports, communications and municipal engineering. Under the agreement, Ukraine and China intend to encourage companies and financial institutions of both countries to actively cooperate in infrastructure construction. The parties have, in addition, agreed to promote the establishment of closer economic ties between the two countries and to provide the necessary assistance and support in the implementation of joint projects. The agreement provides for the attraction of funds on preferential terms from the Government of the People's Republic of China for the implementation of infrastructure projects and, following joint consultations, the parties will approve potential cooperation projects to be supported with Chinese funds. Ukraine could become a "bridge to Europe" for Chinese business, Zelensky told Xi Jinping during a phone conversation last July, adding that his country was eager to export more agricultural products to China. Zelensky reiterated Ukraine's position in support of China's unity, and in return, Xi said China supported Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Since Ukraine's independence in 1992, Beijing has sought closer ties with the former Soviet republic. The two countries cooperate, particularly in military, technological and scientific fields, areas in which Ukraine inherited significant capabilities from the Soviet Union. In 2019, China overtook Russia as Ukraine's largest trading partner.

Although strengthening relations with China could be seen as part of Kiev's efforts to reshape its Asia policy amid growing rivalry between China and the United States, observers in Ukraine doubt that the latest infrastructure cooperation with China can be extended to critical areas. Yuri Poita, head of the Asia-Pacific section of the Kiev-based think tank New Geopolitics Research Network, noted that Kiev was about to introduce a foreign investment screening mechanism that could draw red lines to "limit cooperation with China in the areas of trade, investment, education and tourism"².

Ukraine's place in what is misleadingly referred to as the post-Soviet space, according to Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, lies in Euro-Atlantic integration. For Kuleba, in Ukraine and elsewhere, cutting ties with Moscow will continue, regardless of what Putin or his entourage has to say about it. Ukraine's accession to NATO and the EU will not only strengthen progress in Ukraine but also help unify the West once again. As a player in Central and Eastern Europe and the Black Sea, Ukraine has much to offer in the NATO arena in terms of regional security.

¹ The Clean Network, U.S. Department of State, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-clean-network/index.html>

² Zhou L., *As China and Ukraine vow infrastructure cooperation, Kyiv offers to be Beijing's 'bridge to Europe'*, South China Morning Post, 14 luglio 2021 <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3141107/china-and-ukraine-vow-infrastructure-cooperation-kyiv-offers>

The country's skilled armed forces have valuable combat experience fighting Russian troops since the 2014 invasion. No current NATO member has that experience or the knowledge that comes with it. And when it comes to cybersecurity and countering disinformation, few countries rival Ukraine's ability to recognize and counter Russian tactics. Ukraine also has a critical role to play in ensuring Europe's energy independence. We have been a reliable transit country for gas supplies to Europe for decades. But Ukraine's efforts will not succeed without the strong support of the EU, NATO, and the member states of both bodies. The steps we take must be reciprocated, with all parties working toward the goal of Ukraine's membership in both organizations. The United States and Europe must recognize that Ukraine is part of the West. Only then will our current efforts prove not to be in vain³.

Western banks help Montenegro escape 'debt trap'

In an effort to counter China's attempts to build influence in Montenegro and the Balkans, Western banks have agreed to help the Montenegrin government repay a huge debt incurred with Beijing for the construction of a highway connecting the port city of Bar in Serbia, built by the state-owned company China Road and Bridge Group. In 2014, Montenegro borrowed funds from China's Exim Bank of China to build the first section of the highway (a 41-kilometer portion), despite warnings from international institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, which considered it commercially unsustainable. In total, Podgorica borrowed about € 1 billion from China to carry out the project and, as a result, China currently holds about a quarter of Montenegro's total debt, which, in 2020, exceeded 100% of GDP. Montenegro's growing debt has raised concerns about the financial stability of the Balkan country, formerly a member of NATO and the regions most advanced in the European integration process. In the spring, Montenegro officially requested help from the European Commission, asking for assistance in paying off the debt. The new agreement with some Western, French and American banks actually reduced interest rates from 2% to less than 1%, as stated by Montenegrin Finance Minister Milojko Spajic, speaking of an "incredible success." U.S. authorities praised the agreement, while Beijing suggested that Washington take care of its own business, reiterating that relations between China and Montenegro remain friendly. In addition, the Chinese embassy in Montenegro said the high cost of the project reflects engineering challenges and unfavorable geological conditions in the area.

Montenegro represents one of the clearest examples of the so-called "debt-trap diplomacy" that China is using to extend its influence in the Balkans and beyond, offering substantial funds to local governments to build major infrastructure, at the risk of making those countries economically and politically dependent on Beijing.

According to a research by the Center for Global Development, Montenegro is one of the countries destined to suffer due to debt for the projects of the Belt and Road Initiative, along with Djibouti, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Maldives, Mongolia, Pakistan and Tajikistan, but also in Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ethiopia and Kenya, there could be an increased risk of short-term debt distress due to projects related to the BRI. China is becoming one of the most active external players in the Balkans in recent years, financing coal-fired power plants in Bosnia and Herzegovina, infrastructure projects in North Macedonia, and industry, energy, transportation, and mining investments in Serbia, where President Aleksandar Vucic has called the friendship with China "made of steel." In Belgrade, Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei has also set up a surveillance camera system that could be used in the future in other areas of the Balkans⁴.

³ Kuleba D., *Ukraine Is Part of the West – NATO and the EU Should Treat It That Way*, Foreign Affairs, 2 agosto 2021 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2021-08-02/ukraine-part-west>

⁴ *Western banks help Montenegro to escape from the chinese "debt-trap"*, Strategic Balkans Press Review, NATO Defense College Foundation, luglio 2021 <https://www.natofoundation.org/strategic-balkans-press-reviews/>

Recent Jihadist groups operations in the region

The MENA region has several different security issues to be taken into account, and one of the most important is surely that related to Jihadist groups. Although a full discussion of this issue is outside the scope of this Instant Study, the situation in Afghanistan has raised the question of the impact of such irregular groups on the security in the region. It is fair to say that after its defeat in Iraq in 2017, ISIS and affiliated groups have certainly had a less important and considerable impact on local and regional security. However, these irregular groups have not been permanently defeated and they continue to represent a risk for two main reasons. First, they are still active in different countries, as we will see. Second, their ability to adapt, change their tactics and co-opt local population taking advantage of economic, political and ethnic problems is very worrisome.

The next section describes the latest events (from May 2021) related to Islamic State and similar groups in the region. Then the study will briefly take into account the reason why strategically, tactically, politically such group continue to represent a security threat.

According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies¹, the Islamic State is the only Islamist group still operating in Libya although with reduced capability compared to, for example, 2019. However, on 06 June a suicide bombing at a checkpoint in the southwest city of Sabha killed a police officer and one other person; and on 22 August another suicide bomber attacked a checkpoint in Zella, a small oasis town in the desert south of Sirte located near an oilfield. These attacks testify both the presence of the group and its freedom of movement. In addition to this, the increasing instability in the Sahel region can represent an important factor in possible future development of ISIS in Libya because the group can use the money from illicit traffics from Sahel to the Mediterranean to support, increase and expand its operations.

Algeria is another country deeply affected by the instability in the Sahel region, but contrary to Libya in Algeria operates mainly Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), even though it has not conducted important operations recently. On 17 May, Tunisian forces killed five suspected jihadists in an air and ground operation that targeted a jihadist base near the border with Algeria. Tunisia has seen a surge in radical Islam since 2011 revolution and the army has been battling armed groups since 2012 in the country's central mountains. They include fighters from the Islamic State and jihadists from the local branch of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

Probably Egypt is the most affected country in North Africa by Islamist violence. While that violence was more widespread among the country in the past years, today it is mainly concentrated in the Sinai Peninsula that remains a very volatile region where military operations are ongoing and media are not allowed to enter. The most important group is Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in November 2014, but was already present and active in the region. On 02 August, 8 Egyptian army soldiers have been killed in anti-terrorism operations in the northern Sinai. During the fighting dozens of militants were killed and 200 vehicles were destroyed by Egyptian Air Force. This highlights the military threat posed by ISIS in the Sinai Peninsula and the related difficulties of Egyptian armed forces². Tunnel entrances used to cross into north Sinai were also destroyed. Meanwhile, officials said that on July 31, Islamic State militants ambushed a checkpoint in the northern Sinai town of Sheikh Zuweid, killing at least five security members. On 13 August, a roadside bomb killed eight members of Egypt's security forces in New Rafah, a town on the border with the Gaza Strip.

In the Middle East, ISIS is even more present and dangerous mainly in Iraq where it is still supported by a small portion of local population and it still continues attacking U.S. and Iraqi forces

¹ <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/african-militant-islamist-group-violence-maintains-record-pace-though-slowing/>.

² http://www.ocnus.net/artman2/publish/Defence_Arms_13/Challenges-of-Egypt-s-Military-Strategy-in-Sinai.shtml.

using roadside bombs, suicide bombers and drones. The group has evolved into an entrenched insurgency, exploiting weaknesses in local security to find safe havens and it remains capable of waging a prolonged insurgency between Iraq and Syria.

Syria is probably the most complex theater of operation for several reasons. First, the ongoing conflict has created a landscape in which several militias are involved: Hezbollah, Kurdish forces, militias supported by Turkey, and groups linked to al-Qaeda or the Islamic State. Second, as far as the IS group is concerned, the Syrian theater of operation is often indistinguishable from Iraq since the group still operates in the desert areas between the two countries.

On May 16, the IS-affiliated Amaq news agency published a statement, in which it noted that, between April 13 and May 13, the organization carried out 79 attacks in Syria, the majority of them occurred in Deir ez-Zor and others in Homs, Raqqa, Daraa and elsewhere. IS has recently stepped up its operations in several areas in the western countryside of Daraa carrying out assassinations of members of the regime forces and those who cooperate with them³. In the Aleppo area, Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions suffered from security chaos due to an escalation of violence, assassination attempts and bombings, mostly at the hands of groups affiliated with the Islamic State. IEDs and attacks against police have been recurrent⁴.

In the Syrian desert, which extends over Raqqa, Hama, Homs, Deir ez-Zor and all the way to Suwayda, IS cells resumed their activities to the point that hardly a day passes without IS carrying out an explosion, ambush, assassination or attack. Despite military operations the IS powers and military capabilities remain unhinged and it seems to have regained the ability for a comeback. IS attacks on 3 June demonstrate its renewed military capabilities since it killed a brigadier general of the Syrian government army east of Homs and attacked sites of Syrian army east of Raqqa killing three members. The previous days, IS staged ambushes near Homs killing a military adviser of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and killing other three members of a pro-government militia in a separate incident. The cells gained full knowledge of the details of the Badiya terrain, roads and places of shelter. They resort to the raid strategy, which consists of moving in small groups and using light weapons, to strike and withdraw immediately. As for their tactics, they plant mines around the vital sites of the regime. This rendered unsafe the roads used for supply and logistics on the outskirts of the cities controlled by the regime and its allied forces. IS movements depend on the network of tunnels it dug in the areas it controls and on river supply lines mainly in the north and east Euphrates region⁵.

After the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) cracked down on cells affiliated with the Islamic State, the latter's activity seems to have diminished, especially in June and in the city of Raqqa and its countryside, while IS cells are still active in the countryside of Deir ez-Zor. However, IS is trying to develop the same strategy that was successful in Iraq from 2011, targeting tribal sheikhs and clerics loyal to the SDF, members of regime forces, teachers, civil servants and people they accuse of sorcery⁶. On 06 August, six members of the Syrian Armed Forces and allied militias were killed in an attack south of Idlib. The week before, seven militants loyal to the Syrian regime were killed in another attack in the Deir ez-Zor governorate.

However, ISIS is not the only jihadist group in Syria. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which is the allegedly branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria, is particularly interesting. First, it is working to attract jihadist groups acting outside the limits of its authority⁷. Second, HTS is trying to run an independent emirate in Idlib, which is the area controlled by the group. The fact that a jihadist group controls terrain, as

³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/islamic-state-escalates-operations-against-syrian-forces-during-ramadan>.

⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/islamic-state-cells-terrorize-civilians-northwest-syria>.

⁵ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/islamic-state-rebuilding-syrian-desert>.

⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/kurdish-led-forces-intensify-crackdown-islamic-state-cells-northeast-syria>.

⁷ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/syrian-jihadi-groups-crack-down-rivals-idlib>.

ISIS did previously, is a very disturbing element. Here the group runs checkpoints, controls the crossings between different areas, imposes royalties and taxes on people⁸.

Having described where ISIS is still active, I will now move on to briefly discuss why it is so difficult to eradicate. First, as all irregular groups, ISIS can count on some kind of local support and it lives among the local population, as a consequence a complete eradication is very difficult and it needs a lot of time. Second, ISIS is not a territorial state as we understood such concept. Therefore, a country-focused approach is misleading and not completely effective. For example, to eradicate ISIS in Libya a stronger central state with a good, well equipped and trained army is necessary but not enough because ISIS can move south in the Sahel region to find a space where it can fund, train and carry out new offensive operations from there. Third, modern technology offers to such groups new ways to survive and attack. For instance, ISIS can use the Internet to spread its propaganda and find new recruits in terms of both foreign fighters to fight in Libya, Syria and elsewhere and lone wolves to conduct terrorist attacks in Europe. The group has also used drones to improve their military capabilities, mainly in Iraq during the battle for Mosul and in Syria, and this creates difficulties to local security forces.

⁸ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/syrian-jihadist-group-expands-control-areas-outside-idlib>.

Middle Eastern states watch the Chad political transition with concern

The death of President Idriss Déby Itno in April and the subsequent takeover by the army through the Transitional Military Council (TMC) have opened a delicate political and institutional phase for Chad. Several regional and international stakeholders, particularly the African Union (AU) and France, fear the consequences of the growing instability. Middle Eastern countries are also among the extra-regional players watching the political transition in Chad with great interest. In the post-Arab Spring era, the political agendas of some Middle Eastern players – namely Egypt, UAE, and Turkey - have given greater weight to the country. The geostrategic centrality of Chad, which lies between the Sahel and the Red Sea, and the enlargement of Middle Eastern power competition beyond traditional regional borders are behind their growing interest (Cannon and Donelli 2019).

Over the last decade, Chad has increased its economic, diplomatic, and security integration with Middle Eastern players. The rivalry between the different Middle Eastern power blocks and the post-2011 reshuffling of regional balances have led to the scramble for influence and alliances on the African scene. The Déby regime, like in other African countries, has exploited the Middle East rivalries to increase its material and political gains. Egypt, especially, is monitoring the political circumstances of Chad closely. For geographical proximity, political projection, and strategic interests, Cairo deems Chad as a cornerstone for the stability of its two fragile neighboring countries: Libya and Sudan. Following the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi and Déby Itno had increased security cooperation by raising the level of intelligence sharing. The personal relationship between the two presidents has also boosted diplomatic alignment within key regional fora, where the two leaders promoted the idea of "African solutions to African crises."

The Turkish attempt to gain more influence in the country caused the biggest concern to al-Sisi (Hassan 2021). After having supplied humanitarian assistance in the previous decade, Turkey has intensified relations with Chad since 2017, fueling its intervention model based on win-win partnerships (Anadolu Agency 2017). Chad has a strategic relevance for Turkey, given its proximity to areas of high Turkish strategic interest such as Libya, Sudan, and Mali. Furthermore, the African country is seen by Ankara as a potential economic opportunity, especially for the mining sector. The strengthening of relations between the Déby regime and Turkey experienced a sudden setback following the Turkish intervention in Libya. The crisis in Libya offered an opportunity for some Chadian armed opposition groups, including FACT, to proliferate and increase their offensive capabilities. At the same time, it provided Déby Itno with chances to attract new investment from the Gulf, particularly the UAE.

Since 2017, the Emirates have identified Chad as a target country, critical for their investments and to monitor their Turkish rival's operations in the region (Rahman 2017). Déby Itno established a commercial partnership with the UAE that opened up to increasing the trade ties that have grown in a few years to \$410 million annually.¹ The bilateral relationship increased in the security sector as well, with the contribution of regular Chadian troops to General Haftar's military campaign. In 2020, more than 1,500 Chadian army soldiers were deployed alongside the LNA in Libya (Atalayar 2020). Simultaneously, however, relations with Qatar deteriorated. In 2017, under Emirati pressure, Déby Itno joined the trade and diplomatic embargo of Doha. The Chadian

¹ <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/are/partner/tcd>

president also accused Qatar of supporting Chadian rebel groups on Libyan soil and offering asylum to Timan Erdimi, leader of the RDF group (Al-Jazeera 2018).

Following the announcement of Déby Itno's death, the leaders of key Middle Eastern states showed solidarity with Chad giving full recognition to the power of the military. The current trend of rapprochement amongst players that, until a few months ago, were in open competition with each other, such as Egypt, Turkey, and the UAE, suggests that all of them will support the transition led by Déby's son, Mahamat Idriss Déby. However, if the internal situation degenerated into a civil conflict, Middle Eastern states could adopt different stances. In such a case, the risk would be to make Chad a new ground for a Middle Eastern proxy confrontation.

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“Defense of Japan” and the Japanese security policies in 2021

Introduction

The defence white paper published by the Japanese Ministry of Defense provides an important point of observation for analysing both the perception of the regional and international geopolitical and strategic environment and the evolution of Japan's security policy. The 2021 edition is the first to be produced by the government led by Yoshihide Suga, who assumed the position of Prime Minister in September 2020 following the resignation of Shinzo Abe, who led the country since 2012. The document is also affected by the influence of Defense Minister Nubuo Kishi, half-brother of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.¹ Over the years, Kishi has spoken out in favour of greater political-military cooperation with Taiwan, of an expansion of the possibility of "collective self-defence" that may also include Australian troops and naval units² and the acquisition of autonomous missile systems to deter North Korea.

Defense of Japan 2021 also reflects an improvement in the climate within the alliance after Biden's election. The era in which Abe and Japan had to try to isolate the alliance from strategic uncertainty and Trump's "transactional approach" has ended. Now Washington and Tokyo can work on consolidating and deepening cooperation both in the defence sector and in new sectors such as economic security and technology.

Threats to Japan's security

China

China is perceived as the most pressing threat to Japanese security. In this case, the threat is constituted by both military capabilities, in terms of the military resources and technological sophistication, and a behaviour indicating the desire to change the status quo through an offensive strategy.

On the capabilities front, the document emphasizes above all on the development by China of hypersonic and cruise missiles, fifth generation fighters, attack submarines, frigates and destroyers, in addition to developments in the field of artificial intelligence and cyber. Regarding the use of the military force, the document highlights the growing centrality of operations in the "grey zone", military operations designed to remain below the threshold of open conflict, capable of modifying the status quo through *fait accompli*, and characterized by gradualism, hybridity and deniability (Brands, 2015; Mazar, 2016; Hemmings and Turvold, 2021). In particular, the document highlights "the continuous efforts to change the status quo around the Senkaku Islands", defined as "an object of grave concern" for Japan³. Furthermore, the new Chinese law on the Coast Guard, which authorizes the use of force in case of need, constitutes a significant violation of international law. Finally, the document also presents growing competition between the United States and China and instability in the Taiwan Strait as threats to Japanese security.

¹ Nobuo Kishi is the third son of Shintaro Abe, a former Foreign Minister in the 1980s and father of Shinzo Abe and Yoko Kishi, daughter of former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi. After his birth he was adopted by his maternal uncle.

² Article Nine, or the pacifist clause of the Japanese constitution, has been the subject of various interpretations by the Legislative Office of the Government, the body responsible for interpreting the constitutional rules. The 1954 interpretation only allowed defensive defence, the use of force to repel a military attack. The 2015 interpretation declared the exercise of collective self-defence legal, allowing the use of force to defend an ally in situations where the security of Japan is also in danger.

³ The document reports that incursions into Japanese territorial waters by military ships or the coast guard recorded by the Japanese Self-Defense Forces have averaged 2 to 6 per day in the last decade.

North Korea

The nuclear and ballistic programme is the second most serious threat to Japanese security. *Defense of Japan 2021* points out that despite the moratorium on long-range missile tests and the suspension of atomic tests after 2017, Pyongyang has made further significant progress in the missile sector. In particular, the missiles shown during the latest military parades such as the Pukguksong 4 and 5, i.e. solid-fuelled missiles that can be on ballistic submarines, are particularly concerning. This development would constitute a significant step forward both in terms of the ability to survive a first attack and in terms of the possibility of bypassing anti-missile systems. Furthermore, the progress made by Pyongyang on the intercontinental missile front, in terms of range and mobility, and on the ability to miniaturize nuclear warheads, is also cited as particularly worrying.

Russia

Russia constitutes the third most significant threat due both to the high level of technological sophistication and to the strategies adopted in recent years. First, relations between Japan and Russia are influenced by the territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands, which has persisted since the end of the Second World War and has prevented the development of more cooperative relations between the two states in recent decades. Moscow has progressively drawn closer to Beijing, as testified by joint political stances and military exercises carried out in the Yellow Sea and the Northern Sea of Japan. In addition, the Russian armed forces in recent years have increasingly deployed in the Russian Far East areas the most sophisticated weapon systems as the Borey-class nuclear submarines in the Okhotsk Sea to the S-400 anti-aircraft batteries, also placed in the Kuril Islands.

Climate change

Defense of Japan 2021 for the first time classifies climate change as a security threat, as it can create or exacerbate conflicts over scarce territories or resources and generate large-scale social and political tensions linked to migration or natural disasters.

Allies and partners

The United States

The document indicates that Biden's election marks a return to normal after the uncertainty generated by the Trump administration. However, relations between Washington, Beijing and Moscow remain tense and competitive. Hence the American role in the Indo-Pacific and competition with China are described as central to the Biden administration, as well as for Japan. While during the Trump presidency the goal was to preserve the credibility of the alliance, with Biden Japan can aim to expand areas of cooperation. In the security realm, the document indicates as priorities cooperation in missile defence, ISR activities (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance), maritime security, cyber security, logistical support and disaster relief. The document also mentions initiatives in the area of economic security, considered as the "new frontier" of the alliance. Among these the most significant are resilience of value chains, cooperation in the semiconductor and 5G sector and other critical technologies. In this context, the main objective of bilateral cooperation is to avoid excessive dependence on China.

Another significant element is the Japanese declaration regarding the security of Taiwan. The document here confirms what had already emerged after the summit between Suga and Biden in Washington in April. For the first time since 1969, the joint declaration of a summit between the United States and Japan explicitly mentioned Japan's interest in Taiwan's security and stability.

The Quad

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad) the forum including the United States, Japan, Australia and India is considered a complementary resource to the alliance. Yet it is deemed as essential to promote the Japanese vision of the Free and Open Indo Pacific and its normative pillars,

i.e. freedom of navigation, respect for international law, respect for sovereignty, multilateralism and peaceful dispute resolution.

The activities of the Quad to date have consisted of a series of ministerial meetings and a "virtual" meeting between leaders in March 2021. In addition, the four members carried out the Malabar naval exercise jointly in 2020. In 2021, the Quad also included working groups on non-military issues such as COVID vaccines, climate change, new technologies and the resilience of production chains.

Relations with the individual members of the Quad have recently been strengthened. The Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) with Australia, which will allow the stationing of the armed forces of one country in the territory of the other, facilitating cooperation and the conduct of joint exercises. This agreement is in addition to the existing Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and Information Security Agreement (ISA)⁴. The most important advance with India is the new ACSA agreement, as well as cooperation in Malabar exercises.

ASEAN and South East Asia

The South China Sea is increasingly central to Japanese strategic calculus, both because China has increased its military pressure with operations in the grey zone, and because the security and stability of maritime communication lines are critical to Japanese security (Wallace, 2019)

Cooperation between states of South East Asia and Japan takes place mainly within the framework of Vientiane Vision 2.0.⁵ As part of this initiative, Tokyo has pledged to support partner countries in preserving the principles of international law, with particular attention to maritime and navigation law, including air and maritime space. Japan also promotes capacity building initiatives in the ISR sector, search and rescue at sea and in airspace (SAR), cybersecurity and disaster relief and information sharing. Japan-ASEAN cooperation in this context led to the creation of the Japan-ASEAN Defense Vice-Ministerial Forum, and the promotion of 2 + 2 meetings with defence and foreign ministers with Vietnam and Indonesia (Satake, 2019).

New military capabilities

Defense of Japan 2021 also provides some interesting answers with respect to choices made by the Japanese Self-Defense Forces in the field of technology and the acquisition of weapons systems. There is the cancellation of the Aegis Ashore programme, which would have constituted an important component of the Japanese anti-missile system. Opposition by of the local population in the prefectures where this system would be deployed led to the cancellation of the programme and to place the same system on destroyers. These new naval units, equipped with the new SM-6 interceptor missiles, are expected to be capable of intercepting also hypersonic and perhaps cruise missiles.

The document, on the other hand, does not reveal a clear decision on the issue of autonomous counter-strike capabilities for Japan, namely the acquisition of ballistic and cruise missiles to be used to strengthen deterrence against North Korea and China. Japan currently has no land based medium or long-range ballistic or cruise missiles, which would clearly constitute "offensive capabilities" formally prohibited by Article Nine of the Constitution. However, in 2018, Tokyo introduced a series of "stand-off" missiles, such as the Joint Strike Missile (JSM), which can be launched by F-15s and has a range of up to 900 km, the Joint Air to Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM) and the Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM), with a range of 500 km that can be launched from F-35s. While Abe was leaning towards acquiring land-based long-range missiles, Suga always preferred a strengthening of the anti-missile system and did not give a definitive answer to the debate over Japanese counter-strike capabilities.

⁴ The ISA agreement allows the exchange of classified information, the ACSA agreement allows for logistical cooperation and the sharing of means

⁵ Described in the issue 4 of the Osservatorio Strategico 2020 (Dian, La Vientiane Vision and cooperation between Japan and ASEAN in the field of security)

The document also signals important investments in new domains, such as cyber and space. Cybersecurity personnel will triple in 2021. In addition, the Cyber Defense Command will be established within the Self-Defense Forces. In the space sector, the document anticipates the enlargement of the dedicated unit within the Japanese Air Self Defense Force and the acquisition of SSA-type satellites, dedicated to strengthening Japanese ISR capabilities.

Conclusion

Defense of Japan represents a valuable observation point on Japanese security and defence policies. The 2021 edition highlights the deterioration of the regional strategic environment and illustrates the response implemented by Japan. From a political point of view, there is a desire to consolidate the regional order in the Indo-Pacific and strengthen Japan's role as a "pro-active contributor to peace". In this context, Tokyo has worked to strengthen the alliance with the United States, and to promote new forms of cooperation with regional partners both within the Quad and with ASEAN partners. Finally, the Defense of Japan 2021 highlights how the Japanese government is promoting significant investments in new technologies and weapon systems, from missile defence to cyber capabilities. However, as the debate on counter-strike capabilities has shown, some strategic dilemmas have yet to be resolved.

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The US, the EU, and the challenge of climate change: ambitions and problems at the eve of COP26

The struggle against climate change is an essential component of the Biden administration's political agenda. During the electoral campaign, Biden himself indicated the US return in the 2015 Paris climate agreement as one of the first acts in his possible presidency. In the following weeks, the announcement that former State Secretary John Kerry had been appointed as the United States Special Presidential Envoy for Climate (November 23, 2020) was another sign in the same direction. After the inauguration, things did not change. Measures aimed at promoting the so-called 'green transition' were a large portion of the 'infrastructure package' that the White House presented to Congress; however, their weight was significantly reduced in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill that Congress started discussing in early August. In the same month, a new Federal Office for Climate Change and Health Equity was created in the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), a measure adopted after President Biden's Executive order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad of January 27, 2021¹. These and other initiatives sum up to the targets fixed to reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other greenhouse gases (GHGs) emissions. According to the plan of action that the administration presented in April, the United States should achieve a 50-52 per cent reduction from 2005 levels in economy-wide net greenhouse gas pollution in 2030 and reach net zero emissions economy-wide by "no later than 2050"².

On the European front, ambitions are even higher. According to the European Green Deal, the EU countries should reach carbon neutrality (zero economy-wide net GHGs emissions) by 2050. In the meantime, they should achieve at least a 55 per cent reduction from 1990 levels in economy-wide net greenhouse gas pollution by 2030. Adopting a new EU strategy on adaptation to climate change and the proposal of European climate law and a European climate pact are the institutional steps supporting this process. In financial terms, the program is funded with 600 million euros from the Next Generation EU fund and the provisions of the long-term EU budget 2021-27. These figures challenge the US and place the EU at the forefront of the struggle against climate change. The European Commission's proposals of July 14 offer a detailed picture of the measures to adopt to reach the final goal. These proposals tighten the existing Emissions Trading System (ETS) and extend it to building and transportation, setting binding new targets on energy efficiency for EU member states, increasing the proportion of renewables in the EU's energy mix to 40 per cent by 2030 and expanding the continent's natural carbon sinks by at least 15 per cent through new regulations on agriculture, forestry, and land use, and the planting of three billion new trees. Finally, they ask that "all new cars registered as of 2035 will be zero-emission", thanks to the creation of a continent-wide network of electric and hydrogen-fuel charging stations³.

¹ *Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*, January 27, 2021. Online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad> [accessed: September 1, 2021].

² *President Biden Sets 2030 Greenhouse Gas Pollution Reduction Target Aimed at Creating Good-Paying Union Jobs and Securing U.S. Leadership on Clean Energy Technologies*, April 22, 2021. Online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/22/fact-sheet-president-biden-sets-2030-greenhouse-gas-pollution-reduction-target-aimed-at-creating-good-paying-union-jobs-and-securing-u-s-leadership-on-clean-energy-technologies> [accessed: September 1, 2021]. An evaluation of the White House plan is in Ebenhart, 2021.

³ *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2019/631 as regards strengthening the CO₂ emission performance standards for new passenger cars and new light commercial vehicles in line with the Union's increased climate ambition*, Brussels, July 14, 2021. Online:

Reaching these targets will meet many obstacles, especially in transforming the Commission's guidelines into legally binding rules in the different member states. Moreover, tighter standards in high-emissions sectors could promote their delocalization in less 'virtuous' countries, an outcome that, given the global interdependence existing in the climate realm, could frustrate all efforts (Patrick, 2021). This state of things provides large room for collaboration between the US and Europe. On both shores of the Atlantic, public opinion deeply feels the issue's relevance. According to the 2021 edition of the *Transatlantic Trends*, in countries like Italy, Germany and Sweden, between 44 and 47 per cent of the respondents consider climate change as the most crucial issue for transatlantic cooperation; in the United States, the share is 29 per cent, little less than the 31 per cent that the topmost issue ('global health') scores (*Transatlantic Trends*, 2021: 14). However, things seem going another way. More than fostering cooperation, the new EU targets highlight the cleavage existing between Brussels and Washington on carbon taxation and the possible European adoption of import tariffs on goods from countries not applying EU-like environmental standards. These tariffs would impact several sensitive sectors in the United States, such as steel, aluminum, electricity, fertilizers, and cement (Colman, 2021), already affected by of trade war that the Trump administration started in 2018 to reduce the US import of European products.

Currently, the 'carbon border adjustment mechanism' issue is freeze together with its possible commercial effects, and it will probably remain freeze until the EU's different national governments approve the Commission's guidelines. However, it is not a good omen that two players like the EU and the United States, which openly claim a leading role in the struggle against climate change, are so distant at the eve of COP26, the annual UN Climate Change Conference, scheduled in Glasgow on October 31-November 12, 2021. Despite the signing of a US-EU joint statement committing the parties to greater cooperation to counter the climate crisis (March 9, 2021)⁴, there are still several contrasts in its interpretation (Mathiesen and Colman, 2021). The need to foster economic recovery, the different emission levels and the competing timing and ambitions of the UE and EU adopted measures contribute to widening this gap. In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, per-capita carbon dioxide emissions in the United States were 15.52 tons, compared to 8.52 in Germany and 4.81 in France (Tooze, 2021). For this reason, the US environmental organizations also increased their lobbying on the administration, proposing the European model as the one to follow. The risk is denting the balance that President Biden created to support its positions and strengthening the bipartisan opposition to his measures. The US-EU environmental cooperation sees, thus, trapped between a rock and a hard place. Another element that confirms how – despite the 'softer' language of the US President – Joe Biden's arrival in the White House did not wipe out the differences existing on concrete issues between Washington and Brussels.

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Oil & gas sector trends in the Gulf of Guinea

Despite having some weaknesses, the oil & gas sector very strongly contributes in making the Gulf of Guinea one of the most important areas in Africa. Like other areas in the world and Africa, this Gulf region currently hosts significant projects in the development of renewable energy and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions; moreover, in terms of natural resources, the wealth of the area goes well beyond hydrocarbons¹. However, followed by ports and fishing, the oil & gas sector still represents the first voice of regional economy, with a strong Blue economy imprint (i.e. the economic activities related to the sea). Since the 1950s and 1960s, several Gulf countries, starting with Nigeria, Cameroon and Angola, have been heavily investing in hydrocarbons, becoming important oil & gas producers and exporters, albeit facing environmental consequences.



Figure 1. The Gulf of Guinea - Source: <https://africa.cgtn.com/>

The Gulf of Guinea holds 4.5% of the proven world reserves of oil and 2.7% of those of gas, providing Europe with 13% of its crude oil supply and with 6% of its gas import as well². The area between Senegal and Gabon is one of the world largest in terms of international investments for Western energy companies; the most significant activities are those of Shell, Total, ExxonMobil and Eni³. China is the main international geoeconomic player in the central-southern part of the Gulf area, especially through the activities of China National Petroleum Corporation and with significant economic-financial asymmetries with its local partners. Furthermore, the presence of China is also very relevant in the infrastructural-port sector, where Chinese companies are involved with local actors in several partnerships with rather predominant roles. According to geoeconomic literature, the Gulf of Guinea is one of the areas in which Beijing plays the debt trap strategy⁴. Nigeria, where

¹ In addition to huge reserves of oil and gas, the area includes reserves of uranium, columbite-tantalite, tin, cobalt and diamonds. See: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/transatlantic-approach-address-growing-maritime-insecurity-gulf-guinea>

² Ibidem.

³ In the energy sector, Italian projection in the Gulf is considerable both in commercial terms and as direct investments. Of the oil that Italy imports from Africa, significant shares come not only from North Africa (above all Libya), but also from the Gulf (in particular from Nigeria, Rome's second African supplier after Libya), while Italy is among the countries that export refined oil products in Gulf countries. The most significant entrepreneurial presence (in absolute terms and in the energy sector) is that of Eni, active in various capacities in projects dealing with renewable sources, but above all in the oil & gas sector (where Saipem is also present in infrastructure construction). The company's extraction activities, both on-shore and off-shore, take place in Nigeria, Angola, Republic of Congo, Ghana, Gabon and Ivory Coast. See the following links: <https://www.eni.com/it-IT/eni-nel-mondo/africa.html>
https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/osservatorio/schede-aree-geografiche/Indicatori%20%20Africa_30_03_2021_1617090236.pdf

⁴ A mechanism through which, by subsidizing ports, railways and industrial parks and giving their edification to Chinese companies, Beijing would get not only the control of new production and logistics hubs, but also influence in the

more than 60% of the hydrocarbon sources of the area are located, contributes to almost 4% of the world's crude oil exports (25.2 billion US dollars), that is the 8th place in the world oil exporters ranking. Angola's oil exports (20.2 billion) amount to 3.1% of the world total, which is the 11th world-ranking position⁵. In Nigeria, oil accounts for over 90% of national exports and more than 75% of the federal budget. About 39% of domestic oil production (~ 780,000 barrels per day) is off-shore, as well as 5 of the 6 related production projects scheduled to start between 2021 and 2024. Since 2015, Abuja has launched a program to enhance exploration and exploitation of its oil sources (37 billion barrels of proven reserves), with the goal of reaching 3 million barrels produced per day by 2023. Nigeria produces about 45 billion cubic meters of gas per year; it is at the 9th position in the world for proven reserves (5,600 billion cubic meters). The federal government is aiming at increasing natural gas production of 35% by 2026 (according to some estimates, this should create 20 billion dollars in profits and about 50.000 new jobs). According to recent estimates, between 2018 and 2025 foreign investments in the oil & gas sector are expected to amount to 48 billion dollars, equal to 25% of the foreign capitals moved by the whole African oil & gas sector in the same period⁶.

Despite the production drops occurred in 2020 due to the spread of COVID - 19, the oil & gas sector is going through a very dynamic phase not only in Nigeria. Ghana, also thanks to recent discoveries of offshore basins, is expected to give considerable impetus to both oil and natural gas production in the coming years, and so is Gabon⁷. Expectations are positive, especially in the gas sector, also for Equatorial Guinea, which should benefit from new exploration-extraction activities and an increase in investments, driven by a set of new licenses provided by the government to compensate for the declining production of mature fields⁸. Positive developments, also driven by discoveries of new fields and/or technological advances, were also forecasted for Angola and Senegal, with possible benefits in terms of economic and energy diversifications⁹. Based on the production trend of the first quarter of 2021 and recent rises in oil price (peaking about 70 dollars per barrel), Cameroon estimated its annual oil revenues will increase from 418 to 561 billion dollars, with a quarterly oil output of approximately 13.25 million barrels¹⁰.

Notwithstanding these strengths, the regional energy sector can also be influenced by some critical issues. First, the uncertainties of the global hydrocarbons market, which is more or less cyclically affected by possible contractions. The net oil sector decline due to the pandemics, occurred some years after the market entered a recession phase, brought among other factors by a strong competition on prices between the main producing countries – which was also related to the need of several of them to contain shale oil & shale gas¹¹. Although the Gulf's oil producers should benefit from the global economic recovery expected in the post-COVID phase, possible future drops in crude oil demands or prices could decrease their revenues, thus their capacity to subsidize the domestic

domestic affairs of African states. The same can be said in the energy sector, where some African countries have to pay back China billion dollars in loans. In case of failure, their governments may have to pay in raw materials (oil and minerals), possibly when market prices are declining, or grant China subsidized exploration and exploitation licenses, or shares in national oil companies. See P. Carmody, I. Taylor, T. Zajontz, *China's spatial fix and 'debt diplomacy' in Africa*, «Canadian Journal of African Studies», 2021, 21 pp. On a opposite view of the 'debt trap', see Y. Chen, *Chinese Debt and the Myth of the Debt-Trap in Africa*, 2020: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/chinese-debt-and-myth-debt-trap-africa-27024>

⁵ See: <https://www.worldstopexports.com/worlds-top-oil-exports-country/>

⁶ On the oil & gas industry in Nigeria see also M. Di Liddo e P. Crippa, *Sviluppo, insicurezza e volatilità Politica nel Golfo di Guinea*, Ce.S.I. (Osservatorio di Politica internazionale, Parlamento italiano e Ministero Affari Esteri e Cooperazione Internazionale), Roma, 2021, pp. 9 -13; see also: <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/NGA>

⁷ <https://www.africanews.com/2021/07/15/ghana-emphasizes-the-value-of-an-enabling-environment-and-the-role-of-natural-gas-at-african-energy-week-2021-pavilion/> ; <https://www.mordorintelligence.com/industry-reports/gabon-oil-and-gas-market>

⁸ <https://energycapitalpower.com/equatorial-guinea-revitalizing-the-oil-and-gas-sector/>

⁹ <https://www.iflr.com/article/b1sb6bdf4vm2wz/angola-changes-in-oil-and-gas-sector-accelerate-economic-diversification> <https://www.africanews.com/2021/06/21/senegal-s-petroleum-ministry-petrosen-and-cos-petrogaz-lay-out-gas-strategy-reinforce-partnership-with-african-energy-chamber/>

¹⁰ <http://www.inafrica.es/en/oil-in-cameroon-fcfa-121-68-billion-in-oil-revenues-in-the-first-four-months-of-2021/>

¹¹ See the following links: <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/the-impact-of-coronavirus-covid-19-and-the-global-oil-price-shock-on-the-fiscal-position-of-oil-exporting-developing-countries-8bafbd95/> <https://www.enerdata.net/publications/reports-presentations/world-energy-trends.html>

market for industry, transport and domestic consumptions, relieving some direct costs on consumers. After all, inasmuch as they still have limited refining capacities, these countries are net importers of fuels and petrochemical products with a rather high cost.

Despite in recent years some progress in these areas have been made, the oil & gas sector is still partly affected by shortages of skilled labor, red tape obstacles, lack of transparency, as well as limits in the ability to fight corruption and cronyism. In addition, also because of general governance deficiencies, some of the Gulf's countries are still partly unable to get a sufficiently diffused distribution of the oil & gas revenues at the economic and social level; local communities of the oil producing areas feel partly excluded by central governments economic policies. Even if to a lesser extent than in the past, in addition to other factors this could periodically bring socio-political protests and conflicts in the Angolan enclave of Cabinda, the North West and South West Provinces in Cameroon and more frequently and intensely the Niger Delta area, in Nigeria. After many years of stalemate, in July 2021 the Nigerian Parliament approved a reform of the energy sector that aims at a better legal and fiscal framework through three main changes: a more regulated taxation; greater distribution of wealth for local communities in oil & gas rich areas; the transformation of the Nigerian National Petroleum Commission (NNPC), already known for opaque management cases, into a commercial company oriented to transparency and efficiency¹². However, given the time usually needed to wide reforms to produce their planned effects, as well as the very partial outcomes of similar measures taken in the recent past, the effectiveness of this reform is at the moment quite uncertain.

This is also why in the Niger Delta, at least in the short term, it is likely cyclical protests and violence will make insecurity risks for the oil & gas sector persist. After all, while in recent years in Cameroon and especially Cabinda such risks were limited, in the Niger Delta security incidents concerning infrastructures and personnel of the oil industry highlighted a more serious situation, with quite frequent and severe sabotage and/or thefts against oil pipelines (conducted for political and/or profit purposes), kidnappings of local and international personnel of the oil industry, pirate attacks on off-shore platforms, oil tankers and LNG ships. In the past five years, while the first two types of episodes declined, the third one increased, together with a dramatic rise of piracy in Nigerian waters and ports. After all, maritime piracy has been growing in the whole Gulf region, also because many militias already engaged in insurgent actions along coastal territories turned into pirates¹³. In 2020, oil tankers and LNG carriers were the second most affected category by piracy attacks, out of the more than 20 types of merchant ships classified by the International Maritime Bureau, while in the first half of 2021, when regional piracy slightly declined, they were the third most targeted type of boats by pirates¹⁴.

It is also due to this rise in piracy that Italy, like other countries, progressively increased its military naval activities in support of coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea. In the latter, Italian Navy is carrying out maritime security activities since 2020, focusing in particular on waters close to Nigeria. Among other tasks, it has to protect boats and other offshore oil & gas infrastructures from pirate attacks. After all, as in other areas, the oil & gas production trends depend not only on political and economic variables, but also on the security framework¹⁵.

¹² See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigerian-senate-passes-oil-overhaul-bill-2021-07-01/>

¹³ For the features and transformation of conflicts in the three above mentioned areas see the links below:

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/> ; <https://pindfoundation.org/>
<https://www.eni.com/assets/documents/eng/just-transition/2019/Eni-for-2019-eng.pdf>

¹⁴ Not all attacks were successful, while most of the successful ones involved the kidnapping of crews for ransom and not the stealing or damage of cargoes and ships (which, however, does not lower the costs of piracy to the oil & gas sector). For statistical data on piracy incidents concerning the oil & gas sector in the Gulf of Guinea, please refer to the following urls: https://www.icc-ccs.org/reports/2021_Q1_IMB_Piracy_Report.pdf ; https://www.icc-ccs.org/reports/2020_Annual_Piracy_Report.pdf; https://www.icc-ccs.org/reports/2019_Annual_Piracy_Report.pdf
https://www.american-club.com/files/files/Dryad_Global_Annual_Report_2021.pdf

¹⁵ For further details on the Italian Navy mission, called «Gabinia», please refer to news and data available through the following links: <https://www.marina.difesa.it/Pagine/default.aspx> ;
<http://documenti.camera.it/leg18/dossier/pdf/DI0373.pdf> (pp. 78-79).

After the fall of Kabul: what's next? The threat evolves into "New Insurrectional Terrorism" (NIT)

The ideological and territorial spread of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has triggered a latent global jihadist violence. The Taliban triumph in Afghanistan has given new vital impetus to international jihadism and it is now presented by jihadist propaganda as the victory of Islam over the West and its corrupt values. This happens in contrast with the Taliban approach to jihad, which is limited to bless their national success: a national liberation war, in opposition to the IS-K and other groups who are looking for a global triumph.

But regardless of this, the victory of the Taliban and the opposition to the post-Islamic state terrorist galaxy it's already having direct effects on the will and on the operational capacity of jihadist terrorist groups and individuals at a global level: from the communicative-propaganda aspect to the tactical and operational one.

Over the past 20 years terror groups, cells and individual jihadi fighters alike have begun to increasingly display new tactics, which they exported to, and adapted for, the contemporary and the future jihadi war. A first, bitter taste of things to come were the Mumbai attacks of 2008, when a group of ten terrorists divided into smaller groups mounted a siege which lasted for almost three days. Western cities have since occasionally become the set of complex suicide attacks and team-raids, and more often of individual assaults where the perpetrator efficiently exploits techniques learned in Middle Eastern war theaters. "Islamic State" or al-Qaeda militants and sympathizers have proven widely capable of carrying out deadly attacks and to pose a direct threat to the security of citizens and national institutions. As such, contemporary terrorism can be described and must be recognized as a phenomenon with military characteristics or inspiration, particularly since IS with its external operations came onto the stage.

"New Insurrectional Terrorism" (NIT): is revolutionary, subversive and utopian¹

Today, after the fall of Kabul and the success gained by the Taliban, the specter of terrorism hangs over the space of the Afghan, or Syrian, or Libyan, or Sahel battlefields. Can we claim that the significant increase in jihadi-terror-linked violence recorded in the world and in Europe in the last 20 years is consistent with the classical concept of terrorism?

Terrorist attacks occurring between 2015 and 2018 in Europe, United States, as well as in North African or Middle Eastern countries do confirm the effective operational capability of the terror groups, in particular the Islamic state, whose nature shifted over time from a proto-state reality with territorial control, to what we can deem a de-nationalized, borderless phenomenon. "Leaderless jihad", which anticipates IS, was perfected by the latter, as "aspiring" fighters were prevented from travelling and therefore chose to strike their home countries. What we are facing today has already been dubbed "New Insurrectional Terrorism" (NIT),² a concept which essentially includes all attempts at disrupting the national and/or international political order through violence. NIT is revolutionary and utopian, and whereas terrorism is functional, insurrectional terrorism continuously evolves. The aim of this new "breed" does not consist in instigating the masses with a view to overthrowing

¹ Bertolotti C., Sulmoni C. (2021), How the Twenty-Year Afghanistan War Paved the Way for New Insurrectional Terrorism, in Carenzi S., Bertolotti C. (2021) "Charting Jihadism Twenty Years After 9/11", Dossier ISPI, 11 September 2021.

² Bertolotti C. (2015), *NIT: Il 'Nuovo Terrorismo Insurrezionale'. Dalla '5+5 Defense Initiative 2015' il cambio di approccio alla minaccia dello Stato islamico*, Analysis ISPI n. 292. In https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analisi292_bertolotti_16.12.2015.pdf.

governments, rather in persuading a large number of Muslims all over the world to join the fight against the “infidels” insisting on a narrative supported by the victory of [their interpretation of] Islam in Afghanistan and at the same time presenting that victory as a reason to avoid any compromise with western countries.

This emerging “New Insurrectional Terrorism” has therefore nothing to do with the political terrorism of the ‘70s and ‘80s. It surfaced in the Middle East following the US invasion of Iraq (2003) and developed in the mid-2000s. It attracted world attention in 2014, due to its battlefield victories in Iraq and Syria (and then in Afghanistan). Today, however, IS – which main affiliate group is still fighting in (and possibly from) Afghanistan – has lost most of what it conquered over the past ten years: territories, energy resources, access to trade and finance channels. Its media appeal, though, is still strong and will utilize the Afghan success and the ongoing campaign as a “clear example”, also directed against the Taliban described as corrupted.

The loss of “territory” forced IS to concentrate, on the one hand, on its *franchise* activities abroad, especially in areas of crisis, with a new social approach which includes outsourcing of violence based on the reciprocal recognition between the IS central organization and local groups and opposition movements. Its message tries to turn thousands of radicalized individuals and dozens of young people and armed opposition groups into smart and ready “proximity weapons” prepared to “kill and die” in the name of the Caliphate.

In brief, “New Insurrectional Terrorism” consists in the use of violence, or threatened use of intentional, calculated, rational, self-justified violence in order to achieve political, religious and ideological goals. NIT is characterized by characterizing elements. The nature of the terrorist activity consists in using (or threatening to use) violence in order to reach a political objective. It is complex and, above all, unpredictable, revolutionary, subversive and with a view to establish a proto-state aiming to obtain the “monopoly of force” within a geographical area. Furthermore, it contains political, socio-economic and religious aspects (justified on religious and apocalyptic grounds) and can be described as “stra-ctical” because of its strategic nature being conveyed through tactics which must not necessarily be interconnected. Its nature is “glo-cal”, transnational, borderless and based on “flexibility and adaptability”. Its targets are represented by political, civilian, military, religious and symbolic combatants, as well as non-combatants. It is symbiotic: it “outsources” violence supported by emulative effects, and as a response to the “call to jihad”.

We can find all these elements in the (re)emerging phenomenon of the *Islamic state* which is finding new energies in the defeat of the United States in Afghanistan. What emerges from this description, is a security-threat represented by a contemporary, new form of terrorism: a phenomenon which adapts and evolves without a temporal or geographically-defined goal. NIT just wants to impose a new societal model (the Caliphate) by tearing down alternatives and will use the symbolism associated with the Afghan war to exalt the “victory of Islam” by the sacrifice of “martyrs” and the “divine blessing”.

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Acronyms list

AU:	African Union
CCMSR:	Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic
CNPCIC:	China National Petroleum Company in Chad
DGSSIE:	General Directorate of Security Services for State Institutions
ECCAS:	Economic Community of Central African States
FACT:	Front for Change and Unity in Chad
FNDJT:	National Front for Democracy and Justice in Chad
GNA:	Government of National Accord
IDP:	Internally Displaced People
LNA:	Libyan National Army
RDF:	Rally of Democratic Forces
TMC:	Transitional Military Council
UAE:	United Arab Emirates
UFDD:	Union of Forces for Democracy and Development
UFR:	Union of Resistance Forces
UN:	United Nations

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- Sahel, Gulf of Guinea, sub-Saharan Africa and Horn of Africa;
- China, Southern and Eastern Asia and Pacific;
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