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Issue 3



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Osservatorio Strategico 2021 Issue 3

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Osservatorio Strategico - Part One

Index

The Balkans and the Black Sea	8
The impact of the Afghan crisis in the Balkans, Greece and Turkey	
Matteo Bressan	
Mashreq, Gran Maghreb, Egypt and Israel	17
Iraq	
Andrea Beccaro	
Sahel, Gulf of Guinea, sub-Saharan Africa and Horn of Africa	24
Two domestic crises cast doubts about Cameroon's future stability and security	
Federico Donelli	
China, Southern and Eastern Asia and Pacific	28
China's interests in Afghanistan after NATO withdrawal	
Matteo Dian	
Russia, Central Asia and Caucasus	34
The new Russian Federation Security Strategy	
Sylwia Zawadzka	
Persian Gulf	40
Afghanistan: Taliban 2021	
Francesca CITOSSI	
Euro/Atlantic (USA-NATO-Partners)	49
New bottles for an old wine? The US-Europe relations and the problem of the European strategic autonomy	
Gianluca Pastori	
Energy policies: interests, challenges and opportunities	56
The new Iranian oil terminal of Bandar-e Jask and its possible consequences	
Simone Pasquazzi	
Challenges and unconventional threats	62
The military applications of Artificial Intelligence and the evolution of warfare: Swarming and Machine Teaming	
Claudio Bertolotti	

Osservatorio Strategico - Part Two

Index

The Balkans and the Black Sea	70
IDEF 2021: three new submarine programs from Turkish industry	
Matteo Bressan	
Mashreq, Gran Maghreb, Egypt and Israel	72
Drones in the Middle East	
Andrea Beccaro	
Sahel, Gulf of Guinea, sub-Saharan Africa and Horn of Africa	74
The coup in Guinea: trigger factors and possible trends	
Federico Donelli	
China, Southern and Eastern Asia and Pacific	76
2021 Vice President Harris' visit to Southeast Asia and the role of the United States in the region	
Matteo Dian	
Persian Gulf	80
Pakistan and the Taliban	
Francesca Citossi	
Euro/Atlantic (USA-NATO-Partners)	82
The signing of the trilateral Australia-UK-US agreement (AUKUS) and its possible impacts on the system of the transatlantic relations	
Gianluca Pastori	
Energy policies: interests, challenges and opportunities	84
Energy flows and political risk in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz	
Simone Pasquazzi	
Acronyms list	88

Osservatorio Strategico

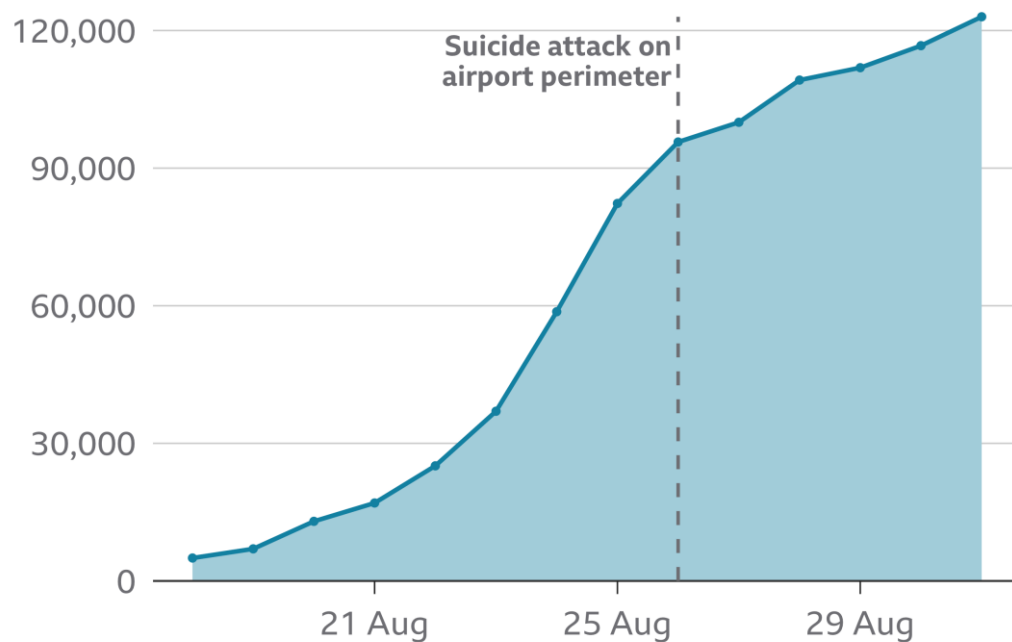
Part One

The impact of the Afghan crisis in the Balkans, Greece and Turkey

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan, marked by criticism of the Biden administration's evacuation methods, has left dismayed European leaders who, since the Taliban's seizure of Kabul, have seen the possible risks of a new refugee emergency. Thousands Afghans have attempted to leave the country between Aug. 15 and the end of the month since the Taliban ended two decades of US involvement in the country. Crowds of desperate locals gathered at the Kabul airport in search of a seat on Western military flights. Those who managed to escape are likely to face a return to the repressive Taliban regime that, between 1996 and 2001, banned women from the streets and workplaces, enforced Sharia law and used the death penalty for crimes including female adultery and homosexuality. More than 123,000 civilians were evacuated by U.S. forces and its coalition partners after the Taliban took control of the capital on Aug. 14, but it is unclear how many of those were exactly Afghan citizens. At the height of the operation, the U.S. said its military planes were leaving the airport every 39 minutes, although evacuations slowed after the Aug. 26 suicide bombing outside the airport that killed about 170 people, including 13 U.S soldiers.

More than 120,000 people were airlifted out of Kabul airport after Taliban took control

Total number of people evacuated by US and coalition planes



Source: Briefings from US Defense Department and the White House

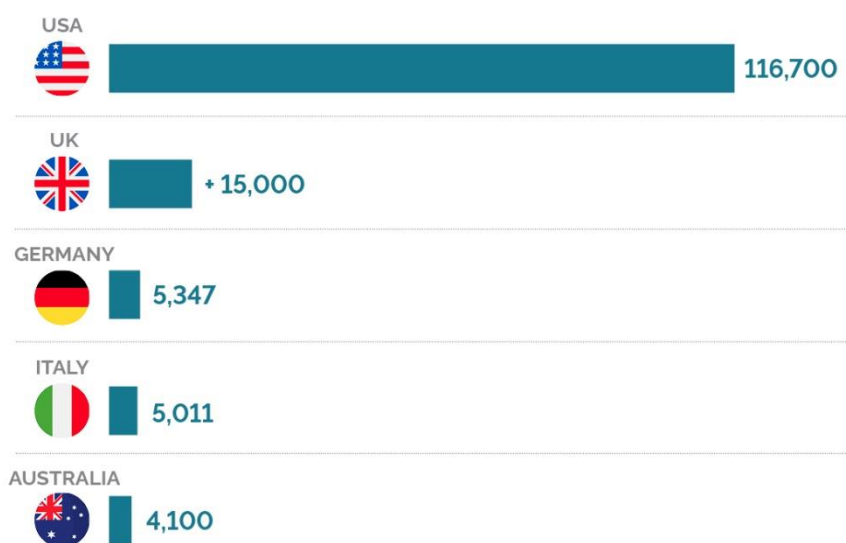
BBC

In detail, the effort led by the coalition countries in organizing the evacuation of Afghan citizens and collaborators between August 15 and 31 recorded the following results, according to the numbers processed by ISPI¹:

Afghanistan: evacuees from Kabul Airport Top 5 countries



Estimated number of evacuated people as of 30 August 2021

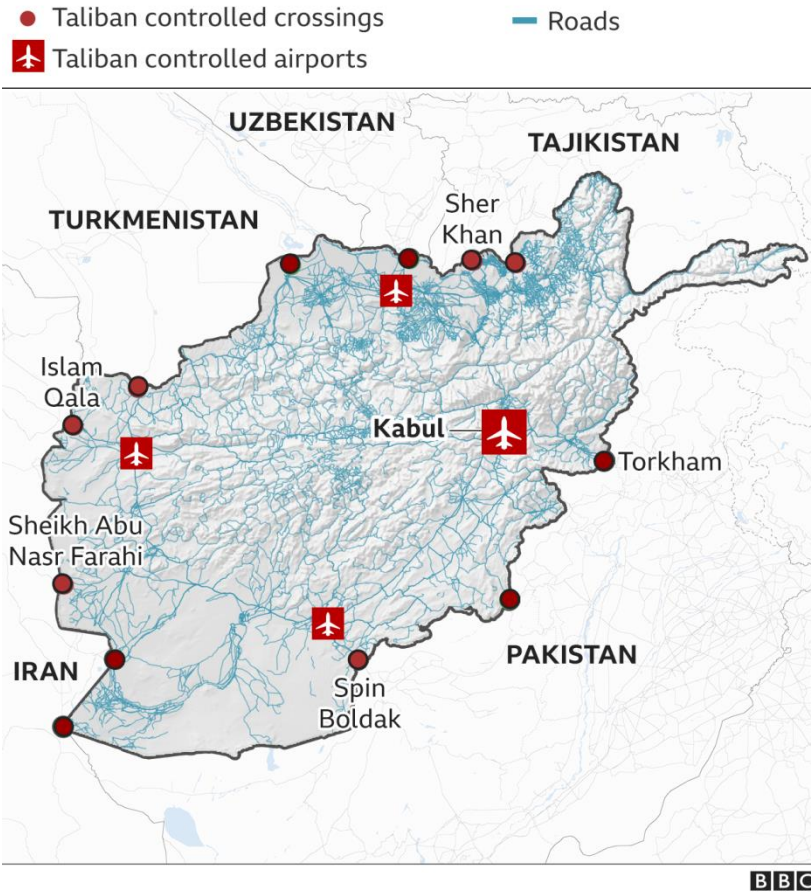


FONTE: Reuters, CNBC

Since Aug. 31, the Taliban have controlled all major land crossings with Afghanistan's neighbors, and reports suggest they are only allowing traders or those with valid travel documents to leave the country. However, many of those seeking to flee under safety concerns under Taliban rule will not have documents. The U.N. has urged Afghanistan's neighbors to keep their borders open to refugees and has called on the international community to support those countries. Uzbekistan, which borders northern Afghanistan, said its main border crossing is closed to "ensure security" and there are no plans to open it. Pakistan, which has the longest border with Afghanistan, on the other hand, has said it will not accept refugees due to its inability to accommodate more. Satellite images released in late August showed crowds of Afghans huddled at the Pakistan-Iran border, though it is unclear how many managed to cross the crossings.

¹ *The Cost of Leaving Afghanistan: Interview with John R. Allen*, ISPI 31 agosto 2021
<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/cost-leaving-afghanistan-interview-john-r-allen-31449>

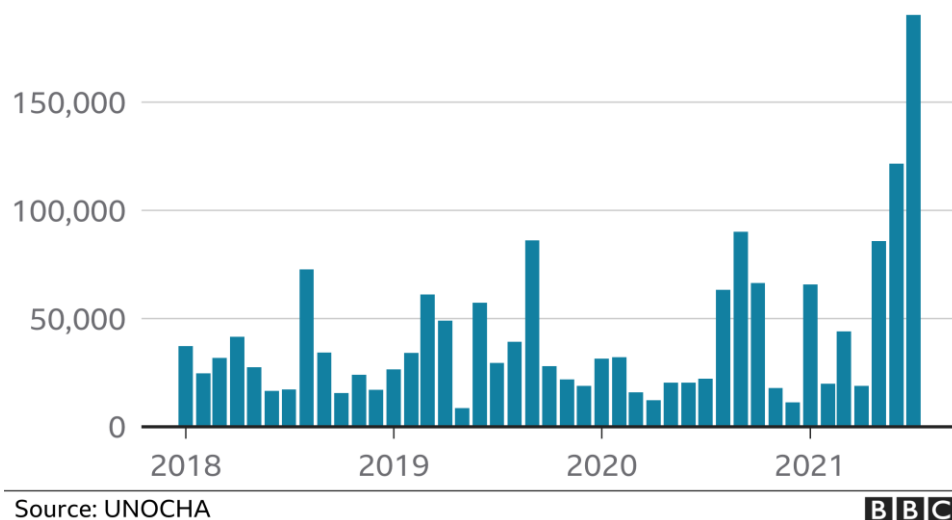
Afghans fleeing the Taliban have few options



The current crisis adds to the 2.2 million Afghan refugees already in neighboring countries and the 3.5 million people forced to flee within Afghanistan's borders. Even before the Taliban regained control, more than 550,000 people had been forced to flee their homes due to fighting this year, according to UNHCR.

Thousands of Afghans were forced to leave their homes this year as fighting intensified

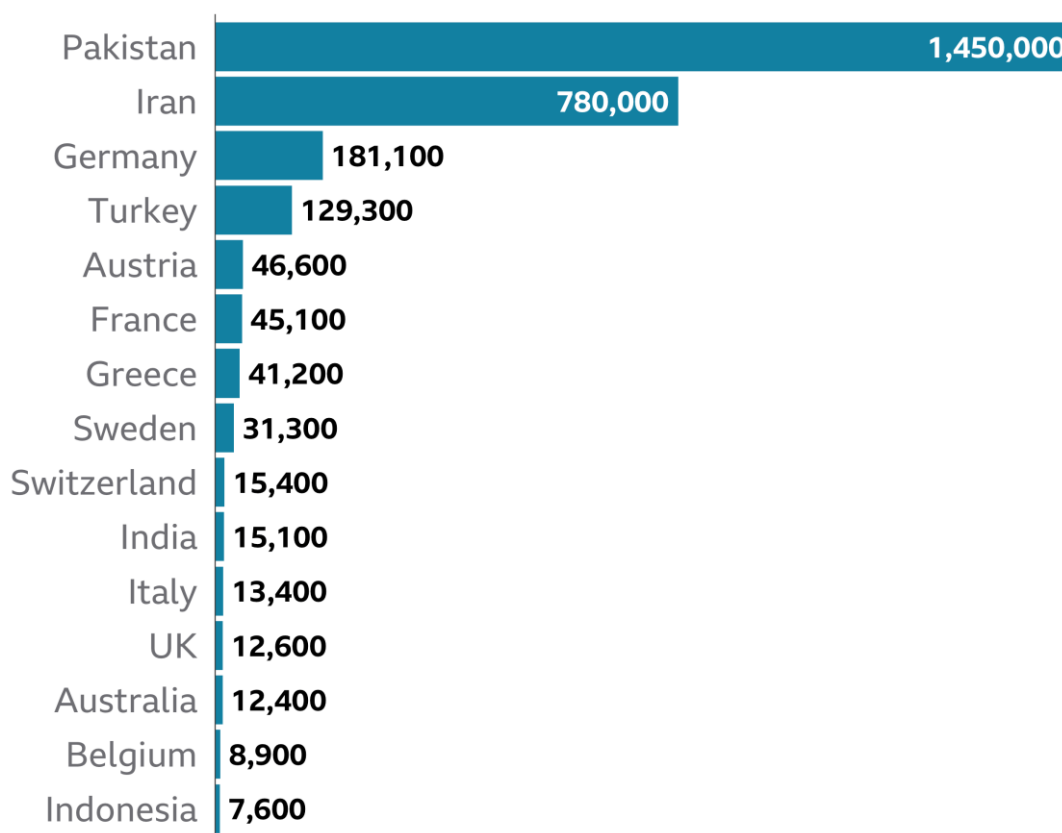
Number of people displaced due to conflict, by month



Neighboring countries Pakistan and Iran saw the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers in Afghanistan last year. Nearly 1.5 million fled to Pakistan in 2020, while Iran took in 780,000, according to UNHCR data. Germany was third, with more than 180,000, while Turkey took nearly 130,000. When looking only at the numbers of asylum seekers - those who have sought asylum in another country but whose claims have not yet been granted - Turkey, Germany and Greece topped the list, with about 125,000, 33,000 and 20,000 respectively. Although there are no Afghan asylum seekers in Iran, those with refugee cards - an official document recognizing their status - can access the country's health and education systems.

Neighbouring countries took in the highest number of Afghans in 2020

Countries with the most Afghan refugees and asylum seekers



Source: UNHCR data for 2020

BBC

Reaction in Europe

In the European Union, events in Afghanistan have fueled fears of a repeat of the 2015 refugee crisis, when nearly a million people fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East passed from Turkey through Greece before heading north and to wealthier states. Such fears had already manifested themselves before the Taliban's seizure of power also due to the pandemic. According to statistics released by Frontex, the number of migrants who entered the European Union illegally through the Western Balkans almost doubled in 2021, with the majority of them coming from Syria and Afghanistan. Frontex said that between January and July 2021, 22,600 migrants were detected entering the EU illegally via the Western Balkans route, a 90 percent increase compared to the same period in 2020. In July, according to data released by Frontex, the number increased by 67%

compared to the same month a year ago. According to Frontex, the number of illegal crossings of EU borders since the beginning of the year has exceeded 82 thousand, 59% more than in the same period last year. The EU also accused Belarus of using illegal migrants, mostly Iraqis, as a political weapon in response to EU sanctions imposed on Minsk. Also according to Frontex, Lithuania recorded about 3,700 illegal entries from Belarus from January to July, including more than 3,000 in July alone, while Poland recorded about 180 illegal border crossings in July and Latvia about 200². Concerns about a possible migratory crisis linked to the Taliban's seizure of power have been expressed by countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, Greece, Italy, Spain, Malta, but the issue of the migratory challenge could have an impact on the elections in Germany next September 26 and those in France scheduled for April. Several German politicians, including Armin Laschet, CDU candidate to succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor, have warned that there should be no "repeat" of the 2015 migration crisis. French President Emmanuel Macron stressed that "Europe alone cannot bear the consequences" of the situation in Afghanistan and "must anticipate and protect itself from significant irregular migration flows." Britain, which left the EU in 2020, has said it will take in 5,000 Afghan refugees this year and will relocate 20,000 Afghans in the coming years. The United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, estimates that 90 percent of the 2.6 million Afghan refugees outside the country live in neighboring Iran and Pakistan. Both countries also host large numbers of Afghans who have left in search of better economic opportunities. For comparison, over the past 10 years, some 630,000 Afghans have sought asylum in EU countries, with the highest numbers, according to the EU's statistics agency, in Germany, Hungary, Greece and Sweden. Jan Egeland, secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, said the Taliban's return to power may not necessarily result in a new refugee crisis. Egeland pointed out that Afghans are "scared, bewildered but also hopeful that a long, long war will end. Much will depend on the willingness of the Taliban in allowing humanitarian assistance. If there is a collapse of public services and if there is a major food crisis, there would definitely be a mass movement of people³.

Greece and Turkey

Soon after the Taliban seized power, Greece had put its border control forces on alert to ensure that the country would not become the gateway to Europe again. In late August, in parallel with concerns in Europe about the possible influx of migrants from Afghanistan after the Taliban's return to power, Greece finished building a 40-kilometer (25-mile) wall along its border with Turkey. It is precisely the Afghan events that have conditioned, as stated by Greek government ministers, the urgency in finishing the wall and mitigating possible migrant arrivals. "The Afghan crisis is creating new developments at the geopolitical level and at the same time it is creating possibilities for migratory flows," said Greek Minister for Citizen Protection Michalis Chrisochoidis after visiting the completed border wall in August. Chrisochoidis went on to explain that "as a country we cannot remain passive in the face of possible consequences. Our borders will remain secure and inviolable. We will not allow uncontrolled and irregular movements and we will not allow any attempt to violate them." Chrisochoidis said the extension of the existing 12.5-kilometer fence was completed in mid-August, as was a high-tech automated electronic monitoring system. Compared to the 2015 crisis, migrant arrivals to Greece, both by land and sea, have slowed overall since 2016, when the EU agreed a deal with Turkey to stem the flows in exchange for financial support. One of the most important parts of the EU's solution to the 2015 refugee crisis was the signing of a deal that funneled €6 billion (\$7.03 billion) to Turkey, which would then provide shelter, education, and healthcare to

² More Syrians and Afghans entering EU via Western Balkans, Reuters 12 agosto 2021 More Syrians and Afghans entering EU via Western Balkans | Reuters

³ *Europe fears Afghan refugee crisis after Taliban takeover*, Al Jazeera 22 agosto 2021

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/22/europe-fears-afghan-refugee-crisis-after-taliban-takeover>

the refugees, thus halting the flow to European countries. Turkey is likely to play a role in this dossier once again, and speaking to CNBC, Alberto-Horst Neidhardt of the European Policy Center (EPC), said that the agreement between the EU and Turkey could be extended to include Afghan refugees as well. At the same time, such an extension could pose a domestic political challenge as Ankara does not seem fully prepared to take on such a burden. Turkey, home to the largest refugee population in the world at 4 million, is witnessing internal divisions on the issue. Therefore, in order to deal with possible and new influxes caused by the Afghan crisis, Turkey has strengthened its border with Iran to stop a potential influx of Afghans fleeing Taliban rule. Turkish officials told AFP that 156 kilometers of wall out of a total of 243 kilometers have already been built to limit migrator flows on the 534-kilometer border with Iran. "The issue of refugee reception has become a major polarizing factor in Turkish society, largely fueled by economic turmoil and rising unemployment," said Wolfango Piccoli, co-president of consulting firm Teneo. "Turkish public opinion is openly opposed to any further arrivals, particularly from Afghanistan, whose culture and customs differ significantly from those of Turkey." President Erdogan said in mid-August that his country is ready to work with Pakistan to prevent a new influx of refugees. In talks on the Afghan issue between Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, the latter urged the European Union to assist the refugees and said that Afghanistan and Iran should be supported or else the risks of a new wave of migration could be real. Erdogan also called on European nations to take responsibility for Afghans fleeing the Taliban and warned that his country would not become Europe's "refugee warehouse. Greece and Turkey, NATO allies and historical rivals, have long been at odds over migrant issues and competing territorial claims in the eastern Mediterranean. Greece has strengthened its migration policy in recent months by fencing off its migrant camps and, in the recent past, has prevented people from entering its waters, although it denies widely reported allegations of so-called "push-backs". Migrants claim that Greek forces stripped them and sent them back to Turkey, an allegation Athens has repeatedly denied. UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, has urged Greece to investigate reports of push-backs at the country's⁴.

The choices of Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia

Immediately after the Taliban seized power on August 15, Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia adhered to the statement issued by the U.S. State Department calling on the Taliban to respect and facilitate the safe and orderly departure of foreign nationals and Afghans wishing to leave the country. The statement was supported by more than 70 countries, mostly from Europe and Latin America, as well as by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia have immediately expressed their willingness to temporarily host an indefinite number of Afghans fleeing their country, as confirmed by the statements of the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, the President of Kosovo Vjosa Osmani and the Prime Minister of North Macedonia Zoran Zaev. In this regard, the President of Kosovo, Vjosa Osmani, commenting on the Afghan emergency, said on Facebook that "no one knows better than us what it means to be expelled and leave by force from where you grew up, to be separated from your loved ones and be forced to flee to save your life. Today we show all of them (Afghans) that we have not only opened our doors but also our hearts because as people who come from a genocidal government we understand very well what it means to be forced to leave your home", added President Osmani, referring to the trauma of Kosovo Albanians under the harsh rule of Serbia in the 1990s. "When it comes to humanitarian issues and when it comes to partners and allies like the United States and NATO, the question is not why, but how. So, all the [refugee] issues we are discussing are technical and logistical in nature", Prime Minister Kurti added. U.S. Ambassador to

⁴ Picheta R. and Liakos C., Greece finishes wall on border with Turkey, amid fears of Afghan migrant crisis, CNN 21 agosto <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/21/europe/greece-turkey-border-wall-completed-scli-intl/index.html>

Kosovo, Philip Kosnet, said as he welcomed the first Afghans to the Pristina airport that "by temporarily hosting Afghans, Kosovo is not only saving lives but giving Afghans the opportunity to build new ones". Kosovo has approved temporary protection for Afghan nationals, some 2,000, who have worked with U.S. and NATO forces and their families for up to one year⁵.

Analisis, assessment and forecastings

The Afghan crisis has once again highlighted the absence of a solidarity-based system for distributing migrants among European states. The mere prospect of Afghan migrants making their way to European shores is forcing the continent to confront its Achilles heel: an unsettled dispute over how to handle asylum seekers. Over 1 million refugees and migrants crossed the sea to reach Europe in 2015. The differences that have emerged between Western European countries and Eastern European countries like Hungary remain deep. Officials had promised reforms to create a system that could efficiently distribute asylum seekers across the continent, but that never happened. In the Afghan case, the proposals that emerged were as varied as they were piecemeal: building border fences, funding refugee resettlement in non-EU countries like Turkey and Pakistan, and offering immediate but temporary EU protection to Afghans. In some cases, countries have gone ahead unilaterally. Greece has already installed 40 kilometers of fencing and surveillance along its border. Moreover, NGOs argue that framing the Afghan crisis as a migration issue will give an advantage to neighboring countries -including Turkey, Belarus, and Morocco- that use migrants as leverage or blackmail with the EU, not to mention far-right political parties within the bloc. Other EU countries, such as Austria, Poland and Switzerland, have said they will not accept new Afghan arrivals and are increasing border security to protect against illegal arrivals. The same hypothesis put forward by the European Commissioner for Economy, Paolo Gentiloni, to establish humanitarian corridors from Afghanistan in order to avoid uncontrolled flows of illegal immigrants has recorded the opposition of the Slovenian Prime Minister, Janez Jansa, who on August 22 wrote on Twitter "the EU will not open any European humanitarian or migration corridor to Afghanistan. We will not allow the strategic mistake of 2015 to be repeated. We will only help the people who helped us during the NATO intervention and to EU members who protect our external border." Filippo Grandi, the U.N. high commissioner for refugees, warned that "any exodus" of Afghan refugees would likely head to the country's immediate neighbors, including Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan. Grandi reiterated that should "aid to these countries not be consistent, then there would be a strong risk that migratory movements would continue to Europe." Commission President Ursula von der Leyen promised to promote a comprehensive refugee resettlement program, saying the EU will increase humanitarian aid for Afghanistan above the current 57 million euros allocated for 2021. Given the Taliban's return to power, working in Afghanistan poses considerable challenges, and EU leaders stressed that any humanitarian assistance cannot go through the local authorities. Essentially, the line agreed upon in Brussels is developing on a combination of funding for member countries resettling refugees and partnerships with outside nations. Apart from this, there have been few concrete offers from European countries that, in addition to evacuating their own citizens and Afghan personnel, claim to focus on helping Afghans at home and in neighboring countries such as Iran and Pakistan. On the humanitarian front, in fact, the European Union has shown that it can do its part, as stated by the Commissioner for Home Affairs and Migration Ylva Johansson: "We have just allocated an extra 200 million euros to deal with the Afghan refugee crisis". According to Johansson, "the fundamental help to be given to Afghans at this time is in the region, and for this reason we will continue to give full support to the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, which operates both in Afghanistan and in neighboring countries". What is important today is to support Afghans in Afghanistan, to support Afghan women

⁵ Bami X., *Kosovo Leaders Welcome First Afghan Refugees Fleeing Taliban*, Balkan Insight 30 agosto 2021 <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/08/30/kosovo-leaders-welcome-first-afghan-refugees-fleeing-taliban/>

and girls, to help Afghans in neighboring countries, to prevent people from relying on human traffickers and embarking on extremely dangerous journeys⁶.

The impact on the Balkans: a geopolitical reading

The risk of a possible migration wave from Afghanistan has had at least three types of consequences in the Balkans. The first concerns Balkan countries providing reception to Afghans who have cooperated with the United States. The second is that while some governments such as Kosovo will try to use the Afghan drama to get closer to the United States, others, such as Serbia, will try to preserve their own balance between the great powers. Third, and potentially the most risky scenario for the Balkans, is the possibility that Afghanistan could generate waves of migrants and refugees towards Europe. The immediate reaction of the Balkan countries was to evacuate their citizens from Afghanistan. The affair, however, has brought other issues to the agenda as well. First, as the U.S. struggles to ensure the safety of Afghans who have assisted the U.S., the Balkans are divided over whether to help the U.S. by hosting the Afghans until their visas to enter the U.S. have been authorized. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has said that Albania is willing to host up to 3,000 Afghan refugees. To that end, the government forced the eviction, without adequate notice, of students from their dormitories at the last minute. Nevertheless, the initial arrival of 300 refugees into the country has been delayed twice. North Macedonia has agreed to host 450 Afghans, while Kosovo said it has taken in 10,000 people. Although Montenegro has adhered to the approval of the UN Security Council resolution to establish a "safe passage" zone for those wishing to leave Afghanistan, it does not feel obligated to provide shelter to Afghan citizens. Serbia has also joined the declaration, but is unlikely to provide housing for Afghans. As Timothy Less of Cambridge University's Center for Geopolitics explained to the Serbian press, Serbia attributes the loss of Kosovo to U.S. policy and is therefore unlikely to help the United States manage this emergency phase of its presence in Afghanistan. Moreover, while some countries are taking the opportunity to move closer to the West, primarily the United States, Serbia is struggling to maintain the balance between the West on the one hand and Russia and China on the other. For the three countries that accepted the Afghans, this was a way to play the U.S. card in the face of still distant EU membership prospects. The former Albanian ambassador to the United States, Agim Nesho, openly stated that for Albania, "this action was an opportunity to gain acceptance from the West." The three countries, moreover the poorest in Europe, by going to meet the U.S. requests for reception of Afghan refugees have in fact emphasized the indispensable role of the United States in the stabilization of the area. "Over the past 30 years, U.S. support has been crucial to the democratic processes of Albania and all the nations of the Western Balkans," said Gjergji Vurmo, who oversees the EU and Balkans program at the Institute for Democracy and Mediation in Tirana. "This is not the first time Albania has responded positively to such requests from the U.S." For North Macedonia, this is also a way to show that it takes NATO membership seriously and also to gain diplomatic leverage to unlock its EU accession talks. In 2019, the country, then called the Republic of Macedonia, changed its name to North Macedonia to settle a dispute with Greece, which had claimed that the country had usurped the name of its northern region. All 27 EU countries have agreed to begin joint accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania in March 2020, but Bulgaria has vetoed North Macedonia's membership until it admits that its language is derived from Bulgarian and adapts its history books to The government in Sofia disputes Macedonian identity, and wants Skopje to recognize that its language and culture are actually of Bulgarian origin. "Appreciation for the United States is extremely high considering how disappointed and angry people are with the EU. People think that the U.S. is

⁶ Parrock J., Johansson: "Accogliamo gli afghani ma l'Ue ha il diritto di erigere recinzioni", Euronews 25/08/2021 <https://it.euronews.com/2021/08/25/accoglienza-difesa-protezione-il-caos-afghano-evidenzia-ancora-una-vola-l-assenza-di-un-si>

the country's key strategic partner," said Predrag Arsovski, a Macedonian commentator and columnist. "The whole region expects a momentous change from the current US administration compared to the Trump administration. They expect Biden to play an incisive role in the region. That is why they want to cash in their chips soon," he said. Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti was even more direct: "Kosovo considers the United States as the main ally and irreplaceable strategic partner. The issue of housing Afghan refugees, apart from the aspect of humanitarian solidarity on our part, has a dimension of alliance and partnership with the United States." In Belgrade's case, the Afghanistan crisis is another challenge to its policy of balancing Western and non-Western powers. According to the Serbian press, Belgrade was reluctant to join the EU-US declaration on Afghanistan to avoid tensions with Russia and China, but gave in under pressure from the US and Germany also to ease future pressure on the Kosovo dispute. Serbia, in fact, is not closing its doors to the United States. Serbian Parliament Speaker Ivica Dačić recently said that during his time as Serbian Foreign Minister (2014-2020), Serbia hosted several secret talks between the Afghan government and Taliban representatives, including talks with former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. Dačić, considered part of a pro-Russian faction in the Serbian government, criticized the West for increasing drug production in Afghanistan and for the former Afghan government's recognition of Kosovo. However, he also noted that both the Washington-led and Moscow-led Afghan talks have failed. For Serbia, the main challenge remains to have an open channel with the United States and the countries that do not recognize Kosovo, Russia and China, without unbalancing on either side. The Afghan fallout has just confirmed this reality. The Balkans could also become a corridor for Afghan asylum seekers heading to Europe. The last migration crisis (2015-2016) distanced the region from the EU and instilled fear in the Balkans that the EU would see it only as a buffer region or, even worse, a dumping ground for migrants. During the last crisis, Serbia built a good reputation for its humane treatment of refugees. Now the situation is different. Many in the EU are cautious about accepting new refugees. Croatia continually practices rejections against migrants, and Croatian President Zoran Milanović has openly stated, "Everyone should find their place in the United States. We can symbolically receive a small number of people. It's not 2015 anymore." Meanwhile, far-right groups are exploiting the anti-migrant sentiments and fears that are growing throughout the former Yugoslavia. As a result, the Balkans are at risk of being on the migrant route and in the middle of a political duel between the EU and Turkey. The threats of terrorism and religious radicalization should not be overstated, but uncontrolled migration flows are a conducive environment for these threats to emerge⁷.

⁷ Vuksanovic V., *Afghan crisis shows the Balkans is a geopolitical backwater*, Euronews 24/08/2021
<https://www.euronews.com/2021/08/24/afghan-crisis-shows-the-balkans-is-a-geopolitical-backwater-view>

Iraq

In the wake of the 9/11 anniversary and of two important events that are happening in these weeks, it is crucial to focus our analysis on Iraq and its security and political situation. Iraq is known to be the second major front of the so called War on Terror that Bush's administration launched in the wake of the Al-Qaeda attacks against the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon. From a certain point of view, Iraq has been the most important theater of operations and one with the most remarkable and long-term consequences. It is enough to think about the evolution of what we now call Islamic State, which was the result of the first Al-Qaeda cells operating soon after the beginning of Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, or to the instability that the conflict in Iraq has produced over the following years in the whole Middle East (Syria and Libya are two good examples albeit very different and with different links to the political situation created by the Iraqi instability). The country remains very volatile due to corruption problems, economic issues, security and political instability, internal fault lines between Sunni, Shia and Kurds, role played by external actors (for instance Iran), corruption and so on.

However, three important events can impact this situation. First, Iraqis head to vote on October 10. As a consequence, the government has taken a series of actions to counter election fraud and increase voter security. Security during the elections will be in charge of Special forces trained to that end, since the risk of terrorist attacks remains very high. Moreover, in order to limit voter fraud, a series of arrests have been made. For example, Miqdad al-Sharifi, a former member of the electoral commission, was arrested September 2 on financial charges at Baghdad International Airport. Sharifi were on widespread fraud occurred in the 2018 elections. Over 130 international experts will be present in Iraq to assist and monitor the elections. A further issue is the boycott, since corruption and security are not the only challenges that may affect the incoming elections. The 2018 elections were widely contested as less than 20% of eligible voters casts their ballots. This year, up to 3,250 candidates are competing to win a total of 329 seats in the Iraqi parliament, which means an average 10-15 candidates campaigning for each seat¹. Second, the American President Joe Biden approved in April the withdrawal of the US combat troops from Iraq. This does not mean a completely withdraw or political disengagement from the country, as it has happened in Afghanistan for example, but a re-balanced kind of operations in which the combat element is not part of the mission. American troops will remain in Iraq but in a very limited number and with different goals. Third, Italy will take the command of NATO Mission Iraq from Denmark in 2022, reflecting the sustained willingness of European countries, particularly Italy, to play their role in NATO's burden-sharing. NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) is a non-combat advisory, training and capacity-building mission, conducted in full respect of Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity. It was established in Baghdad in October 2018 and currently involves several hundred trainers, advisors and supporting personnel from Allied and partner countries. In February 2021, NATO defense ministers agreed to expand NMI, as requested by the Iraqi government. NATO does not deploy its personnel alongside Iraqi forces during combat operations: it only trains members of the Iraqi security forces under direct and effective control of the government of Iraq. In the light of the US withdrawal from Iraq by the end of this year, the NMI is likely to have a more prominent role in the Iraqi security².

As a consequence, it is important to take into account the security situation in the country. Since the end of Saddam regime in April 2003, Iraq faced several security problems and sources of

¹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/iraq-focuses-voter-security-ahead-elections>.

² <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/what-to-expect-when-youre-expecting-nato-in-iraq/>.

instability impossible to analyze here in-depth. Therefore, just the most recent operations of the Islamic State and then of Shia militias have been taken into account.

The Islamic State (IS) in Iraq

As it is widely known, Iraq has been the cradle of the Islamic State previously known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and then Islamic State (IS)³. Although the former President Donald Trump said that IS was completely defeated and the Iraqi president announced in 2018 the defeat of the militia, this group is still active in the country and able to conduct different kinds of attacks in several Iraqi provinces.

On 10 May 2021, for instance, three Iraqi border guard commanders were arrested because a couple of weeks before they abandoned their positions, equipment and weaponry during an alleged Islamic State (IS) attackers seemed to show seriousness on the part of the government but also fostered concern. The attack happened at an outpost south of the city of Rutbah, relatively near Iraq's borders with Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia⁴. The police behavior underlines the problem related to the training of Iraqi police and, at the same time, the ability of IS cells to conduct small scale operations but against government and guarded targets. In May Iraqi security forces and Kurdistan Peshmerga coordinated in order to attack IS cells that were able to take advantage of a 20-kilometer gap on the line between the Kurdistan Region of northern Iraq and federal Iraq. With no barracks, houses, running water or electricity and amid a politically charged land dispute, both security forces have been reluctant to fill the void. As a consequence, IS has used the vacuum to take shelter and coordinate attacks. In May, at least 21 people were killed and dozens injured in the disputed territories in a surge of renewed IS bombings and hit-and-run attacks⁵. Unfortunately, such "no man's lands" are not uncommon in Iraq: bordering areas between Kurds and Iraqi security forces, or areas in the Anbar province, around Mosul, bordering Syria represent similar security problems and offer to the IS the space where it can operate undetected.

On 30 June an explosion in a crowded Baghdad market in Sadr City injured 11 people: the same area was targeted in April when a car bombing claimed by the Islamic State (IS) killed four people and wounded 20 others. Previously, twin suicide bombings tore through a crowded shopping area near Tayaran Square in January, killing more than 30 and injuring over 110 people. IS claimed responsibility for what was Baghdad's deadliest attack in three years.

In early July, the Islamic State attacked fishermen near the Haditha Dam, killing four people. At that time, IS claimed responsibility for improvised explosive device attacks targeting Iran-aligned armed groups on the road between Qaim and Akashat, allegedly killing one and wounding two others, near the Syrian border. This is a Sunni area but under the control of the PMU⁶. Few days later, on 19 July, a suicide bomber killed at least 35 people and wounded dozens in a crowded market in Baghdad, in the Wahailat market in Sadr City. IS claimed responsibility and it was the third time this year that a bomb hit a market in the densely populated neighborhood⁷. The day after, IS showed its ability to conduct more guerrilla-style operations attacking the headquarters of the 66th Army Brigade in the Salahuddin province and killing two Iraqi soldiers. Some days later in the same province a military helicopter crashed on a combat mission, one of the several that Iraqi forces constantly conduct in the area⁸. This crush is meaningful for two reasons. First, it highlights both the IS ability

³ A. Beccaro. *ISIS. Storia segreta della milizia più potente e pericolosa del mondo*, Newton Compton, Roma 2018.

⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/islamic-state-takes-border-station-iraqi-desert-drug-smuggling-wali>.

⁵ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/iraqi-security-forces-fill-security-vacuum-harbors-islamic-state>.

⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/islamic-state-uses-hit-and-run-tactics-iraq>.

⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/19/iraq-roadside-bomb-kills-10-in-baghdad>.

⁸ https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/07/29/iraqi-crew-killed-crash/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=iraqi-crew-killed-crash.

to operate and the continuous Iraqi military effort to eradicate this threat. Second, it shows a very worrisome ability of IS to deny the Iraqi Forces a complete domain of the air since the helicopter was hit from the ground.

At the beginning of September at least 12 Iraqi police officers have been killed in an attack the IS carried out at a security checkpoint south of Kirkuk city. According to the Al-jazeera report, the attackers first engaged in a military confrontation with police officers that lasted about two hours, killing three officers; then reinforcements coming to the area were killed in an ambush using explosives planted on the roadside. This is a classic IS tactic extensively used in the past and an indication of its rebuilt military capacities, since the group appears to be able to coordinate its operations and engage important military targets. In another incidents, at least three Iraqi soldiers were killed and one was wounded when gunmen attacked an army checkpoint southeast of the Iraqi city of Mosul⁹. Some days later IS attempted to conduct another ambush against a Counter-Terrorism Service patrol, but the CTS were able to repel the attack killing several members of the group.

In summary, this review shows that IS remains a strong militia with good links to at least part of the local population and the ability to conduct different kinds of attacks from small scale such as suicide operations against civilians/civilian targets to more organized, complex and larger operations against military targets (both fixed, such as police stations and military bases, and mobile such as ambush against patrols). IS does not control terrain anymore, but at the same time it has freedom of movement in different areas and provinces in north-west Iraq.

Shia militias

The so called PMF¹⁰ (Popular Mobilization Forces) represents another risk to Iraq stability, Shia militias linked to Iran and not always under the control of the central government in Baghdad. They represent a key issue to understand current Iraqi instability and possible evolution over the short to medium term. PMF is an umbrella organization composed of approximately 40 forces, mostly Shia Muslim groups, but also include only minimal Sunni Muslim, Christian, and Yazidi groups. The Popular Mobilization Forces were formed in 2014 to fight against IS and play a crucial role in defeating it, but they also created major political problems related both to the Iranian influence in the country and to the fault line between Sunni and Shia sections of the Iraqi population.

A full discussion on the impact of these militias on Iraqi stability and security is outside the scope of this brief research, therefore just one extensively used tactic has been considered, representing a major security concern in Iraq but also elsewhere since it can be used by other irregular actors around the world, i.e. the use of missiles and drones against fixed targets, mainly military bases where U.S. soldiers were deployed or U.S. facilities.

For instance, on May,3 two rockets have targeted a base at Iraq's Baghdad airport, while 10 days before three rockets crashed into the sector of the Baghdad airport base occupied by Iraqi troops, wounding one soldier. On May, 4 six rockets were fired towards Iraq's Balad airbase north of Baghdad, lightly wounding a foreign contractor working for a US company that maintains F-16 aircraft.

On June 4 two drones were destroyed above a base housing United States troops. The US military's C-RAM defence system was activated to shoot down the drones above the Ain al-Asad airbase, located in Iraq's western desert.

One month later, on July 6, the US Embassy in Baghdad was targeted by an armed drone launched from a residential area near the airport in Baghdad. This was probably the first time that militias used a public place for launching an attack against US sites. The day after, 14 rockets hit the Al-Assad Air Base in western Iraq. To conduct this attack was probably used a mobile rocket launcher

⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/5/isil-attack-kills-at-least-13-iraqi-police-security-medics>.

¹⁰ <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/warning-signs-qassem-musleh-and-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces/>.

hidden in a truck loaded with bags of flour and parked in the nearby village of Baghdadi¹². This attack was part of a major operations that targeted American diplomats and troops both in Iraq and Syria using both rockets and drones. In Syria, a drone attacked the Al Omar oilfield in an eastern area bordering Iraq, separately, a drone had been brought down in eastern Syria¹³.

On 25 July, a drone attack targeted a base near al-Harir, northeast of Erbil. On 11 September, Erbil International Airport has been targeted by two armed drones.

On the one hand, it is difficult to always understand who carried out such attacks (not always the militias confirmed their involvement); on the other hand, the PMF showed their arsenal and are very well known to have Iranian drones. For instance, on June 26, thousands of members of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces have marched in a parade showcasing tanks and rocket launchers. The event marked the seventh anniversary of the formation of the PMF, was broadcast on Iraqi state TV and was attended by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. It took place in a military base in Diyala and showed the conventional arsenal of these militias ranging from Russian-made tanks, boats and locally made rocket launchers, Iranian-made weaponry, including drones¹⁴. The militias, which in the past used Chinese drones CH-4B, showed for the first time the Iranian drone Mohajer-6s. During the parade the Mohajer-6 was seen armed with two small munitions similar to the Ghaem-series, up to four of which are usually carried by the type¹⁵.

In this section, it has been demonstrated the quasi-conventional military capabilities of Shia militias that represent one of the major security problem in Iraq due to their links to Iran and the fact that, at least some of them, can be more loyal to Tehran than to Baghdad. The political relevance of these militias has been also demonstrated by the fact that last week the Iraqi government has agreed to restore the contracts of 30,000 salaried militia fighters after having dismissal.

This brief research has attempted to provide a brief summary of the security situation in Iraq in light of the incoming elections. This is a very important issue since violence can impact on political process and election as the explosion that targeted a convoy belonging to an Iraqi parliamentary candidate, Mohammed Al-Dayni, in Diyala province on 13 demonstrates.

Main Events in the Maghreb and Mashreq Area

Morocco

Morocco's long-ruling Islamists have suffered a crushing defeat in parliamentary elections to liberal parties. The Justice and Development Party (PJD), which headed the ruling coalition for a decade, saw its support unexpectedly collapse from 125 seats in the outgoing assembly to just 12, following the Parliamentary elections at the beginning of September. It was far behind its main liberal rivals, the National Rally of Independents (RNI) and the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), with 97 and 82, respectively, and the centre-right Istiqlal Party with 78 seats in the 395-seat assembly. The RNI is headed by billionaire businessman Aziz Akhannouch, described as close to the palace.

After two years, Morocco has finally agreed to the nomination of former United Nations Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura as the Secretary-General's representative on the disputed Western Sahara. The sparsely-populated desert territory boasts significant phosphate resources and a long Atlantic coastline with access to rich fishing waters. Despite the fact that the region has witnessed violence for decades, two different facts explain current tensions. First, in November 2021 when Morocco sent troops into a buffer zone to reopen the only road leading from Morocco to Mauritania, after the separatists had blocked it the previous month. Second, last year the administration of then-US

¹² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/7/barrage-of-rockets-fired-at-airbase-housing-us-troops-in-iraq>.

¹³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/8/rockets-fired-at-us-embassy-in-iraq-after-series-of-attacks>.

¹⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/26/iraq-paramilitaries-show-off-weaponry-in-big-anniversary-parade>.

¹⁵ <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2021/08/the-militiamens-ucav-mohajer-6s-in-iraq.html>.

president Donald Trump recognized Rabat's sovereignty over Western Sahara as a consequence of Moroccan decision to normalize ties with Israel.

First the sending of Moroccan troops into a buffer zone to reopen etc etc. Second, the US recognition of Rabat's sovereignty over Western Sahara in change for Moroccan decision to normalize ties with Israel

Algeria

On September 6, Algeria arrested 27 suspected members of a separatist group that the government declared a terrorist organization, after an attack in two northern towns. MAK (Movement for the self-determination of Kabylie) group seeks independence for the Berber-speaking Kabylie region and it is supported by Morocco and this is one of the reasons alleged by Algeria in the recent cut of diplomatic relations with the kingdom. Moreover, the government blamed MAK for devastating wildfires killing at least 65 people in the Kabylie region last month.

Moreover, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune announced the creation of several new diplomatic roles, including the position of Western Sahara and Maghreb envoy, angering Morocco because the new envoy, Amar Belani, will work with a lawyer for the Polisario Front to seek the cancellation of two treaties between Morocco and the European Union¹⁶.

On September 17, the former President, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, died at 84. Mr. Bouteflika fought in the bloody independence struggle against France and then maneuvered through coups, conflicts and political intrigue to become the longest-ruling leader of Africa's largest country; however, he went underground since his hospitalization for a stroke in 2013.

Tunisia

The political situation in Tunisia remains complex. The instability and the absence of government and parliament is affecting also the economy and investment climate, as political experts warn of an unprecedented economic disaster.

President Kais Saied indicated plans to change the country's constitution via a referendum, but the opposition from political parties and the powerful UGTT labor union disagreed.

Libya

Fighting broke out in Tripoli early on Friday 03 between rival armed forces, the heaviest clashes in the Libyan capital since the conflict between eastern and western factions paused a year ago. The new fighting pitted the 444 Brigade against the Stabilisation Support Force, two of the main forces in Tripoli. This not isolated clash, last month the city of Zawiyah witnessed similar violent clashes, demonstrated the fragile situation in Libya and also the problems and conflicts present inside the forces that allegedly support the government of Tripoli. Meanwhile, Libyan authorities released Saadi Gaddafi, son of the former leader Muammar Gaddafi. The 47-year-old immediately departed on a plane to Istanbul and this may mark a new role in Libya for Turkey that is probably trying to not be sidelined in the incoming elections¹⁷.

On 07 September government forces have arrested a senior Islamic State group (IS) figure in an operation south of the capital.

Egypt

Egypt has been very diplomatically active in the last weeks. Egypt's president held talks in Cairo with the king of Jordan and the president of the Palestinian Authority (PA) aimed at reviving

¹⁶ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/algerian-appointment-western-sahara-envoy-angers-morocco>.

¹⁷ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/why-has-turkey-turned-gadhafi-family>.

the Middle East peace process and strengthening a ceasefire that halted the latest escalation in violence between Israel and Hamas.

Then Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi met on to likely discuss de-escalating tensions between Israel and Palestinian armed groups in Gaza Strip, and on Egypt's efforts to maintain calm in the occupied Palestinian territories. A very important sign of the normalization of the relationship between Egypt and Israel is that Egyptian state airline EgyptAir will begin, for the first time since 1979, direct flights to Tel Aviv next month,.

Then, Egypt and Turkey announced on September 08 that they will continue talks on normalizing their relations since they still are supporting different militias in Libya and they have conflicting interests in the Mediterranean.

A high-profile Islamic State commander in Sinai, Mohamed Saad Kamel, also known as Abu Hamza al-Qadi, has given himself up to a tribal union loyal to the Egyptian military, exposing possible cracks within the organization and potentially putting valuable information at the disposal of Cairo. Qadi is the highest-ranking IS Sinai commander to turn himself in to the authorities to date.

Israel

Israel's Rafael Advanced Defense Systems has been awarded an \$80 million contract to an undisclosed Asian country to supply a naval warfare systems suite for Shaldag Mk V Fast Attack Craft. The three-year contract will see the firm supplying the suite, including: "a Combat Management System, Typhoon & Mini-Typhoon Remote Operating Weapon Systems, Naval SPIKE Missiles, Sea-Com Internal Communication System & BNET Tactical Data Link," with complete maintenance and support services¹⁸.

Israeli President Isaac Herzog met King Abdullah II of Jordan in Amman. The two leaders discussed a series of political and economic issues including energy and sustainability.

Israel's first private port opened September 1 but the problem is that it is operated by the government-run Chinese company SIPG. Therefore, this project and the growing Chinese involvement in the Israeli economy are a point of dispute with the American administration. One of the warnings raised was that the US Navy's Sixth Fleet, which sometimes docks at the port of Haifa, would be vulnerable to Chinese bugging and surveillance because a permanent Chinese presence at the Haifa port would provide a unique opportunity to collect intelligence and conduct cyberwarfare. The Chinese port operator will be able to closely monitor US ship movements and the likelihood of information and electronic surveillance systems jeopardize US information and cybersecurity.

Lebanon

The energy crisis in Lebanon continues and in order to resolve the problem Syria welcomed Lebanon's request to import Egyptian gas via its territory after Lebanese ministers made a high-level visit to Damascus. The plan involves using Egyptian gas to generate electricity in Jordan that transmitted to Lebanon via Syria. However, US sanctions on Damascus are a complicating factor even though the US Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea said there was a will to make the plan happen.

Finally, on September 10, Prime Minister Najib Mikati and President Michel Aoun signed a decree forming a new government, after 13 months, in the presence of Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri. Like the previous government, the lineup consists of newcomers, including Finance Minister Yousef Khalil, a senior Central Bank official, and Health Minister Firas Abiad of the government-run Rafic Hariri University Hospital. However, it is too soon to understand whether the new government

¹⁸ https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/09/02/rafael-naval-warfare-suite-contract/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=rafael-naval-warfare-suite-contract.

can improve the situation even because the economic crisis is very severe and political/security issues remain difficult to address.

Syria

A precarious ceasefire held in the city of Deraa on 06 September after negotiators for rebel forces and the Syrian government tried to close to a comprehensive peace agreement to end a three-month siege. The tense negotiations to finalise the deal came after new government demands to deploy nine military checkpoints in Deraa, for the fighters to hand over more weapons, and to allow government forces to search the city for wanted people. Finally on 08 Syrian government forces entered Daraa al-Balad to set up checkpoints under Russian supervision and begin searching for weapons used by terrorists.

On 13 September Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad have met in Moscow to discuss cooperation between their militaries and how to gain control of the last rebel-held areas in Syria. The last meeting between the two was held in the Syrian capital in January last year. Putin has stressed the nowadays the main problem to stabilize Syria is that foreign armed forces remain in certain regions of the country without the approval of the United Nations and Syrian permission. Putin is referring to the presence of both Turkish and American troops that support different local militias.

The Arab Bakara tribe announced the establishment of a Shura Council in Syria's northwestern city of Idlib, which is under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, a terrorist organization linked to al-Qaeda). Many tribesmen are members of HTS, fighting against the Syrian regime. HTS is now a de facto authority and demanded the tribes in the areas it controls to coordinate with it in order to solve its problems and to settle disputes. However, HTS is the ultimate decision-maker and this is a very huge security issue because, after the defeat of the Islamic State, today we are witnessing again an Islamist group that controls terrain and local population¹⁹.

Arabian Peninsula

Saudi Arabia intercepted three ballistic missiles launched by Houthis in Yemen targeting the country's oil-rich eastern region as well as the cities of Najran and Jazan in the south. The attacks come four days after a drone hit Abha International Airport in the south, wounding eight people and damaging a civilian plane.

In order to respond to the increasing threat posed by drones, the US Navy's 5th Fleet announced that it would be launching a new task force that includes airborne, sailing, and underwater drones. Specific systems are not been disclosed but in recent exercise has been used aerial surveillance drones, surface ships, the Sea Hawk and the Sea Hunter, and smaller underwater drones.

¹⁹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/syrian-jihadist-group-works-attract-tribes-idlib>.

Two domestic crises cast doubts about Cameroon's future stability and security

The worsening of two intertwined crises within the country is threatening Cameroon's stability. The controversial 2018 elections polarized Cameroonian society characterized with a strong political rivalry between President Paul Biya's movement and the Maurice Kamto-led opposition. The second factor of domestic destabilization is tied to the five-year-long conflict between government security forces and armed separatist groups in the two Anglophone regions of the country: North-West and South-West. Attacks in the country have increased in recent months, mostly involving civilian targets. For many years, analysts and international observers considered Cameroon as a beacon of stability in the region. Nevertheless, the emergence of growing political and institutional fragility, the ongoing crisis in the Anglophone regions, and the threat posed by groups linked to international terrorism threaten to drag the country into chaos.

The first crisis scenario shows the gradual erosion of the country's institutional political system. Cameroon's fragility index significantly rose after the controversial outcome of the last elections, held in 2018¹. The vote confirmed the 88-year-old President Paul Biya for the seventh time since 1982. The elections were held in a tense atmosphere. Biya's victory - with 71% of the preference, according to official data - triggered a wave of protests led by the opposition party, which obtained only 14%. The Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM), and its chairman Maurice Kamto, have contested the electoral result advancing the suspect of fraud. Doubts about the election increased after Bishop Samuel Kleda, President of the Episcopal Conference and a highly influential institution in Cameroon, issued a statement in which he questioned the regularity of the vote. The demonstrations organized by the CRM, and supported by the Social Democratic Front (SFD), continued for months and culminated with the arrest of Kamto and other party members. After his release, Kamto has persisted in denouncing the inability of Biya's government to promote reforms and, above all, a new electoral law (Este, 2021). The dialectic between the two sides has become violent. This is happening partially due to a new phenomenon in Cameroonian politics and social life: social media. Social media has fuelled propaganda, fake news, and political aggression by exploiting the lack of control of the authorities and the silence from the oppositions. The ambiguous attitude of both sides contributed to the outbreak of violent episodes, such as those that took place in Sanghelima. Kamto's profile has grown significantly since the arrest. Former Minister of Justice in the Biya government, Kamto resigned in 2011, denouncing the erosion of the rule of law. He enjoys popularity mostly in urban centers and among young people. Biya, on the other hand, relies on a national consensus base, fostered by his patrimonial control of public assets and state resources. While the political tensions might be a matter that can be solved among party leaders, a more worrisome dynamic is emerging. The political competition between the president's party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), and Kamto's CRM now seem to have an ethnic dimension. The major clash is between the Beti/Bulu and the Bamileke. Their dispute reflects the one between the President (Bulu) and Kamto (Bamileke). So far, President Biya has managed ethnic divisions distributing seats in his cabinet and jobs in the public sector. Over the years, the practice has been institutionalized with the introduction of regional quotas to hire employees in the public sector. If

¹ The country has climbed position in the ranking of the most fragile states. Cameroon in 2017 was 26th with a score of 95.6, while in 2021 it is 15th with 97.2. See Fragile Index Database. URL: <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>

things were to change and Biya's administration wasn't able to maintain this system, the outbreak of inter-ethnic disputes on a national scale could lead to a civil war scenario.

Crucial to the country's future is the instability of the two Anglophone regions Northwest and Southwest. The ongoing conflict between the regular troops and armed separatists is witnessing a new phase of escalation. In recent months, attacks, fires, and kidnappings have increased, forcing entire communities to leave the western regions of Cameroon. The mounting tensions first erupted in 2016 after decades of increasing marginalization and discrimination by the hand of the country's francophone majority (Orock, 2021). Civil society peaceful protests were bloodily repressed by security forces. The army violence and the complete refusal of dialogue contributed to the radicalization of the Anglophone movement. In a few months, more than thirty armed groups were formed. The armed separatists, known as 'the boys' among locals, refer to themselves as 'freedom fighters' or 'restorers' (Kewir et al., 2021). Their common goal is the secession of the two western regions and the establishment of an independent nation, Ambazonia. The separatists, of which the Ambazonia Restoration Forces (ARF) group is a prominent one, have self-proclaimed an interim government of Ambazonia. The Cameroonian government has included them as in the terrorist organizations' list. However, they enjoy a certain level of popularity and public support in the two anglophone regions. During these years, the anglophone diaspora residing in the US and EU has given generous economic and lobbying support to the armed separatists. At first, the conflict's dynamics between Cameroonian troops and armed separatist groups were those of the classic cycles of violence. The attacks by the separatists were followed by the army's reaction, which in most cases also dramatically involved civilians. Over the past two years, however, changes have emerged. The number of direct clashes between armed groups and security forces has decreased. Simultaneously, the number of fatalities among civilians has grown. Separatists have targeted public buildings such as post offices and markets and kidnapped several volunteers, including doctors and teachers (Craig, 2021). Schools, in particular, have played a central role since the emergence of the Anglophone protest movement. The first peaceful protests in 2016 were driven by the desire to draw attention to the Frenchification attempt of the younger generation in the two Anglophone regions. The central government had gradually increased the use of French in the school curricula in the Northwest and Southwest regions. In addition, teachers in the state schools have been almost exclusively monolingual French speakers in recent years. Accordingly, separatists first called for a boycott of schools and then launched targeted attacks to discourage class attendance. Therefore, schools have become a sensitive target. In less than a year, 35 attacks on school buildings have been recorded. In this context, an even more worrying trend is that the armed groups' attacks have been carried out using Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) These have worsened the consequences and damage to property and people. Moreover, in the areas of clashes, international NGOs, among which the Human Rights Watch (HRW), have denounced arbitrary arrests and violence carried out by security forces on civilians (HRW, 2021). Over the past five years, about four thousand civilians have died, and over seven hundred thousand people have fled the two Anglophone regions. A recent United Nations report estimates that almost three million of the total population of four residing in the Cameroon Northwest and Southwest regions have suffered the effects of the conflict.

Analysis, assessment and forecasting

The conflict in the two Anglophone regions is linked to Cameroon's political crisis. Kamto accused Biya of being unable to manage the crisis. He pointed out that the policies of armed contrast initiated in 2016 have aggravated the situation. For this reason, the MRC leader considers necessary the opening of a channel of dialogue with the non-armed components of the Anglophone movement. President Biya has adopted a dual-track policy. On the one hand, he has given a commission, the National Commission of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism, the task of trying to defuse tensions.

However, the commission's powers are only advisory. On the other hand, the President has given the management of the conflict to the military leadership, in particular to General Nka Valere, assisted by the influential Defense Minister Joseph Beti Assomo. This solution brought very limited results (Kindzeka, 2021). Recent developments signal increasing coordination with Nigeria. In spring, Nigerian President Buhari announced full support in the fight against armed separatists as a factor of regional instability. The Nigerian government took such a stance following the pact between some Anglophone groups and Biafran separatists. Widespread human rights violations and abuses reported by international NGOs led the United States to reduce funding for military assistance to Cameroon. The American decision, combined with the two crises discussed so far, has provided more oxygen to ISWAP activities in the Far-North region. Since 2014, the Cameroonian army assisted by the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), has been countering the advance of Boko Haram, now Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), in the Far-North region. The decrease in Cameroonian economic and human resources used to counter the advance of the terrorist group threatens to open a further crisis front in the coming months. The group's efforts do not aim at weakening state security and institutional structures, but rather at presenting itself as a concrete alternative to the Yaoundé government. ISWAP aims at establishing an elaborate governance structure for the entire Lake Chad Basin within the wider framework of the Islamic State.

The above picture shows how a variety of internal and external threats have been challenging Cameroon's security. The main concerns are about the country's political and institutional resilience. The next few months will be crucial in outlining possible future scenarios. Within the current Presidential power circle, there is not anyone with power and charisma enough to take over Biya's legacy. On the other side, although Kamto enjoys growing popularity, his rise could be a further divisive factor for the country. Undoubtedly, until Cameroon finds political stability, it will be challenging to tackle the crisis in the Anglophone regions and the advance of ISWAP at the same time. Biya's precarious health increases the risk of a crisis within the CPDM. Since last July, when the president spent time in Switzerland to undergo medical treatment, leading members of the CPDM are watching the evolution of his health condition while preparing for the leadership race. Consequently, when Biya will no longer be able to rule, an implosion of the ruling party cannot be excluded. If that happened, it would accentuate the country's political crisis.

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China's interests in Afghanistan after NATO withdrawal

Introduction

The withdrawal of the United States and NATO from Afghanistan and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban has led several analysts to predict a rapid expansion of Chinese influence on the country. Furthermore, the American and Western withdrawal has been interpreted by many analysts as a defining moment in an alleged linear process of "power transition" between a US-led international system to a multipolar system, or even to a Chinese-led system (Borger, 2021; Khan, 2021; Thoor, 2021). Other analyses have gone so far as to foresee an alliance between China and Islamic extremists, interpreted through the lens of the "clash of civilizations" proposed by Samuel Huntington (Panebianco, 2021). These analyses are based on a "zero-sum" logic which implies that a decline in American influence immediately translates into an advantage for China, in the context of the great power competition between the US and China. A more careful analysis of the local and regional context leads to highlighting the complex aspects of the situation.

This article aims to describe the Chinese interests and role in Afghanistan and Central Asia, highlighting the complexity of the consequences of the Western withdrawal. Although the potential benefits for Beijing are significant, recent developments in the country involve several risks and possible costs for the People's Republic of China.

Gains for Beijing

The withdrawal of the United States and NATO allies from Afghanistan, completed in August 2021, resulted in a series of advantages for China, in the strategic and political-ideological realms.

The first advantage is related to the end of the perceived encirclement of China by the United States. The Chinese government considered the American presence in Afghanistan, along with the hub and spoke alliance structure in East Asia¹, as components of a vast system capable of encircling China and containing its political, economic, and military rise (Liff, 2018). The breakup of this encirclement by the US and the reduction of the Western presence in the region is therefore considered an opportunity for China to expand its influence in Central and South Asia. Over the past decade, this region has become increasingly central to China's strategic ambitions. For example, already in 2012, the influential scholar Wang Jisi argued the need for a reorientation of the axis of Chinese foreign policy towards the West, rebalancing the centrality of Northeast Asia, with greater attention to the Euro-Asian continental mass (Wang, 2012 e Ferdinand, 2016).

The second strategic advantage relates to the alleged decline in American credibility towards regional and global allies and partners. In both the West and China, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has been seen as damaging the credibility of US-led alliances. In China, the newspaper Global Times explicitly linked the withdrawal from Afghanistan with the possibility that the United States could abandon Taiwan (The Global Times, 2021). The same argument was mentioned in the internal debate in Taipei, where the Kuomintang, in favour of cooperative relations with the People's Republic, described the American withdrawal as a signal of a transition of powers towards a region dominated by Beijing, with evident consequences for the independence aspirations of the governing People's Democratic Party, a supporter of an autonomous political identity for the island.

Nevertheless, the idea that the US withdrawal could undermine the credibility of US-led alliances in Asia or even NATO is generally viewed with scepticism by security and deterrence

¹ That is the alliances created after the Second World War with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines and Australia.

experts. In fact, it is highlighted how the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the reduction of the American exposure in Central Asia, allows the United States to concentrate its political-military resources on East Asia, an objective pursued by Washington since the beginning of the Pivot to Asia promoted by the Obama administration (Dian, 2015). Several recent studies have also underlined how allies consider credibility and commitment to their security, supported both by political positions and by the presence of military resources, rather than a general American credibility in the world, as crucial (Jervis, Yarhi Milo, Casler, 2020; Henry, 2020; Blankenship, 2020).

The precedent of Vietnam during the Cold War testifies that a withdrawal from a single conflict did not significantly damage the American network of alliances (Ford and Cooper, 2020). Finally, the Biden Administration has returned to consider alliances as a fundamental resource for the American role in the world, after the period of Trump's "amoral transactionalism" (Dian and Baldaro, 2018; The White House, 2021).

The second important dimension is that of the competition between two models of regional and global order taking place between China and the United States (Dian, 2021). The American withdrawal from Afghanistan is a clear signal of the crisis of the liberal international order and its expansionary capacities. Afghanistan, for the entire War on Terror, could be considered a test for the ability of both the American hegemon to promote a democratic transformation in states and in regions culturally and economically distant from Western standards. Afghanistan was probably the most difficult and ambitious case for the American transformative project at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The 2021 withdrawal does not only highlight the failure of the attempt to export democracy, but also the impossibility of achieving progressively more limited objectives, such as the state building, or the mere stabilization of the country (Haas, 2021).

The failure of the American and Western approach, based on the liberal "Wilsonian" principle of promoting democracy as a method to generate peace, freedom and prosperity opens up to a greater political influence of alternative models of order, and in particular to the Chinese one. The American and Western failure in Afghanistan is, in fact, an opportunity for China, but also for Russia and other non-democratic powers, to promote a model of international order based on respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and "agnosticism" towards values and human rights. In this sense, China proposes itself as a power capable of understanding the position of states that have suffered colonization and Western occupation, by virtue of its historical experience marked by the century of humiliation. More concretely, Beijing proposes to all possible political and economic partners to establish "win-win relations", which ignore the nature of the counterpart's internal regime, asking in exchange respect for sovereignty and non-interference in Chinese internal affairs (Mazarr, Heath, Cevallos, 2018; Rolland, 2020)

This approach has also been applied in recent months by the Chinese government. Contacts between the Taliban and Beijing have intensified over the past year and culminated in the visit of the Taliban delegation on July 28, during which the Taliban representative Abdul Ghani Baradar met with Foreign Minister Wang Yi. On that occasion, Wang Yi defined the Taliban as a decisive political and military force for Afghanistan "(Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). Nonetheless, as will be illustrated in the next paragraph, the evolution of the Afghan situation does not only entail advantages for China but also a significant series of costs and possible risks.

Risks for China

Despite the Chinese pragmatism, the American and Western withdrawal and the seizure of power by the Taliban have also generated a series of problems for Beijing. The first is associated with the very nature of the Taliban government. The Taliban embody what the Chinese government defines as "The Three Evils", namely religious extremism, terrorism, and separatism.

During the July visit to Beijing and in the previous months, China made a series of requests to the Taliban leadership. The first is not to support, protect or host terrorist groups. The Chinese fears in this case are manifold. First, Afghanistan could become a logistical base for separatist groups in the Xinjiang region, such as the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) (Glaser e Small, 2021). Foreign Minister Wang Yi made several explicit requests: to deny support and prevent this group or any other armed group the use of the Afghan territory for possible operations in Xinjiang or other areas of Chinese territory. Furthermore, Beijing fears the spread of episodes of terrorism against Chinese citizens present in Afghanistan and especially in Pakistan, often engaged in the construction of infrastructures or in the promotion of other Chinese investments. The Taliban are considered unwilling or unable to control the armed groups present in the Afghan territory. This could endanger the development of the China-Pakistan Corridor, the central axis of the entire Belt and Road Initiative. In 2019, there were more than 30,000 Chinese workers in Pakistan alone. In the same year Chinese companies invested \$ 14 billion in the country. The two terrorist attacks against Chinese citizens in Pakistan in July 2021 are seen as signs of possible future problems associated with regional instability (Li, 2021).

More generally, the Chinese government seems very sceptical of the possibility that the new Taliban leadership could moderate its positions and abandon Islamic extremism and, consequently, support for Islamist-inspired terrorist groups. For this reason, the "agnostic" and pragmatic approach, which led to frequent contacts with the Taliban, remains accompanied by a good dose of prudence.

Beijing is aware of having tools to influence the new Afghan leadership. First, up to the Western withdrawal, nearly half of the Afghan state budget was constituted by international aid. This financial flow was interrupted in August 2021. For this reason, China can be one of the possible alternative sources of financing. However, China will not offer the new government figures similar to those guaranteed by the Western states, given the Taliban government's lack of reliability.

Previous experiences in the realm of economic cooperation such as investments in the Mes Aynak copper mines and the Amu Darya oil fields are considered failures, due to local instability and the lack of necessary infrastructure. For this reason, it is very unlikely that Afghanistan will be included in the BRI partner countries, given the absence of the minimum conditions of stability and security to promote infrastructure investments.

The second source of influence is that of diplomatic recognition. Western states will not recognize the new government in the medium term. Official recognition and stable diplomatic relations with Beijing would be a major advance for the legitimacy of the Taliban government. Even in this case, however, the Chinese government seems willing to maintain its leverage, delaying official recognition and subordinating it to concrete results in the prevention of terrorism.

The Chinese government seems aware that the influence guaranteed by the promise of economic aid and possible diplomatic relations is limited. Although Beijing continues to cultivate both direct contacts and indirect relations through the Pakistani government, the ability to moderate the behaviour of the Taliban appears to be restricted. The Chinese leadership itself seems convinced that the Taliban are neither able nor willing to promote stability in the region. First, it is unlikely that the new regime will be able in the short and medium term to take complete control of the country and all the armed groups present on its territory. Second, the Taliban government is unlikely to see economic incentives as a sufficient reason to abandon the more militant aspects of its Islamist ideology.

Finally, China is aware that Afghanistan is considered the "tomb of empires" and is therefore very sceptical of an active involvement in the affairs of the country. A significant increase in the investments in the country, determined by a possible expansion of the BRI, would expose one of the potential contradictions in Chinese foreign policy. On the one hand, Beijing continues to promote the principles of respect for sovereignty and non-interference. On the other hand, the presence of

increasingly large investments in unstable and conflict-prone countries creates a strong incentive for political interventions, and perhaps in the future, even military ones. If China decides to expand its presence in Afghanistan, and it finds violent opposition from the government or one of the multiple armed groups, or if these come to directly threaten the China-Pakistan corridor, Beijing would find itself facing a fundamental dilemma. It would therefore have to choose whether to abandon the practice of non-intervention or accept that the central pillar of the Belt and Road Initiative is damaged by the lack of security and stability.

Conclusion

The American and Western withdrawal from Afghanistan has generated several benefits for China. Many of these are at a "macro" level and concern the strategic dimension and ideological competition between different models of international order. The failure of the project to export democracy and state building in Afghanistan can, in fact, be read as a step forward for the Chinese vision of the international order, which provides that each country can adopt the political system that best suits its national characteristics. Furthermore, on a strategic level, the withdrawal of American troops from an area close to China's north-western borders is considered good news in Beijing. On the contrary, those who consider the withdrawal from Afghanistan as a symptom of the decline in the credibility of American extended deterrence, tend to exaggerate the consequence of US actions in distant theatres, while ignoring the recent processes of consolidation of US led alliances.

The Western withdrawal also generates several risky situations for China. Despite its pragmatic approach, the Chinese government remains very sceptical of the Taliban, which it continues to consider as an expression of the "Three Evils" (terrorism, separatism and religious extremism). Beijing considers the Taliban to be unable or unwilling to promote stability in the country and the region. For these reasons, it fears the possibility that the China-Pakistan corridor will be threatened by terrorist attacks against Chinese workers engaged in infrastructure works.

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The new Russian Federation Security Strategy

The security of a state passes from the perception that this has of itself in the geopolitical space of its direct interest, whether it is geographically or culturally close, or falls within its own sphere of economic competence. Such perception is the basis of the relevant legislation aimed at the defense of its citizens as well as the safeguarding of national interests. In this sense, last July 2nd, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, signed the decree approving the new National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation¹. The document, which replaces the previous one from 2015 (which, in turn, renewed the 2010 version), has its legal basis in the Russian Constitution and was adopted in accordance with the provisions of the federal laws of June 28, 2014 N 172 - FZ "On strategic planning in the Russian Federation"² (and subsequent amendments / additions) and of 28 December 2010 n. 390-FZ "On safety"³.

The national security strategy is - in the hierarchy of sources - a fundamental document or, as the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, Dmitrij Trenin, states, "*мать всех стратегий*" ("the mother of all strategies")⁴, since both military and military doctrine originate from it. The concept of foreign policy⁵. Furthermore, the document identifies the most important **threats** for the country. They have an exogenous and endogenous nature, both short and long term. Thus, among the major exogenous threats are military ones, identified as long term, while endogenous ones are linked to social, economic and information processes or to new technologies. The strategy defines, at the same time, the **guidelines** for the development of the state security system of the Russian Federation. The strategy is updated periodically, through an annual report by the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, and all state institutions, coordinated by the president, are responsible for its implementation. The document therefore appears as an element of strategic communication mainly to the United States and its allies, as well as other powers (China) and post-Soviet states.

Analyzing the strategy, there is a strong feeling of "Western pressure", in particular that of the United States (the European Union is never mentioned) which manifests itself in various forms: from the economic to the military one, passing from the moral and value sphere where the Russian tradition and historical heritage is under attack, threatened by Westernization which, in an attempt to rewrite history in a way unfavorable to the country, would potentially be capable of depriving Russians of cultural sovereignty⁶. The premise is ideal for eventual and further historical campaigns

¹ Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 02.07.2021 № 400 «О Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации». Full text of the Strategy document (in russian) on: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202107030001?index=0&rangeSize=1>

² «О стратегическом планировании в Российской Федерации», testo completo (in lingua russa) su <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/420204138>. The document has been updated on a five years basis, the new version, one year later than the previous one, was presented to the president in May 2021 and was probably influenced by the meeting with Biden at the Geneva Summit 2021 (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/17/biden-putin-geneva/>). Despite what's written in the 2015 version, in fact, in which a dialogue with the USA is prefigured, in the 2021 edition this dialogue disappears to leave room for comparison in which the USA are perceived as a military threat (Art. 36) and of the value system (Art. 87).

³ Федеральный закон от 28.12.2010 г. № 390-ФЗ, «О безопасности». Full text (in russian) is available on <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/32417>

⁴ Dmitrij Trenin, «О матери всех стратегий» ("About the mother of all strategies"), *Коммерсант*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4888683>.

⁵ A full list of strategic planning documents (*Документы стратегического планирования*) of Russian Federation is available on the web page of Russian Ministry of Economic Development https://www.economy.gov.ru/material/directions/strateg_planirovanie/dokumenty_strategicheskogo_planirovaniya/

⁶ Dmitrij Trenin, *Манифест новой эпохи. О чем говорит новая «Стратегия национальной безопасности России»* ("The manifesto of a new era. What is the new "National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation"), Московский Центр Карнеги, 8 luglio 2021, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/84904>

with the pretext of preserving the memory while at the same time declining reality and aimed mainly at countries such as Poland or the Baltic States where, in turn, the Russophobic note is predominant.

Still Western countries, mainly the United States and some of its allies - which not only "destabilize the world situation", but also conduct "hostile actions" aimed at Russia (through military, economic, political, as well as informational and historical campaigns) - are identified as a source of military threats. The strategy underlines that the "Western world" is fighting for confrontation resulting in an arms race, including nuclear ones and, precisely to counter this phenomenon, Russia should continue to increase the mobilization potential of its armed forces and invest in the development of new military technologies⁷.

The strategy therefore describes the space in which the country moves as apparently hostile. So, an important response element should become Russia's independence from the international environment in the sectors of food, economy, energy, information technology and science: such a turn would in fact allow the reduction of military or economic threats from the outside - such as the sanctions imposed by Western countries - aimed at weakening the Russian state. Part of this centripetal vision present in the document is therefore the readiness of society and state institutions to function "in time of war". The dangers associated with the information system, against which the armed forces responsible for the fight against cybercrime must be used as important.

In light of the above, the strategy clearly indicates the need to further strengthen the role of the state as a fundamental guarantor of the security of the inhabitants of Russia and the protection of its citizens living abroad.

National Security Strategy 2015 and 2021. Two documents compared

Six eventful years have passed from the approval of the old document (2015) to the promulgation of the new one. In the meantime, the international context changed: from the worsening of the Ukrainian crisis, to the significant deterioration of relations with NATO - or rather, the US - and the EU, to the pandemic. COVID-19. Undoubtedly, both national interests and strategic objectives have suffered from such situation, nevertheless the new document is not revolutionary in its nature. It contains a series of principles and approaches that have already appeared in Russian strategic documents (and, sometimes, were applied in practice) but only now clearly worded. The most important threats have been identified in a similar way, but their sources are mainly Western countries, which seek to change the state order in Russia. Previously, the challenges were perceived in a much broader way, for example the dangers related to terrorism, including Islamic (the so-called Islamic State was not mentioned this time), or illegal immigration. The new strategy puts greater emphasis on ensuring independence from the outside world. The way in which Russian foreign policy objectives are presented has also changed: they are designed to pursue Russia's interests, furthermore the announcement of developing political cooperation with the United States or cooperation in the Arctic has been abandoned, while declarations of strategic partnership with China and India are present.

Comparing the paragraphs dedicated to **national interests** (no more 6 but 8), part of the previous and current version of the document, the commonality of intent is evident (see Chart 1). Overall, there are only two fundamentally new points of national interest, namely the "development of a secure information space, the protection of Russian society from destructive information and psychological impact" (point 4) and the "protection of the environment, conservation of natural resources and use rationalization of natural resources, the adaptation to climate change" (point 6). While the first implies the influence of information from abroad, the second, in a certain sense, draws inspiration from abroad in an attempt to adopt or adapt the "precepts" of the Western-style green economy to the Russian reality. National interests in the field of economics now seems slightly

⁷ The budget allocations of the "National Defense" section in 2022 will amount to 3,510.19,600,000 rubles (42.4 billion euros), in 2023 to 3,557,223,300.00 rubles (42.96 billion euros), and in 2024 to 3,811.777.500.000 rubles (46.04 billion euros). At the same time, the share in the total volume of expenditure of the federal budget under the section "National Defense" in 2022 and 2023 compared to 2021 (14.4%) will increase and will be 14.8% in 2022, at 14.5% in 2023 and 15.2% in 2024. For the nuclear weapons complex, approximately 49bn rubles per year will be disbursed for 2022-2023 (an increase of 7.1%, 6% compared to previously approved volumes of Federal Law No. 385-FZ), for 2024 - about 56 billion rubles (an increase of 14% compared to 2023). Official page of the State Duma (in Russian language) of 15.10.2021 <http://duma.gov.ru/news/52460/>

different, which implies their development on a new technological basis that can be explained by the desire of the country's leadership to digitize key economic processes.

Chart 1. Russian Federation National interests (2015 and 2021 documents compared)

2015 ⁸	2021 ⁹
1) Strengthening the defense of the country, guaranteeing the inviolability of the constitutional system, sovereignty, independence, state and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation;	1) Safeguarding the Russian people, developing human potential, raising the quality of life and well-being of citizens;
2) Strengthening national consensus, political and social stability, developing democratic institutions, improving the mechanisms of interaction between the state and civil society;	2) Protection of the constitutional order, sovereignty, independence, state and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, strengthening of the country's defense;
3) Raising the quality of life, strengthening the health of the population, guaranteeing a stable demographic development of the country;	3) Maintaining civil peace and consensus in the country, strengthening the rule of law, eradicating corruption, protecting citizens and all forms of property from illegal violations, developing mechanisms for interaction between the state and civil society;
4) Preservation and development of Russian culture and traditional spiritual and moral values;	4) Development of a secure information space, protection of Russian society from the psychological impact of destructive information;
5) Increased competitiveness of the national economy;	5) Sustainable development of the Russian economy on a new technological basis;
6) Consolidation of the status of the Russian Federation as a major world power, whose activities aim to maintain strategic stability and mutually beneficial partnerships in a polycentric world.	6) Environmental protection, conservation of natural resources and rational sustainability, adaptation to climate change;
	7) Strengthening traditional Russian spiritual and moral values, preserving the cultural and historical heritage of the Russian people;
	8) Maintaining strategic stability, strengthening peace, security and the legal basis of international relations.

⁸ Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 31.12.2015 г. № 683, «О Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации» Chapter III Национальные интересы и стратегические национальные приоритеты, section 30 <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391>

⁹ See note 1, Chapter. III Национальные интересы Российской Федерации и стратегические национальные приоритеты section 25.

Comparing the **strategic priorities** instead (see Chart 2), we will see the reformulation of the points in terms of importance in the new version of the Strategy. The safeguarding of the people is thus in the foreground, rather than the defense of the country, which can really indicate a shift in the attention of the leadership on internal problems and, in a sense, in the current reality, it represents an even greater threat to national security than those. It is in this section that this priority has been moved from the previous version of the Strategy as "health care". In this regard, the "safeguarding of people" will represent a multidimensional task, which implies "an increase in the real incomes of the population, the quality of education, fertility, life expectancy, quality and availability of medical care (including vaccinations and remedies available) and guarantee of sustainability of the health system, a decrease in mortality".

Naturally, the lessons of the pandemic were taken into account, because other sections of the document also speak of the need to respond to biological threats, and to create a favorable health and epidemiological situation in the country.

"Economic growth" has been replaced in the order of priorities by "economic security" (in general, the term security - "безопасность" - appears more often than in the old edition), which could indicate that, given the current conditions economic conditions of the country, and taking into account the specificities of the Russian economy, this task may not be fully implemented in the coming years and its failure could - above all - also have political consequences. When compared with other national priorities, assessed mainly by qualitative indicators, economic growth can be clearly plotted in specific numbers, which could create damage to the image, mainly due to the financial and economic blockade of the Russian government. Ensuring economic security is a complex goal that includes maintaining macroeconomic stability, de-dollarization of the economy, increasing labor productivity, increasing the number of investments and so on.

An important and long overdue point of the strategy is the consolidation of information security as a national priority. It is assumed that to achieve this goal it will be necessary to ensure the uninterrupted functioning of the critical information infrastructure, to protect Russian society from the destructive impact of information by terrorist and extremist organizations, special services and propaganda structures of foreign states and to switch the use of Russian information technologies and equipment.

Chart 2. Russian Federation strategic priorities (2015 and 2021 documents compared)

2015 ¹⁰	2021 ¹¹
1) Defense of the country;	1) Safeguarding the Russian people and developing human potential;
2) State and public safety;	2) Defense of the country;
3) To improve the quality of life of Russian citizens;	3) State and public security;
4) Economic growth;	4) Information security;
5) Science, technology and education;	5) Economic security;
6) Healthcare;	6) Scientific and technological development;
7) Culture;	7) Ecological safety and rational use of natural resources;
8) Ecology of living systems and rational management of nature;	8) Protection of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values, culture and historical memory;
9) Strategic stability and equal strategic partnership.	9) Strategic stability and mutually beneficial international cooperation.

¹⁰See note 4, section 31.

¹¹see note 5, section. 26.

With regard to other innovations, it can be noted that references to previously taboo or not considered topics appear in the strategy, such as Russia's transition to the use of artificial intelligence and the development of a national economic system based on technologies with low environmental impact. According to the authors of the document, all this should, lead to a qualitative change in the economy. Furthermore, the task of ensuring the integration of economic systems within the Eurasian partnership has been added to the development of the provisions of the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation. Compared to the previous version of the document, more attention is paid to the protection of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values, culture and historical memory, which is fully consistent with the policy pursued by the country's leadership in recent years, including the introduction of issues present in the amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation. As a side note, it should be emphasized that Russia is now ready to apply symmetrical and asymmetrical measures in response to hostile actions by foreign states.

Conclusions

The new security strategy reflects the Russian political elite's perception of the world as a place of competition, while also reiterating the importance of the strength factor in international relations invariably considered the key means of guaranteeing one's own security. Such security built up structure, within a global framework, is in turn evaluated as not responding to contemporary challenges and therefore in need of changes. The main objective of the new document is to "adapt the country to a world that is still interconnected, but which is a process of fragmentation and disunity, when new front lines run not so much between countries as within them, and since the greatest difficulties await Russia on the domestic front, then the main efforts of the authorities should be directed there too"¹².

Although the document presents new challenges, such as those related to climate change, the greatest emphasis is placed on responding to "traditional" military threats. Therefore, Russia will continue to increase the potential of its armed forces, strengthen the nation's spiritual and cultural values, and build state self-sufficiency.

The international cooperation sector seems to be the most penalized. Relations would be limited to the UN forum, where the country has the right of veto, and to organizations formed by Russia (such as the Eurasian Economic Union), the strategy does not include the will to cooperate within the OSCE or, mindful of the sanctions imposed, with institutions such as the EU, finally the elements relating to building a partnership with the United States have been removed.

Isolationism or, as scholar Mark Galeotti argues, the "paranoid vision"¹³ that transpires from the document and the need to build the potential of the state "in times of war" indicate that in the coming years Russia will be even less willing than before to undertake wider international cooperation. Although the document lists the countries it will want to collaborate with (mainly CIS members and Asian countries), the scope of this cooperation will be limited to current national interests. The country will continue to seek to increase its international influence in the near future by strengthening the emphasis on integration with countries such as Belarus.

Taking into account the structural problems of the Russian state, it can be assumed that the country will not be able to cope with most of the challenges identified, especially in the social or scientific and technical development, especially as the document does not impose implementation obligations on state institutions. Indeed, as Alexey Podberezkin¹⁴, Director of the Political-Military Research Center at MGIMO (Moscow State Institute for International Studies) argues: "*As in the previous strategy, there are not enough implementation mechanisms. This edition emphasizes that*

¹² See note 6.

¹³ It is the scholar's opinion that the Russian leadership sees a threat to national security in almost every phenomenon and process, so much so that, like the document, it is paranoid. Mark Galeotti, "New National Security Strategy Is a Paranoid's Charter. Russia's new National Strategy regards not just foreign countries as a threat, but the very processes reshaping the modern world". The Moscow Times, July 5, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/07/05/new-national-security-strategy-is-a-paranoids-charter-a74424>

¹⁴ Эксперты оценили перемены в подписанной Путиным стратегии нацбезопасности ("Experts assessed the changes to the national security strategy put forward by Putin") <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/03/07/2021/60e0a1c79a7947a36edadc3d>

the security strategy national is the basic document for other strategies and concepts". At the same time, there are no mechanisms of implementation, apart from the annual report of the Secretary of the Security Council on the state of security in the Russian Federation. Of course, it is said that the state and the public institutions should be guided by a strategy, but how it should be controlled, in general, is not described in the strategy. Unfortunately, in Russian history there have been situations where the country's leadership has adopted important documents containing fair assessments of the state of things in the state and in the world, correctly formulated development goals and priorities of the to state policy, but all this remained on paper. As a result, Russia is faced with the task in the coming years of transforming a politico-military strategy into a successful policy in strategic directions.

Afghanistan: Taliban 2021

The twenty-year intervention in Afghanistan that ended in mid-August 2021 reports a final toll of 243,000 deaths and a cost of 2,313 trillion dollars¹. During this period infant mortality has halved and life expectancy has improved by six years; years of school attendance increased by three years for men and four for women. Graduates have gone from under 31,000 to nearly 200,000².

The conquest of power³

Few days were enough for the Taliban to conquer Afghanistan, sometimes occupying the main provincial capitals with just few shots. Beyond the unexpected military collapse of the Afghan army, interviews with Taliban leaders, Afghan politicians, diplomats and other observers suggest that the Islamist movement has carefully planned its strategy.

Being ready for a tougher struggle to regain control of a country they ruled from 1996 to 2001, insurgents have cultivated relationships with local political and military officials and the elderly since early 2020. This, combined with the anticipated withdrawal of Western troops, broke trust in the Kabul administration and encouraged desertions. The Taliban did not want to fight, but to provoke a political collapse.

When his fighters took control of the presidential palace, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, one of the main architects of the victory, said that it was an unrivaled triumph that came unexpectedly fast. Suhail Shaheen - Taliban spokesman resident in Doha and appointed ambassador to the United Nations⁴ - stated that a large number of districts have been conquered through personal contacts that have a long tradition in Afghanistan, where inducing rivals to switch sides has always been a common tactic through direct talks with local security forces⁵ and the mediation of tribal and religious elders. The Taliban secured border posts, ending a crucial source of income for the local government and clans. After being thrown out of power in 2001, they gradually reconstituted, financing themselves with opium and illegal mining, avoiding large-scale clashes as long as the US air force backed the Afghan military. They focused on remote villages and isolated checkpoints, spreading fear to cities through suicide bombings. They took control of many provincial areas with a shadow form of government, establishing their own courts and tax systems. In the northern and western areas, where the mainly Pashtun ethnic Taliban movement was traditionally weaker, they moved to gain local support and conquer Tajiks, Uzbeks and other ethnic representatives of Afghanistan. During the military advance, Baradar managed to preserve a united front between the Taliban political leadership and the fighters across the country, overcoming sometimes conflicting interests on issues ranging from peace talks to sharing the proceeds of poppy cultivation.

With the February 2020 Doha Agreement the Taliban had obtained what they wanted, the withdrawal of the US troops without having granted anything: the inter-Afghan peace dialogue never started indeed. Once President Biden confirmed the previous Trump administration's

¹ Watson Institute International&Public Affairs, "Costs of War"; <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>.

² Brookings Institution, "Afghanistan Index", August 2020; <https://www.brookings.edu/research/afghanistan-index/>.

³ Reuters, "How the Taliban engineered 'political collapse' of Afghanistan", August 17, 2021; <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/how-taliban-engineered-political-collapse-afghanistan-2021-08-17/>.

⁴ BBC, "Taliban ask to speak at UN General Assembly in New York", 22 September 2021; [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58632147?xtor=AL-72-%5Bpartner%5D-%5Bgnl.newsletters%5D-%5Bheadline%5D-%5Bnews%5D-%5Bbizdev%5D-%5Bisapi%5D&xtor=ES-213-\[BBC%20News%20Newsletter\]-2021September21-\[top+news+stories\]](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58632147?xtor=AL-72-%5Bpartner%5D-%5Bgnl.newsletters%5D-%5Bheadline%5D-%5Bnews%5D-%5Bbizdev%5D-%5Bisapi%5D&xtor=ES-213-[BBC%20News%20Newsletter]-2021September21-[top+news+stories]).

⁵ V. Felbab-Brown, "Will the Taliban regime survive?", Brookings Institution, August 31, 2021; https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/08/31/will-the-taliban-regime-survive/?utm_campaign=Foreign%20Policy&utm_medium=email&utm_content=155607731&utm_source=hs_email.

agreement, the long campaign in the provinces quickly paid off. Despite the peace accords signed prior to the withdrawal, the US military and intelligence had clearly signaled that the Taliban had stepped up attacks on district capitals and were trying to block highways as they prepared to attack major cities. In addition, a series of targeted assassinations of key Afghan security personalities have been launched with the aim of undermining morale and public confidence in the government.

The strategy has fatally weakened Ashraf Ghani government - a Western-trained academic backed by Washington but with little popular support outside Kabul and limited relations even with some of his own commanders. Being a Pashtun, viewed with distrust by other ethnic groups, Ghani had relied on the support of the unruly leaders of the former Northern Alliance whom the United States had recruited to defeat the Taliban in 2001. Among these were Atta Mohammad Noor, former governor of the Balkh province, and Uzbek leader Rashid Dostum, but the patient efforts of the Taliban undermined also the sponsorship system that kept these leaders in place that fled as well.

An important role was played by the corruption and the lack of reliability of the data regarding the preparation and actual number of Afghan security forces, as reported several times by SIGAR, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction⁶.

The interim government of the Islamic emirate

Among the 33 exponents that make up the executive - there has not been yet the inauguration ceremony⁷ - there are five former Guantanamo detainees released in 2014 - in exchange for an American soldier captured by the Taliban - and now at the ministries of Information and Culture, Tribal Affairs, Foreign Affairs and the Deputy Directorate of Defense. The executive is made up of various power groups and some frictions, promptly denied⁸, have already emerged in mid-September between Baradar and Khalil ur-Rahman Haqqani, minister of refugees⁹. As a rebel force, the Taliban will have to face the challenges of a government that must manage a country by controlling the disagreements within the government structure and facing the serious economic and humanitarian crisis and stemming the internal irregular forces¹⁰.

Hibatullah Akhundzada became Supreme Commander in May 2016 and is now leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. In the 80s he participated to the Islamist resistance against the Soviet military campaign in Afghanistan, but his reputation is more of a religious leader than a military commander. He was head of the sharia courts in the 90s when the Taliban introduced and supported punishments according to their interpretation of Islamic law by publicly executing murderers and adulterers and amputating thieves' limbs. Under the leadership of Mullah Mohammed Omar (who died in 2013), the Taliban banned television, music, films, makeup and prevented girls over 10 from attending school. Akhundzada is in his 60s and has lived most of his life in Afghanistan. He maintains close ties with the "Quetta Shura", the Afghan Taliban leaders based in the Pakistani city of Quetta. As the group's supreme commander, he is responsible for political, military and religious affairs. The leader of al-Qaeda, al-Zawahiri had sworn an oath of allegiance to him.

⁶ Politico, "The \$88 billion gamble on the Afghan army that's going up in smoke", 08/13/2021; <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/13/afghan-army-pentagon-504469>.

⁷ TASS, "Taliban cancels inauguration ceremony of Afghan interim government", 10 September 2021; <https://tass.com/world/1336289>.

⁸ K. Noor Nasar, "Afghanistan: Taliban leaders in bust-up at presidential palace, sources say", BBC, 15 September 2021; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58560923>.

⁹ South China Morning Post, "Cracks growing in Taliban leadership amid reports of clash at Afghanistan presidential palace", 16 September 2021; <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/russia-central-asia/article/3148906/cracks-growing-taliban-leadership-amid-reports-clash>.

¹⁰ M. Kugelman, "Opinion: How real is the threat of Taliban infighting?", DW, 21 September 2021; <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-how-real-is-the-threat-of-taliban-infighting/a-59250547>.

The government is mainly made up of Pashtun personalities¹¹: Mullah Muhammad **Hasan Akhund**, prime minister¹², is one of the four men who founded the Taliban in 1994 and head of the Quetta Shura. He has long been the head of the powerful Taliban governing council, Rehbari Shura. He served as foreign minister and deputy prime minister during the 1996-2001 government, he is subject to UN sanctions for his role at that time.

Mullah **Abdul Ghani Baradar** is vice premier, co-founder of the movement with Mullah Omar, he was a centerpiece of the insurgency after the 2001 invasion, later captured in a joint US-Pakistan operation in the southern city of Karachi in Pakistan, in February 2010. He was in prison for eight years, until his release in 2018 at the request of the US as part of a plan to facilitate the peace process. He was head of the political bureau in Doha from January 2019. In 2020 he became the first Taliban leader to communicate directly with a US president after having a telephone conversation with Donald Trump: on behalf of the Taliban he signed the Doha agreement on the withdrawal of US troops in February 2020¹³.

Sirajuddin Haqqani is minister of the interior, close to Al Qaeda, he is wanted by the FBI with a bounty of 5 million dollars: educated, English-speaking and historically linked to Pakistani services. After the death of his father, Jalaluddin Haqqani, he became the new leader of the network which has been credited with some of the most violent attacks in Afghanistan in recent years against Afghan Forces and their Western allies. The Haqqani Network is currently one of the most powerful militant groups in the region. The group, designated by the United States as a terrorist organization, oversees the financial and military resources of the Taliban along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. In an article that appeared in the New York Times, in February 2020, before the signing of the Doha agreement, Haqqani wrote: *"I am convinced that the killing and the maiming must stop ... we together will find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam - from the right to education to the right to work - are protected"*¹⁴.

Mohammad Yaqoob is defense minister: son of Mullah Mohammed Omar, he is believed to be just over 30 years old and is currently the group's head of military operations. After the death of former Taliban leader Akhtar Mansour in 2016, some militants wanted to appoint Yaqoob as the group's new supreme commander, but others deemed him young and inexperienced. As the Taliban advanced through the country, Yaqoob urged Taliban fighters not to harm members of the Afghan army or government and to stay out of the abandoned homes of government and security officials who had fled.

Amir Khan Muttaqi is foreign minister, a member of the government in the period 1996-2001, he was a negotiator in Doha.

Other appointments were made at the end of September¹⁵ including 4 Tajiks, 2 Uzbeks, a Turkman, an Hazara, a Nuristani and a Khwaja. With a total of 53 members this expanded cabinet

¹¹ BBC, "Afghanistan: Who's who in the Taliban leadership", 8 September 2021; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58235639>.

¹² AlJazeera, "Taliban announces new government in Afghanistan", 7 Sept 2021; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/7/taliban-announce-acting-ministers-of-new-government>.

¹³ "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America", February 29, 2020; <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

¹⁴ S. Haqqani, "What We, the Taliban, Want", New York Times, February 20, 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html>.

¹⁵ I. Bahiss, "Afghanistan's Taliban Expand Their Interim Government", International Crisis Group, 28 September 2021; https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-taliban-expand-their-interim-government?utm_source=Sign+Up+to+Crisis+Group%27s+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=384785ff3f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_01_28_08_41_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1dab8c11ea-384785ff3f-359938605

is a small gesture towards the inclusion of ethnic minorities, although it is still dominated by Pashtuns.

The Taliban intend to govern Afghanistan according to the sharia law¹⁶. During the previous period in power, 1996-2001, the militant group was known for its rigorous interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence. Many countries besides Afghanistan, including Saudi Arabia, Iran and parts of Indonesia and Nigeria, apply Sharia law even without the specific restrictions of the Taliban regime. Sharia law, "path" in Arabic, indicates the conduct that pleases God. It covers criminal, commercial and family law, but is much more holistic than secular legal systems: it also establishes the ethical rules that Muslims must follow. Sharia is based on the Quran, Islam holy book; the *hadiths*, or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and the subsequent work of scholars of Islamic law. The Quran, the Sunna (i.e. the Prophet's *'aḥādīth*), the consent of the experts (*ijmā'*) and the legal analogy (*qiyās*) are generally considered to be the sources of Islamic law. The first two are the basis of the sacred law, the *sharī'a*, as divinely produced or inspired. The Arabic word "Sunnah" indicates "the practice", "the line of conduct" and refers, in particular, to the Prophet's practices, those actions in his behavior that Muslims had to follow. "Hadith" means "tradition" in its oral transmission of the news of a saying, an act, a fact, that indicates the Islamic line of conduct of the Prophet Muḥammad, transmitted from generation to generation, through a chain of trustworthy people whose first ring is a direct visual or listening witness, belonging to the circle of the Prophet followers. There are some very harsh punishments for crimes deemed against God (*hudud*), including death by stoning or 100 lashes for adulterers, but the standard of proof for conviction is extremely high making these punishments rare: in the case of adultery four witnesses must be present. Punishment for serious crimes against people, such as murder, can also be severe, based on the principle of *qisas*, "an eye for an eye", but Islam encourages victims to be merciful and to pay compensation instead, *diya*, the "Blood price"¹⁷.

The humanitarian situation

The rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban seizure of power has left the country fragmented, with an unstable administration and public officials fearful of retaliation.

The 40% of the country's GDP was generated by international aid that was suspended (World Bank and International Monetary Fund) and accounted for 75% of government spending¹⁸.

By 2022, 97% of the population, already hit by the pandemic and the drought, could fall below the poverty line (currently at 72%); according to the World Food Program, more than half of the population - 22.8 million people - faces acute food insecurity and only 5% have adequate daily nutrition. While the health system collapses, there have been several cases of cholera, measles, polio, malaria and dengue, as well as the coronavirus pandemic¹⁹. G20 leaders have already agreed that humanitarian aid will be channeled through UN agencies to avoid worsening the situation²⁰ involving the Taliban government, but excluding its recognition.

The government will face a serious economic²¹ and financial²² situation with banks in serious cash crisis, aggravating Kabul's persistent dependence on international aid²³. It is likely that the

¹⁶ The Economist, "What is Sharia", September 8th, 2021; <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2021/09/08/what-is-sharia-law>.

¹⁷ E. Giunchi, "Afghanistan", Carocci, Roma, 2007, pag. 46.

¹⁸ P. M. McKinley, "Afghanistan's Looming Catastrophe", Foreign Affairs, December 3, 2021; <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-12-03/afghanistans-looming-catastrophe>.

¹⁹ P. Beaumont, "Afghan health system 'close to collapse due to sanctions on Taliban'", The Guardian, Dec 13, 2021; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/dec/13/afghan-health-system-close-to-collapse-due-to-sanctions-on-taliban>.

²⁰ P. Wintour, "G20 leaders agree to involve Taliban in distributing Afghanistan aid", The Guardian, 12 October 2021; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/12/afghanistan-at-make-or-break-point-says-un-as-g20-ministers-meet>.

²¹ Reuters, "One month after fall of Kabul, economic crisis stalks Taliban", September 15, 2021; <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/one-month-after-fall-kabul-economic-crisis-stalks-taliban-2021-09-15/>.

Taliban authority does not have the technical capacity to manage the economy and to provide satisfactory basic services²⁴, their ability to govern will depend on the collaboration of civil servants previously in service. The Taliban have extended amnesty declarations in many areas of the country in an attempt to persuade local government employees to continue working. Reports of abuses, detentions and targeted executions have emerged in some areas under Taliban control, demonstrating that there is no one-size-fits-all approach in areas ruled by different leaders: so far the Taliban have not presented a common political vision for the entire country. Within the movement, different interpretations of governance and policy seem to emerge and many other militias and tribal groups are still maintaining control over their respective areas²⁵. Reported anti-Taliban protests in Kabul and other cities have been met with violence and localized conflict is likely to continue as anti-Taliban opposition and armed groups attempt to recapture Taliban-controlled areas.

Even before the capture of Kabul in August, half of the Afghan population, 18 million people, depended on humanitarian aid provided from abroad²⁶. In September, the United Nations convened a conference to raise funds and address the situation, in particular food and health. Internal population movements have increased significantly. More than 400,000 people have been registered as new displaced since the beginning of May, bringing the total number in 2021 to over 550,000. Months of violence have resulted in disruptions to health services and an increase in health needs²⁷; 14.5 million people (about 33% of the population) were in need of health care before the recent escalation. The combined effects of drought, coronavirus pandemic, escalation of conflict and restrictions on humanitarian access after the change of power could further worsen the food security situation in the country. Increasing security concerns have emerged since May, including targeted killings, enforced disappearances, violence against women and children, forced marriages, access and mobility restrictions and attacks on civilian infrastructure, including homes, schools and clinics. An estimated 12.8 million people were in need of protection by early 2021. Humanitarian organizations are likely to disrupt or delay operations to ensure the safety of personnel and to obtain access clearance from the Taliban and to reassess priorities. Although the Taliban have issued official statements about the reception and presence of humanitarian operations, several factors are likely to hinder humanitarian activities, including uncertain access conditions, existing risks of violence against humanitarian workers, lack of available information, difficulties in collecting of data, interference in humanitarian operations and aid diversion.

²² J. O'Donnell, R. Jain, "Running out of dollars, Afghan banks ask Taliban for more cash", Reuters, September 15, 2021; <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/running-out-dollars-afghan-banks-ask-taliban-more-cash-2021-09-15/>.

²³ Reuters, "Afghan acting foreign minister urges international donors to restart aid", September 14, 2021; <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-acting-foreign-minister-urges-international-donors-restart-aid-2021-09-14/>.

²⁴ UN News, "UN commits to staying in Afghanistan, with basic services close to collapse", 31 August, 2021; <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1098862>.

²⁵ International Crisis Group, "Are the Taliban on a Path to Victory?", 14 August, 2021; <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/are-taliban-path-victory>.

²⁶ Reuters, "U.N. seeks \$600 million to avert Afghanistan humanitarian crisis", September 13, 2021; <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-seeks-600-million-avert-afghanistan-humanitarian-crisis-2021-09-12/>.

²⁷ World Health Organization, "Acute health needs in Afghanistan must be urgently addressed and health gains protected", 22 September 2021; https://www.who.int/news/item/22-09-2021-acute-health-needs-in-afghanistan-must-be-urgently-addressed-and-health-gains-protected?utm_source=UN+News+-+Newsletter&utm_campaign=a8e2768b4c-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2021_09_22_01_45&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_fdbf1af606-a8e2768b4c-106833977.

The gender issue

The Taliban prevented women from returning to work in public employment²⁸ and in the media. They banned co-education by imposing gender separation in classrooms, an unspecified Islamic dress code²⁹ and the ban on sports has been introduced³⁰. Mohammad Ashraf Ghairat, appointed by the Taliban rector of Kabul University, said that the female students will have to stay at home until an "Islamic environment" - that has not been specified - is created. Access to secondary schools for girls has been prohibited since September (37% of girls and 66% of boys are literate)³¹.

More than 200 judges lost their jobs and received threats³², they are hiding for fear of retaliation as the Taliban have freed many inmates they have condemned. The Ministry for Women has been replaced by a "Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice"³³. However, these provisions did not prevent street demonstrations against the new regime³⁴ and Pakistan's interference to crush the Panshijr resistance³⁵. Restrictions on information, music and entertainment apply to the entire population.

The power groups: Haqqani, al-Qaeda, Islamic State-Khorasan and the Fatimioun

The three main groups, the Taliban (approximately 80,000 fighters), the Haqqani Network (3,000-10,000) and al-Qaeda (300), are closely aligned³⁶. They have multigenerational ties between them that date back to the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad, strengthened over time by family ties and fighting against US and NATO troops. Although the Haqqani network fights under Taliban aegis, it maintains relative operational autonomy in its main operational zone in eastern Afghanistan. HQN also acts as the main link between the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. The Taliban and the HQN have the same external patron, Pakistan's Interservice Intelligence (ISI), which has supported these groups as a cover against Indian influence in Afghanistan.

According to UN counterterrorism officials, the Taliban maintain close ties with al-Qaeda. Although they have begun to register, restrict and monitor AQ-linked foreign fighters, their leadership has not made a credible commitment to limit the threat, much less severing its ties with the group. The Taliban continue to provide AQ leaders with safe havens in southern and eastern Afghanistan along the border with Pakistan, allegedly in exchange for funds and specialized

²⁸ BBC, "Afghanistan: Stay home, female Kabul government workers told", 19 September 2021; [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58614113?xtor=AL-72-%5Bpartner%5D-%5Bgnl.newsletters%5D-%5Bheadline%5D-%5Bnews%5D-%5Bbizdev%5D-%5Bisapi%5D&xtor=ES-213-\[BBC%20News%20Newsletter\]-2021September19-\[top+news+stories\]](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58614113?xtor=AL-72-%5Bpartner%5D-%5Bgnl.newsletters%5D-%5Bheadline%5D-%5Bnews%5D-%5Bbizdev%5D-%5Bisapi%5D&xtor=ES-213-[BBC%20News%20Newsletter]-2021September19-[top+news+stories]).

²⁹ A. Borges, "Taliban government says women can study in gender-segregated universities", Euronews, 12/09/2021; <https://www.euronews.com/2021/09/12/taliban-government-says-women-can-study-in-gender-segregated-universities>.

³⁰ The Guardian, "Afghan women to be banned from playing sport, Taliban say", 8 September 2021; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/08/afghan-women-to-be-banned-from-playing-sport-taliban-say>.

³¹ UNICEF, 22/09/2021; <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/education>; RFE/RL 18/09/2021; <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-schools-girls/31466540.html>; The conversation 09/09/2021; <https://theconversation.com/education-in-afghanistan-was-a-battlefield-long-before-the-taliban-returned-167204> Trust 17/08/2021; <https://news.trust.org/item/20210831110425-cvykj>; Center for Global Development 16/08/2021; <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/girls-education-casualty-disastrous-withdrawal-afghanistan>.

³² C. Press, "Female Afghan judges hunted by the murderers they convicted", BBC, 28 September 2021; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58709353>.

³³ A. Pal, "Taliban replaces women's ministry with ministry of virtue and vice", Reuters, September 17, 2021; <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-replaces-womens-ministry-with-ministry-virtue-vice-2021-09-17/>.

³⁴ E. Graham-Harrison, A. M. Makoi, "Evidence contradicts Taliban's claim to respect women's rights", The Guardian, 3 September 2021; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/03/afghanistan-women-defiant-amid-taliban-crackdown>.

³⁵ S. Kermani, "Anger directed at Taliban and Pakistan", BBC, 7 September 2021; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58472978>.

³⁶ A. Shah, "How Will the Taliban Deal With Other Islamic Extremist Groups?", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace August 31, 2021; <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/31/how-will-taliban-deal-with-other-islamic-extremist-groups-pub-85239>.

training: al-Qaeda fighters were killed fighting alongside the Taliban against the Afghan security forces and US troops. Upon entering Kabul, the Taliban freed thousands of jailed militants, including al-Qaeda agents and HQN fighters.

The three groups have a conflicting relationship with the Islamic State of Khorasan province, in part because it has exploited their internal conflicts to steal disillusioned members.

IS-K (3,000) is a regional affiliate of the self-proclaimed Islamic State operating primarily in Afghanistan. It was initially based in the eastern province of Nangahar on the border with Pakistan. Disillusioned commanders from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, which seeks to overthrow the Pakistani state, formed the group in 2015. These commanders fled to Afghanistan following Pakistan's military offensives in the districts adjacent to eastern Afghanistan (formerly known as Federally Administered Tribal Areas) in 2014.

Their declared mission is to restore the historical region of Khorasan, which includes Afghanistan and Central Asia, as part of a global Islamic caliphate. While IS has provided the group with both recognition and funds, IS-K is an operationally autonomous network that has attracted former members of various jihadist groups to the region, including the Taliban, al-Qaeda and the Haqqani network. IS-K and the Taliban are openly enemies: the two groups fought fiercely for resources, recruits and territory in eastern and northern Afghanistan. The Taliban have repeatedly clashed with IS-K to regain control of several rural districts in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces, where IS-K was initially able to establish a territorial base. The Taliban summarily executed imprisoned IS-K fighters, including former leader Maulvi Zia ul-Haq, after taking control of Kabul.

IS-K leaders view the Taliban as "dirty nationalists" due to their agenda, which is confined to the Islamic emirate in Afghanistan, in contrast to IS-K's aspiration to establish a regional Islamic caliphate. After the Doha agreement they portrayed the Taliban as serving the United States. In a long statement released days after the August 26th attack at Kabul airport³⁷, which resulted in 182 deaths, the group also branded the Taliban as a "Pakistani militia" - referring to Pakistan's support - to undermine the alleged legitimacy of the Taliban as an Afghan nationalist group. IS-K used the attack at the airport to boost its global jihadist credentials by positioning itself as the only group in Afghanistan that is fighting both foreign troops and the Taliban, claiming them to be US puppets because of their close cooperation against IS-K.

Finally, Liwa Fatemiyoun³⁸ (or Hezbollah Afghanistan) are Afghan Shia fighters³⁹, a pro-Assad force organized by the IRGC, Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, trained and deployed to fight in Syria and Libya. Some 50,000 Afghans have fought in Syria as part of Fatimiyoun since 2013: many of the recruits were desperate refugees or immigrant workers from the Shiite Afghan community, most from the estimated four million Afghan community living in Iran, of predominantly Hazara ethnicity. Back in Afghanistan - estimated to be between 10,000 and 20,000 - they can pose a threat to the Taliban⁴⁰ who regard them as unfaithful proxies of Iran and have already carried out attacks against them since the 1990s.

³⁷ F. Gardner, "Afghanistan airport attack: Who are IS-K?", BBC, 27 August 2021; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58333533>.

³⁸ BBC, "Afghanistan: Biden was advised to keep 2,500 troops, say generals", 29 September 2021; [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58719834?xtor=AL-72-%5Bpartner%5D-%5Bgnl.newsletters%5D-%5Bheadline%5D-%5Bnews%5D-%5Bbizdev%5D-%5Bisapi%5D&xtor=ES-213-\[BBC%20News%20Newsletter\]-2021September28-\[top+news+stories\]](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58719834?xtor=AL-72-%5Bpartner%5D-%5Bgnl.newsletters%5D-%5Bheadline%5D-%5Bnews%5D-%5Bbizdev%5D-%5Bisapi%5D&xtor=ES-213-[BBC%20News%20Newsletter]-2021September28-[top+news+stories]).

³⁹ A. Shuja Jamal, "The Fatemiyoun Army: Reintegration into Afghan Society", United States Institute of Peace, March 19, 2019; <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/03/fatemiyoun-army-reintegration-afghan-society>.

⁴⁰ L. Hassan, "What Is the Fatemiyoun Brigade and Why Does It Make the Taliban Nervous?", PBS, July 20, 2021; <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/what-is-the-fatemiyoun-brigade-and-why-does-it-make-the-taliban-nervous/>.

The Taliban government has stated that it does not intend to collaborate with the United States to counter the Islamic State group⁴¹.

Government recognition

At the September 2021 meeting members of the Shanghai Cooperation Council, SCO⁴², raised the issue of the recognition and legitimacy of the Taliban government as Afghanistan has held the observer status since 2012.

Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is a continuation of the state administered by the former government. It is possible to communicate with the new government even without effective recognition - which would lead to legitimizing a government based on a dictatorial regime, responsible for serious violations of human rights. It is sufficient to ascertain that the new government exercises its authority over the territory and the population, since what is relevant is the principle of effectiveness. The Doha agreements of 29 February 2020 were signed indeed between the United States and the Emirate of Afghanistan since at that time Afghanistan was still under the aegis of the government of Kabul and the Taliban were only a revolutionary entity. The UN Security Council refers to the Doha Agreements in UNSCR 2513/2020⁴³, and subsequently took note of the fact that the Taliban constitute the effective authority of Afghanistan, it expects them to honor their commitment to allow those who wish to leave the territory⁴⁴. Since this is a case of state continuity, the treaties stipulated by the previous government are inherited by the new government structure and remain in force, except those that can be considered extinct due to a fundamental change in circumstances. It does not seem for the moment that there are bilateral Italy-Afghanistan treaties. Afghanistan, on the other hand, is party to important multilateral treaties, including the United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Statute of the International Criminal Court that the new regime has not denounced, so they continue to bind Afghanistan. The country is a member of the United Nations and other bodies of the system. Until 2020 it was a member of the Human Rights Council and it was elected member of the Commission on the Status of Women, a body of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (it deals with equality and promotes the powers of women in social life: the Afghanistan mandate expires in 2025).

Governments can therefore refrain from taking sides with a formal act of recognition by the Taliban government.

International relations

The international community reacted to the Taliban takeover of Kabul by freezing \$9 billion of the Afghan Central Bank assets and suspending foreign aid that had financed 75% of public spending. Major donors, including the European Union and the United States, see aid as one of the few levers against the Taliban and insist that these funds will not be released until the government fulfills its commitments to establish an inclusive government, to protect the rights of all Afghans and to cut ties with terrorist groups. The Taliban in turn have stepped up a hard line in running the country⁴⁵.

The countries invited to the government inauguration ceremony - that has not yet taken place - China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, Qatar and Turkey - will compete for influence over Kabul.

⁴¹ K. Gannon, "Taliban say they won't work with US to contain Islamic State", AP News, October 9, 2021; <https://apnews.com/article/business-taliban-islamabad-middle-east-islamic-state-group-4d419bb70259f93f7165169889d05ff1>.

⁴² Cina, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India e Pakistan.

⁴³ "The situation in Afghanistan", 10 March 2020; <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2513>.

⁴⁴ UNSCR 2593/2021, "The situation in Afghanistan", 30 August 2021; <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2593>.

⁴⁵ P. Mills, "Afghanistan in review: November 20-December 8, 2021", Institute for the Study of War, 2021;

Pakistan has deep ties to the ruling Taliban who are a friendlier counterpart, but this provokes the resurgence of local militants. Beijing has announced that it will maintain relations with the Taliban executive power but is concerned that the Taliban victory will inspire the rebellion of the Uighurs, a Muslim minority in the province of Xinjiang. **China** can provide economic support, infrastructure and diplomatic recognition and is therefore a key ally for the Taliban⁴⁶. Moscow has set the Taliban on the list of terrorist organizations⁴⁷, **Russia** fears indeed the possibility that Islamist militants infiltrate the former Soviet republics and is the leader in supporting humanitarian aid to keep the situation in balance. The three states have held joint military exercises several times since August 2021 and fear that ISKP will leak into their territories. **India**, which supported President Ghani, suffered a hard hit but decided to take a more pragmatic line towards the new government as it has development projects underway in all 34 Afghan provinces, including the construction of the parliament building in Kabul⁴⁸.

Europe has so far welcomed a small number of Afghans fleeing the country on a humanitarian basis given the unexpected emergency, but in the future the continent will have to prepare for other migratory flows. The second issue concerns the diplomatic-strategic line to be taken with the new government: how to deal with respect for (or lack of) human rights and the strengthening of the Union's foreign and security policy⁴⁹ for a unified and not fragmented action as happened for the extraction of its citizens from Afghanistan. Migration, terrorism and drug trafficking remain the most pressing regional issues that could have a reflection in Europe.

The **Gulf states** are seriously reconsidering the reliability of the Carter Doctrine - the commitment that the oil-dependent states would always employ military force to defend their interests in this economically strategic area. This may be encouraging Saudi Arabia and UAE-Iran dialogue, after Riyadh already signed a military cooperation agreement with Moscow last August.⁵⁰ Qatar provided technical assistance for the reopening of Kabul airport⁵¹ and it played a key role in evacuating 43,000 people and sending humanitarian aid. Doha - which has hosted the Taliban Political bureau since 2012 - was also the first country to send its foreign minister to visit the new government: the diplomatic/international community evacuated from Kabul moved to Doha to continue its activities, including the embassies. Tehran - which hopes for an inclusive government - has complex relations with Kabul: seeing US troops leaving was a relief, but in 2001 **Iran** collaborated in defeating the Taliban; it then resumed pragmatic relations since 2010 in order also to protect the Shiite minority and to try to limit the refugees flow (currently there are 4 million).

The regional geo-political opposition for the influence on Kabul will see Pakistan and China on the one hand, India, Iran and Russia on the other⁵².

⁴⁶ I. Johnson, "How Will China Deal With the Taliban?", Council on Foreign Relations, August 24, 2021; <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/china-afghanistan-deal-with-taliban>.

⁴⁷ Servizio Federale di Sicurezza della Federazione Russa, <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm>: Corte Suprema della Federazione Russa, del 14.02.2003 No GKPI 03-116, entrata in vigore il 04.03.2003.

⁴⁸ S. Miglani, A. Shahzad, Y. Lun Tian, "Analysis: China, Pakistan, India jockey for position in Afghanistan's new Great Game", Reuters, August 23, 2021; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-conflict-greatgame-analysis/analysis-china-pakistan-india-jockey-for-position-in-afghanistans-new-great-game-idCAKBN2FO0VC>.

⁴⁹ A. González Laya, "Europe's post-Afghanistan to-do list", European Council on Foreign Relations, 24 September 2021; <https://ecfr.eu/article/europes-post-afghanistan-to-do-list/>.

⁵⁰ Reuters, "Saudi deputy minister of defense signs military cooperation agreement between the kingdom and Russia", August 24, 2021; <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-deputy-minister-defense-signs-military-cooperation-agreement-between-2021-08-23/>.

⁵¹ The New Arab, "Qatar jet carrying technical team lands in Kabul, after US withdrawal", 01 September 2021; <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/qatar-jet-carrying-technical-team-lands-kabul>.

⁵² P. Wintour, "Taliban takeover of Afghanistan will reshape Middle East, official warns", The Guardian, 13 Sept. 2021; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/13/taliban-takeover-of-afghanistan-is-an-earthquake-for-middle-east>.

New bottles for an old wine? The US-Europe relations and the problem of the European strategic autonomy

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan contributed to reopening the debate about establishing a possible European military capability to be employed – if needed – outside the NATO framework. On August 30, in an interview to the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-president of the European Commission, Josep Borrell, raised the point by proposing the “creation of a European Initial Entry Force that could act rapidly in case of emergency. The EU must be able to protect its interests when the United States does not want to be involved. Our ‘First Entry Force’ should be five thousand men strong, to mobilize at short call” (Fubini, 2021). Borrell words – later relaunched in a *New York Times* op-ed (Borrell 2021) – were followed by well-known reactions from both the supporters and the opposers of the idea of a ‘European Army’. However, this time, things seem moving faster than in the past, also due to the fact that the ‘First Entry Force’ was already on the European institutions’ agenda. In early May, fourteen countries had already put forward the proposal Borrell endorsed to give birth to a European rapid response force to be deployed in international crises. Although Kabul events gave further momentum to this proposal, several questions remain. The willingness to provide Europe with greater strategic autonomy cyclically resurfaces at least since the mid-Nineties, every time clashing with some recurrent problems: problems that, on this occasion too, will probably emerge, reflecting the different visions within and outside the EU on the topic.

The long quest for a European strategic identity

From a historical and institutional perspective, the efforts to give birth to a European strategic identity and the initiative (promoted by the French Prime Minister René Pleven with the support of the Italian President of the Council of Ministers, Alcide De Gasperi) to establish a European Defense Community (EDC) date back to the early Fifties. In an age of growing East-West competition, the project aimed to promote West Germany’s rearmament while reassuring the French public opinion (still sensitive after the Second World War experience) on the possible adverse effects of a ‘German-owned’ process. The decision of the French National Assembly not to ratify the EDC treaty (August 30, 1954), the evolution of the Cold War after Nikita Khrushchev rise to power in the USSR, and the growing US weight in guaranteeing Europe’s security, contributed to reducing the relevance of the problem. The enlargement of the Western Union to Italy, the German Federal Republic (October 23, 1954¹) and West Germany’s entry into NATO (May 9, 1955) became the pillars of a ‘European military order’ that – with only minor changes – would have lasted until the end of the Eighties. In the foreign policy realm, the first coordination structures date back to the early Seventies, with the adoption of the (essentially intergovernmental) mechanism of the European Political Cooperation. In the following years and through further developments this path led to the provisions of the European Single Act (1986) and of the treaties of the Nineties and the 2000s, which contributed to the present-day EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

CFSP’s aims are listed in art. 21.2 of the Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union². They include safeguarding its values, fundamental interests, security,

¹ After the enlargement, the Western Union was re-labelled Western European Union (WEU).

² Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the European Union, in *Official Journal of the European Union*, October 26, 2012, C366/15-C326/45. Online: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF [accessed: September 20, 2021].

independence and integrity; consolidating and supporting democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the principles of international law; preserving peace, preventing conflicts and strengthening international security, in accordance with the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, with the principles of the Helsinki Final Act and with the aims of the Charter of Paris, including those relating to external borders; fostering the sustainable economic, social and environmental development of developing countries, with the primary aim of eradicating poverty; encouraging the integration of all countries into the world economy, including through the progressive abolition of restrictions on international trade; helping the development of international measures to preserve and improve the quality of the environment and the sustainable management of global natural resources, to ensure sustainable development; assist populations, countries and regions confronting natural or man-made disasters; and promoting an international system based on stronger multilateral cooperation and good global governance. They are far-reaching aims, and they can be declined in different forms, not always mutually compatible. Above all, to be pursued credibly, they require enough resources and a bouquet of political, economic, and military tools. Collecting these tools was the tremendous effort that the EU made (although not always in a coherent way) starting, between the late Nineties and the early 2000s, with the approval of the Helsinki Headline Goal, of the Headline Catalogue and the European Capability Action Plan (2001).

Despite these efforts (and despite the *European Global Strategy 2016* “nurtured the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union”³), the results have been limited. In late 2020, the first *Coordinated Annual Review on Defence* (CARD 2020) confirmed that the Union still lacks the defence capabilities needed to meet its level of ambition⁴. The reasons are different. In a nutshell, the problem would be the fact that – at the state level – the European defence initiatives are generally underfunded. Political leaders perceive them as less important than national initiatives, and – when collective security is concerned – NATO is still seen as the main point of reference. Moreover, as the High Representative pointed out: “If the biggest army in the world, the US, only has four types of warships and only one type of main battle tank, it does not make a lot of sense that here in Europe we have 30 different types of warships and 16 different types of main battle tanks” (Brzozowski, 2020). The current EU’s multiannual budget tried to partly solve these problems, at least from the financial perspective. In the same vein, several programs developed in the PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) framework are deemed to be completed in the coming years, significantly promoting the integration of the different national defense industries. However, suppose the EU future military ambitions are the ones that Borrell highlighted; in that case, it needs another qualitative leap, particularly regarding the enabling capabilities, which – unsurprisingly – play a central role among the development priorities that the CARD 2020 indicates.

From words to deeds: a long and winding road

The possibility of such a leap depends on the availability of more financial resources, which the recently created European Defence Fund allotted replacing the old European Defence Industrial Development Programme. However, it also depends on the restart of meaningful political dialogue on common defence and security issues. In this field, France played a central role, which, in the years leading to establishing the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP, since 2007 Common Security and Defence Policy), consolidated in the Saint-Malo declaration (December 4, 1998). However, Paris’ engagement is even older. In 1987, towards the end of the Cold War, it

³ *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels, 2016. Online: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf [accessed: September 20, 2021].

⁴ *2020 Card Report*. Online: <https://eda.europa.eu/docs/default-source/reports/card-2020-executive-summary-report.pdf> [accessed: September 20, 2021].

contributed to creating a joint Franco-German brigade, activated in 1989 and the first seed of the future Eurocorps. Moreover, according to the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), French public opinion is the most sensitive to a possible EU's geopolitical role. In a recent survey, at the end of 2020, 27 per cent of the French respondents considered protection from war and conflict as the area where the EU provides the main benefits; the share was 25 per cent among Austrians, 22 per cent among Swedes, 20 per cent among Germans, 19 per cent among Poles, and 15 per cent among Finns. On the other hand, just 17 per cent of Frenches viewed the economic advantages of EU membership (including access to the single market) as the Union's primary benefit: a smaller share than in any other surveyed country, which could signal a gap between France and its partners in their vision of the EU's role and purpose (Ciulla and Varma, 2021).

French activism mainly emerged during Emanuel Macron's presidency (2017-) due to the rising tensions with Donald Trump's United States. During the 2016 US presidential campaign, the attacks of then-candidate Trump against the Atlantic Alliance and NATO and its supposed obsolescence fuelled a lively debate. After the new President's inauguration, the debate gained intensity, with several European leaders fearing a possible US disengagement from the Old Continent (Birnbaum, 2017). Against this background, in 2017, Paris launched the idea of a European Intervention Initiative (E2I), which took shape in June 2018 with a letter of intent signed by nine 'founding countries'. According to this letter, E2I aims to promote the emergence of a "shared strategic culture" among members and to lay the foundations for future "international military missions and operations, throughout the spectrum of crises"⁵. Paris' initiative raised doubts and criticisms (Pastori, 2018), and its results', too, seem not to have been the expected ones. In 2016, the EU engagement, too, stepped up. Elaborating on the *European Global Strategy* and the conclusions of the Bratislava summit (September 16), the Implementation Plan of November 14 introduced new tools and mechanisms in several fields to foster cooperation among members, address the existing capacity gaps, improve the response and planning instruments, and make collaboration with non-EU partners smoother. Finally, at the end of November, the European Defence Action Plan (EDAP) was adopted. The Plan is the base of the European Defence Fund and was aimed "to ensuring that the European defence industrial base is able to meet Europe's current and future security needs and [...] enhancing the Union's strategic autonomy, strengthening its ability to act with partners"⁶.

Force generation is still a crucial problem. In the past, there were efforts to promote a European rapid reaction force at a light division level (EUROFOR, 1995, in the WEU framework; since 2011 until its disbandment, in 2012, in the CFSP framework). After that, following the guidelines of the 1999 EU Helsinki summit and the Franco-British Le Touquet summit (2003), in 2005, more flexible EU battlegroups were created in the form of multinational reinforced battalions (1,500-2,200 men strong) under the orders of the European Council. However, in this case, too, in the transition from project to implementation, troubles emerged. Moreover, in front of growing commitments, resources substantially declined due to the 2007-2008 financial crisis. Neither the search for greater efficiency nor the adoption of 'pooling & sharing' programs for assets and capabilities could compensate for

⁵ *Letter of Intent between the Defence Ministers of Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom Concerning the Development of the European Intervention Initiative (E2I)*, June 25, 2018. Online: https://www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/535740/9215739/file/LOI_IEI%2025%20JUN%202018.pdf [accessed: September 20, 2021].

⁶ *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. European Defence Action Plan*, Brussels, November 30, 2016. Online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0950&from=en> [accessed: September 20, 2021].

this state of things, worsened by the burden placed on the shoulder of NATO members by the participation in missions like the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan (2001-14). The impact of the 2009-12 Greek crisis and the role that the EU played contributed to fostering bipartisan Euroscepticism in the political élite and the public opinion. In its turn, this Euroscepticism took different forms and – at the government level – led to the growing renationalization of foreign and security policies. Worth noting, also CARD 2020 raise this problem. Significantly, the document points out that only 60 per cent of the national troops and weapons nominally available to NATO are in a fit state to be deployed and that formal EU military missions receive just seven per cent of all EU states' military personnel committed worldwide (Emmott, 2020).

The long quest for a political will

It is primarily a political matter. As already remarked, in several quarters, the perception is that the common defence problems come third after the national ones and the obligations stemming from one country's NATO membership. Moreover, some member states do not regard foreign policy and a common defence among the EU's core functions. A third element is the different legal positions of some countries participating in the EU common defence programs. The neutrality clause included in its Constitution formally limits Austria's possibility to assume a more active role. Sweden and Finland are officially non-aligned countries, although their actual posture is increasingly leaning towards NATO. Austria, Ireland, and Malta formally participate in the CDSP, but their actual contributions are minimal. Finally, the referendum that ratified the country's adoption of the Maastricht Treaty (May 18, 1993) disengaged Denmark from all security and defence issues (Cramer and Franke, 2021). Keeping all these different positions together and coordinating them with those of the other countries is not easy. If the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) gave the system some margins of flexibility, it is the parties' ambiguity that keeps possible contradictions under control. The EU-NATO relationship – and, behind that, the EU-US relationship – is equally problematic. In fact, despite the tensions that, in the last few years, affected the system of their mutual intercourses, the Atlantic Alliance remains the essential frame of reference for many countries, which show no hurry to replace its 'security umbrella' with the protection that the EU could provide them.

Unsurprisingly, after Borrell's declarations, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg reaffirmed NATO's central role in promoting European security. Stoltenberg's arguments revolved around the well-known "three Ds" (no decoupling, do duplication, no discrimination) that then State Secretary Madeleine Albright listed in 1998 replying to the Saint-Malo declaration. While the Alliance's looks favourably at the EU's efforts to strengthen its military capabilities, in Stoltenberg's words, "any attempt to establish parallel structures, duplicate the command structure [...] will weaken our joint capability to work together because with scarce resources we need to prevent duplication and overlapping efforts", also because non-EU members pay 80 per cent of NATO's military expenditure. It is not just an economic problem. According to Stoltenberg, a possible EU security identity "can never replace NATO [...] Any attempt to weaken the bond between North America and Europe will not only weaken NATO, it will divide Europe" (Malnick, 2021). This vision strikingly contrasts with the growing consensus of the European institutions around the need to gain greater strategic autonomy. In her last state of the Union speech, even the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, pointed out the urgency of strengthening the EU's military capabilities because "Europe can – and clearly should – be able and willing to do more on its own"⁷. On the other hand, she also

⁷ The original declaration was signed in 2018: *Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation by the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, Brussels, July 10, 2018. Online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/press/press-releases/2018/07/10/eu-nato-joint-declaration> [accessed: September 20, 2021].

pointed out that this process should not jeopardize cooperation with NATO, which Brussels aim to promote by signing a new EU-NATO Joint Declaration in that field⁸.

In the background, there is the topic of the so-called 'Strategic Compass', the document that the EU's Defence Ministers should adopt between the end of 2021 and the early months of 2022 (but, according to some sources, a final draft could be already released by the end of November 2021). Scheduled by the end of 2020 and delayed by the pandemic, the document's adoption has grown increasingly significant over time (Moro, 2021; Zandee, Stoetman and Deen, 2021), gaining further importance after Borrell's and von der Leyen's declarations. The 'Compass' should define the main threats to European security from five to ten years and agree on well-defined and credible strategic targets to strengthen the EU's role as a defence and security field. However, it would be a hazard to think that its approval could mobilize enough political consensus to lead the transition to a meaningful European strategic autonomy to a successful conclusion and – even more – to fill the existing capability gaps and operational weaknesses. Quite paradoxically, the Compass could also reduce the EU projection capabilities if – in the wake of the Afghan experience – the prevailing line should be that of the supporters of a 'retrenched' Union, mainly focused on protecting its internal security (Pietz, 2021). The EU Battlegroups – envisaged in 2003, operational since 2007, never deployed, and now largely understaffed – offer valuable indications about the problems a project meets in its implementation; problems that can be even greater when the project is complex and ambitious like that of building a 'true European army' (Barigazzi, 2021).

Analysis, evaluation, and forecasts

Emotional considerations have often affected the debate about European military ambitions, and what is currently happening is proof in this sense. While starting before the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the debate on a possible EU First Entry Force largely reflects this experience, which gave it a certain sense of urgency. The question is: how much this sense of urgency will survive the passing of time? On the one hand, the cleavage between the US and Europe (which resurfaced after the enthusiasm of the first part of the year) provides a strong incentive to strengthen the Union's military capabilities. On the other side, doubts remain about who must be the driving force behind the process. Lacking the traditional German counterweight (which often contributed to dampening possible anti-American undertones), French activism risks spurring the opposition of those who fear its impact on the Union's fragile political balance. The European Commission, in its turn, seems to have embraced the idea that strengthening the EU's military capabilities is a desirable aim; however, the central role that states still play in this field drastically reduces the weight of its declarations. Finally, there is the sensitive issue of the EU-NATO relationship. Until now, both sides decided to focus on what they have in common, highlight the room for collaboration between a stronger EU and a most effective NATO, and emphasize the need for more structured cooperation. On the other hand, facing growing commitments and declining resources, defining this cooperation's term could be more complex than envisaged, especially if the US-EU relations deteriorate again.

⁸ The original declaration was signed in 2018: *Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation by the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, Brussels, July 10, 2018. Online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/press/press-releases/2018/07/10/eu-nato-joint-declaration> [accessed: September 20, 2021].

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The new Iranian oil terminal of Bandar-e Jask and its possible consequences

In the summer of 2021, the complex geopolitical situation of the Strait of Hormuz, and more broadly of the Persian Gulf, became even more delicate due to the launch of a new offshore oil terminal by Iran, which is able to play a particularly incisive maritime role in the Strait of Hormuz, due to its geographical position and naval forces (significantly larger and better equipped than those of Arab countries in the area). Adding to a multi-year series of tensions and naval incidents, which often involved *inter alia* naval units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran) and the US Navy Fifth Fleet, the event aroused some concerns in the international press, including assumptions about a possible closure of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran and negative consequences for world energy supplies¹ (a significant part of which are linked, as showed in a specific focus on this same issue of the Strategic Observatory, precisely to energy flows in transit through the Strait). Iran inaugurated the new oil terminal in its port of Bandar-e Jask, located approximately 1,270 km south-east of Tehran, in the Gulf of Oman. Although the related project was known since 2019, the news, anticipated by the dissemination of some satellite images on open sources, was officially announced on Thursday, 22 July 2021 – just 4 days after OPEC plus reached an agreement for an increase in international oil production².

Iran: oil pipeline from Goreh to Bandar e-Jask terminal



Source: <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-growing-iranian-threat-around-the-strait-of-hormuz>
(See also: <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/middle-east/iran-launches-new-oil-export-terminal-near-jask-to-bypass-strait-of-hormuz.html>)

¹ See, for example, the article at the link below:

<https://thearabweekly.com/iran-opens-oil-terminal-bypass-strait-hormuz-impact-likely-limited>

² After several months of complex negotiations, on 18 July 2021, the 23 OPEC Plus nations, which includes the 13 OPEC members plus 10 other major producers, including Russia, reached an agreement for a monthly production increase equal to an average of 400,000 barrels per year. Starting in August 2021, this increase is expected to raise world production by 2% by the end of the year. The group, which at the peak of the pandemics in 2020 had responded with a maxi-cut of 9.7 million barrels per day to counter the fall in oil prices, should return to full production in September 2022. This at least in theory, because OPEC Plus may have to react to further unforeseen events. The final ok for the production increases in 2022 should arrive next December, when the group is expected to re-examine the situation. And before then there will be other opportunities to change direction if necessary, as the OPEC+ summits will continue to be held monthly. Please refer to: <https://www.ilsol24ore.com/art/opec-agosto-meno-tagli-all-offerta-petrolio-AEQ0QpX>

The new infrastructure will allow Iran to export hydrocarbons and ships to carry them so to 'bypass' what is currently Tehran's oil terminal, located in the port of Kharg, that is in the Strait of Hormuz Iranian coastal area. Compared to that of Kharg, the new terminal is located further south, thus allowing ships traveling to the Arabian Sea to save fuel and days of navigation and, at least theoretically, to reduce some serious risks related to sanctions imposed by the US on Iranian oil exports, i.e., controls and possible seizures by US and other Western military vessels navigating the Strait³.

The project, worth 2 billion US dollars, is underway since June 2019, and is currently over 80% completed. It has involved so far about 250 contractors and local companies. In terms of employment, the value of the project is estimated to be around 5,000 direct and 15,000 indirect jobs. Also in light of the storage capacity of the port of Jask, equal to several million barrels of oil, starting from next autumn the structure is expected to manage the transport of about one million barrels of oil per day. This is exactly the transfer capacity of the new 1,000 kilometers oil pipeline to which the Jask oil terminal is connected, originating in Goreh, a city in the southwestern Iranian province of Busher⁴.

In the initial phase, however, the barrels of oil exported daily should be included between 300,000 and 350,000⁵. The new facility, whose main offshore components are located approximately 7 km (4.7 miles) off the coast, can be used for different varieties of crude oil, but also for gas condensates; it is equipped with three metering systems and six 36-inch pipelines that connect to three single point moorings (SPMs), and would currently allow the pumping of 30,000 barrels of crude oil into tankers per hour⁶. The former Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, said the launch of the new terminal can be considered as a "strategic move to avoid the Strait of Hormuz" (defined "vulnerable today"), an "important step for Iran" in order to pursue the continuity of its oil export, decrease the dependence on the Kharg terminal and increase its competitiveness with respect to Iran's main regional rivals. "The oil industry is very important to us, and it is also important to the enemy", declared the Iranian leader. Rouhani said that on July 22, 2021, about 100 tons of oil were loaded to be transported out of the country without having to pass through the Strait of Hormuz, showing "the failure of US sanctions". Similar statements also came from the outgoing Iranian Minister of Oil, who affirmed the new terminal is the first in over 100 years of history of the national oil industry to allow oil exports not transiting through the Strait of Hormuz, a "historical step" for Iran, a national project representing "a manifestation of the breakdown of sanctions"⁷⁸.

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/22/iran-opens-new-oil-terminal-in-bid-to-bypass-crucial-strait-of-hormuz-for-exports.html>

⁴ <https://www.nsenergybusiness.com/news/iran-opens-goreh-jask-pipeline/>
<https://tankterminals.com/news/jask-oil-terminals-storage-capacity-to-be-increased/>

⁵ <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/07/22/Iran-opens-new-oil-export-terminal-bypassing-Strait->

⁶ On the features of the oil terminal see the following websites:
<https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/petrochemicals/071821-iran-set-to-start-first-oil-export-terminal-on-the-gulf-of-oman> ; <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-bypasses-strategic-hormuz-strait-to-export-crude-oil-via-gulf-of-oman/>
<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iran-starts-oil-exports-from-oman-sea-bypassing-strait-of-hormuz/2311448>

⁷ For the quoted declarations see: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/22/iran-opens-oil-terminal-to-bypass-strategic-strait-of-hormuz>; <https://sicurezzainternazionale.luiss.it/2021/07/22/iran-inaugurato-un-terminal-aggirare-le-minacce-ad-hormuz/>

⁸ After those imposed following the Islamic revolution of 1979, further sanctions against Tehran were decided by Washington from the mid-1990s, in response to Iranian support to Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as well as its nuclear program. Due to the latter and human rights violations, sanctions against Iran were also adopted by the UN (2006, 2007, 2008 and 2010) and the EU (2007, 2010 and 2012). With the agreement on the Iranian nuclear dossier reached in Vienna in 2015 (JCPOA), a large part of all these sanctions, concerning not only Iranian energy exports, were lifted or eased. Then the Trump administration, following its withdrawal from the JCPOA (2018), largely reintroduced US sanctions against Tehran. In the hope of being able to launch new negotiations on the nuclear

Assessment and forecasting

Iranian oil exports still partly suffer from US sanctions, (re)introduced after the decision by the Trump Administration to exit from the JCPOA in May 2018, which led to a significant drop in oil exports⁹. Partly due to the declines in energy demand linked to COVID-19 the latter passed at least officially, from over 2,500,000 barrels per day in 2019 (a figure lower than the production levels of 3,800,000 in 2018) to less than 500,000 in 2020, bringing a net decrease in Iran's main source of income in hard currency, on which the country's economy significantly depends¹⁰. More or less progressively, in 2021 there was a partial recovery of the energy sector activities, also because Tehran increased production, mainly thanks to supply agreements with Beijing for more than 1,000,000 barrels of oil per day to China (though the quotas actually **reached** their destination **were** at least 30% lower). In addition, the profits from Iranian oil exports were affected by the costs due to middlemen changing export documents to show a different origin for Iranian oil, and then buying goods and shipping them back to Iran¹¹. As well as Syria and Venezuela, China tried to support the Islamic Republic when it lost ground in oil and gas exports due to sanctions. Ranking third in the world for proven oil reserves and second for natural gas reserves¹², according to recent estimates Iran could bring crude oil production back to 3.8 million barrels per day - and possibly more - within a few months; however, this goal seems quite difficult without an agreement with the US administration lifting Washington's sanctions against Tehran¹³. Moreover, since last April, Tehran and the Biden administration have been engaging in indirect talks, currently stalled, to restart the negotiations aimed at relaunching the agreement on Tehran's nuclear program. After all, such negotiations see a series of uncertainties, due *inter alia* to the recent settlement of the new conservative President Ebrahim Raisi (August 2021) and its possible consequences on Iran's domestic and foreign policies, but also how the US will decide to set up the relationship with Iran in a particularly complex phase, marked among others things by the recent and difficult US withdrawal from Afghanistan¹⁴.

Although Iran's economy is still very much affected by US sanctions and serious socio-economic effects linked to COVID-19, the country could not revoke in the short term the quite assertive posture it adopted in the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian-Persian Gulf, as well as the whole Middle East. After all, by ending possibly provocative actions towards US military ships and

dossier, but also to allow Tehran to respond to the Covid-19 emergency in the country, the latter were then partially reduced by the new Biden administration, in June 2021. For a summary of the history of sanctions on Iran please refer to the following link: <https://complyadvantage.com/knowledgebase/iran-sanctions/> For further details see the following sources: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RS20871.pdf>

<https://www.filodiritto.com/le-sanzioni-degli-usa-verso-iran-ed-il-regolamento-di-blocco> ;

<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/il-difficile-puzzle-delle-sanzioni-Tehran-23223>

⁹ Signed during the second term of the Obama administration, on July 14, 2015, after negotiations with Tehran that took place in Vienna and also involved the EU, China, France, the UK, Germany and Russia, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action lifted a series of sanctions on Tehran, which had hampered its economy and severely reduced its hydrocarbon exports. In exchange for the lifting of sanctions, Iran had accepted some conditions aimed at stopping the military dimension of its nuclear program, including IAEA inspections of its nuclear facilities.

¹⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-oil-production-analysis-int-idUSKBN2AF101>

<https://sicurezzainternazionale.luiss.it/2021/07/22/iran-inaugurato-un-terminal-aggirare-le-minacce-ad-hormuz/>

¹¹ Ibidem. See also: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/irans-oil-exports-rising-trend-drop-may-china-buying-ebbs-2021-05-19/> <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/exclusive-chinas-ccpc-takes-centre-stage-iran-venezuela-oil-trade-sources-2021-07-22/> <https://iranintl.com/en/world/iran-selling-more-oil-2021-middlemen-reap-profit>

¹² https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Iran/pdf/iran_exe.pdf

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ According to press reports released in early September 2021, Iran's nuclear talks could restart in Autumn 2021, more or less simultaneously with the effective start of the public work of the new Iranian administration; see also: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-says-nuclear-talks-wont-resume-for-2-3-months/>

more or less specious controls on oil tankers and merchant ships of other states, or the support to variously radical Shiite groups or various regional disputes, as well as the military nuclear program and the related missile proliferation, Iranian regional prestige and influence could be weakened. This could consequently decrease its deterrence capabilities, while on the other hand Tehran's credibility towards its allies (think about Hezbollah in Lebanon, or the Syrian regime). A demonstration of weakness in the foreign policy domain could be perceived, at least by a part of the population, as a signal of internal fragility (consequently decreasing the fear, or the consensus, of part of the Iranian society towards the ruling elite). At the same time, it is not sure that the new President will be more 'hawkish' towards the US than its predecessor, and that Tehran will adopt overly risky foreign policy decisions, that is to say actions that will irreversibly raise tensions with its regional and Western rivals. Indeed, although not without possible contradictions or ambiguities, the country had already shown its willingness to negotiate for a progressive and complete lifting of sanctions by joining the 2015 Vienna agreement, largely compromised by the unilateral decision to leave it taken in 2018 by the Trump administration (supported from Israel and Saudi Arabia, never fully convinced about the agreement and any action could make Iranian economy get back to growth)¹⁵.

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz, repeatedly threatened by Tehran in order to try to make pressure on the US and other rivals, is not necessarily more likely now that the country is equipped with an additional oil terminal. Though relevant, and perhaps useful to let Tehran sit at a negotiating table in a better position than in the recent past, the latter cannot (yet) serve the total oil export of the country (albeit reduced by sanctions), a wide part of which is moreover directed to China.

A closure of the Strait could damage Iran, whose territory depends on the Strait not only for oil exports, and virtually its relations with an economic and political partner which would be very difficult to renounce; this also in light of the recent agreement between Iran and China, providing for 400 billion dollars of Chinese investments in Iran in the next 25 years¹⁶ (not to speak of the serious consequences to which Tehran would expose in terms of further sanctions and possible military retaliation by Western and/or Arab countries using the Strait of Hormuz for their oil and gas transport needs). Although perhaps overemphasizing its strategic value, even the statements released by Iranian leaders in the aftermath of the new terminal inauguration have highlighted the latter represents a victory in the confrontation with the US because it can let Iran possess an alternative route for its oil export, not for closing the Strait of Hormuz (regardless of legal considerations, to be carried out completely this action would also require the assent of Oman).

In any case, even assuming this scenario as possible in light of certain domestic features of the Ayatollahs' regime¹⁷, geopolitical literature has repeatedly observed this event could cause significant increases in hydrocarbons' prices, at least in the short term, as well as consequent negative economic impacts, but it would hardly bring very serious and long-lasting energy supply crises in Western countries. This because of storage energy stocks and the possibility to diversify oil & gas routes and transits, as well as energy sources both at the global and regional levels¹⁸. That said, considering the international tension reached in the Strait of Hormuz is all but free from risks of miscalculation and misperception, an effective and rapid diplomatic action for detente is needed and desirable. This could decrease political risk about energy flows in the area, some of which are

¹⁵ See also: <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/5/8/17328520/iran-nuclear-deal-trump-withdraw>

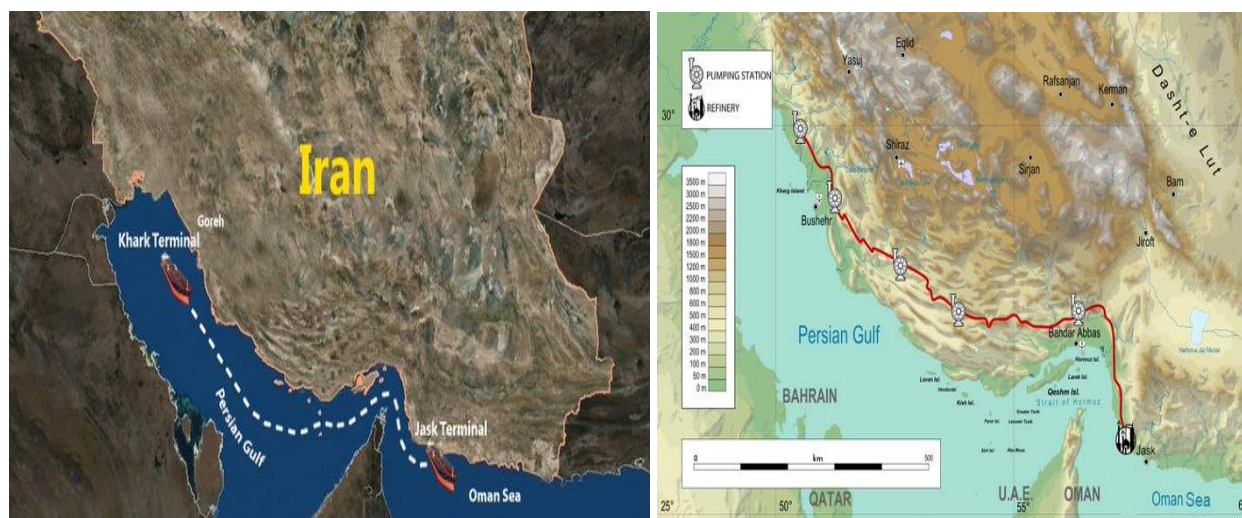
¹⁶ <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/85122>

¹⁷ Like other political systems, especially if not democratic, in the event of a serious international crisis Iran may take scarcely rational decisions, not hesitating to take overly offensive or counterproductive actions, functional to serve almost exclusively the interests of small but influent domestic groups aimed at becoming risk acceptant in order to try to maintain the status quo.

¹⁸ This had emerged even in *The Strait of Hormuz and the threat on an oil shock* (Joint Economic Committee of the US Congress), one of the first study on the topic; it was published indeed in 2007, that is when the Western dependency on oil coming from the Persian Gulf countries was higher than today.

directed to Italy. Meanwhile, the European Mission Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH), launched in 2020 thanks to several EU states (including Italy), could increase regional maritime security, and thus contribute, at least indirectly, to reduce geopolitical risk¹⁹. Also due to the potential instability of areas such as the Strait of Hormuz, the diversification of energy transits and their areas of origin are some cornerstones of Italian energy security; the storage and diversification of energy sources are important as well. All this applies in the short term, but even more in a medium to long-term perspective; it is likely also in this light that Italy is putting growing attention to energy sources alternative to fossil fuels²⁰.

Pictures concerning the new oil terminal of Bandar-e Jask



Source: <https://twitter.com/vezaratnaft> (August, 2021)

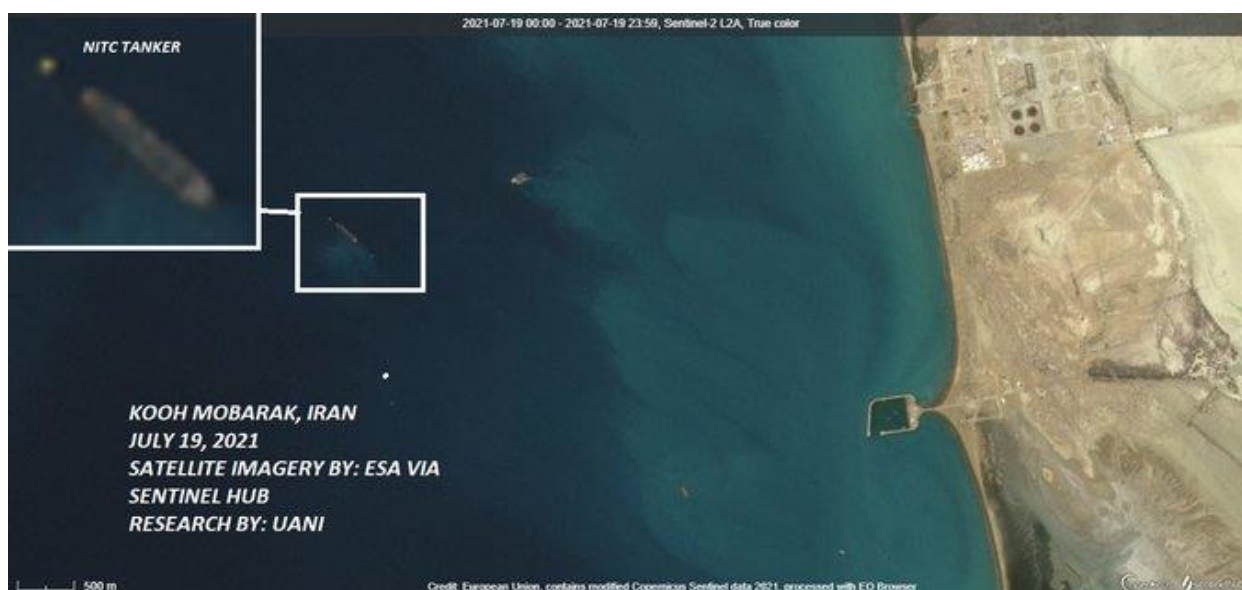
¹⁹ For example, in this regard it was hypothesized the mission could also stimulate the establishment of a confidence measure with Iran as for how to behave during casual close maritime encounters - similar to the non-binding procedure defined in 2014 with the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (Cues) between countries participating in the Western Pacific Naval Symposium. See the article by F. Caffio at the link below:

<https://www.analisidifesa.it/2020/01/la-francia-guidera-la-missione-navale-europea-ma-non-ue-ad-hormuz-con-la-partecipazione-dellitalia/> Launched by France at the Foreign Affairs Council of the EU, 20 January 2020, and supported on a political or politico-military level also by Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal, EMASOH is a European initiative (but not formally by the EU) aimed not at containing Iran, but rather protecting the freedom of navigation and maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz. It provides for the use of air and naval assets for activities of control and surveillance. The Italian military participation was supposed to begin in 2020, but then it was postponed;

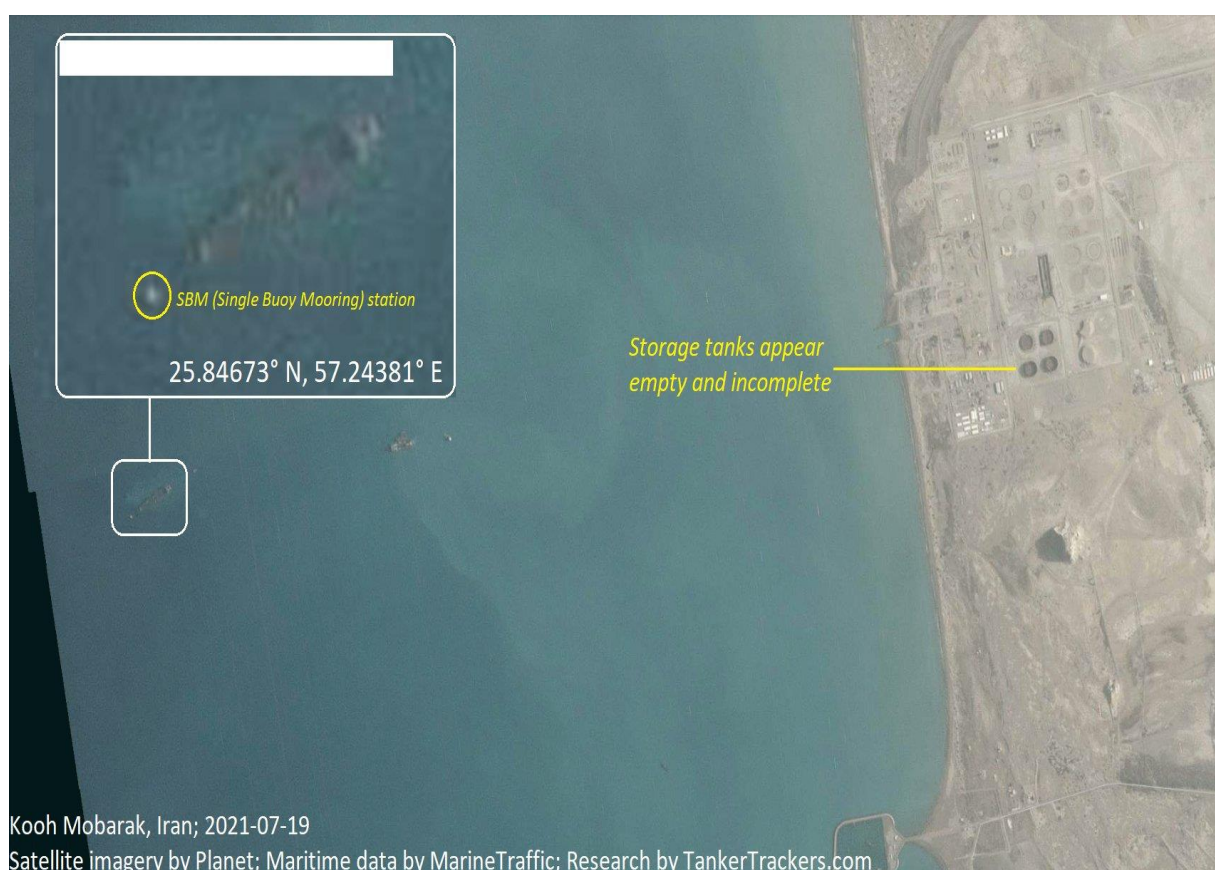
recently, it was included in a resolution of the Italian Council of Ministers in the summer of 2021, providing for the use of a ship and two aircraft (tot. 193 units of staff). On EMASOH and the Italian respective participation, please refer to the following link: <http://documenti.camera.it/leg18/dossier/pdf/DI0373.pdf>

²⁰ We refer mainly to renewable sources of energy but, assuming it could be used in the next future as a sufficiently competitive, safe and non-polluting source, and not only on a limited scale, also to fourth generation nuclear power, on which the Italian Minister of Ecological Transition released very relevant statements in September 2021.

National Iranian Tanker Company ship and mooring station close to Bandar-e Jask oil terminal



Source: <https://twitter.com/pjonesbilly>



Source: <https://twitter.com/TankerTrackers>

The military applications of Artificial Intelligence and the evolution of warfare: Swarming and Machine Teaming

The military applications of Artificial Intelligence¹

There is an increasingly tight interconnection between *intelligence* and AI. Countering contemporary asymmetric threats will progressively require a sound use of AI, which can help, by instance, determine the size and position of troops and armaments belonging either to allies or enemies; evaluate the feasibility of military actions; alter the conduct of operations depending on the evolving battlefield context.

The role of AI in supporting *intelligence* processes – from data gathering to analysis – and reiterated in his turn that never before has the military been so tightly supported by AI. Specifically, the increasing deployment of aircraft technology can be rewarding indeed for investors, as it affords them a decisive, battlefield superiority.

We must take into consideration the potential of AI specifically applied to confined areas, such as airports or other targets, or wider ones such as urban areas, and which can be further enhanced by integrated systems at the national or transnational level.

Furthermore, we must consider that AI potentially imposes a radical change onto the *Revolution in Military Affairs* (RMA): it is, in brief, a true revolution to the deadly detriment of those who do not adjust to AI's offensive and defensive capacities. The traditional, combat 'mechanic system' is undergoing great and rapid developments thanks to AI, while cyberwarfare also grows in efficiency. As a consequence, command and control systems will increasingly be influenced by AI technology and capabilities, thus also requiring a regular updating in the field of military affairs.

In addition, we must consider the AI different perspectives of specific military applications, in particular the "swarming and "machine teaming". Swarming indicates the deployment of low-cost, autonomous elements (generally small drones or robots) coordinately acting to carry out tasks without central command. Given the rapid development of technology, the security and defense community wished to gain a better understanding of the challenges and risks related to swarming, especially as an effective defence system against such hypothetical attacks is still lacking.

Artificial Intelligence and the evolution of warfare²

What can we assess about the role of AI in the next phase of *Revolution in Military Affairs* (RMA – in other words, the evolution of warfare) which bears direct consequences on the very same concept of war and the decision-making process? The assessment is that AI potentially imposes a radical change onto RMA: it is, in brief, a true revolution to the deadly detriment of those who do not adjust to AI's offensive and defensive capacities.

For instance, it can aptly support the decision-making process by providing a prompt analysis of all primary and secondary factors that could affect strategic and operational planning. Furthermore, the combination of electronic warfare and cyber capacity grants an extraordinary offensive and defensive military leverage, as it allows a thorough monitoring of enemy targets without exposing one's own pilots and recognition assets to risks and threats³.

¹ *The military applications of Artificial Intelligence. A focus on the 8th Beijing Xiangshan Forum (24-26 October 2018)*, START InSight, November 4th, 2018, in <https://bit.ly/2EnPdfH>.

² *Artificial Intelligence and the evolution of warfare. Report on 8th Beijing Xiangshan Forum*, START InSight, November 6th, 2018, in <https://bit.ly/2zQeuLO>.

³ *Ibidem*.

The same thing applies to critical infrastructures, whose security and safety can still be guaranteed with limited resources, be it in terms of soldiers or equipment. Within this context, the deployment of (partially or totally) remote controlled or AI controlled robots, without entirely replacing troops on the battlefield, nevertheless becomes instrumental in supporting them; and represents a technological and cultural development which, in asymmetric conflicts above all, can still safeguard the human component's primacy⁴.

On the virtual level, an ever more realistic wargaming activity takes place, which greatly benefits from AI in terms of both training and planning. And as yet another dimension of the contemporary battlefield, the social media represent a great opportunity for surveillance and analysis, in spite of the looming threat of mass control. It is important underline how, with specific reference to wargaming, the private sector plays a fundamental role⁵.

The traditional, combat 'mechanic system' is undergoing great and rapid developments thanks to AI, while cyberwarfare also grows in efficiency. As a consequence, command and control systems will increasingly be influenced by AI technology and capabilities, thus also requiring a regular updating in the field of military affairs. Automatic systems will also increasingly play a leading role, particularly in training and direct combat. It's now clear that what separates winners from losers on the global battlefield is supremacy in the intelligence sector, where the support of Artificial Intelligence is becoming paramount.

Artificial Intelligence is about to play its part in combat. But is it up to the task? Such is the *vexata quaestio*. We must consider the rapidly progressive evolution of intelligence on the contemporary battlefield, and the forthcoming, tactical role of AI (which essentially translates as 'battlefield-bound'); as far as the strategic and operational ones, we are not there just yet, despite progress being made. Should a direct, ground confrontation between two actors with equal military capabilities take place, AI would cease to represent a crucial factor.

AI made two key contributions to the military and intelligence fields: in the first place, it represents a launching platform for future, autonomous weapons; secondly, it's fundamental in *problem solving* and *decision-making* processes⁶.

Furthermore, we must consider the social implications of AI: how Artificial Intelligence could potentially be used to influence and alter social structures and functions, and to induce a change in individuals' attitudes and opinions? It is an issue which clearly paves the ground for a critical analysis on ethical issues linked to certain applications of AI within RMA.

AI's diffuse application does indeed induce changes in the social behavior of populations which are subjected to remote-controlled surveillance. And it doesn't make a difference whether such control is exercised by an external actor (like an enemy or an influencer) or by one's own government: citizens simply adapt their behavior to the new situation. In the same way, AI can bring about shifts in the enemy's attitude, specifically in operational and tactical terms; the Taliban in Afghanistan for instance, reshaped their techniques and tactics as a result of the deployment of drones.

Can we figure out the impact of robots in asymmetric wars, in Iraq or Afghanistan for instance? How would that affect the mind of the enemy and of the local populations?

The degree of development and deployment of Artificial Intelligence is contingent upon an individual actor's ethical issues and constraints. But it's those who overlook ethics and push the boundaries of AI, who will take the lead in the battlefield⁷.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

Swarming and machine teaming: different perspectives

Swarming indicates the deployment of low-cost, autonomous elements (generally small drones or robots) acting in coordination with one another to carry out tasks without central command. Early examples of (semi-autonomous) commercial swarms -like drones flying in formation- have already been on display. Military use is actively researched but currently restrained due to limitations in reliability and predictability. Autonomous systems also raise ethical issues which are being discussed at UN-level.

Given the rapid development of technology, the security and defense community wished to gain a better understanding of the challenges and risks related to swarming, especially as an effective defence system against such hypothetical attacks is still lacking.

Autonomous systems and underlying technologies: the state of play⁸

Autonomous systems are systems that can complete a task without direct human involvement, interacting instead with the environment by means of sensors and computer programming. On a basic level, they must be able to perceive the environment and process it in a way that serves as an input to the decision-making process. The critical part is planning; designing autonomous systems in itself is not complicated and depends on 2 key variables: the complexity of the task and the environment.

For instance, autonomous navigation is very context-dependent, with air or underwater environments presenting less obstacles compared to land, where interaction with people or machines must also be taken into consideration. Also, the civilian environment is less challenging, more predictable or controllable, which might not be the case on the battlefield. We can have autonomous cars and military vehicles if we can pre-map the area but we need to unlock new possibilities in vision-based guidance. One major achievement is autonomous drones for refuel in flight, which demonstrate we can attain complex operations in air and detection. There have also been developments in resilience, as components can be discarded⁹.

The limitation of perception intelligence is the most important obstacle towards use of robotics systems in predictable environments, especially in the military field, as systems can be easily tricked and limitations exploited by enemies. Machines can process images and understand words but have no common sense.

Planning decision-making: there are limitations with synthetic reasoning. Computers can calculate far beyond human capabilities, they are powerful, fast, precise, but they can not generalise from previous experiences and adapt to new situations. Small robots don't have enough computer-power in them.

Machine-machine teaming: systems can share information including target information, perform collaborative operations for simple tasks (flying in formation, surveillance, inspect buildings in uncomplex environment). Research projects in the US for machine-machine teaming in distributed attacks operations (LOCUST). Major constraint is reliance on communication infrastructure.

Human-machine teaming: no symmetrical communication between machine and humans is a great limitation (no voice command for critical functions). Finding the right ratio is also difficult, as we might need more than one operator for one system, especially when things go wrong.

⁸ Vincent Boulanin, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in *12 perspectives on swarming*, Report START InSight for Armasuisse S+T, Workshop on *Swarming and Machine Teaming*, Thun, Switzerland, November 21st, 2018.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

Intelligence domain: systems can generate maps, detect explosives and locate weapons fire, threat assessment. Actively researched: automated surveillance, intelligence data fusion and analysis. Or robots doing practical, autonomous operations¹⁰.

Targeting: most critical application of autonomy which is being discussed at UN-level as well. Can only engage very large material targets and specific signatures, but do not have ability to make distinction between civilian and military target. Actively researched (e.g. DARPA Trace).

In brief: swarming is a means to an end. Feasibility depends on task, with 'general' or ill-defined tasks being the most complicated. Complex interaction with other agents, human or machines might be difficult to engineer. Autonomy is much easier to achieve for commercial applications.

Swarming and the evolution of military strategy: consequences for international stability¹¹

Swarming is considered the 5th evolution of military strategy. There are four other ways to apply force (military strategies)¹²:

1. Denial - breaks through the enemy forces and destroys them; target is military; e.g. WWI – Blitzkrieg
2. Punishment - hits civilians and infrastructure to exert indirect pressure; e.g. WWII's bombings, terrorism
3. Risk - tries to win over adversaries by threatening an escalation (psychological warfare); e.g. US USSR Cold War
4. Decapitation: targets the enemy leadership thanks to technology. It can compensate for lack / withdrawal of troops, as was the case with Bush and Obama's counter-terror operations, which were fought not only through human beings but technology (drones). Technological advances brought about what is known as RMA (Revolution in Military Affairs).

Swarming deemed the 5th evolution of military strategy because of the way it can concentrate mass, firepower, speed, forces in a way that is unseen in human history.

Requirements for a swarm to work: it must count on a large number of small units with sensory capabilities, easy to maneuver, able to observe, react and act in coordination. In terms of technology, we are already there. 3D printing of gun components and drones' challenges states' monopoly of the use of force (by non-state actors, open source access). During the notorious battle of Mosul (2017) several Iraqi soldiers were killed by drones operated by ISIS, in what is the first instance of the West losing tactical aerial supremacy. Swarming tactics is a means to wage asymmetric wars. Before we see physical manifestation of swarms, however, we will witness cyber manifestations of swarm. Malware equipped with autonomous capabilities already exist¹³.

Iron domes on the other hand, represent an early example of the emergence of defensive swarms. Research is being conducted on swarms competing against swarms. And also on machines and robots which can be recomposed. War is increasingly being waged by human and technological surrogates. China and the US are investing heavily in AI, which provides many advantages as it's cheaper and allows States to deny an operation. A report by US DoD (2016) declares how autonomy is the new super-bullet in future armed conflict.

But what's the impact of swarming on strategic stability? Stability exists if there is no incentive to attack a neighbor (defensive advantage). Right now we are living in a defensive-dominant international environment because of nuclear weapons. In the cyber domain though, the offensive already has the advantage. If swarming becomes a mainstream strategy, there will be a likely shift

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Jean-Marc Rickli, Geneva Center for Security Policy (GCSP), in *12 perspectives on swarming*, Report START InSight for Armasuisse S+T, Workshop on Swarming and Machine Teaming, Thun, Switzerland, November 21st, 2018.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

in the offense-defense balance resulting in a more conflictual international environment, where conflict becomes the norm and not the exception¹⁴.

Concluding, autonomy and swarming are two key characteristics of the battlefield of the future; 3D printing and swarming for military application will have tremendous implications.

Manned-unmanned teaming (MUM-T) and swarming: possibilities and challenges in military applications¹⁵

Is swarming a game changer? Having ‘many of something’ is not a problem; what you want is to have cheap sub-systems with no single point of failure and a reduced number of operators.

The antagonist perspective is considerably different from the civil perspective. Swarms rely on communication and satellite navigation and should you clash with adversaries who can master a high technological command, you can end up being GPS-denied, with a lack of communication in a contested environment, having then to increase the robustness of each agent. Many robust systems are quite expensive and this is why it will probably take some time before we see swarms in military applications, more likely in non-antagonistic environments (like surveillance missions). Another limitation is that the battlefield requires predictability¹⁶.

Manned-unmanned teaming (MUM-T) for swarms has been a research topic for quite some time but there are a number of challenges to be addressed, the main question being: how to control a fleet for different missions, at different operational levels and with different fleet sizes? How to reach the ‘one operator-many agents’ balance? Teaming itself is quite complex, there must be a broad, dynamic interplay between the operator and the system, but machines understanding humans and *viceversa* is inherently difficult. Finding a solution which is robust for such interplay is a challenge. And robustness (which is desirable in many aspects, for instance when swarms lose agents, and in the military field), might lead to fragility in context¹⁷.

Other issues to take into account for flying objects are flight safety rules and policies (the air space is not free) and difficulties linked to testing. Stability and predictability are paramount in military applications, and because a system acts within its own software-designed space, autonomy is to make that design space very large, as to include many potential events. But outside of simulation, testing a system remains difficult and unpredictability takes over.

Concluding, what is important to underline is that there are many demonstrations on how to control a swarm for one single task but a robust interface between man and machine is still research topic.

Swarming, the Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) and Meaningful Human Control¹⁸

Autonomous weapons raise ethical issues debated at UN-level. UNIDIR (UN Institute for Disarmament Research) has been dealing with UAVs (un-manned aerial vehicles) since 2015, inheriting previous work started in New York at around 2012 and considering the issue mainly from a human rights perspective, with concerns about the use of Reapers and Predators (drones). As part of its role, it encourages the international community to consider what new challenges may emerge (e.g. strategic implications of un-manned systems with the core question of whether their features enable new military practices). Un-manned nature creates new opportunities and risks, the risks

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Martin Hagström, FOI - Swedish Defence Research Agency, in *12 perspectives on swarming*, Report START InSight for Armasuisse S+T, Workshop on Swarming and Machine Teaming, Thun, Switzerland, November 21st, 2018.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ George Woodhams, UNIDIR Security and Society Programme, in *12 perspectives on swarming*, Report START InSight for Armasuisse S+T, Workshop on Swarming and Machine Teaming, Thun, Switzerland, November 21st, 2018.

being that if you don't put personnel in harm's way, the military is more likely to deploy lethal force. As part of internal research, UNIDIR tried to understand how it could encourage some of the states engaged with debates around the use of drones, to think about drivers for these systems to become smaller¹⁹.

Drivers for the acquisition of smaller systems: they are pilot-friendly (they do not put pilots out of job); they are affordable; they are expendable in combat (low-cost). An issue for the UN to consider in the long-term, is whether due to the low-risk and cheap deployment, these systems might lead to problematic military practices. Relevant to this debate and developments, is the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, a UN negotiating body designed to address certain weapons systems with implications on international humanitarian law. The framework is to ban or restrict the use of specific types of weapons that are considered to cause unnecessary or unjustifiable suffering to combatants or to affect civilians indiscriminately; mines, IED, cluster ammunitions, etc. A Group of Government Experts to address Lethal Autonomous Weapons systems (LAWs) was established in 2014, with the participation of 84 states; experts and military advisors are regularly invited in²⁰.

Since 2014, a key discussion is on meaningful human control: *Why is it an ethical concern that increasing autonomy might mean increasing detachment from the individual and the deployment of lethal force?* There are those with ethical reasons in favour of LAWs (protection of military personnel, for instance), others concerned with retaining human agency in decisions to use lethal force; the loss of human dignity, moral responsibility and human accountability. In the first two years of conversation, a major problem was characterization of the systems under consideration. Key challenge: huge diversity of states and military capabilities. Level of insight is difficult. The point is that there is a different way of characterising those systems and terminology. Further consideration of the human element in the use of lethal force – aspects of human-machine interaction in the development, deployment and use of emerging technology in the area of LAWs; review of potential military applications of related technologies in the context of the Group's work; possible options for addressing the humanitarian and international security challenges posed by emerging technologies in the area of LAWS²¹.

In brief, there's a need to identify best practices and practical measures to encourage info sharing for improving complying with international law. Beyond technology, there are different national perspectives that come from underlying ethical arguments. Swarming has not been mentioned specifically over the last four years but its the one area of autonomy that catches the imagination the most.

Analysis, assessment, forecast

What emerges from the observation of the evolution of the Artificial Intelligence applications is that AI made two key contributions to the military and intelligence fields: in the first place, it represents a launching platform for future, autonomous weapons; secondly, it's fundamental in problem solving and decision-making processes. Furthermore, we must consider the social implications of AI because it could potentially be used to influence and alter social structures and functions, inducing a change in individuals' attitudes and opinions.

Regarding Swarming and the evolution of military strategy, autonomy and swarming are two key characteristics of the battlefield of the future; 3D printing and swarming for military application will have tremendous implications.

About manned-unmanned teaming (MUM-T) and swarming, considering the possibilities and the challenges in military applications, what is important to underline is that there are many

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

demonstrations on how to control a swarm for one single task but a robust interface between man and machine is still research topic.

On the topic of “swarming, the Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) and Meaningful Human Control”, in brief, there’s a need to identify best practices and practical measures to encourage info sharing for improving complying with international law. Beyond technology, there are different national perspectives that come from underlying ethical arguments. Swarming has not been specifically mentioned over the last four years but it’s the one area of autonomy that catches the imagination the most.

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Osservatorio Strategico

Part Two

IDEF 2021: three new submarine programs from Turkish industry

During the 15th edition of the International Defense Industry Fair (IDEF 2021), Turkey's most important defense event held from August 17-20, Savunma Teknolojileri Mühendislik (STM), one of Turkey's leading defense industry companies, unveiled the 500-ton STM500 submarine project, along with the TS1700, a 1700-ton submarine project.

The STM500 is a shallow-water diesel-electric attack submarine designed to operate up to 30 days at a depth of more than 250 meters. The unit can accommodate 18 + 6 (special forces) crew members with eight modern heavy torpedoes and guided missiles.

In addition to general submarine operations, the STM500 mini submarine is specifically designed to conduct shallow water operations in addition to normal submarine ones. It will also conduct UXV operations, which will involve the deployment of unmanned underwater vehicles when necessary.

The submarine's specifications incorporate some of the latest technology such as lithium-ion batteries.

Various types of sonar may be installed on the submarine, and it is anticipated that information collected by these sensors will be processed by the combat management system. The platform will be equipped with an optronic periscope and an ESM antenna.



Features

Length: 42 meters

Width: 4.2 meters

Height: 8.5 meters

Displacement: 485 tons on the surface, 540 tons in immersion

Speed: 18 knots maximum (probably underwater), 5 knots cruise

Propulsion: 2 diesel generators, lithium-ion batteries, 1.5 MW Electric motor

Range: 3,200 nm on diesel, 75 nm on batteries (or 4,000 nm with diesel + AIP)

Armament: 4 x 533 mm (21") torpedo tubes with 4 reloads.

Crew: 18

PAX: 6 special forces¹

The TS1700 submarine is a diesel-electric submarine designed by STM. It is powered by an electric motor, two diesel generators assisted by an air independent propulsion (AIP) system. The platform is capable of diving to a depth of over 300 meters and accommodating 25+6 people for 90 days at sea.

¹ Sutton HI, *Two New Turkish Indigenous Submarine Designs*, Covert Shores HI Sutton, 22 agosto 2021
<http://www.hisutton.com/Turkish-Indigenous-Submarine-Designs.html>

Its eight tubes are capable of launching a variety of 16 modern heavy torpedoes and guided missiles. The TS1700 is primarily designed to perform submarine warfare, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, special operations, Network Centric Warfare and ground attack operations.



Features TS1700

Length: 60.14 meters

Width: 6.50 meters

Height: 13.40 meters

Displacement: 1517 tons on the surface, 1740 in immersion

Speed: 20 knots maximum, 4 knots underwater

Range: 6000 nm (Diesel), 400 nm (Battery), 7250 nm (Diesel + AIP)

Armament: eight torpedo tubes (4 tubes are available for guided missiles)

Crew: 25

PAX: 6 special forces

The third prototype presented at IDEF2021 is a light submarine, designed by Turkish shipbuilder Dearsan. The unit is 33.60 meters long and 3.50 meters wide. The submarine's calculated maximum speed underwater is more than 10 knots and exceeds 6 knots on the surface. Company officials declined to provide further information.

The studies conducted are the result of the knowledge gained by the Turkish defense industry, which is increasingly able to enrich design capabilities and provide multiple options to the policy maker even in the field of surface units, as confirmed by the recent TF-2000 ADD destroyer project where all systems will be provided by the domestic industry²

Due to their small size, mini-submarines are extremely effective units in coastal waters, since during anti-submarine warfare operations, it is extremely difficult to detect and destroy an opposing submarine in coastal waters. The reason for this is that sonar performance in such an environment is significantly reduced due to background noise. Despite having less endurance and operational range than larger submarines, mini-submarines could be even more difficult to detect than larger submarines due to their limited acoustic and magnetic signature.

As a result, the Turkish Navy could deploy a flotilla of mini-submarines in the Aegean Sea capable of penetrating beyond the adversary's lines and gathering intelligence. Mini-submarines are also an excellent option for missions that require high levels of confidentiality, such as special forces operations, detection of possible mining activities, and so on³.

² Ozberk T., *IDEF 2021: Turkey Full Steam Ahead With TF-2000 Air Defense Destroyer Project*, Naval News 25 agosto 2021 <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/08/idef-2021-turkey-full-steam-ahead-with-tf-2000-air-defense-destroyer-project/>

³ Ozberk T., *IDEF 2021: Turkish Industry Unveils Three New Submarine Designs*, Naval News, 30 agosto 2021 <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/08/idef-2021-turkish-industry-unveils-three-new-submarine-designs/>

Drones in the Middle East

On July 29, three armed “suicide drones” attacked the *Mercer Street*, an Israeli-managed commercial oil tanker. Two drones missed the target during an attempted first strike, but one successfully flew into the *Mercer Street*’s bridge during in a second time¹. The attack killed a British security guard and the vessel’s Romanian captain. No one claimed responsibility for the it, however experts and analysts said that the available evidence points to Iran. Therefore, this operation was just one of the last actions of a US-Iran “shadow war” that has been simmering across the Middle East for the past two years. While it is uncertain who deployed the drones (Iranian regional proxies? Elements of the Iranian armed forces?) it is well known that Iran has become what we can call a “drone superpower”. From September-2019-strikes on the government-owned Saudi Aramco facilities in eastern Saudi Arabia to attacks on the US troops in northern Iraq in July 2021, a string of drone strikes ties back to Iran. Moreover, Iran started to use drones in 1984 when Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) formed its first unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) unit. More recently, Israel’s defence minister, Benny Gantz, accused Iran of providing foreign militias from Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon with drone training at an airbase near the city of Isfahan².

However, Iran is not the only actor in the Middle East to use drones and the increasing regional presence of this war-tool is one of the most important and relevant elements of contemporary security and a very concerning tactical development. The aim of this brief research is starting to scratch the surface of this issue.

A recent research³ has recorded 440 drone attacks conducted by militants through 2020. Over 98% of them occurred in the Middle East mainly from two groups, the Islamic State and Houthi rebels in Yemen, responsible for over 80 percent of these. Another research has found that militant groups use drones especially for disrupting opponent command and logistics and delaying the movement of military personnel and materiel. They do not use drones for what we can call “strategic bombing”, as well as for targeting military centers of gravity⁴, even though defining what is a “center of gravity” is a controversial and thorny issue.

In short, the different use of drones by militias in the Middle East, may be summarized in at least three main purposes. First, drones, commercial or military ones, support ground operations and the best-know example is the IS during the battles to defend cities in Iraq and Syria: IS staged over 200 drones attack during the battle of Mosul (October 2016-July 2017)⁵. Second, drones, commercial or military one, are used to attack logistic hubs, arms depots, critical infrastructure, and command headquarters behind front lines. This is probably the most common attack. The attack against the *Mercer Street* in July is of this kind, but the attacks that Shia militias carried out in Iraq against U.S. troops and bases also can be listed in this category. Although a database of these attacks does not exist, the most recent events has been discussed on the *Strategic Observatory* n.3 and it is possible to say that the US troops, bases and facilities (including the US embassy in Baghdad) have been targeted around 60 times this year. Although none of these attacks have resulted in fatalities or critical damages, they did prompt the Biden administration to order retaliatory airstrikes against the militant groups behind them. Probably the most dangerous attacks were conducted against both Baghdad and Erbil airports, which were targeted at least two times: on 25 July, a drone attack targeted a base near al-Harir, northeast of Erbil; and on 11 September, Erbil International Airport has been targeted by two armed drones. Moreover, in late August, eight people were injured in a drone attack on Saudi Arabia’s Abha airport. The drone was intercepted and

¹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/multiple-iranian-drones-used-in-deadly-attack-on-israeli-operated-ship-report/>.

² <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-iran-gantz-militias-drone-training-isfahan>.

³ <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2020/issue-5/haugstvedt-and-jacobsen.pdf>.

⁴ <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss2/8/>.

⁵ Omar Ashour, *How ISIS Fights. Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2021, p. 60.

shrapnels struck the runway. It was the second attack on the airport in 24 hours, when a ballistic missile struck the airfield⁶.

There are two elements in drone management in Iraq by several militias which are relevant and concerning. First, the Iraqi PMF (Popular Mobilization Forces), mostly Shia militias, are Iran-backed and they are known to use military Chinese drones CH-4B, but also the Iranian drone Mohajer-6s. During a military parade in late June the Mohajer-6 was seen armed with two small munitions similar to the Ghaem-series, up to four of which are usually carried by the type⁷. Second, during the recent Israel-Gaza conflict some of the drones flying over Israel have been claimed to be sent from Iraq or Syria. Iraqi pro-Iran militias, many of them present in Syria as well, continuously threaten that they can attack Israel from Iraq. There was information in February that drones were launched from the Iraq-Saudi Arabia border toward a royal palace in Riyadh. As such, pro-Iran armed groups in Iraq have chosen this new mechanism, which ensures greater camouflage, target accuracy and greater protection for their members⁸. Moreover, from April 2018 to October 2019, the Houthis executed 115 drone attacks, 62 of whom against civilian airports or critical infrastructures⁹.

The third use of drones is less known because it rarely grabs the headlines but it is very important for the militias in order to improve their military capacities. Several militant groups have used unarmed drones for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations. Drone-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance offers significant gains to militants for relatively little cost or risk. IS is again a good example. It used these kind of drones to re-direct in real time suicide vehicles (SVBIEDs) during the battle of Mosul in order to bypass Iraqi defenses and find new ways to approach the designed targets. More recently, the Islamic State's affiliate in West Africa was reported to have used drones to surveil the locations and movements of counter-insurgent forces in northeast Nigeria¹⁰.

Since this constant, extensive and widespread use of drones, it is surprising that such militias never used drones to carry out terror attacks, even though drones seem particularly well-suited to such a task.

The flying drones are not the only threat from unmanned vehicles in the Middle East. In fact, since 2017, Houthi forces in Yemen have improving their use of maritime drones to carry out attacks against maritime vessels and port facilities in the region. As the flying drones, also these attacks have not yet resulted in several fatalities or critical damages but caused material damages to a number of ships and led to the temporary shutdown of one of Saudi Arabia's port. Moreover, as the flying drones, the majority of all Houthi maritime drone attacks were not directed against military targets but instead at more commercial and civilian ones: four targeted civilian ports and two targeted oil production and distribution facilities¹¹.

This brief research showed the considerable and substantial impact of drones used by irregular militias in the Middle East. This is an increasing threat because current technology offers different tools and possibilities that irregular groups can use in the future to improve their military capabilities. We have to understand that we are witnessing a deep technological revolution that, in contrast to what we experienced for example during the Cold war, is an open one. That means that each group, or even person, can use modern technologies, improve them, combine different tools and create something new and unexpected. A similar phenomenon occurred, for instance, in the 19th century for the invention and the development of dynamite¹². Therefore, it is important to analyze current operations in order to understand beforehand possible evolution and novelties.

⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/drone-attack-saudi-airport-injures-8>.

⁷ <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2021/08/the-militiamens-ucav-mohajer-6s-in-iraq.html>.

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¹² A.K. Cronin, *Power to the People: How Open Technological Innovation is Arming Tomorrow's Terrorists*, Oxford University Press, New York 2019.

The coup in Guinea: trigger factors and possible trends

The military coup in Guinea threatens to open a new scenario of instability in the political and security framework of the wider Sahel region. A few days after the events, there is a lot of uncertainty about the next developments in a country. Guinea's significance lies in its geographical proximity to highly volatile states such as Mali. Moreover, Guinea has an important place in the minerals market. Indeed, it is the second-largest producer in the world of Bauxite, which is essential for the production of aluminum.

The Guinean army's special forces led by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya arrested 83-year-old President Alpha Conde on September 5. Following the establishment of checkpoints in the capital Conakry, the military dissolved the country's institutions and assumed full power establishing the National Committee of Reconciliation/Rally and Development (NCRD). Within hours, the military began replacing regional governors by spreading control across the country. In a television communiqué, Doumbouya justified the action by accusing Conde and his entourage of managing political power by promoting corruption and impoverishing the population. The international community has immediately condemned the action, including the African Union and the United Nations. A few days later, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the main regional economic bloc, also suspended Guinea's membership. The decision taken by ECOWAS members was expected. However, on the margins of the meeting, it emerged that Guinea's position will be reconsidered in the coming weeks. The scenes of celebration by the Guinean population that followed the news of Conde's arrest have given many ECOWAS members food for thought.

Although the action of the special forces took the Guinean population by surprise, uneasing signs had been growing for several months. The coup d'état is only the latest episode in order of time. The political climate had progressively worsened in the months leading up to last October's elections. Conde's decision to amend the constitution to serve a third term in office had exacerbated party divisions. Furthermore, a few days before the vote, the President accused the opposition leader Cellou Dalein Diallo of recruiting foreign mercenaries. With this pretext, Conde closed the borders, thus preventing the diaspora from returning to vote. Following Conde's third consecutive victory election, many protests and violent clashes erupted in Conakry. The toll of the riots was dozens of deaths and hundreds of arrests. The youth were among those most involved. The youth protested against widespread corruption and the country's poor economic conditions. This latter issue is paradoxical in virtue of the many mineral wealth that Guinea enjoys. Besides bauxite, Guinea has the largest unexploited reserve of iron ore, many diamond mines, and the African seventh-largest miner of gold. A further social issue concerns mining activities. Foreign companies - China Hongqiao, Alcoa, Rio Tinto - in joint-venture with the Guinean state run mining activities. The government has for years ignored the inhumane conditions in which the mining workers live and work. These factors explain the reaction of the population which, at the moment, seems to have sided with the army.

Guinea's future stability depends on the unity of the army and Doumbouya's ability to involve civilians in the transition process. As for the first aspect, Doumbouya is a former soldier of the French Foreign Legion. The special forces he leads are an elite corps of the Guinean Army. In recent years they have attended training and drills organized by the United States as part of AFRICOM training plans. Doumbouya enjoys an excellent reputation among officials and soldiers. As such, many sectors of the Guinean security forces have chosen to cooperate with the junta. Concerning civilian involvement, the army has repeatedly reiterated its intention to lead the country in a transitional phase that would be inclusive of the civil society's sectors. The army released several of Conde's

political opponents who were arrested following last fall's demonstrations to prove their good intentions. Opposition leader Diallo endorsed the junta, giving Doumbouya full willingness to cooperate in drafting a new constitution. However, the junta's plans are vague. For this reason, a part of the population fears that the transition could turn into a period of military dictatorship as happened in the past (1984; 2008). The lack of a political agenda raises the doubt that Doumbouya's opening to national dialogue is meant to reassure the international community, in a way similar to what happened in Chad. Therefore, it is not possible to exclude that following the pattern of similar regional cases the junta may decide to stay in power especially in light of the low political and economic costs.

Finally, another factor to be considered is the role of international stakeholders. Although the army reassured the companies active in the mining sector, there is a growing logic of political competition among different players. As of 2019, Conde's decision to extend the presidential term limit had cooled relations with key Western partners. Both France and the United States, which have many economic interests in Guinea, had been very critical of the third term as they considered it a setback in the uneasy path to democratization. To compensate, Conde had turned to other international partners, strengthening relations primarily with Russia and, to a lesser extent, with Turkey. To those four players, China is added. Guinean mines are Beijing's main source of bauxite. Any interruption of production or revisions of concessions could generate considerable damage to Chinese investments in the country. The military junta does not seem to have any intention of modifying mining agreements however speculation is growing about a forthcoming Guinean rapprochement with the Western partners (US, France). These five players could seek to influence the transition to their benefit. In a way similar to what is going on in neighboring Mali, support to different political factions could generate instability and further complicate the transition. If this happens, the army will likely decide to retain power.

At the regional level, the coup represents another evidence of the institutional fragility of the Western African countries. In the Sahel area, three coups have been successful (Mali 2020-2021; Chad 2021) and one has failed (Niger 2021) in one year. The hesitant reaction of the international community and the same regional organizations risk fuelling this regional trend. In this sense, it will be necessary to monitor above all the situation in the Ivory Coast.

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2021 Vice President Harris' visit to Southeast Asia and the role of the United States in the region

Introduction

During the last week of August 2021 Vice President Kamala Harris made an official trip to Southeast Asia, with stops in Vietnam and Singapore. This trip follows that of Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, which included stops in the same countries as well as in the Philippines.

The visit by the Vice President Harris was part of the attempt to revive American influence in Southeast Asia, a region considered of fundamental strategic importance by the Biden administration. Trump's term was characterized by a lack of attention to Southeast Asian allies and regional partners and by a simultaneous increase in Chinese economic and political influence. While the trip was welcomed in the region as a sign of the continued commitment of the United States to play a central role in regional security and stability, it also highlighted some important differences between the Biden administration and some of the major players in the region.

The United States in Southeast Asia.

The United States competes with China for the exercise of political and economic influence in Southeast Asia. The American objective is to consolidate an open and inclusive regional order based on the Indo-Pacific concept. This concept is based both on a broad geographical interpretation of the region, which starts from the Indian Ocean and reaches the west coast of the United States, as well as a series of strategic and normative principles. The Indo-Pacific concept comprises a central strategic role for the United States as a provider of security and stability. Furthermore, it implies a vital role for liberal and democratic values such as human rights, multilateralism, peaceful settlement of disputes, respect for international law and freedom of navigation.

The integration of Southeast Asia into Washington's preferred regional order is an extremely complex goal. In the last two decades, China has established itself as the main economic partner of all the states in the region and as a real "economic engine" of Asia. Consequently, no state can consider continuing its development path while drastically reducing the level of trade with China. Furthermore, from 2013 onwards the Belt and Road Initiative has led to a significant increase in Chinese investments in the region, especially in the infrastructure sector. Finally, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Beijing has launched a series of initiatives aimed at preventing the spread of the virus, such as "mask diplomacy" in 2020 and "vaccine diplomacy" in 2021, sending millions of doses of the Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines to the region.

While the analysis of economic relations portrays a Sino-centric image of the region, security relations are still centred on the US role. The American presence is, in fact, still crucial for regional security and stability. Thailand and the Philippines are allies of the United States, although these two alliances are the least healthy among those linking Washington to the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, especially after the Pivot to Asia promoted by the Obama administration, the United States has built a series of partnerships with non-allied states¹. The majority of the Southeast Asian states bordering the South China Sea have been the object of the Chinese coercive strategy, aimed at claiming the maritime areas and islands included in the so-called "nine dashed line"². Chinese coercion in the

¹ By definition, a military alliance is characterized by the presence of a mutual security clause, or a commitment to defend the allied country in the event of an attack on its territory. A partnership is defined by cooperation in the security and defence sector, without a mutual security clause.

² The nine dashed line is a line that defines the southern Chinese maritime border according to an interpretation offered by the Republic of China in 1947 and then inherited by the People's Republic. This claim is based on the

South China Sea has prompted many non-allied states to move closer to the United States and to forge security partnerships featuring information exchange, maritime and disaster relief cooperation, and joint bilateral and multilateral exercises (Capie, 2020).

This tension between the economic and political dimensions is further complicated by the political, institutional and normative background that characterizes the region. First, the region is characterized by a plurality of forms of state and government. In fact, in Southeast Asia, one-party socialist states such as Vietnam, democracies such as Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia, and countries in which military dictatorships replaced democratic regimes, such as Myanmar and Thailand, coexist. Furthermore, all ASEAN states agree on promoting the principles of protection of sovereignty, self-determination, peaceful dispute resolution, and limiting the role of great powers. This means that ASEAN tends to view the escalation of Sino-American rivalry as a threat to the region's stability and to economic growth. Therefore, they have an interest in maintaining a cooperative relationship with both and not taking sides with either of them (Acharya, 2021; Emmers and Teo, 2015).

The United States and Singapore

The meeting between Vice President Harris and Minister Lee Hsien Loong led to a joint statement on common challenges in the security sector. Furthermore, it led to the signing of partnership agreements in the sectors of contrasting climate change, cyber-security, and the resilience of production chains with particular attention to the semi-conductor sector (Strangio, 2021).

During the visit, Harris also visited the Changi Naval Base, a key logistics hub for the American presence on the southern side of the South China Sea and in the Strait of Malacca. The last appointment of the Singapore stage, and probably the most significant one, was that of the speech at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. The speech was an opportunity to reaffirm the normative pillars of the American vision of the Indo-Pacific, namely freedom of navigation, human rights, free trade, and the absence of political and military coercion. Furthermore, the speech reaffirmed the American will to continue playing a fundamental role in Southeast Asia and contrast of China's coercive strategy in the South China Sea.

While these steps have been considered as positive by most analysts, it has been pointed out that the differences between the parties persist. In particular, in the debates following Harris's speech on the American vision of the Indo-Pacific, a potential tension between to key dimensions of the US approach to the region. On the one hand, the Biden Administration has attributed a key role to the Quad (i.e. the partnership between the regional maritime democracies, namely United States, Japan, Australia and India). On the other hand South East Asian partners as Singapore advocate the so called ASEAN centrality in the regional political and institutional architecture. This tension evoked the fears expressed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his 2020 article in *Foreign Affairs*, entitled "the Endangered Asian Century" (Lee, 2020). On that occasion, Lee explained how, from Singapore's point of view, the American attempt to polarize the region along strategic and ideological lines contributed to fuelling regional tension and instability. In this sense it could be considered counterproductive to the American overall effort to maintain and consolidate its regional influence.

While the Trump administration tended to view competition with China in Southeast Asia primarily through the lens of security and ideology, the Biden administration is trying to promote broader initiatives, including those involving sectors exploited by Beijing to increase its influence, such as health cooperation and infrastructure investments. However, the renewed emphasis on the role of human rights could lead to widening differences on important political issues such as the approach towards Myanmar after the February 2021 coup (Li and Chen, 2021).

concept of Chinese "historical maritime rights", and was rejected, implicitly by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982 and explicitly by the Permanent Court of Arbitration of The Hague in 2016.

The United States and Vietnam.

Kamala Harris's visit in August 2021 is part of a rapprochement process between Washington and Hanoi that started in 1995, when Vietnam re-established diplomatic relations with the United States and entered ASEAN. In 2007, Hanoi joined the World Trade Organization. This has allowed entry into various commercial agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the EVFTA agreement with the European Union³. Vietnam's foreign policy remains anchored to the principles of peaceful coexistence, respect for sovereignty, autonomy, and independence. Consequently, the Vietnamese government continues to adopt the "three nos" approach (to military alliances, foreign bases and security pacts against other states) (Thayler, 2017).

Nonetheless, the pressure exerted by China in the South China Sea and the periodic rekindling of disputes over the Spratly and Paracel's Islands have brought Hanoi closer to the United States. This cooperation cannot be considered as a form of alignment. On the contrary, as in most cases in the region, it can be described as a form of hedging, or a strategy aimed at diversifying the "portfolio" of diplomatic, economic and security relations, with the aim of reducing the risks associated with instability (Tan, 2020).

During her meeting with President Nguyen Xuan Phuc, Harris stressed the importance of bilateral cooperation for maintaining regional order based on freedom of navigation and respect for sovereignty. Additionally, Harris announced the donation of one million Pfizer vaccines and \$ 23 million in aid to tackle the new wave of Covid-19. Vietnam, which had been one of the most effective countries in limiting the spread of the virus during the first wave, has been strongly affected by the Delta variant in 2021. Despite convergence on security issues and pandemic relief efforts, the contrast between American geopolitical needs and the priority assigned to human rights also emerged in the Vietnamese stage of the journey. Harris, in fact, mentioned the need for Vietnam to take steps in areas such as the status of women, workers' rights, freedom of expression and dissent (Leonard and Heijmans, 2021).

Conclusion

Vice President Kamala Harris's trip was generally welcomed in Vietnam and Singapore and more broadly in the region. It was interpreted as a sign of continued American regional engagement. Nonetheless, it highlighted some of the limitations of the Biden administration's strategy in the region. The Obama administration's Pivot to Asia was a multidimensional strategy based on three dimensions: security, diplomacy, and economics. The Trump administration effectively dismantled the "economic leg", with the "trade war" and the withdrawal from the TPP. To date, the Biden administration has not yet proposed a well-defined vision for a new strategy to relaunch the US economic engagement towards the region, although this has been identified as a priority.

Furthermore, Harris's trip, being limited to Hanoi and Singapore, and thus avoiding the most populous state (Indonesia) and the two regional allies (Philippines and Thailand), gave the impression of a partial revival of the American role. Skipping Manila and Bangkok, Harris avoided addressing thorny issues such as the suspension of democracy by the armed forces in Thailand or the recent rapprochement of the Philippines to China during the Duterte presidency. More generally, the visit once again highlighted the uncomfortable compromise between the emphasis on American values and rights and the US strategic needs in the region, which leads to the need to find a political and normative compromise between ASEAN centrality and the role of the maritime democracies of QUAD.

³ The US withdrew from the TPP in 2017.

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Pakistan and the Taliban

The Pakistani government and the army are not monolithic institutions¹: within them there are fragmented groups with competing interests. In general, the country was in favor of a Taliban victory: in the aftermath of Kabul capture, Prime Minister Khan declared that the group was "breaking the chains of slavery" and humanitarian assistance was ensured² to the country in trouble.

There are several reasons for this position. Pakistan was created in 1947 as a Muslim nation: Islam was the glue that should have kept together many otherwise disparate communities with different linguistic and ethnic identities. In 1971, after a bitter civil war, much of east Pakistani territory, dominated by the Bengali-speaking community, broke away to form Bangladesh. This loss has made the Pakistani government particularly sensitive to the western territories of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which are home to Pashtun or Pashto-speaking populations. Pakistan established madrassas in these territories to spread the particularly strict Wahhabi Islamic school hoping that Islamic nationalism would supplant Pashtun nationalism. Taliban leaders, that embrace Islamic nationalism, grew up in those madrassas.

Second, Pakistani officials are concerned about the border with Afghanistan: since 1947, Afghan governments have rejected the Durand Line that separates Pashtun-dominated Pakistani territories from Afghanistan which, home to a Pashtun majority, claims these territories as part of a "Pashtunistan", while Taliban ideology emphasizes Islam over Pashtun identity.

Finally, the confrontation with India: Islamabad accuses New Delhi of exploiting its ethnic and linguistic divisions to destabilize and disintegrate the country. India's good relationship with the government of former President Ashraf Ghani had not allayed this concern. The Taliban government could help Pakistan to fight India, including by providing shelter to anti-India jihadist groups.

Pakistan continues to be a major source of financial and logistical support to the Taliban. The Pakistani agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has supported them from the start with money, training and weapons, and the ISI maintains strong links with the Haqqani network. The Taliban own real estates in Pakistan and they receive large donations from individuals in the country.

However, Pakistan's influence on Kabul' new government could decrease. The Taliban have been particularly shrewd in trying to build ties with China, Iran and Russia. If Pakistan's ally China chooses to recognize the Taliban government, it will do so without enthusiasm due to the virulent religious nationalism, supported by both the Taliban and Pakistan, which could spill over into China's Xinjiang region, where the Chinese government continues to confront the Uyghur Muslims problem.

Pakistan is also taking a risk in supporting the Taliban: its goal of containing Pashtun nationalism and countering India with a friendly government in Afghanistan does not take into account either the internal fragmentation of the Taliban or the religious fundamentalist forces opposing each other within Pakistan.

Regarding the Durand Line, Pakistan has spent millions of dollars in recent years to strengthen and to demarcate the border. However, the Taliban, in accordance with other Afghan

¹ M. Chatterjee Miller, "Pakistan's Support for the Taliban: What to Know", Council on Foreign Relations, August 25, 2021; <https://www.cfr.org/article/pakistans-support-taliban-what-know>.

² A. Hashim, "Pakistan pledges \$28m in Afghanistan humanitarian support", AlJazeera, 23 November 2021; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/23/pakistan-pledges-28-million-in-afghanistan-humanitarian-support>.

governments, have accepted neither the Durand Line nor Pakistan's attempts to physically demarcate it, or have they ever renounced or condemned the Afghan goal of a Pashtunistan.

Moreover, the Taliban maintain close ties with the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP)³, sometimes referred to as the Pakistani Taliban. The TTP includes Pashtun militant groups sympathetic to the Afghan Taliban - they operate along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and have sworn war on Pakistan until there is an independent Pashtunistan. Some observers call them "two sides of the same coin". If Afghanistan falls back into civil war, Pakistan will face another massive influx of refugees⁴ (currently about 3 million).

The United States faces a complex situation in South Asia and its bilateral relations with Pakistan. In order to honor the anti-terrorism alliance with Washington, Islamabad has over the years detained Taliban commanders, including Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Washington has a long history of investing in Pakistan in exchange for cooperation against terrorism⁵. It all began with the end of the Soviet-Afghan war when the United States, after allying with Pakistan to finance and to arm the mujahideen that Islamabad had trained to fight the Soviets, looked away from the region (Washington then sanctioned Pakistan for its nuclear weapons program). US needs in Afghanistan have defined US-Pakistan relations over the past 20 years, including flying over Pakistan's shrine to the Taliban⁶. Washington now has little incentive to ignore Pakistan's double game or broaden ties. The attention of the States has now turned to the east: on its relations with India and other countries to counter China. In this context, relations between the United States and Pakistan face a showdown.

In recent years, India has become more receptive to US openings for closer security ties. Given the advantages in US-India relations, the US should be cautious in its relations with Pakistan: any feeling that Washington is not using the means at its disposal to limit Pakistan's support for cross-border terrorism will jeopardize its relations with New Delhi.

The other important element is China's growing interest in the region. Beijing will seek to work with the Taliban and perhaps even to incorporate Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Any US strategy should try to offset Chinese investments and consider that China also has an influence on Pakistan. One option for the United States is to use China's fears of religious nationalism and militancy that could leak out of Afghanistan to initiate a US-China-Pakistan cooperation strategy to put pressure on Kabul.

³ AlJazeera, "Afghan FM confirms Kabul 'mediating' talks between Pakistan, TTP", 15 November 2021; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/15/afghan-taliban-mediating-pakistan-ttp-talks>.

⁴ A. Furqan, "Pakistan Refuses to Host Additional Afghan Refugees", VOANews, July 13, 2021; https://www.voanews.com/a/south-central-asia_pakistan-refuses-host-additional-afghan-refugees/6208191.html.

⁵ M. Afzal, "Post Afghanistan, US-Pakistan relations stand on the edge of a precipice", Brookings Institution, October 13, 2021; <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/10/13/post-afghanistan-us-pakistan-relations-stand-on-the-edge-of-a-precipice/>.

⁶ M. Afzal, "An uneasy limbo for US-Pakistan relations amidst the withdrawal from Afghanistan", Brookings Institution, August 6, 2021; <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/08/06/an-uneasy-limbo-for-us-pakistan-relations-amidst-the-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/>.

The signing of the trilateral Australia-UK-US agreement (AUKUS) and its possible impacts on the system of the transatlantic relations

The recent agreement among Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) takes place in a sensitive moment for transatlantic relations, already affected by the tensions following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. More than the agreement's provisions, it was how it was signed that raised Europe's irritation since neither the EU political leaders nor the different European governments would have been informed of the negotiations undergoing or of the imminent signing of the document. Moreover, the new entente was officially announced a few hours from the President of the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy delivering their Joint communication on the new EU Indo-Pacific strategy. The reactions were quick and harsh. The French government defined the agreement as "a stab in the back" and recalled "for consultation" its ambassadors in Washington and Canberra. Worth noting, France's shipbuilding industry should pay the highest bill for this agreement. The EU High Representative stated that AUKUS further confirmed the need for Europe to acquire greater strategic autonomy, while several EU members sided with France in its protests. They fear that Washington's move could destabilize the Indo-Pacific region, antagonizing China and triggering an arms race whose consequences could be hardly predictable. Beyond their immediate impact, such developments could wrongfoot Europe's regional strategy, which aims to promote security through dialogue with China and engage Beijing as a stabilizing factor.

The most immediate risk is the freeze of the relations between Brussels and Washington. The French foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, already compared President Biden's attitude in the AUKUS affair to Donald Trump's (Feng, 2021), while the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, talked about the US "lack of loyalty" towards the European allies (Herszenhorn, 2021). Criticisms against the US also came from the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen that – in a CNN interview – labelled as "not acceptable" how France had been treated and stated that "a lot of open questions about the AUKUS deal have to be answered". The fact that AUKUS involve the United Kingdom gives the problem further relevance. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson repeatedly associated the decision to quit the EU with the possibility to relaunch London's international role. This 'Global Britannia' should have one of its pillars in the military dimension: an aspect mirrored since 2018 by UK's defence expenditure growth. In this perspective, the political-diplomatic success represented by the signing of the AUKUS agreement could foster new tensions within the EU. On the one hand, it could present 'Brexit' as a rewarding choice and stimulate – within the Union – emulation at different levels. On the other, the cancellation of the contracts that Australia had with France and the exclusion of France from the agreement in favour of the post-Brexit Britain could strengthen the idea that – in the US – an anti-EU penchant was not just a product of the Donald Trump's four-years turbulent presidency (Meunier, 2021).

On both sides of the Atlantic, there have been efforts to mend the tear. On September 21, in his speech to the UN General Assembly, President Biden remarked the central role of the US-Europe relationship in the struggle against climate change and in promoting international security (Sullivan, Vazquez e Liptak, 2021). Some sources observed that the US decision to remove the travel ban imposed in the most critical days of the COVID-19 pandemic could be another friendly message sent to the counterpart. On the European front, after the support expressed to Paris and the criticisms levied on the White House, the aim is to avoid a further deterioration of bilateral relations with Washington and Canberra. One possible target is avoiding that tensions could affect the negotiations for a free trade agreement currently undergoing between the EU and Australia. However, the AUKUS

affair triggered a confidence crisis (especially regarding the United States), and its impact could be deep. Among the European governments, the US decision not to consult its traditional allies was seen as a sign of the White House's lack of interest in their opinion and a measure of their political irrelevance. Once again, the point especially applies to France, not only for AUKUS's economic impact but also because it is the EU member with the most solid interests in the Indo-Pacific region and – for this reason – 'the most entitled' to be the White House's counterpart. Once again, behind the new 'English-speaking alliance', the unspoken fear is a resurgence of the US unilateralism: a fear that Joe Biden's electoral victory was supposed to dissipate.

Finally, there is NATO. The French authorities already said that the AUKUS affair would affect the Alliance's future: an Alliance that President Macron repeatedly and heavily criticized in the past. While the ambitions to provide Europe with greater strategic autonomy are gaining new strength, the signing of the AUKUS agreement could reinforce the trend. The signing of the agreement could also heighten the problems that the allies are facing in keeping a balance among their competing interests and could make it more challenging to support the recently-found consensus around NATO's 'global' role. On this aspect, the US decision about tools to prioritise in order to contain China's political and military rise will play a pivotal role. Strengthening Australia's military capabilities (AUKUS's aim) is not incompatible with the 'global partnerships' strategy that the Atlantic Alliance pursues. The risk is that the two tools mutually elide at the expense of NATO's operating mechanisms, more rigid and compromise-oriented. If the United States can accept this state of things, such an attitude could help compose the existing tensions in time. However, the AUKUS affair clearly shows how transatlantic relations – far from being returned to their former glory – still need a credible and lasting 'restart'. Such a 'restart' is also in the US interest. Suppose the White House increasingly shifts its focus to the Indo-Pacific region in the coming years. In that case, this could not happen at the expense of the Atlantic theatre, where Washington still has the most important allies and the most crucial source of legitimization of its international role.

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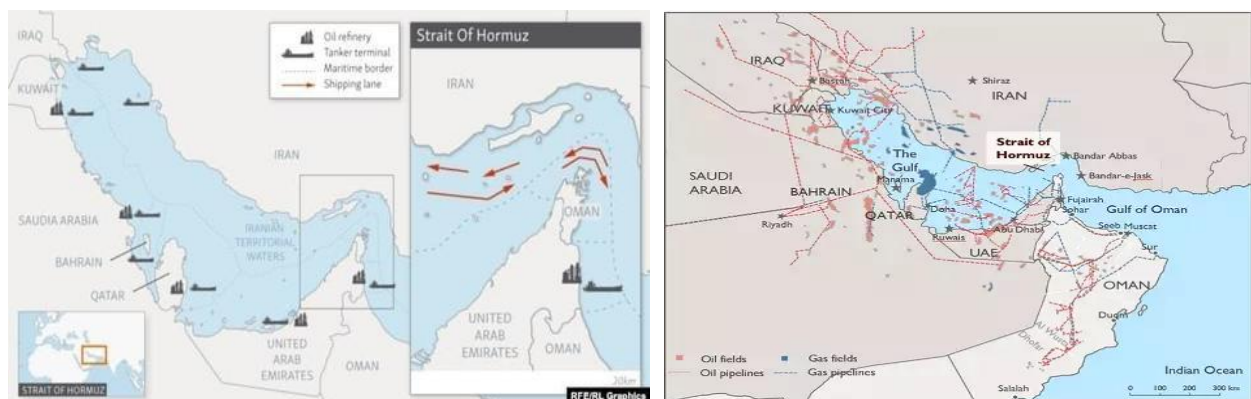
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Energy flows and political risk in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz

Renowned in past centuries as a transit route for shipments and commercial exchanges, and for the spread of piracy - today almost absent -, in the last 3 or 4 decades the Strait of Hormuz (named after an island close to the Iranian coast) became a very important strategic area. Indeed, connecting the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, its waters are located in one of the richest areas in the world in terms of oil and gas fields. This contributes to explain some territorial disputes, such as between the U.A.E. and Iran on the island of Abu Musa. In any case, the most relevant geopolitical issue regarding the Strait is its merchant traffic, mostly consisting in flows of crude oil and liquefied natural gas. For the transport of hydrocarbons outside the Persian Gulf, there are also land and/or sea pipelines, several of which were commissioned over the years, especially by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in order to diversify energy routes. In any case, such routes also require ships to reach their final destinations, while not all the pipelines of the area are constantly fully operational, so that the Strait remains one of the most viable options for transporting large amounts of oil and gas out of the Gulf¹. Ports and oil terminals are located in the UAE, Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also Kuwait, Bahrein and Oman.

Oil terminals and refineries, Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz²



Although, among others, also refined oil products are directed to the area, most of its hydrocarbon flows are mainly oil exports from the Middle East to Europe, North America and Asia (especially China, Japan, South Korea, India and Singapore). The latter continent receives over 70% crude oil in transit along the Strait³. Before the drop in energy flows due to the contraction in world energy consumption linked to the COVID-19 crisis (2020), the Strait hosted the passage of about 21% global petroleum liquids consumption, equivalent to 20.7 million barrels per day in 2018, and more than 25% liquefied natural gas traded worldwide – mainly as exports from Qatar, the world's

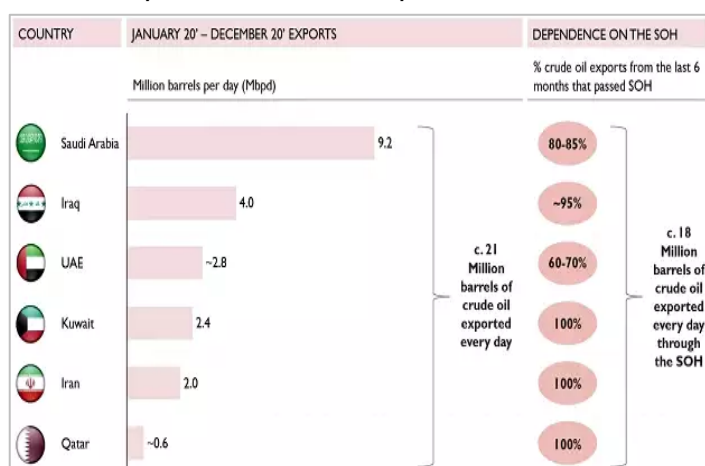
¹ Among others, pipelines in the area include a Saudi oil pipeline across the Red Sea, with a capacity of around 5 million barrels of oil per day, as well as one that can carry around 1.5 million barrels of oil per day along the UAE coast and another that can carry Iraqi oil to the Mediterranean coast. See C. Clausi, *The Strait of Hormuz and the turbulent geopolitics of the Persian Gulf*, Aspenia online, 2021.

² Pictures coming from the following links: <https://www.zerohedge.com/energy/iran-opens-export-terminal-bypass-worlds-biggest-oil-chokepoint> ; <https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/oil-and-gas/blockage-of-shipping-lines-in-the-suez-canal-and-ramifications-for-the-strait-of-hormuz/81686828>

³ <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/middle-east/iran-launches-new-oil-export-terminal-near-jask-to-bypass-strait-of-hormuz.html>

leading exporter of LNG⁴. Not surprisingly, more than once, the US Energy Information Administration defined the Strait of Hormuz "the world's most important oil transit choke point"⁵. After all, the latter is still important for the US too. Indeed, although in recent years the US significantly decreased its reliance on oil and gas imports from the Middle East and the Gulf, becoming a net energy exporter in 2019, according to data published in 2020 at least 7% of oil products consumed in the US still transit through the Strait⁶. Furthermore, the Strait is crossed by oil and LNG flows directed to Washington's allies and economic partners both in Europe and Asia, moreover from countries politically and economically linked to the US (except Iran). This means stability in the area is needed for Washington in order to preserve regional and global interdependence⁷. Several European countries, including Italy, receive oil and LNG passing through the Strait. Very significant shares of the Italian oil and gas imports come precisely from the Gulf area. According to estimates published in 2021, in 2020 Italy obtained 30.5% of its oil imports from Iraq (17.3%) and Saudi Arabia (13.2%), while 10.4% of its natural gas from Qatar (plus smaller shares of oil from the U.A.E.)⁸. It should also be considered that since 2017 Eni, the main Italian energy company, considerably increased its direct investments in the whole Gulf area, especially through agreements for offshore gas exploration with state-owned companies in the UAE and Qatar; Eni carries out other significant energy-related activities in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq and Oman⁹. According to data (not yet definitive) on 2020, published in 2021, the ranking of the main crude oil exporters using the Strait of Hormuz is as follows: Saudi Arabia (over 9 million barrels per day), Iraq (4 million barrels per day), U.A.E. (about 2.8 million b/d), Kuwait (2.4 million b/d) and Iran (2 million b/d)¹⁰.

Main crude oil exporters and their dependence on the Strait, 2020¹¹



⁴ <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=39932>

<https://oilgasnews.it/nel-2020-il-qatar-resta-il-primo-esportatore-mondiale-di-gnl-in-un-mercato-franto-dal-covid/>

⁵ <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=4430> ; <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=39932>

⁶ See D. Marengi, *Le sfide per la sicurezza del Golfo Persico e la strategia navale iraniana*, Centro Studi Internazionali (Ce.S.I.), Roma, giugno 2020.

⁷ See A. H. Cordesman, *America's Strategy in the Middle East*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/americas-failed-strategy-middle-east-losing-iraq-and-gulf>

⁸ Italy's net energy imports amount to 73.4% of the national gross energy availability, and are largely made up of oil and natural gas: https://dgsaie.mise.gov.it/pub/sen/relazioni/relazione_annuale_situazione_energetica_nazionale_dati_2020.pdf (pp. 10, 157, 164).

⁹ For further details please refer to the following source: <https://www.eni.com/it-IT/eni-nel-mondo/medio-oriente.html>

¹⁰ On the ranking see: <https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/oil-and-gas/blockage-of-shipping-lines-in-the-suez-canal-and-ramifications-for-the-Strait-of-hormuz/81686828>

The 2020 ranking seems to greatly confirm that of 2018 (when Saudi Arabia exported 6.4 million of oil barrels per day through the Strait, Iraq over 3.4 millions, UAE about 2.7 millions and Kuwait more than 2 millions): <https://aspeniaonline.it/lo-stretto-di-hormuz-e-la-geopolitica-turbolenta-del-golfo-persico/>

¹¹ Table coming from the following website: <https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/oil-and-gas/blockage-of-shipping-lines-in-the-suez-canal-and-ramifications-for-the-Strait-of-hormuz/81686828>

In recent years, the growing political-diplomatic tension between Iran and other countries, including the United Kingdom but especially the United States and Israel, contributed to an increasing trend of maritime insecurity in the area, with several episodes of near collision, boarding and seizure of merchant ships and oil tankers, warning shots and, in some cases, attacks and sabotage against merchant ships, oil tankers, LNG carriers and military ships. In 2015 the US recorded 23 cases of maritime insecurity in the area, 35 in 2016 and 14 in 2017; after a relative decrease in incidents in 2018, episodes of maritime insecurity increased again in 2019, with at least 12 occurring between July 2019 and August 2021¹². In addition to oil and LNG tankers, most cases involved naval units of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Pasdaran*), as well as ships of the US Navy 5th Fleet, which is responsible for the US naval activities in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and parts of the Indian Ocean. At least in two circumstances, that is in April and May, 2021, US military ships operating in international waters were over-approached at high speed and with no prior communications by Iranian military vessels, so that the former had to fire warning shots in order to continue their navigation. After all, the Iranian will to exercise a preminent role in the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf frequently induces Iranian naval forces to go far beyond the country's territorial waters and take provocative actions or illegitimate blockades of foreign oil tankers and other merchant ships; this stance clashes with US objectives in the area, including that of containing Iranian attempts to circumvent US sanctions, which since 2019 have been curtail Iran's oil exports back – also through controls and possible consequent seizures of ships used to transport Iranian crude oil out of the area¹³. Three recent episodes indicating a significant degree in geopolitical tension in the area are reported below; they all occurred between June and August, 2021:

- on June 1, a large Iranian military ship caught fire and sank in waters near the southern Iranian port of Jask (while the crew were able to escape); though considering plausible an accidental fire originated on board, Tehran did not rule out a sabotage conducted by external powers¹⁴ (also on the basis of sabotages occurred in the previous months to its own boats);
- on July 29, the Mercer Street tanker, operated by a London based company, was allegedly hit by a drone while in transit in the Gulf of Oman. The ship was supposed to reach the U.A.E., where it had to load diesel to deliver to East Africa. The US, the UK and Israel blamed Iran for the incident, not ruling out possible collective countermeasures. Declaring itself "ready to defend its interests" in the event of hostile actions, Tehran strongly denied any involvement in the attack, which cost the lives of two crew-members. This greatly contributed to raising tensions, inasmuch as oil tanker incidents in the area generally increase crude oil prices, and sometimes the insurance costs of oil sea cargoes, but do not cause deaths;
- on August 3 2021 the Asphalt Princess, a merchant ship owned by the EAU based company "Glory International", sailing with the flag of Panama, was allegedly boarded in the waters of the Gulf of Oman by unidentified hostile actors and forced to move, albeit only temporarily and without shootings resulting in casualties, on another route, apparently headed for the Iranian coast. As reported by various sources, the episode might include a responsibility by military

¹² Data on 2015-2019 come from: <https://sicurezzainternazionale.luiss.it/2021/05/11/stretto-hormuz-ancora-colpi-avvertimento-degli-usa-navi-iraniene/> ; data on 2019-2021 come from various open sources.

¹³ Since November 2018, the Trump administration, following its withdrawal from the Vienna agreement on the Iranian nuclear program (2015) in the previous May, has largely reintroduced the related sanctions already adopted against Teheran. In the hope of being able to launch new negotiations on the nuclear dossier, but also to let Iran respond to the Covid-19 emergency, sanctions were partially reduced by the Biden administration in June 2021.

¹⁴ For example, in April 2021 an Iranian freighter (perhaps used to transport weapons to pro-Iranian Houthi militias in the Yemeni conflict) would be hit by mines placed on its hull by rival (apparently Israeli) military forces, while Iran too would make extensive use of mines to sabotage military and merchant vessels of other countries. Please refer to: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/02/iran-warship-has-caught-fire-and-sunk-in-gulf-of-oman-say-local-agencies>

forces of Iran; though defining the incident as "completely suspicious", the latter denied any involvement, inviting not to exploit the issue for geo-political purposes¹⁵.

Rotta Mercer Street (29 luglio 2021)



Petroliera colpita nei pressi di Hormuz (2019)¹⁶



Presumably due to the aforementioned events, on September 8 2021, the US Navy announced the launch of Task Force 59. Overseen by the Naval Forces Central Command and the Fifth Fleet, and provided with unmanned systems and artificial intelligence, the latter is aimed at supporting US deterrence and maritime awareness capabilities in the Middle East¹⁷.

In light of such complex scenario, and despite the several multinational maritime forces active in various capacities in the area¹⁸, it is likely in the next months the Strait of Hormuz will continue to see maritime security incidents and possible stops to some of its very many oil and LNG flows. Any possible détente in Iran's international relations, particularly those concerning the US, could decrease the frequency and intensity of such episodes; in any case, in line with the previous years and barring exceptional events, it is expected that the latter will not cause too severe and lasting increases in oil prices¹⁹.

¹⁵ Please see also the following links:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-58083671> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2021/08/03/iranian-proxies-accused-of-maritime-hijacking-in-Strait-of-hormuz/?sh=6ca26b553a3e> https://www.ilnautilus.it/porti/2021-08-09/nuova-tensione-tra-uk-e-iran-possibile-dirottamento-di-una-nave-al-largo-di-hormuz_86488/

¹⁶ Sources: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-58059271>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2021/08/03/iranian-proxies-accused-of-maritime-hijacking-in-Strait-of-hormuz/?sh=6ca26b553a3e>

¹⁷ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-us-trigger-list/flashpoints/hormuz> ;

<https://www.stripes.com/branches/navy/2021-09-08/navy-task-force-middle-east-terrorism-drones-afghanistan-2815900.html>

¹⁸ These include Task Force 152 of the Combined Maritime Forces (2004), as well as the Coalition Task Force Sentinel of the International Maritime Security Construct (2019) and Agenor-European Mission Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (2020).

¹⁹ Just to mention one example, in the first half of 2019, despite price increases due to attacks on oil tankers, the cost of oil remained mostly stable (between 60 and 70 dollars per barrel - with a peak of 72 in April). Moreover, the oil market more or less cyclically can be subject to factors that can increase prices (e.g. agreements for production cuts or limits or political risk events), but also to opposite trends, due for example to production increases related to US shale oil and its buffer effects on crude oil prices. See also F. Borsari - F.S. Schiavi, *Crisi nello stretto di Hormuz*, ISPI-oline, 2020.

Acronyms list

AFRICOM: United States Africa Command
ARF: Ambazonia Restoration Forces
AU: African Union
CAR: Central African Republic
CPDM: Cameroon People's Democratic Movement
ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States
HRW: Human Rights Watch
IED: Improvised Explosive Devices
ISWAP: Islamic State's West Africa Province
JAS: Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād
MNJTF: Multinational Joint Task Force
NCRD: National Committee of Reconciliation/Rally and Development
UN: United Nations

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