

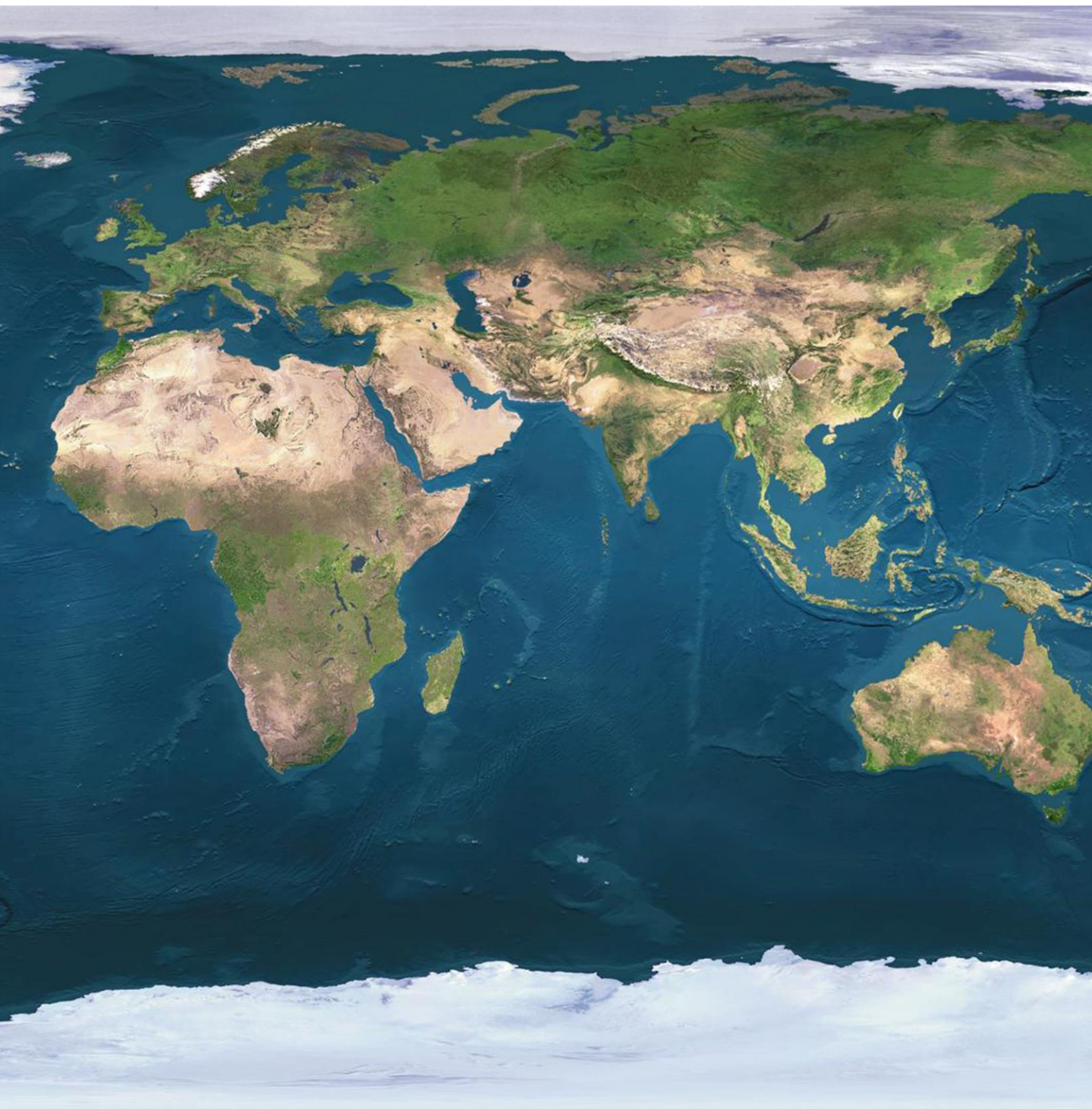


# Osservatorio Strategico

2023



3





CENTER FOR HIGH  
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DEFENSE ANALYSIS AND  
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# **Osservatorio Strategico 2023 Issue 3**



# Osservatorio Strategico

YEAR XXV ISSUE 3 - 2023



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### **Osservatorio Strategico 2023**

This book has been edited by  
**Defense Analysis and Research Institute**

Director  
**Col. (Army) Gualtiero Iacono**

Deputy Director  
**Col. (A.F.) Loris Tabacchi**

Editorial staff  
**CWO (N) Massimo Lanfranco – W.O. (N) Gianluca Bisanti – 1° Aviere Capo (A.F) Alessandro Del Pinto**

Graphic and layout  
**CWO (N) Massimo Lanfranco – W.O. (N) Gianluca Bisanti – Serg. (Army) Nello Manuel Santaniello**

Revising and coordination  
**Capt (N) Massimo Gardini - 2LT (Army) Elena Picchi – Adm. Off. Aurora Buttinelli – Adm. Off. Enzo Striano - Adm. Ass. Anna Rita Marra**

Authors  
**Andrea Beccaro, Matteo Bressan, Francesca Citossi, Federico Donelli, Carlo Frappi, Francesca Frassinetti, Francesco Marone, Gianluca Pastori, Lorenzo Termine.**

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

**Defense Analysis and Research Institute**  
Piazza della Rovere, 83 - 00165 – ROME- ITALY  
tel.00 39 06 4691 3204  
e-mail: [irad.usai.capo@casd.difesa.it](mailto:irad.usai.capo@casd.difesa.it)

**ISBN 979-12-5515-050-3**



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# **Osservatorio Strategico**

## **Part One**





## **Wagner's revolt and the spread of Private Military Companies in Russia: impacts on the Ukrainian war**

### **Abstract**

Wagner's increasingly central role in the war in Ukraine and the rifts between Prigozhin and Shoigu as it resulted in the June 23-24 rebellion leave open quite a few questions about the resilience of Russia's military instrument and related power dynamics in the shadow of the Kremlin.

### **Wagner rebellion**

The complex dialectic between Wagner's leader, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and the Chief of General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Valery Gerasimov, last June 23 and 24 marked an unprecedented rift in relations between the largest Private Military Company (PMC), Wagner, and the political-military leadership of the Russian Federation.

Tensions between Yevgeniy Prigozhin and Minister Sergei Shoigu had already become evident during the Bakhmut battle, which lasted from August 2022 to May 2023. At that juncture, the co-founder and owner of Wagner, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, had appealed to the Russian population to exert pressure, not only through social channels, on the top leadership of the Russian armed forces, responsible, according to Prigozhin, for failing to timely supply the Wagner men engaged in the battle and against the Ukrainian armed forces in the Donetsk region.

Wagner's chief denounced the lack of 80 percent of ammunition, pointing the finger at Shoigu and Gerasimov, guilty in doing so of wanting to destroy Wagner. This accusation was denied and refuted by the Defense Ministry, which pointed out that such accusations undermined coordination among Russian units by benefiting the enemy<sup>1</sup>.

However, Moscow's need for additional fighters in Ukraine created fertile ground for the development of Russian PMCs. The Wagner group then filled the need through massive recruitment campaigns using billboards, Telegram channels, Pornhub, and tapping into the school and prison reservoirs. The latter was characterized as the main recruitment reservoir within which Prigozhin used inmate leaders to carry out careful selection. In return for a six-month deployment in the ranks of Wagner's troops, detainees between the ages of 22 and 50 are promised freedom and the opportunity to continue fighting in the organization.

Wagner has also expanded its recruitment pool through the opening of the Wagner Youth Center, called Wagneryonok, located in the facility already in operation since November 2022 in St. Petersburg.

The goal of the Wagner Youth Center open to 18-year-old boys and girls is to promote patriotism, prepare young people for military service, and assistance to the families of volunteers engaged in the conflict in Ukraine. Meetings with activists, war-supporting politicians, bloggers and media related to the Prigozhin group's info-war activities are held at the same location<sup>2</sup>.

The war in Ukraine has not only brought Wagner, previously engaged in more or less covert operations in Syria, Libya, Mali, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Sudan and Mozambique, out of the shadows, but has resulted in an exponential growth of the group's militiamen. The Wagner,

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<sup>1</sup> *Prigozhin Calls On Russians To Pressure Army Over Ammunition Supplies*, Radio Free Europe 22 febbraio 2023 <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-prigozhin-wagner-pressure-army-ammunition-ukraine/32283299.html>

<sup>2</sup> *Russia's Wagner Mercenary Group Launches Youth Club in St. Petersburg*, The Moscow Times 3 marzo 2023 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/03/03/russias-wagner-mercenary-group-launches-youth-club-in-st-petersburg-a80387>

whose existence and connection was not publicly confirmed by Prigozhin until September 2022, today can count on a force of about 50,000 personnel, a tenfold increase from before the war began.

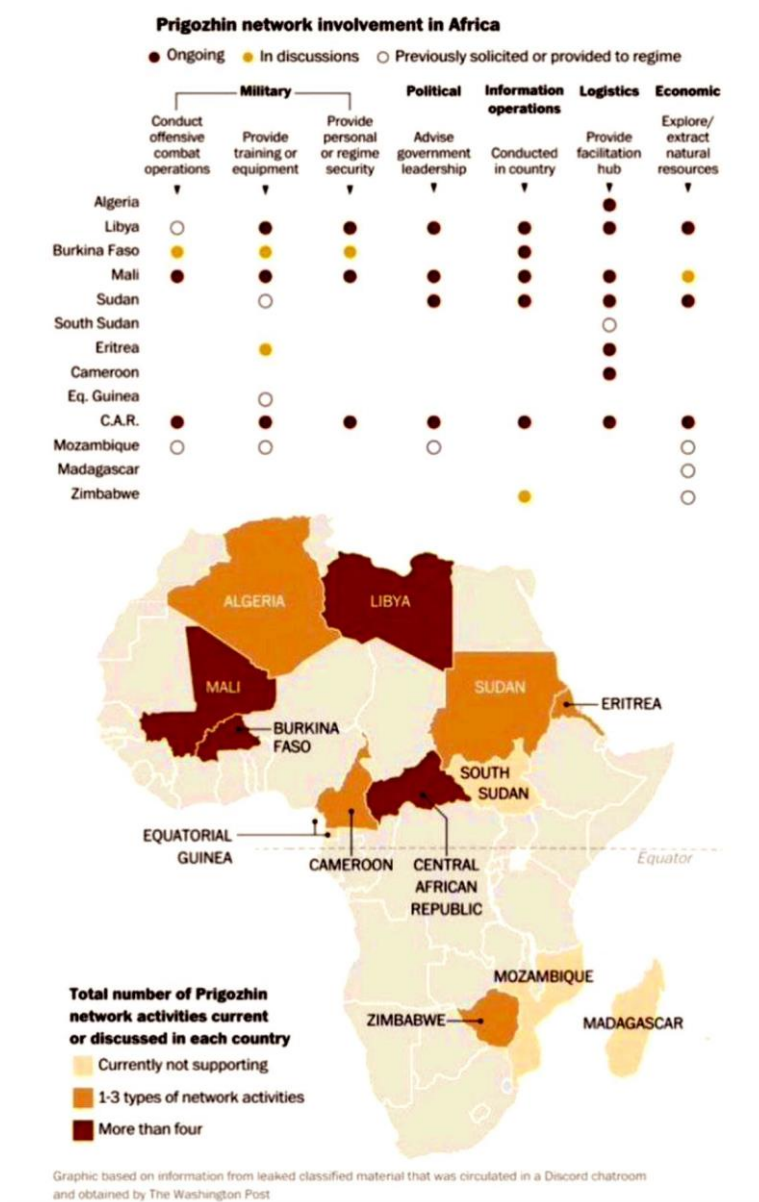


Fig. 1. Prigozhin network involvement in Africa

In the face of the need to strengthen combat forces without resorting to general mobilization and with the intention of improving force generation, last June 10 the Russian Defense Ministry announced that it would formalize, through individual contracts or of the respective volunteer formations, the organization of the activities of the volunteer formations - about 40 according to Secretary of State and Deputy Defense Minister Nikolai Pankov - by July 1, in the interest of increasing the effectiveness of volunteer detachments<sup>3</sup>.

According to the deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, the Russian military would recruit, as of January 1, 2023, more than 117,400 contract personnel framed in volunteer formations. Through this process it would be possible to provide volunteer formations with the necessary legal status and, in the intentions of Deputy Defense Minister Nikolai Pankov,

<sup>3</sup> Шойгу подписал приказ о порядке службы добровольческих организаций, TASS, 10 giugno 2023 <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/17981391>



these measures would serve to increase the combat capabilities and effectiveness of the armed forces and their volunteer detachments.

Although the ministry had not mentioned Wagner in its statement, Russian media reported that it was an attempt by Shoigu in trying to bend the mercenaries. This directive was strongly contested by Prigozhin, who publicly stated that Wagner would never sign any contract with the Russian Defense Ministry, thus transiting under the chain of command and control of the Russian armed forces<sup>4</sup>.

Prigozhin denounced Shoigu's inability to manage military formations while pointing out his direct contact and coordination with Air Force General Sergei Surovikin, commander of Russian forces in Ukraine. Surovikin was dubbed "General Armageddon" by the Russian media after serving in Syria and Chechnya, where his forces reduced cities to rubble by adopting a scorched-earth policy against its enemies.

His appointment on Oct. 10, 2022, was quickly followed by the largest wave of missile strikes against Ukraine since the beginning of the war<sup>5</sup>.

Prigozhin reached the highest point of his confrontation with Shoigu on June 23, dismantling the very narrative with which Putin had justified aggression against Ukraine. For the Wagner chief, in fact, Ukraine was not in the process of attacking, along with NATO, Russia, and war - a de facto forbidden expression to endorse the Special Operation narrative - would not be necessary to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine.

By attacking Shoigu for deceiving Putin to satisfy his own personal ambitions and for failing to conduct military operations in the first phase of the conflict, as well as the oligarchs accused of wanting to further enrich themselves from the occupation of the Donbass, Prigozhin implicitly refuted those in the United States and Europe who accuse the West of provoking Putin<sup>6</sup>.

On Saturday, June 24, Wagner was sending troops towards Moscow after taking control of the headquarters in the city of Rostov, the main logistical hub for Russian forces operating in Ukraine's southern Russia. Although the population in Rostov encouraged Wagner's forces, showing how little attachment there was to Putin, Wagner's initiative did not garner forms of support either of a popular or military nature - the latter aspect with respect to which it is possible that Prigozhin had harbored some expectations.

Although the targets of Prigozhin's invective continued to be Defense Minister Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff General Gerasimov, the initiative to move on Moscow-described by Prigozhin himself as the "march of justice"-appeared, at least for several hours, to be an attempted coup. Confirming the uncertainty of the moment were the words spoken on June 24 by Vladimir Putin, who, in a video message to the nation, spoke openly of treason, of backstabbing, going on to recall the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

On the one hand Putin emphasized how divisions within Russia would favor external enemies, while on the other he avoided explicitly mentioning Prigozhin and Wagner by appealing to fighters who through deception and threats had been involved in a criminal adventure. In the same hours security was being tightened in Moscow and Rostov-on-Don, where the Russian military headquarters for the southern region is located and which also oversees the fighting in Ukraine. Military vehicles manned the center of the Russian capital as early as the early hours of Saturday,

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<sup>4</sup> Faulconbridge G., *Prigozhin says Wagner will not sign contracts with Russia defence minister*, Reuters 11 giugno 2023 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/prigozhin-says-wagner-will-not-sign-any-contract-with-russian-defence-minister-2023-06-11/>

<sup>5</sup> *Russia war commander admits Kherson situation 'very difficult'*, Al Jazeera 19 ottobre 2022 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/19/russia-war-commander-admits-kherson-situation-very-difficult>

<sup>6</sup> Von Drehle D., Boot M., Ignatius D., Robinson E., Lane C., Willick J., Rogin J. and McArdle M., *Opinion: What happened in Russia — and what happens next? Our columnists weigh in*, The Washington Post 26 giugno 2023 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/06/26/russia-coup-prigozhin-putin-ukraine/>

and soldiers armed with assault rifles were stationed outside the main Defense Ministry building, and Red Square was closed to traffic. Late Saturday evening news was being disseminated that Prigozhin had agreed to President Lukashenko's mediation, with Putin's approval, and would therefore halt his march on Moscow (that had meanwhile reached 200 km from the capital), in order to avoid bloodshed among Russians in exchange for guarantees for their security.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov reported that Prigozhin himself would move to Belarus under the agreement.



Fig. 2. Wagner's march on Moscow

Explaining the reasons for the about-face was Prigozhin himself, who, in an audio message released on Telegram on June 26, reiterated that his initiative was not aimed at overthrowing the Russian government so much as opposing the absorption of Wagner by the Defense Ministry.

### **The rise of PMCs**

Contributing to the proliferation of PMCs, in addition to the need to be able to have forces to deploy on the front lines and in defense of border areas, as well as in Crimea, has also been the enactment of a series of laws passed by the Duma and signed by President Vladimir Putin, outlawing initiatives aimed at discrediting and spreading fake news with regard to volunteers and mercenaries fighting in Ukraine alongside the Russian armed forces. Offenses are punishable up to \$650 if committed by individuals, up to \$2,600 for officials and \$6,500 for organizations. Repetition of such offenses will be punishable by prison terms of up to 15 years.

Wagner is not the only one, and the war in Ukraine has led to the expansion of other PMCs and the founding of new ones. This explosion of what are essentially private armies is not only shaping the battlefield in Ukraine but could have devastating impacts even at the end of the conflict. Armen Sarkisyan, recently appointed as administrator for prisons in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, reportedly plans to use his position to develop a PMC utilizing the Wagner Group's prison

recruitment model. In Kherson, near Crimea, a former Wagner commander is reportedly involved in establishing a PMC called Convoy.

Gazprom, a major Russian oil company, has multiple PMCs. Early this year it formed Gazpromneft Security, reportedly to protect oil and gas production and storage sites, particularly in the Arctic. It may also be seeking the favor of Russian President Vladimir Putin by creating other nonstate armed forces he can rely on. Other recently unveiled Gazprom units, like Potok, have been fighting in Ukraine with Russia's forces.

Ramzan Kadyrov, the notorious warlord who Putin put in charge of the republic of Chechnya, already uses the region's security forces as his private paramilitary, even though they technically are part of the Russian National Guard. He has expressed interest in building his own PMC as well.

Some assert that Moscow is encouraging the creation of additional PMCs as a way to dilute Prigozhin's influence, or to supplant the Wagner Group entirely. Pitting competing groups against one another matches Putin's divide-and-rule political management style. The proliferation of PMCs could stoke dangerous rivalries as these groups vie for political and material support from Moscow. Groups stationed around Bakhmut already started fighting among themselves, including disparaging one another and competing for recruits.

By operating outside the traditional military chain of command, PMCs could undermine national security, just as the growing number of competitors could push more Russian PMCs to pursue lucrative contracts outside Ukraine, as happened with Wagner, engaged in operations in Africa, Asia, Europe and South America.

### **Final considerations**

The events of June 23 and 24 in Russia led to multiple speculations about the political future of President Vladimir Putin, the likely impact that Yevgeny Prigozhin's uprising might have on the trajectory of the war in Ukraine, as well as the future of Russia.

Prigozhin was quickly promised amnesty in negotiations that took only a few hours, and in doing so Putin avoided deploying significant military resources to Rostov-on-Don to directly counter Wagner, an escalation that would have raised widespread alarm. He might also have given military forces the opportunity to side with Wagner, had they been directly pitted against each other.

In contrast, Putin, in his address to the nation on June 24, drew a careful line between emphasizing the seriousness of Prigozhin's actions, avoiding mentioning him explicitly by name, and praising the exploits of Wagner's troops in the war so far.

With the benefit of hindsight, it can be argued that the uprising had been in preparation for months and that Putin failed to prevent the deflagration of the confrontation between Prigozhin and Shoigu. It also cannot be ruled out that there was an attempt by Prigozhin to offer Wagner's willingness to be incorporated into the Russian National Guard, reporting directly to Putin, rather than flowing into the Defense Ministry chain of command and thus to Shoigu.

Putin's non-response to the Prigozhin-Shoigu feud is in keeping with his approach to infighting in general, aware that this type of dynamic can rarely erode his own authority. However, the Wagner chief's "truth" operation could threaten the Russian regime far beyond the June 24 uprising. Prigozhin has undoubtedly touched on central and defining aspects of the Putin regime, such as corruption and incompetence, with his denunciations.

Prigozhin, a petty criminal turned war criminal, confirmed that he is an expert troublemaker capable of tapping into popular dissatisfaction with the Kremlin more effectively than any other liberal critical voice. Although the uprising has been neither met with popular support nor led to defections within the armed forces, the discontent it has brought out could be an Achilles' heel for Putin in the



continuation of operations in Ukraine<sup>7</sup>. On the contrary, should the Ukrainian counteroffensive prove less effective than anticipated, it is conceivable that, in the future, there may be less and less room for the likes of Prigozhin<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Von Drehle D., Boot M., Ignatius D., Robinson E., Lane C., Willick J., Rogin J. and McArdle M., *Opinion: What happened in Russia — and what happens next? Our columnists weigh in*, The Washington Post 26 giugno 2023 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/06/26/russia-coup-prigozhin-putin-ukraine/>

<sup>8</sup> Ferris E., *Prigozhin's Rebellion: What We Discovered, and What We Still Need to Know*, RUSI 26 giugno 2023 <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/prigozhins-rebellion-what-we-discovered-and-what-we-still-need-know>

## **Syria's return to the international community**

### **Abstract**

Syria has been the focus of international attention for several years because of the civil war and geopolitical confrontation taking place on its territory following the instability brought by the Arab Springs. After the Russian military intervention in September 2015, the situation on the ground has been stabilized, and today, although the civil war cannot be considered over and the country stabilized, Damascus and Assad have now been firmly reintegrated into regional political life from which they were cut off about a decade ago. In this study we will try precisely to highlight the current Syrian situation, the diplomatic steps of the last period, and the geopolitical scenarios affecting Damascus.

### **The situation in Syria**

The civil war in Syria began in 2011 as a result of the protests related to the Arab Springs that brought a series of conflicts and instability throughout the MENA region, for instance in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, but also Yemen. Those protests turned, with Western support and that of various regional players, first and foremost Saudi Arabia, into a real civil war with two different dynamics<sup>1</sup>. On the one hand, an internal clash between many factions that were fighting each other while aiming to bring down the Assad regime. Within this environment groups linked to international jihadi groups such as Al-Nusra, an offshoot of Al-Qaeda, and ISIS, developed since 2012 (Lister, 2015). On the other hand, the war in Syria showed classic elements of a proxy war from the outset, as the rebels were readily supported by the West, which ignored connections to international jihadist terrorism, and by Saudi Arabia whose goal was to bring down a regime considered an enemy and dangerously close to Iran. In support of the regime, however, other international actors moved in different ways and at different times: Iran, which then directly engaged in the conflict through Hezbollah - and here the role played by General Soleimani should not be forgotten (Jones, 2021); Russia, which first through diplomatic means succeeded at the Security Council in blocking various resolutions and then imposed its control over the dismantling of the Syrian chemical arsenal and finally intervened directly from September 2015 with its own armed forces to support the regime (Geukjian, 2022). In this context, the country has been subjected to heavy destruction and high levels of violence: it is difficult to establish the exact number, but one of the most credible estimates indicates about 580,000 casualties (GCR2P, 2023).

Due to Russian support, the situation in Syria today has definitely improved, although the civil war, internal instability and violence in general have not disappeared. Regime forces have recaptured much of the Syrian territory, eliminating over the years the territorial presence of the various militias, first and foremost that of the Islamic State, which remains active to this day but without territorial control (Winter, Alrhoun, 2022). However, some difficult and complex issues remain. First, the Syrian Kurds have been experiencing a situation similar to that of the Iraqi Kurds, as by exploiting the instability of the civil war they have managed to carve out a kind of autonomy that is not accepted and recognized by Damascus and is seen as a serious threat to its national security by Turkey. The latter is another international actor present in Syria with its own armed forces in the north of the country where it has conducted several operations in the past years. The Turkish military presence in Syria began in 2016 with Operation *Euphrates Shield* in the region between the Euphrates River in the east and the rebel-controlled area around Azaz in the west. The Turkish army and Syrian rebel groups aligned with Turkey fought against Islamic State forces and the Syrian

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<sup>1</sup> In truth, the Syrian war was and remains extremely complex with multiple levels of confrontation and interests to consider, but for the purposes of this paper we simplify that complexity by focusing on the issues of greatest interest.

Democratic Forces (SDF) from August 24, 2016 to March 29, 2017. Operation *Olive Branch*, on the other hand, was a cross-border military action conducted by the Turkish military in the Kurdish-majority Afrin district in northwest Syria against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the action lasted from January 20, 2018 to March 18, 2018. The 2019 Turkish offensive in northeastern Syria, Operation *Peace Spring*, again saw Turkish armed forces cooperating with local militiamen against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). On October 6, 2019, the Trump administration ordered U.S. troops to withdraw from northeastern Syria, and on October 9, the Turkish operation began with several airstrikes on border towns. The goal of this action was to expel SDF forces, designated by Turkey as a terrorist organization because of their ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), from the border region, as well as to create a 30-kilometer-deep safe zone in northern Syria where some of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey were to resettle. Operation *Spring Shield* was similar to the previous ones but took place in Idlib governorate in northwestern Syria, and began on Feb. 27, 2020 with the aim, as part of the Astana talks, of securing a ceasefire agreement in the second buffer zone in northern Syria and preventing migration from Idlib to the Turkish border. On March 5, Turkey and Russia signed a ceasefire agreement in Moscow. Finally, and most recently, on Nov. 2022, the Turkish Air Force launched Operation *Claw-Sword*, a series of airstrikes against Syrian Democratic Forces and Syrian Army positions in northern Syria (in Aleppo, Raqqqa, al-Hasaka).

Finally, there is a notable presence of American soldiers with various tasks: as a deterrent to defend the Kurds, for offensive operations against what remains of the Islamic State (one of the last raids took place on April 17, 2023 in the northwest of the country near Jarabalus), control of areas deemed crucial for natural resources so that the regime cannot exploit them, and control and deterrence towards Iranian operations in the country. Precisely the Iranian issue is significant because American positions have often been the target of drone attacks by Shiite militiamen. In this context it is also necessary to point out that moments of tension are not uncommon even with Russian forces operating at the request of the Damascus government in the country. Just in recent weeks such tensions have increased prompting the United States to increase its forces in the region. In fact, after sending a number of A-10 ground attack aircrafts in late April, in mid-June the Pentagon deployed a number of F-22s to the Middle East in an attempt to deter increasing incursions by Russian pilots who violate existing agreements in U.S.-controlled airspace in Syria. The purpose is clearly to create a deterrent and demonstrate American determination to preserve its presence by discouraging aggressive maneuvers by Russian pilots as a result. The problem, not a new one but one that has escalated in the spring perhaps as a result of a previously planned strategy, at least according to some news rumors (Warrick, Hill, 2023), is that Russian pilots conducted some 85 reported raids in May and April 2023 alone. The United States maintains about 900 troops in Syria mainly in the northeast of the country, but a major base is located to the south, in Al-Tanf (near the border with Iraq - a central area to control the highway connecting Baghdad with Damascus), and it is mainly over this base that violations have increased. (Szuba, 2023).

### **Syria in the international context**

While internally the situation is complex, intricate and still has elements of tension and conflict as we have seen, from an international perspective Damascus' role has improved significantly. In fact, after a series of bilateral rapprochements occurred already in the past years between Syria and other Arab countries in the region, in May the Arab League delegates meeting in Amman decreed Syria's re-entry into the Arab League at the following meeting on May 19 in Saudi Arabia. Jordan played an important role in this framework, as it hopes for a resolution of the Syrian crisis in order to solve the problem of Syrian refugees on its territory (about one million) and that of drug trafficking, mainly captagon, which has its point of origin in Syria. Present in Amman were Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and his Egyptian and Iraqi counterparts, Sameh Shoukry and Fuad Hussein, in addition to Syrian Faisal al-Mekdad (Lucente, 2023). Jordan has also proposed a peace plan that include the exit of all illegitimate foreign troops from Syria (i.e., Turkey, the United States



and Hezbollah), a necessary step but one that today's geopolitical scenario does not suggest is viable.

Syria's return to the Arab League is a significant change to de-escalate the conflict and try to bring it to an end, but it is still not enough because not all Arab countries agree and because, since this is a *proxy war*, external interests are crucial and as seen before currently conflicting.

## Conclusions

The Syrian situation tells us a lot about the geopolitics of the Middle East. The strong presence of foreign forces on its territory demonstrates two aspects.

On the one hand, a conflict that is not yet fully concluded and involves the interests of external powers such as Russia, the United States, and Turkey (plus of course Iran, which, however, is present with a militia, not regular forces) and an eventual conclusion passes through their respective capitals (given the current crisis situation it is difficult to foresee how Moscow and Washington can dialogue on Syria). Not to mention that a weakening of Moscow on the domestic or Ukrainian front would have immediate consequences in Syria.

On the other hand, the present tensions in Syria (those between Russian and American pilots mentioned earlier, but also between Russia and Turkey since on June 12 a Russian soldier died as a result of Turkish shelling against Kurdish positions in the north) do not rule out a future escalation of the conflict no longer in the form of civil war as in the previous decade, but as a confrontation between powers that could at that point involve not only Syria, but the whole Middle East.

A second aspect to consider concerns the stabilization that Damascus has managed to create in recent years, which has also enabled its return to the international scene. This is certainly a positive sign that can defuse a number of regional dynamics (linked to this aspect is then the rapprochement, central to regional stability, between Saudi Arabia and Iran), but it also has a more negative side. Indeed, Assad's return, albeit with all its limitations, represents a double defeat for the American political agenda because, on the one hand, it sees the *regime change* project that it had inaugurated with the Arab Springs and had led Washington to finance the Syrian rebels definitively wrecked; on the other hand, it is an unequivocal victory, albeit with limitations as the slow Astana process demonstrates, for Russia. Indeed, the latter has not only successfully interfered in U.S. regional policy, but has established itself as a regional player (it is too early to assess any consequences of the situation on the Ukrainian front) and gained strategic bases it did not have before.

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## **Escalation of violence in Sudan: exploring dynamics and determinants of armed clashes**

### **Abstract**

After three months of violent clashes between two structures of the Sudanese security apparatus, the SAF, and RSF, diplomatic resolution of the conflict appears far-fetched. The myriad of diverging political and economic interests turn the conflict into a zero-sum game for both belligerents. Both sides also enjoy enough resources to fuel the fighting for many months. Therefore, there is a serious chance that the fighting in Sudan will evolve into a war of attrition. The report explores the dynamics and processes that led to the armed clashes by pinpointing the determinants of the escalation of violence.

The armed struggle that began in April involves Sudan's two main security apparatuses. On one side stands the traditional national army, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). The SAF is led by General Abdel Fattah al Burhan, who has de-facto ruled the country since October 2021. On the other side is the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group led by Commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, aka Hemeti. RSFs are a diverse set of armed militias that, during the early 2000s, fought in support of the SAF and the government of then-leader Omar al-Bashir in Darfur. Starting in 2013, Al-Bashir chose to promote the gradual systematization of the militias by establishing the RSFs as a parallel apparatus to the SAF. Since the Sudanese independence (1956), the military has played a primary role in the country's political and economic system. Al-Bashir established a paramilitary organization entirely dependent and loyal to him (RSF) to counter SAF power. To this end, al-Bashir increased the RSF's power, fueling rivalry and competition with the SAF. However, in the spring of 2019, the two parallel security structures converged in a pragmatic yet temporary alliance. The country was going through a deep economic crisis, and protests against the al-Bashir government were growing. The SAF and RSF dismissed and arrested al-Bashir and the Islamist-based ruling group linked to the National Congress Party (NCP), thanks to the support of external actors (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt). The military's intervention opened a new phase in Sudanese politics marked by civilian-military power-sharing. The transition led by the Transitional Sovereignty Council (TSC), a collegial body with military and civil society members - organized in the Forces of Freedom and Change (FCC) - was interrupted by a new army intervention. The SAF leader reformed the TSC by only including SAF and RSF members. During the military junta's months, tensions between al-Burhan and Hemeti increased, reaching a breaking point in the second week of April.

The report aims to highlight the dynamics and processes that led to the current armed conflict by identifying the determinants behind its outbreak and foreshadowing the possible directions it might take.

### **1. Origin of the SAF and RSF rivalry**

Since 1956, the military has held centrality in Sudan's political affairs. The SAF's weight increased dramatically in 1989 when Omar al-Bashir led the army to seize power with the support of the National Islamic Front (NIF) driven by Islamist politician Hassan Al-Turabi. Already in the second half of the 1980s, the military had increased its grip on the Sudanese economy by exploiting the neoliberal policies recommended by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the

World Bank (WB) (Ryle et al. 2011). Likewise, in Egypt, SAFs in Sudan exploited stabilization and structural adjustment programs to take over several companies. In a few years, the military gained a monopoly over manufacturing and export companies operating in the defense sector. The consolidation of power in al-Bashir's hands and the marginalization of the Islamist components closest to al-Turabi allowed the military to extend their interests to other remunerative sectors, such as gold mines and oil (Berridge 2017). SAFs were thus able to thrive thanks to the patronage system established and nurtured by al-Bashir. As a result of their power, al-Bashir commissioned the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) to institutionalize the irregular armed militias used to counter insurgencies in peripheral regions such as Darfur and South Kordofan into the RSFs.

The NISS established RSFs as a paramilitary organization independent of traditional Sudanese military structures. The RSFs' origin dates back to the civil war in Darfur when al-Bashir legitimized Arab militias known as the Janjaweed to suppress an insurgency in the northwestern regions. The Janjaweed arose from the pan-Arab *Tajammu al-Arabi* legion formed and armed by Muammar Gaddafi. The group consisted of fighters from the Bedouin Rizeigat clan. They had established a presence in the cross-border areas between Libya, Chad, and Sudan (Flint and De Waal 2008). In 2013, the Janjaweed became the backbone of the RSF. Since then, the al-Bashir government employed the RSFs to manage unstable situations in the country's peripheral regions, especially in South Darfur. The organization was not a monolithic bloc, however. Within the RSF, tension grew between two distinct groups. On one side was the Mahamid clan led by the Janjaweed historic leader Musa Hilal. On the other side, a rising young commander, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, led the Mahariya clan. If Hilal wanted to gain more autonomy from the NCP, Dagalo strengthened personal ties with al-Bashir. The rifts within the RSFs worried al-Bashir, who feared they could weaken the organization.

In 2017, the Sudanese president decided to arrest Musa Hilal, leaving the field open to Dagalo, who has since become known in the president's circle as "Hamayti" (Hemeti), my protector. That same year, al-Bashir chose to detach the RSFs from the NISS, making them a fully-fledged independent paramilitary organization. Al-Bashir gave Hemeti and his circle military ranks and, most importantly, secured them access to state funds and control over rich natural resources like gold mines (MEE 2023). In a short time, Hemeti took control of several companies, accumulating wealth and power (Berridge et al. 2022). The RSFs leader also increased his international profile by forging relations with several extra-regional actors (TGW 2019). The RSFs' engagement in the Yemen conflict allowed Hemeti to consolidate ties with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Gallopini 2020). By the end of the al-Bashir era, the RSFs emerged as a direct challenge to the military, political, and economic status of the SAFs. In 2019, Hemeti chose to turn his back on al-Bashir and cooperate with the SAF to overthrow him and begin a complex political transition.

## **2. The conflict's inevitability**

The SAFs and RSFs opted to converge on common stances by sidelining reasons for friction to prevent civil protests from threatening their respective privileges. The political-strategic alignment between the two Sudanese security structures opened a honeymoon that was destined to be short-lived. The steady growth of tensions between the two groups has marked the four years between al-Bashir's fall and the outbreak of fighting. However, some key moments punctuated the degeneration of relations between al-Burhan and Hemeti. Those can help in understanding the conflict's inevitability.

The first critical step goes back to October 2020 with the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) signing. The Khartoum government signed the agreement with representatives of several armed groups active throughout the country, particularly the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF). The

JPA was supposed to strengthen civilian-military cooperation by further boosting the political transition. However, the agreement did serve the SAFs and RSFs to co-opt members of the armed groups and postpone the formal handover to the FCC (Murphy 2021). The negotiations were mainly led by Hemeti, who used the opportunity to consolidate his power in Darfur and along the border with South Sudan.

The RSFs leader gained control of the oil fields in West Kordofan. Simultaneously, the RSFs transformed from a set of various armed militias to a unified and powerful force with nationwide political objectives (Verjee 2021). Such developments increased al-Burhan's perception of threat. Twelve months after JPA, the relationship between al-Burhan and Hemeti was further deteriorated by the former's choice to assume full powers. The October 2021 a coup ended the military-civilian cooperation. Faced with a fait accompli, Hemeti aligned himself with his rival's decisions, knowing that the SAFs' next target would be the RSFs. Al-Burhan's showdown made it clear how the clash between the two security structures was inevitable. The signing of the Framework of Agreement (FoA) on December 5, 2022, was the last crucial step towards escalation. After months of discussions conducted mostly underground with some Sudanese political figures, the military junta signed the agreement. It provided conditions for the revival of the transition path aimed at the return of a civilian government. Within the military junta, there were two distinct positions. The SAFs were skeptical about signing the agreement. Conversely, the RSFs supported the FoA. Following the 2021's coup, the paramilitary group gradually moved closer to the FCCs, arguing the need to reopen dialogue with civil society. Hemeti's rapprochement with the FCC was driven merely by political calculus. With the support of Egypt, Al-Burhan chose to organize an alternative civil coalition known as the Democratic Bloc (FCC-DB) (Marsden 2023). The emergence of the FCC-DB split the Sudanese civilian front. Both leaders were seeking alliances in preparation for an imminent showdown. In such an environment of increasing tensions, SAF and RSF carried out the steps necessary to implement the FoA. Two terms of the agreement can be considered triggers for the outbreak of violence.

The first concerns the many assets associated with SAFs and RSFs. As already included in the first transition agreements in 2019, the FoA also provides the military's relinquishment of its many economic holdings in agriculture, trade, natural resources (gold, oil), and the defense sector. The second issue concerns reforming the security apparatus by establishing a single national army by integrating the two structures (Young 2023). SAFs and RSFs consider both conditions unacceptable. Despite the many facade statements, al-Burhan and Hemeti see the FoA implementation as a threat to their respective economic and political interests. As pointed out by the Resistance Committee, a coalition of civilian actors detached from the FCC and the FCC-DB, the two structures (SAF and RSF) have instrumentalized the December agreement to gain relative power above the rival.

### **3. New alliances and outlooks**

The sources of friction between SAF and RSF had thus been present for years. The downfall of al-Bashir and the following coup (2021) accelerated trends already in place, creating the conditions for the outbreak of violence. In the past two years, al-Burhan and Hemeti have forged new alliances within the country. The RSFs conducted recruitment campaigns throughout West Darfur, involving several Sudanese militias that had fought in Libya over the past few years. Al-Burhan, on the other hand, followed a two-track policy. On the one hand, he sought to establish relations with some of Hemeti's rival militias and traceable to Musa Hilal. On the other hand, the General has gradually rehabilitated several members of the old NCP regime by co-opting them within agencies and ministries. The rapprochement between the SAF and NCP is not coincidental. Many SAF officers maintain in-depth ties with al-Bashir's establishment and constituency. The two groups share national and regional political and economic power interests. Therefore, SAFs and

NCP are interested in ensuring continuity to an economic-political system and structure that has enriched them for more than 30 years. The RSF, by contrast, while being a creation of al-Bashir and an expression of his political culture, positions itself as the challenger of traditional power logic.

These dynamics can be explained by an often-overlooked dimension of today's conflict, namely the center-peripheries one. Historically, Sudan is plagued with more or less latent civil war situations that reflect the struggle between the center (Khartoum) and its southern (Blue Nile, South Kordofan) and western (Darfur) peripheries. The struggle between SAFs and RFSs is a new phase in the conflict between a political-military elite representative of the center and an emerging militarized one, which is the expression of one of the peripheries that have suffered most from Khartoum's marginalization and power, namely Darfur. The two structures conceive the clash for control over the state as a zero-sum game from which only one winner can emerge. Such an approach to the conflict derails mediation efforts, whether by extra-regional actors (Saudi Arabia, US) or African actors (IGAD, AU). Looking ahead, the most likely scenario is a protracted war of attrition.

The conflict's length will depend on the ability of the two sides to fuel their military efforts. Both can count on control over the country's refineries (al-Jaili/RFS; Port Sudan/SAF), businesses (SAF), and mineral resources (RFS). As a result, they will continue to enjoy resources. The most dangerous aspect of the course of the conflict and the stability of the whole region concerns the gradual widening of violence. Specifically, violence has recently increased in Darfur, al-Geneina, and Kordofan, near a-Obeid. In these areas, both SAFs and RFSs are trying to mobilize fighters and militias by appealing to latent ethnic-based rivalries and hatreds. If such a dynamic takes root in the country, the clash will degenerate into a widespread ethnic-based conflict. Such a scenario represents a threat to the precarious interethnic balance within Sudan and in some neighboring countries.

There is a risk of regionalization of the conflict. Especially the most significant short-term risks involve Chad due to cross-border clan and political ties.

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## **The resumption of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia: the consequences on conflicts and regional balances**

### **Abstract**

In June 2023, Iran reopened its embassy in Saudi Arabia, one of the effects of the agreement sealed between Teheran and Riyadh in March 2023, with China' intermediation, which could have some consequences on regional conflicts and tensions. The détente - forced for Riyadh that in recent years has not obtained the desired results and for Teheran due to internal problems and the JCPOA failure - has not yet led to a de-escalation in the area so far. The agreement is the result of pragmatism forced by necessity. The US disengagement from the Middle East is part of a calculated strategy to shift attention to its growing rivalry with China. The US seeks to return to its pre-1990 approach to the region that combined a minimal military presence with dependence on its regional allies to keep the peace, but Beijing is carving out a growing role for itself in the Middle East region.

On June 7, 2023, Iran reopened its embassy in Saudi Arabia<sup>1</sup>, one of the effects of the agreement sealed between Teheran and Riyadh in March, with the intermediation of China<sup>2</sup>, which could have significant repercussions on regional conflicts and tensions<sup>3</sup>.

Diplomatic relations have resumed after the interruption in 2016 and many relapses in the area - especially in Iraq, Yemen, Syria and Lebanon - at the height of a permanent tension between the two capitals which has its roots in the Islamic Revolution of 1979, beyond the Sunni-Shiite opposition which, before that date, had not prevented good relations between the two systems.

The differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the formation of historical identity have always constituted a terrain that fuels conflicts beyond the diplomatic and political aspects having a cultural, ideological and structural dimension<sup>4</sup>.

These differences had not prevented cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran during the Cold War. After the revolution in Iran in 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, all forms of cooperation and understanding between Teheran and Riyadh broke down. The confrontation was fuelled by the Iran export policy of the Islamic revolution and Saudi Arabia full support to Iraq during the war in 1980-88. In 2003, the balance of power between the Kingdom and the Islamic Republic was disturbed by the international intervention in Iraq and the rise to power of the Shiite majority. The 2011 revolutions were the catalyst for breaking the rules of regional conflicts, but Yemen is where the two regional powers have mainly clashed. Riyadh saw the events in Yemen as a serious

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<sup>1</sup> M. Benmansour, "Iran's embassy reopens in Saudi Arabia for first time in seven years", Reuters, June 6, 2023; [https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-embassy-reopens-saudi-capital-riyadh-al-arabiya-tv-2023-06-06/#:~:text=Iran%27s%20embassy%20reopens%20in%20Saudi%20Arabia%20for%20first%20time%20in%20seven%20years,-By%20Mohammed%20Benmansour&text=RIYADH%2C%20June%206%20\(Reuters\),conflicts%20across%20the%20Middle%20East.](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-embassy-reopens-saudi-capital-riyadh-al-arabiya-tv-2023-06-06/#:~:text=Iran%27s%20embassy%20reopens%20in%20Saudi%20Arabia%20for%20first%20time%20in%20seven%20years,-By%20Mohammed%20Benmansour&text=RIYADH%2C%20June%206%20(Reuters),conflicts%20across%20the%20Middle%20East.)

<sup>2</sup> France24, "L'Iran et l'Arabie saoudite scellent leur réconciliation à Pékin", Débat, 06/04/2023; <https://www.france24.com/fr/moyen-orient/20230406-l-iran-et-l-arabie-saoudite-scellent-leur-r%C3%A9conciliation-%C3%A0-p%C3%A9kin>.

<sup>3</sup> M. Nihal, I. Naar, A. Mostafa, "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister has 'positive' talks with Iranian counterpart", June 17, 2023; <https://www.thenationalnews.com/gulf-news/2023/06/17/saudi-arabias-foreign-minister-prince-faisal-bin-farhan-arrives-in-teheran/>.

<sup>4</sup> M. N. Mirza, H. Abbas, I. H. Qaisrani, "Structural Sources of Saudi-Iran Rivalry and Competition for the Sphere of Influence", SAGE Publications, Vol. 11, I. 3, July 16 2021; <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/21582440211032642?icid=int.sj-full-text.similar-articles.1>.

threat to its national security, political establishment and strategic equations, while Teheran viewed them as a new factor in its regional competition with Saudi Arabia<sup>5</sup>.

In the pre-2011 period, Iran had supported its long-time ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, while the Saudis sided with the opposition, the Islamic Front<sup>6</sup>. Since late 2015, Teheran has been associated with international negotiations on Syria's future, a further incentive for Riyadh to extend its influence in resolving regional crises.

The post-2011 period has seen the emergence of three regional alliance blocs: one led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, another by Iran and its allies and a third by Qatar and Turkey<sup>7</sup>.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have positioned themselves as counter-revolution forces across the region. Initially Riyadh was in favour of a regime change in Syria - readmitted to the Arab League after 12 years in May 2023 - and both have encouraged the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen. They generally tried to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>8</sup> to take power, but with some differences: Riyadh supports the Yemeni wing, Islah.

Iran, despite claiming a revolutionary posture since 1979, has supported revolutions only in states where allies of the Saudi, Israeli and US enemies were threatened, such as Egypt, but it has supported crackdowns by incumbent allied governments such as Syria and, subsequently, Iraq and Lebanon.

Qatar and Turkey have generally supported the protesters and favoured the Muslim Brotherhood and other popular Islamist movements that seemed set to rise to power, but Doha did not intervene when riots broke out in Bahrain in 2011 when Saudi Arabia sent its troops to deal with the popular insurrection in the predominantly Shiite but Sunni-ruled country<sup>9</sup>.

The Saudi-Iranian deal has the potential to lower tensions in Iraq. Teheran has exploited the chaos following the 2003 international intervention to spread its influence, especially among the majority Shiite population and the ruling Islamist parties that represent them. Iran has funded and trained paramilitary groups - operating outside the control of the Iraqi state - aligned with Shiite political parties, some of which operate as part of the Popular Mobilization Forces, which were set up to fight ISIS and nowadays continue to enjoy a solid position in the country<sup>10</sup>. They are supported by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Qods Force - Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps that operates outside Iranian borders - have periodically fired rockets at remaining US forces in the country and might be responsible for the attacks in Saudi Arabia in 2019 and 2021. Iraqi Sunnis historically maintain tribal, trade and religious ties with Saudi Arabia. Baghdad has sought to reposition Iraq as a regional dialogue player: Iranian and Saudi representatives have travelled to Iraq for five rounds of direct talks during former Prime Minister Khadimi's term and with Prime Minister al-Sudani Iraq has sought to cement its ties with Saudi Arabia. Saudi-Iranian détente could remove the political hurdles that have stalled substantial Saudi investment in Iraq<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> A. Faez, "A Struggle of Influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia: The Repercussions of Confrontation and the Likelihood of Peace A Case Study of Yemen", AlJazeera Centre for Studies, 8 May 2023; <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/analyses/struggle-influence-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia-repercussions-confrontation-and>.

<sup>6</sup> T. Poole, "Iran and Saudi Arabia's great rivalry explained", BBC, 4 January 2016; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35221569>.

<sup>7</sup> C. Phillips, "From revolutions to rapprochement: The end of the '2011 era' in the Middle East?", Middle East Eye, 26 June 2023; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/middle-east-revolution-rapprochement-end-2011-era>.

<sup>8</sup> Muslim Brotherhood, one of the most important international Islamist organizations with a political approach to Islam. Founded in Egypt (where they are particularly widespread and at the origin of the advent of Mohamed Morsi in 2012) in 1928 by Hasan al-Bannā in Isma'iliyya in the context of a cultural and religious awakening in reaction to the westernization of Islamic society, they have been outlawed as a terrorist organization by Bahrain, Egypt, Russia, Syria, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. They receive more or less explicit support and protection from the governments of Turkey and Qatar.

<sup>9</sup> M. Chulov, "Saudi Arabian troops enter Bahrain as regime asks for help to quell uprising", The Guardian, 14 March 2011; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/14/saudi-arabian-troops-enter-bahrain>.

<sup>10</sup> AlJazeera, "How has the Saudi-Iran divide affected the Middle East?", 7 April 2023; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/7/how-has-the-saudi-iran-divide-affected-the-middle-east>.

<sup>11</sup> International Crisis Group, "The Impact of the Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement on Middle East Conflicts", 19 April 2023; <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran-saudi-arabia/impact-saudi-iranian>.

The war in Yemen – which began in 1994 and has gone through various phases<sup>12</sup> with external interventions affecting the confrontation between south and north reunified in 1990<sup>13</sup> - escalated in March 2015 when a Saudi-led coalition<sup>14</sup> launched a campaign of air strikes against the Houthi-Saleh coalition<sup>15</sup>. Riyadh's stated goals were to push back the Houthis and to reinstate former President Hadi by framing the war as opposition to Iranian influence as the Houthis are perceived as proxy of Iran<sup>16</sup>- that supports the rebellion<sup>17</sup> since 2009<sup>18</sup>.

While Saudi-Iranian détente is a necessary step towards stabilizing Yemen, it must be emphasized that are primarily local issues and competition for power among Yemeni actors that drive the conflict. It is not a common Shia faith that brings Iran and the Houthis together. The Houthis are Zaydi – a branch of Shiism distinct from the Twelver Shiism practiced by the majority of the Shia population in the region - their beliefs diverge significantly and many Zaydi in Yemen are against the Houthis. The armed movement is economically autonomous from Teheran, with its own political agenda and a distinct power structure. Iran does not control the Houthis decision-making process, even if their worldview is similar, inducing convergence in foreign policy issues: both the Houthis and the Iranian leadership cultivate an anti-imperialist narrative, claiming to protect the oppressed from arrogance by strongly opposing the United States and Israel.

The support of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - Qods Force (arms and ammunition smuggling and military training) has enabled the Houthis to enhance their defense capabilities and further develop their asymmetrical skills. The IRGC-QF is mainly interested in maintaining the transit points for arms and smuggling through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Hodeida and the nearby Red Sea coast represent, despite the blockade by the Saudi-led coalition, an entry point and a stronghold for Iranian maritime depth. Hezbollah is also the closest ally of the Houthis in the Iranian constellation and it plays a mentor role for military training.

A common dissatisfaction with the status quo is at the origin of the Iran-Houthi collaboration together with a conjunctural convergence of interests<sup>19</sup>. Iran opposes the regional order, dominated by the United States and its partners, especially Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Houthis opposed the Hadi government, supported by Saudi Arabia and the Islah party. With the arrival in 2022 of the Presidential Leadership Council, PLC – formed in Riyadh and extremely multi-faceted<sup>20</sup> in an attempt to involve as many actors as possible in the framework of the civil war - the Hadi phase has definitely

<sup>12</sup> AlJazeera, "A timeline of Yemen's slide into conflict and war", April 11, 2023; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/11/a-timeline-of-yemens-slide-into-conflict-and-war>.

<sup>13</sup> Even earlier, during the civil war of the 1960s, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the main external supporters of the Yemeni sides, agreed to withdraw in 1967, but the war still dragged on for another three years.

<sup>14</sup> Air and ground forces provided by Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, United Arab Emirates, Oman for medical assistance, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain.

<sup>15</sup> T. Juneau, "No, Yemen's Houthis actually aren't Iranian puppets", May 16, 2016; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/16/contrary-to-popular-belief-houthis-arent-iranian-proxies/>.

<sup>16</sup> Mainly they are Hamas, Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, coordinated and supported by the Qods Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

<sup>17</sup> J. Bender, "Iran's proxy war in Yemen just got exposed", May 1, 2015; <https://www.businessinsider.com/irans-proxy-war-in-yemen-just-got-exposed-2015-5?r=US&IR=T>.

<sup>18</sup> AFP, "Iran arming Yemen's Houthi rebels since 2009: UN report", Middle East Eye, 1 May 2015; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-arming-yemens-houthi-rebels-2009-un-report>.

<sup>19</sup> E. Ardemagni, "Houthis and Iran: A War Time Alliance", ISPI, 22 March 2023; <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/houthis-and-iran-a-war-time-alliance-121951>.

<sup>20</sup> Rashad al-Alimi (President), former adviser to President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi; Tareq Saleh (member), Yemeni military commander, nephew of late President Ali Abdullah Saleh, leader of the National Resistance; Sultan Ali al-Arada (member), regarded as a major tribal and military figure, Governor of Marib Governorate, member of Al-Islah Party; Abed al-Rahman Abu Zara'a (member), leads the Southern Giants Brigades of the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council; Abdullah al-Alimi Bawazeer (member), from President Hadi's inner circle and member of the Al-Islah party; Othman Hussein Megali (member), lawmaker and one of the tribal leaders of Sa'dah, the main Houthi stronghold; Aidarus al-Zoubaidi (member), current president and commander of the STC and de facto leader of the Southern Movement in Yemen; Faraj Salmin al-Buhsani (member), former governor of Hadramaut.

ended. The new government has failed to impose control over the territory or to find an agreement among the warring factions<sup>21</sup>.

Furthermore, tensions between the Saudi bloc and the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council, STC, have intensified in recent months: Saudi Arabia is planning to set up a new administrative body in the city of Aden, the PLC interim capital, in order to decrease the STC influence on the city, despite being part of the PLC<sup>22</sup>.

The Houthis resilience and unexpected capabilities have allowed the Iranians to indirectly put pressure on Saudi Arabia with limited material investment, gaining indirect access to the Red Sea thanks to the Houthis presence in the Hodeida port.

Since the Yemeni conflict has decades-deep roots and a keen rooted local dimension<sup>23</sup>, the rapprochement between Teheran and Riyadh will not produce immediate or decisive effects on the conflict<sup>24</sup>. Prisoner exchanges<sup>25</sup> have been underway since April 2023, largely biased in favour of the Houthis, but the achievement of a stable and lasting ceasefire and a peace agreement are still a long way off<sup>26</sup>.

The Iran-Saudi deal could provide the Houthis with an opportunity to seize additional territory by exploiting the other parties' de-escalation. The Houthis have little reason to believe such regional developments will serve their interests; they also have a record of accomplishment of using previous negotiations to consolidate their power.

Saudi Arabia fears the formation of a Shiite crescent stretching from Iran to Lebanon via Iraq - led by the Shiite majority since Saddam Hussein overthrow of in 2003 - Bashar el-Assad's Syria, an Alawite, Yemen, Bahrain and Saudi provinces in the east of the country where Shiites are locally in the majority.

The Islamic Republic's strategy is to exploit instability, to penetrate weak political systems and targeting disaffected political parties or militias that oppose, violently or otherwise, the national or regional status quo. Iran opposes the regional presence of the United States and wants to increase the deterrence level, arming its proxies so that they can react against US interests or partners and to position itself as an essential regional power.

In July 2015, following a negotiation activity that lasted a few years, Iran had reached the signing of the JCPOA, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, with the counterpart made up of the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council - China, France, Russia, UK, USA - plus Germany) and the European Union<sup>27</sup>.

This historic agreement - considering the 1979 interruption of relations between Washington and the Islamic Revolution and the international isolation that followed - gave Teheran a new and unexpected leeway. The agreement envisaged - starting 16<sup>th</sup> January 2016 - the lifting of the economic sanctions imposed on Iran by the international community in 2003, but also the

<sup>21</sup> A. al-Sakani, "Yemen inaugurates new presidential council", *AlJazeera*, 19 April 2022; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/19/yemen-inaugurates-new-presidential-council>.

<sup>22</sup> Middle East Monitor, "Yemen: Saudi Arabia to form council to run Aden, counter STC", July 2, 2023; <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230702-yemen-saudi-arabia-to-form-council-to-run-aden-counter-stc/>.

<sup>23</sup> T. Manley, F. Al-Goidi, "Saudi-Iran Rapprochement Unlikely to Bring Lasting Peace to Yemen", *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, April 13, 2023; [https://mecouncil.org/blog\\_posts/saudi-iran-rapprochement-unlikely-to-bring-lasting-peace-to-yemen/](https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/saudi-iran-rapprochement-unlikely-to-bring-lasting-peace-to-yemen/).

<sup>24</sup> D. Hilton, "Yemen vice-president: Independence of the south is the solution", *Middle East Eye*, 23 June 2023; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/yemen-vice-president-independence-south-solution>.

<sup>25</sup> *AlJazeera*, "Yemen prisoner exchange talks wrap with focus on political figure", 19 June 2023; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/19/yemen-prisoner-exchange-talks-wrap-with-focus-on-political-figure>.

<sup>26</sup> A. al-Haj, "Yemen: Fighting kills 16, endangering peace efforts", *AP*, March 22, 2023; <https://apnews.com/article/yemen-fighting-truce-marib-houthi-peace-df1636fc946f8ddf1b613cb5d8377262>.

<sup>27</sup> Under the agreement, Iran had agreed to eliminate medium-enriched uranium reserves, cut low-enriched uranium reserves by 98%, reduced the number of gas-fired centrifuges by 2/3 for 13 years. For the next 15 years, Iran was allowed to enrich uranium to 3.67% and pledged not to build new heavy water nuclear reactors. Uranium enrichment activities were to be limited to a single plant using first generation centrifuges for 10 years, the other plants had to be converted to avoid the risk of nuclear proliferation. The monitoring of Iranian compliance with the agreement is entrusted to the IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency, which had to be guaranteed regular access to all nuclear facilities. The expected counterpart for Iran was the lifting of the economic sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union and the United Nations Security Council in accordance with resolution no. 1747 of 2007.



progressive release of the 90 billion dollars frozen abroad and the return of foreign investors attracted by an internal market of over 78 million inhabitants, thus allowing Teheran to revive its economy deeply damaged by decades of sanctions. Furthermore, Iran could have modernized its armaments, a significant part of which dates back to the Seventies. Iran boasts an army of 550,000 men and 125,000 highly experienced Pasdaran, while Saudi Arabia can deploy 230,000 troops but much better equipped<sup>28</sup>. In May 2018, the Trump administration, also following pressure from Israel, unilaterally announced exiting the agreement and re-establishing the economic sanctions (a decision not supported by France, the United Kingdom and Germany that had already partially started investment programs in Iran).

On January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2016, Sheikh Nimr Baqr al-Nimr - a Saudi political dissident belonging to the country's Shiite minority and therefore extremely representative - was executed with 46 other people (al Qaeda fighters and some Shiite militants accused of violence during the protests). The same day the Saudi embassy in Teheran was attacked and set on fire. The next day Saudi Arabia decided to sever diplomatic relations. Furthermore, several Arab League countries have since sided with Riyadh. Al-Nimr represented the political rift located in the east of the country, which he proposed to unite with the predominantly Shia Sunni-ruled Bahrain. The execution of the Saudi political dissident has provoked various violent reactions not only in Iran, but also in Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are the two main strategic poles of the Middle East area, around which alliances with the great powers are organised. They embody the same quest for leadership in the Persian Gulf region, which can be exercised effectively only within the borders defined a century ago. The munificence of the ultra-conservative power held by the Saudi dynasty contrasts with the austerity of the mullahs, but both derive their legitimacy from religious conservatism – Shiite or Sunni – and at the same time they are the embodiment of the strict control exercised by civil and religious authorities over the citizens. The two countries are also characterized by the massive use of the death penalty, which is why they are both subject to criticism by the international community in terms of governance and respect for fundamental rights. However, the Saudi kingdom is one of the main oil producers and holder of 10% of world reserves, easily accessible but concentrated essentially in the eastern part of the country, where the Shiite minority lives, as well as being the guardian of the holy places of Mecca and Medina - taken from the Hashemites in 1925.

The questioning of the Middle East political map, which dates back to the 1916 French-British Sykes-Picot agreement, was at the heart of Daesh's strategy that aimed to establish a caliphate on the Abbasid model that disappeared in the 13th century.

The end of the Ottoman Empire rule was initially accompanied by a sharing of influence between France and the United Kingdom over part of the region - Lebanon, northern Syria and the Mosul province for the former; Southern Syria, Mesopotamia, current Kuwait and Palestine for the latter. Saudi Arabia established itself in 1932 on the basis of an entity created with ups and downs between 1744 and 1818, thanks to an alliance between the Saud family and the Wahhabi clergy. The alliance with the United States dates back to the Quincy pact - oil supplies in exchange for security and military protection - essential for understanding what is currently happening, with Riyadh's refusal to cooperate with Washington that has not hidden its irritation<sup>29</sup>.

In February 1945, US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt returned from the Yalta conference on the USS Quincy: he was visited by King Ibn Saud, founder of the dynasty still in power. The Quincy pact - renewed in 2005 during the Bush administration - represented one of the founding pillars of the international balance in the second half of the twentieth century. In July 2022, President Biden travelled to Saudi Arabia to ask Saudi leaders to increase the oil production in order to bring

<sup>28</sup> P. Dupont, T. Flichy de La Neuville, « L'Arabie saoudite et l'Iran face à la crise du Moyen-Orient », *Revue Défense Nationale* 2016/4 N° 789, pagg. 91-94 ; <https://www.cairn.info/revue-defense-nationale-2016-4-page-91.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> E. Knickmeyer, K. Freking, C. Megerian, "A bump and a miss: Saudi oil cut slaps down Biden's outreach", AP, October 7, 2022; <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-2022-midterm-elections-biden-inflation-business-fa45f3023af51b1b7201f0c06d86f72d>.

down the price especially in light of the war in Ukraine<sup>30</sup>. Gulf producers, tied to Russia within OPEC+<sup>31</sup>, chose instead to put their own interests first.

The practice, which has persisted for some years, of keeping the oil production low by OPEC+, is explained by the intention of hindering shale oil producers in the United States - which in this way have freed themselves from energy dependence from this area as of 2019<sup>32</sup> – and the weakening of Iran. However, this policy is backfiring in Saudi Arabia, whose population of 35 million is facing growing economic and social difficulties.

Saudi Arabia has not officially broken the pact with the United States, but the kingdom belongs to the group of medium regional powers that want to emancipate themselves from any protection or constraint, given the United States diminishing interest in the area. The Saudis drew their conclusions about the relative American disengagement in the region and the protection that has proven insufficient. They prefer to approach countries that do not set conditions on human rights, making the most of oil revenues while the world is on its way to a reduction of fossil energies. The lack of reaction at the attack on Saudi territory in September 2019, probably conducted by Iran<sup>33</sup>, ultimately convinced Riyadh to autonomously provide for its own security by lowering regional tensions, which is why an Iran-Saudi Arabia agreement was reached.

Although associated with a feudal-type regime, the Saudis have always maintained good relations with the international community while the mullahs' government, in reaction to the Pahlavis, built its identity on the rejection of the West and Israel. The Islamic Republic of Iran, heir to a centuries-old civilization, gladly mocks the Saudi kingdom, whose history is recent and whose population is of nomadic origins. Iran is also one of the most indomitable enemies of the Islamic State organization, IS, one of the preferred targets of which is the Shiite community. The same goes for Saudi Arabia, repeatedly the target of attacks attributed to IS. For the first time since the fall of the Shah, Riyadh and Teheran had a common enemy - revolutionary and jihadist Salafism - an unprecedented scenario. In June 2023, Mohammad bin Salman hosted a thirty ministers meeting of the coalition against the Islamic State, including the United States and France, met with Secretary of State Blinken to discuss human rights, approached Syria and organized a summit of the Arab League, inviting Bashar al-Assad but also the Ukrainian president Zelensky<sup>34</sup>.

The strategic rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia includes a military dimension that foreshadowed an indirect confrontation near Saudi borders. With this agreement the path changed, even reaching the formation of a naval alliance<sup>35</sup> which, in addition to Iran and Saudi Arabia, includes Qatar, Bahrain, Iraq, India and Pakistan<sup>36</sup>. Iran, confirming its aptitude for pragmatism, is moving on several fronts: while the de-escalation activities regarding Riyadh continue, it is weaving a network of alliances among states united by US sanctions: Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> A. Gabon, "Saudi-Iran deal: Towards the de-Americanisation of the Middle East?", Middle East Eye, 23 March 2023; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/saudi-iran-reconciliation-middle-east-de-americanisation>.

<sup>31</sup> Members are: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, Algeria, Angola, Libya, Nigeria, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Venezuela, South Sudan, Azerbaijan, Brunei, Kazakhstan, Bahrain, Malaysia, Mexico, Oman, Russia, and Sudan.

<sup>32</sup> USA facts, "Is the US energy independent?", October 31, 2022; <https://usafacts.org/articles/is-the-us-energy-independent/>.

<sup>33</sup> D. Hearst, "EXCLUSIVE: Iranian drones launched from Iraq carried out attacks on Saudi oil plants", Middle East Eye, 15 September 2019; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-iranian-drones-launched-iraq-carried-out-attacks-saudi-oil-plants>.

<sup>34</sup> France24, "Arabie saoudite : le prince héritier MBS au centre du jeu grâce à sa nouvelle diplomatie ? ", Débat, 08/06/2023 ; <https://www.france24.com/fr/%C3%A9missions/le-d%C3%A9bat/20230608-mbs-au-centre-du-jeu-la-nouvelle-diplomatie-du-prince-h%C3%A9ritier-d-arabie-saoudite>.

<sup>35</sup> Reuters, "Saudi Arabia urges improved maritime security in Gulf as ties with Iran resume", June 17, 2023; <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-foreign-minister-arrives-Teheran-amid-rapprochement-iran-tv-2023-06-17/>.

<sup>36</sup> AFP, "Iran says it will form joint naval force with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman", June 3, 2023; <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-says-it-will-form-joint-naval-force-with-saudi-arabia-uae-oman/>.

<sup>37</sup> M. Motamedi, "Iran's Raisi secures array of agreements on Latin American tour", AlJazeera, 16 June 2023; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/16/iran-president-secures-array-of-agreements-on-latin-american-tour>.

Saudi Arabia, thanks to this rapprochement, is regaining weight internationally and diplomatically, it but needs to conclude quickly the unfortunate Yemeni adventure<sup>38</sup> and fears Iran's nuclear endowment<sup>39</sup>. Iran, following the deadlock in the JCPOA negotiations that the Biden administration has not yet managed to restore<sup>40</sup>, cannot afford to prolong the international isolation that affects the regional risk tolerance threshold, in addition to the serious damage to the economy and the recurring internal social protests. This is also why Teheran has chosen a clear position regarding the war in Ukraine by providing support to Russia with military equipment, drones and other assets.

## Conclusions

Overall, the détente - forced for Riyadh that has not obtained the desired results in recent years and for Teheran due to internal problems and the JCPOA failure - has not yet led to a de-escalation in the area<sup>41</sup>. The agreement is the result of pragmatism forced by necessity.

The US disengagement from the Middle East is part of a calculated strategy to shift attention to its growing rivalry with China as the US seeks to return to its pre-1990 approach to the region that combined a minimal military presence with dependence on regional allies to keep the peace<sup>42</sup>.

The Biden administration boasts the ability to resist the Middle Eastern entanglement that trapped its predecessors as they tried to steer towards Asia. This strategy, however, has given way to Beijing<sup>43</sup> as a new economic and commercial broker and investor in the Middle East area<sup>44</sup> within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

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<sup>38</sup> D. Hearst, "Saudi Arabia: MBS should enjoy his moment in the sun. It won't last", Middle East Eye, June 13, 2023; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/saudi-arabia-mbs-moment-sun-wont-last>.

<sup>39</sup> J. Gambrell, "Analysis: Stakes rise as Iran can fuel 'several' atom bombs", AP, January 26, 2023; <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-iran-politics-government-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-6acdb64d36fcbe05b3ee725d8a585d96>.

<sup>40</sup> K. Robinson, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?", Council on Foreign Relations, June 21, 2023; <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-iran-nuclear-deal>.

<sup>41</sup> S. A. Cook, "Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement Has Failed to Bring De-escalation", Foreign Policy, June 12, 2023; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/12/saudi-iran-rapprochement-normalization-deal-china-de-escalation-yemen-syria/>.

<sup>42</sup> M. Leonard, "The Post-American Middle East", European Council on Foreign Relations, 19 June 2023; <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-post-american-middle-east/>.

<sup>43</sup> Atlantic Council, "Why did China broker an Iran-Saudi detente?", March 10, 2023; <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/fastthinking/why-did-china-broker-an-iran-saudi-detente/>.

<sup>44</sup> S. Khan, "Arab nations seek Chinese investment as Saudis take centre stage", The National News, June 11, 2022; <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2023/06/11/arab-nations-seek-chinese-investment-as-saudis-take-centre-stage/>



## **Historic and Theoretical Profiles of Chinese Nuclear Deterrent**

### **Abstract**

China's nuclear deterrent is traditionally described as minimal, and its No First Use policy has not changed for more than 60 years. By applying nuclear deterrence theory notions and concepts, the article assesses Chinese historical nuclear posture and locates it across the spectrum of possible nuclear stances, comparing Beijing to Washington and Moscow.

### **Introduction**

Chinese nuclear posture is traditionally described as both minimal and historically consistent since it has been translated into a small-size deterrent and its No First Use (NFU) declaratory policy has not changed for almost 60 years. This minimalism is usually interpreted in the wake of Mao Zedong's notion of "paper tiger" (纸老虎)<sup>1</sup> which downplays the utility of atomic weapons when it comes to interstate competition. Recent scholarly assessments have confirmed that still today China is likely to keep sticking to a strategy of assured retaliation (Fravel and Medeiros, 2010) which does not contradict its long-standing, minimalistic posture. In explaining such a distinctive, enduring nuclear stance, scholars often mention China's peculiar strategic culture (Lin, 1988), Maoist-Marxist ideology (Babiarz, 2015), or for shorter sub-periods of time, China's development-centered program of reforms which freed budget from the military and devoted it to the civilian sector (Gurtov, 1993), institutional deficiency and limited expertise (Fravel and Medeiros, 2010), or factional competition (Rosa, 2018).

This article will refer to nuclear deterrence theory concepts and instruments to assess Chinese nuclear posture and briefly compare it to historical US and Soviet stances.

### **Basic Notions of Nuclear Strategy**

Referring to coercion and nuclear deterrence theories and concepts (e.g. Schelling, 1959; 1966) we might interpret historical nuclear strategies as it follows, distinguishing by moment, mean and target.

#### *Moment #1: First strike-possible postures*

First uses of nuclear weapons are atomic strikes on enemies without them having launched or hit with nuclear weapons first. First strikes can respond to different logic and motives:

- 1) A first strike may be for the purpose of preemption and to disarm the enemy. A disarming first strike is the capability to conduct a first attack on an enemy's nuclear capabilities and have success.
- 2) A first strike could be also launched as a crisis management option, namely, to deter conventional attacks or to compel belligerents to halt hostilities.
- 3) After all, first strikes could also have non-strategic objectives. Tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) are designed to pursue more limited military objectives on the battlefield or in the conflict theater.

#### *Moment #2: Second strike-only postures*

Second strike refers to the employment of nuclear weapons only after one has been hit with the same type of arms. A second strike usually exerts deterrence through the threat of punishment

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<sup>1</sup> This expression was publicly used by Mao for the first time with reference to atomic weapons in an interview with Anna Louise Strong in 1946.

so that a “second strike force” is “one capable of ensuring effective retaliation even after absorbing an enemy’s first strike” (Freedman, 2003: 128). A ‘balance of deterrence’ exists in that situation in which “the incentives on both sides to initiate war are outweighed by the disincentives” and is described as ‘stable’ when “political events, internal or external to the countries involved, technological change, accidents, false alarms, misunderstandings, crises, limited wars, or changes in the intelligence available to both sides, are unlikely to disturb the incentives sufficiently to make mutual deterrence fail” (Schelling and Halperin, 1985: 50).

#### *Means #1: Deterrence*

As Snyder (1960) pointed out first, deterrence can be understood in two separate ways: either by denial or by punishment. Deterrence by denial projects into the mind of the potential aggressor the doubt of having enough resources to attain the goal and, when the denial is credible, convinces it to refrain from attacking.

Differently from the previous, deterrence by punishment “grants [the aggressor] the gain but deters [it] by posing the prospect of war costs greater than the value of the gain” through the threat of retaliation (Snyder, 1960: 163).

No matter what deterrence one exerts, it will always be meant to a threat to keep an adversary “from starting something,” or “to prevent [an adversary] from action by fear of consequences” (Schelling, 1966: 69).

#### *Means #2: Compellence*

Compellence refers to “a threat intended to make an adversary do something” (Schelling, 1966: 71), which is to modify the status quo. For instance, nuclear compellence occurs when a nuclear-armed state employs threats of nuclear strike against another state with the purpose of stopping it from waging war against the compeller. Compellence, then, involves “initiating an action that stops or becomes harmless, only if the target responds” (Freedman, 2008: 218).

Compellence can be designed both by denial and by punishment. Compellence by denial means that the compeller “has sought out the target’s military forces and attacked them, with the purpose of degrading, crippling, or destroying them”. Compellence by punishment is achieved “by attacking a target’s population and cities and inflicting unacceptable pain” on the coerced so as to push it to action (Greenhill and Krause, 2018: 20).

#### *Target #1: Countervalue*

Finally, nuclear targeting defines the type and range of targets that a nuclear strike is designed to hit. There are two major types of nuclear targeting logics used by states: countervalue – aka counter-city – and counterforce.

Countervalue is a targeting strategy organized around the ability to hit enemy’s cities and, thus, population. The essential role of nuclear weapons, in this view, is usually to punish an adversary.

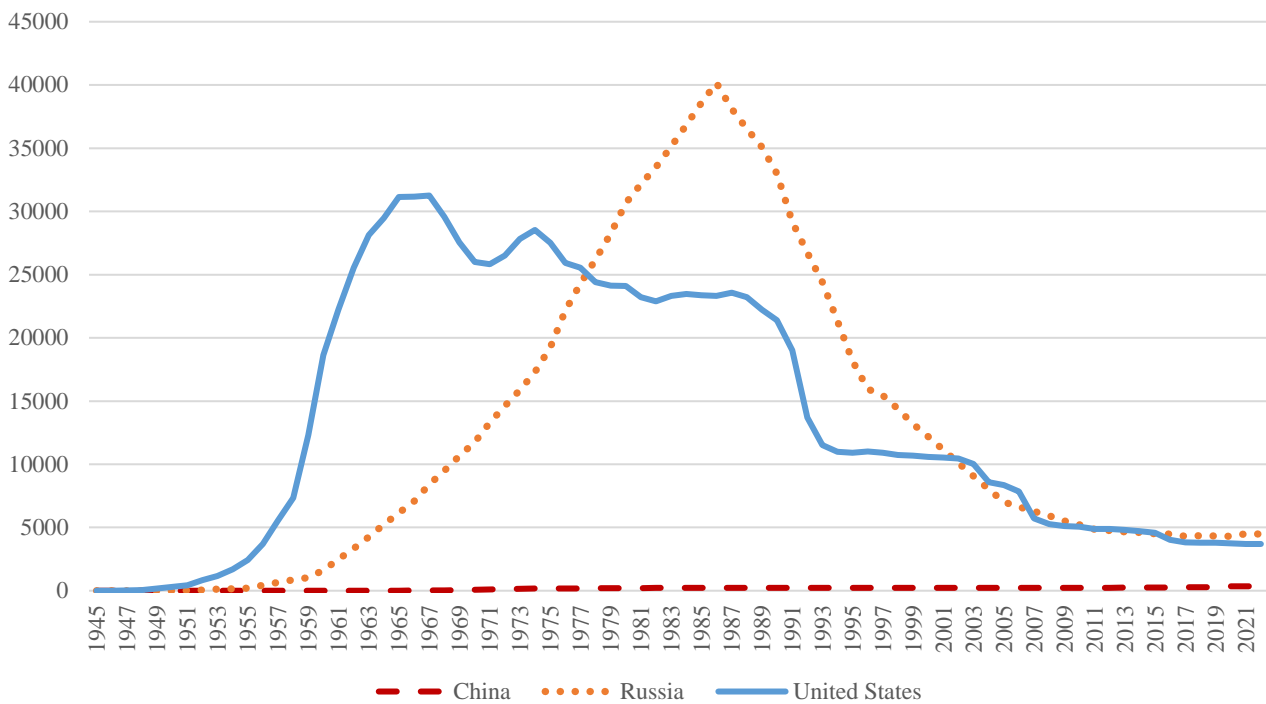
#### *Target #2: Counterforce*

A second targeting option is known as counterforce and is built around the capacity of aiming at enemies’ military resources. The overarching mission of nuclear weapons in counterforce strikes is to deny an adversary the ability to threaten nuclear strikes – in what literature defines as hard counterforce (Clary and Narang, 2019). A counterforce strategy requires an arsenal of many nuclear weapons of varied ranges, including those with high accuracy and great sophistication.

### **Main Tenets of Chinese Nuclear Posture**

Both in the midst and after the Cold War, the small size and the limited operational flexibility of Chinese nuclear arsenal has always struck analysts and pundits.





Tab. 1. Nuclear warhead inventories (estimated), 1945-2022

During the Cold War Beijing's nuclear deterrent not only was minute in terms of numbers but also displayed minor flexibility, mainly relying on a meager inventory of silo-based ICBMs that constituted the core – if not the only – Chinese retaliatory capability (Lewis and Xue, 1988).

The historical roots of the Chinese nuclear strategy dates back to the traumatic experiences of the Korean War and the Taiwan Strait crises during the 1950s when the United States, then bound to South Korea and Taiwan, kept on the table a nuclear option against Beijing. After testing their first A-bomb in southern Xinjiang in October 1964, Beijing stated that, given the power of annihilation, “China will not at any time or under any circumstances employ atomic weapons first.” The NFU policy is, then, congenitally rooted in China's nuclear doctrine.

An NFU posture drives the attention of strategists on the later moment of a nuclear exchange: the second-strike. In Chinese strategic documents, this posture has been labeled as “gaining mastery by striking only after the enemy has struck” (只有在敌人攻击后, 才能通过攻击获得控制权). Given its pledge not to attack first, China could only develop second-strike capabilities to deter rivals from taking the big step and attack with nukes.

For decades, the NFU pledge and the second-strike orientation have meant that Beijing would not use a nuclear weapon: a) to strike or threaten a non-nuclear state; b) after a conventional attack against China.

With regards to nuclear hardware, Chinese nuclear minimalism determined some relevant consequences. A minimum deterrent such as China's had not to cover as many options as the American or the Russian and, thus, didn't have to display a high level of precision and/or accuracy. To put it in the words of Zhang Aiping, Chinese Defense Minister in the 1980s and a key figure in China's nuclear weapons development, “If a nuclear war breaks out between China and the Soviet Union, I don't think there is too much difference between the results, provided China's ICBM misses its predetermined target, the Kremlin, and instead hits the Bolshoi theater.”

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, even when US and Russian armory started shrinking substantially, the PRC always stayed way behind them (Kristensen and Korda, 2021). However, it was not only numbers. From Mao on, China devised operational plans and concepts – a handful to

be honest – for its nuclear deterrent that have evidently contrasted with those of the two superpowers (Fravel and Medeiros, 2010).

If we take on the notions and concepts outlined in the previous section, we can interpret historical Chinese nuclear strategy as based on a second strike-oriented, countervalue-only, by punishment deterrence. This is the most minimal nuclear posture of all because it logically rules out any disarming or degrading strike against enemies' atomic weapons and rejects nuclear warfighting and launch-on-warning postures<sup>2</sup>. The NFU pledge categorically excludes nuclear strikes against non-nuclear states, even against potential stronger actors in conventional terms who may still be terribly menacing to PRC's national security. It then dismisses any nuclear coercive diplomacy whatsoever.

Between 1958 and 1959, China's first real strategic document – the "Guidelines for Nuclear Weapons Development" – emphasized the development of a strategic force based on the high-yield nuclear and thermonuclear weapon and long-range missile launchers while explicitly excluded the development of tactical nuclear weapons. In 1961, a "Bulletin of the Activities of the People's Liberation Army" by the PLA General Political Department, listed twenty-nine instructions on nuclear weapons.

Prominent among them was the belief that the tactical value of nuclear power could be neutralized by conducting a "people's war" at night and resorting to guerrilla warfare, complete with dispersal and seeking close combat with the enemy (Godwin, 1978). Therefore, the corollary of Chinese nuclear minimalism was that TNWs is of no use and could be dismissed.

## Conclusion

Based on the abovementioned, Table 2 summarizes historical nuclear strategies, including United States (USA), Soviet Union (SUN) and China (PRC).

|                | Moment       |               | Means                 |                           |                      |                          | Target |       |
|----------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|--------|-------|
|                | First strike | Second Strike | Compellence by denial | Compellence by punishment | Deterrence by denial | Deterrence by punishment | Force  | Value |
| <i>PRC</i>     | X            | V             | X                     | X                         | X                    | V                        | X      | V     |
| <i>SUN/RUS</i> | V            | V             | V                     | V                         | V                    | V                        | V      | V     |
| <i>USA</i>     | V            | V             | V                     | V                         | V                    | V                        | V      | V     |

Tab. 2. Deterrence theory and US, Soviet/Russian and Chinese nuclear strategies

Chinese nuclear stance, then, stands out in every aspect of nuclear strategy, proving peculiar regarding moments, means and targets. This Chinese atomic minimalism has been tagged with different labels: minimum deterrence (Lewis, 2008), minimum means of reprisal (Lewis, 2007), credible minimum deterrence (Gill, Mulvenon and Stokes, 2002), limited nuclear retaliation, assured retaliation (Narang, 2014); lean and effective (Cunningham and Fravel, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> "Nuclear warfare" refers to that conflict in which one contemplates the use – one's own and the enemy's - of tactical and theatre nuclear weapons and thus envisions warfare scenarios under atomic conditions. Launch-on-warning postures involve launching a nuclear strike upon notification of launch by the enemy, before, therefore, receiving it.

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## **Monitoring Maritime Safety and Security in the Indo-Pacific**

### **Abstract**

In May 2022, the leaders of the QUAD nations announced the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) to improve the Indo-Pacific partners' capacities in the field of monitoring maritime safety and security. While this is not the first US-promoted maritime security framework, the Southeast Asian countries and some island nations in the Pacific and Indian Ocean have been included in the same collaborative structure for the first time. A year later, however, the initiative is struggling to take off. Meanwhile, the Europeans' interest in enhancing their presence in the Indo-Pacific waters has grown amid frictions with China and the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Upholding a maritime rules-based order is at the core of the EU's maritime strategy. Such normative role represents a significant resource for deepening Brussels' involvement in the defense and security dynamics unfolding in the Indo-Pacific region.

### **The QUAD's role**

In May 2022, the leaders of the QUAD nations – the United States, Australia, India and Japan – met in Tokyo for the second in-person summit. The joint statement presented a new initiative called the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA). The overall focus of the IPDMA relies on monitoring the Indo-Pacific waters through the provision of training and cutting-edge technologies, which are expected to strengthen the capacity of regional actors and improve the maritime situational awareness (MSA) framework. Although officially the initiative is said to counter any action that seeks to undermine regional maritime stability, the IPDMA has implicitly been perceived as an anti-China mechanism. This echoes the changing attitudes that had led to the relaunch of the QUAD in 2017. Back then, the perceived Chinese leadership's attempts to alter the status quo in the Indo-Pacific through economic and military coercion provided the main rationale for the revival of the grouping. Arguably, the IPDMA's formulation and announcement has been accelerated by developments that took place in the Chinese regulatory framework. Indeed, in Autumn 2021, China's new Data Security and Personal Information Protection Laws came into effect.

The new laws (among other things) allow ships operating in or near territorial waters to turn off their automatic identification systems (AIS). This has led to many cases in which Chinese vessels have 'gone missing' in some of the world's most congested and contested waterways (Saul and Baptista, 2021). Failures to detect the presence of these vessels is significant given the role that Chinese fisheries play in supporting Beijing's coercive initiatives to reinforce its claims in the disputed waters of the South and East China Seas (Martinson 2021).

Against this backdrop, among the various challenges that the IPMDA is set to address (e.g. natural disasters, trafficking in human beings and weapons, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing), a great amount of effort will be spent in countering the so-called dark shipping. In this regard, the IPMDA is expected to rely on a commercial satellite tracking service that should provide participant countries with a faster and more accurate location of the exclusive economic zones enabling them to counter high seas crime. In order to collect and share maritime intelligence information in real time, the information fusion centers will be crucial, particularly those in India, Singapore, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands (The White House 2022). These centers are the outcome of joint efforts among several agencies that provide resources and data to central authorities with the aim of maximizing their ability to detect, prevent and respond to criminal and terrorist activities.

One year later, however, the IPMDA struggles to thrive. The QUAD's guiding assumption is that science, technology and supply chains are increasingly linked to security and defense issues. Therefore, the IPDMA aims to provide those public goods that have so far lacked in the Indo-Pacific region. Indeed, maritime domain awareness stands as a necessary condition to ensure a free, open and rules-based regional order. While many of the countries that the QUAD's leaders would like to see on board might be in favour of supplanting Beijing's assertive presence in the maritime domain, framing the new maritime security instrument in anti-Chinese terms risks to dissuade their participation, eventually jeopardizing the implementation of the mechanism *tout court*. For this reason, adopting a more inclusive language could be helpful in order for the strategic interests of like-minded partners to be acknowledged.

It is worth stressing that since the first interministerial meeting, the QUAD has presented itself as a flexible mini-lateral grouping of countries that share the same vision of the Indo-Pacific region and wish to provide practical solutions to common challenges. The Biden administration has tried to downgrade the excessive focus on traditional security issues in an effort to assuage fears – especially from actors in the region – that the QUAD was meant to contain China's ambitions. To do so, the agenda has evolved and under the banner of the 'QUAD Plus', it has come to include issues like the provision of vaccines, climate change and critical technologies as well as the resilience of supply chains. In 2020, a survey conducted across Southeast Asia by the ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute of Singapore showed that among policy makers, the business sector, academia, media and civil society activists, a majority of respondents (54.2%) thought that the QUAD had a negative impact or no impact at all on regional security (Tang et al., 2020). Two years later, 58.5% viewed the enhanced partnership based on ad hoc cooperation as very positive for the region's prosperity (Seah et al., 2022).

As things stand, the major weakness of the IPDMA seems related to its geographic extension. Although it is not the first US-promoted maritime security framework, the Southeast Asia countries and some island nations in the Pacific and Indian Ocean have been included in the same collaborative structure for the first time. However, the absence from the IPDMA of the Western Indian Ocean along with Northeast Asia arguably weakens the maritime domain awareness framework.

### **The EU as a maritime security provider beyond its borders**

In recent years, Brussels has placed renewed emphasis on the need for the European Union (EU) to act as a provider of maritime safety in its neighborhood and beyond. European officials are eager to foster dialogue and synergies with Indo-Pacific partners to jointly address maritime security challenges, all the more so in the aftermath of Russia's aggression on Ukraine. The war and the Sino-Russian 'marriage of convenience' have reinforced the tendency to consider the European and the Indo-Pacific security theaters as thoroughly connected. Moreover, the Indo-Pacific theatre has increasingly been viewed as an important testing ground for transatlantic and intra-European cohesion as well.

The growing convergence in terms of threat perception and assessment have bolstered the EU relations with Washington as well as with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, across the Japanese and South Korean policy-making circles anxiety has risen in response to the threat of nuclear use constantly evoked by Vladimir Putin amid the conflict in Ukraine and the rapid advancements in the Chinese and North Korean nuclear programmes. As a result, fears that «Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow» have reignited public discussions about the possibility that some of the US traditional allies in Asia might acquire autonomous nuclear arsenals regardless of the guarantees provided by Washington's extended deterrence (Frassinetti and Sciorati, 2023, p. 159).

The EU's involvement in the security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region is quite recent. Brussels has overcome its reticence as more inclusive visions and approaches have been



announced by states within the EU and East Asia such as the ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific unveiled in 2019 (Köllner, 2021). Between 2019 and 2021, several member countries most notably the Netherlands, Germany and France lobbied for a more decisive European approach towards the Indo-Pacific while laying out their respective national strategies.

In September 2021, the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region was announced with the aim to overcome a fragmented approach towards the region and provide member states with the same toolkit. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the center of gravity of commercial, political and defense and security interests has progressively shifted towards East Asia. On the other hand, EU officials have come to the conclusion that their outreach towards East Asian states should no longer take place primarily in bilateral terms or through multilateral organizations such as the ASEAN. Meanwhile, Brussels' relations with Beijing has deteriorated and China has been formally described by the EU as «a partner for cooperation [...] an economic competitor [...] a systemic rival that promotes models of alternative governance» (European Commission, p. 1).

It can be argued that the ambitious goals of the EU's Strategy for the Indo-Pacific align with the priorities of many regional governments that see Brussels as a strategic partner with particular reference to those sectors in which «the EU has the technical capacity and the resources to address many of these challenges, from tackling all sorts of seaborne criminal activities to natural or man-made disaster response». (Borrell, 2021). Naval diplomacy and maritime cooperation are the main examples of such collaborative spirit. Since 2021, the EU NAVFOR Atalanta has conducted three joint naval exercises with the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces in the Arabian Sea in addition to joint naval exercises with South Korea, India and Indonesia. Around the same year, the presence of European naval assets has become more frequent carrying out port calls and joint naval exercises with India, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, the United States and Australia. Recently, Italy has convincingly put itself on the Indo-Pacific map. Most notably, since April 6, the vessel Francesco Morosini, which is the second ship of the Italian Navy's Multipurpose Offshore Patrol Vessel (PPA) class, has been engaged in a five-months Maritime Campaign in the Far East that will include fifteen ports in fourteen countries.

On 8 March 2023, taking stock of the Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and the Strategic Compass, the EU updated its 2014 Maritime Security Strategy in which it reaffirms the willingness to contribute to regional maritime security. Compared to the 2014 document, Nick Childs (2023) notes that the latest version depicts a far more contested maritime domain in which states are the primary actors involved in competing dynamics whereas «lower-end non-state threats» have received far less attention.

Given the lack of its own Navy, the EU has also announced a Coordinated Maritime Presences mechanism (CMP) which «will complement the activities of the EU and its Member States in the region, respecting the mandate and chain of command of the EUNAVFOR operation ATALANTA» (Council of the EU, 2022b). The CMP aims to improve the coordination between the member states' naval and air assets that are deployed in areas that Brussels considers of strategic interest in order to bolster Europe's profile as a reliable partner in the field of maritime security. The CMP has already been successfully tested in the Gulf of Guinea. Therefore, in February 2022, it was extended to the North-Western Indian Ocean. Based on the most recent update of the Maritime Strategy, it might be expected that the EU's maritime areas of interest could be expanded towards the Pacific island nations. Arguably, such a decision would largely reflect France interests, however, it could benefit most Member States considering the need to secure energy supplies amid the decoupling from Russia.

Besides the Pacific island nations, it has been suggested that the scope of the CMP might address the waters surrounding the Korean Peninsula as well. According to Philip Shelter-Jones (2022), such development would account for the fact that the participation of Germany, France and United Kingdom in joint operations to monitor the implementation of UNSC resolutions against the

DPRK's illicit activities in the East China Sea has been «Europe's most prominent operational contribution to Indo-Pacific security» to date (p.1). Aside from that, the potential involvement of South Korea in the CMP mechanism has indeed been discussed by Ursula von der Leyen and Charles Michel with President Yoon Suk Yeol during their mission to Seoul in May 2023.

## Conclusions

In case of a major crisis resulting from a unilateral disruption of the Indo-Pacific maritime status quo, it can be expected that the EU's contribution would probably be limited from a military and operational perspective. The fact that the most recent update to the EU's Maritime Strategy explicitly mentions only the Northwestern Indian Ocean could be indicative of such constraints. On the other hand, upholding a maritime rules-based order is at the core of the EU's maritime strategy. Such normative role represents a significant resource for deepening Brussels' involvement in the defense and security dynamics unfolding in the Indo-Pacific region. Against this backdrop, Europeans' renewed focus on the protection of critical maritime infrastructures (e.g. pipelines and submarine communications cable) largely in relation to Russia and China's hybrid tactics in the maritime gray area could help the EU be perceived by its Asian partners as a provider of maritime safety also in the Indo-Pacific region.

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## **Transatlantic relations: another year of light and shade?**

### **Abstract**

For transatlantic relations, 2022 was a year of light and shade. The Russian invasion of Ukraine actively contributed to strengthening the link between the US and Europe and reviving cooperation at the NATO level; European countries proved more resilient than expected, the general elections in France and Italy and the new governments in different European countries did not lead to fundamental changes in the political course and the impact of the midterm vote in the US was also limited. However, over time, weakness became more and more evident. France's and Germany's leading role in the EU has declined. At the same time, the measures the Biden administration has taken to support the American economy have fuelled new tensions with the European allies. Although support for Kyiv remains strong, in public opinion, the first signs of weakness have emerged in the second half of the year, especially in the countries traditionally closest to Moscow. Finally, the beginning of the US presidential campaign, leading to the vote in November 2024, seems destined to increasingly impact US-Europe relations, undermining the consensus that, so far, has marked the Biden administration's years.

### **Introduction**

For transatlantic relations 2022 was a year of light and shade. The Russian invasion of Ukraine actively contributed to strengthening the link between the US and Europe and to reviving cooperation at the NATO level. Despite the tensions, European countries proved more resilient than expected, and even in a sensitive field such as energy supply, the results of the measures taken have been satisfactory. The general elections in France and Italy and the new governments in power in different European countries did not lead to fundamental changes in the political course, and even the impact of the US midterm vote was, overall, limited. The widespread increase in military budgets had positive effects also on the political level, defusing the "burden sharing" issue (which has always been a critical element in US-Europe relations) and bringing NATO closer to the symbolic goal of reaching the Celtic Manor pledges on Defence expenditure. However, over time, weaknesses have grown increasingly evident. Within the EU, the traditional leading countries (first of all, France and Germany) seem to have lost a good part of their driving force. On the other hand, the measures the Biden administration has adopted to support the US economy (especially the Inflation Reduction Act of August 2022) have fuelled new tensions with the European countries, penalised by what they regard as Washington's new neo-protectionist attitude. Although support for Kyiv remains strong, in public opinion, the first signs of weakness emerged in the second half of the year, especially in the countries traditionally closest to Moscow: a trend that continues in 2023. Finally, the beginning of the US presidential campaign, leading to the vote in November 2024, seems destined to increasingly impact US-Europe relations, undermining the consensus that – despite ups and downs – has marked, so far, the Biden administration's years.

### **France-Germany: the "European engine" is losing momentum?**

Between the second half of 2022 and the first of 2023, the French and German governments faced difficulties that weakened their positions. In France, the 2022 presidential and parliamentary elections, while confirming Emmanuel Macron's as President of the Republic until 2027, led to a weak executive, which faced its first reshuffle a few weeks after taking office. A contested pension system reform, approved through a special constitutional procedure and bypassing the vote in the National Assembly, raised a wave of protests and exposed the President's growing unpopularity. In

Germany, the “traffic light coalition” between Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s Social Democrats, Finance Minister Christian Lindner’s Liberal Democrats, and Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock’s Greens is showing increasing signs of disconnect, coupled, between the end of 2022 and the first months of 2023, with economic difficulties that pushed the country into a technical recession. In both cases, the authorities sported confidence. In Germany, Chancellor Scholz spoke of recovery in the second part of the year; in France, President Macron seems to have chosen to compensate for his internal fragility with increased international activism, although this has sometimes led to disagreements with France’s European partners (Rankin, 2023; Irish and Lopatka, 2023). The European institutions have expressed optimism, too. However, the Franco-German bilateral relations seem to have cooled down, adversely affecting the Union’s internal dynamics. The last bones of contention have been Berlin’s choice to oppose the phasing out of thermal engine vehicles that the EU wanted to schedule in 2035 and the parallel pressure from Paris to give a “weighty” role to nuclear power within the European energy transition strategy framework.

Behind these positions, there are primarily domestic issues. On the German side, the aim is to protect the traditionally strong national automotive industry in a moment when the economy is living in a difficult phase; on the French side, the (somewhat similar) aim is to protect the nuclear sector, which is central in the country’s energy mix, and that makes France the leading European electricity exporter. However, together with the countries’ petty interests, the Franco-German competition also mirrors the geopolitical changes that the Ukraine war has produced. In the last months, the war has given a new impetus to the shift of the European political and military centre of gravity to the north-east, a shift that strengthens Germany vis a vis France and, in the long run, could affect a collaboration that, so far, has been one base of the EU’s dynamism (Louis, 2022). Today, many important differences exist between Berlin’s and Paris’s positions. France and Germany are working on a common response to the subsidies the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (IRA) has offered the US industry. However, they are on opposite sides on issues like the reform of the EU financial rules, how to enhance the Union’s energy security and promote its green transition, and the posture Brussels should assume vis-a-vis US-China rising tensions. Although the issue must not be overestimated, the cancellation of the Franco-German summit of October 2022 (later rescheduled to January 2023) is a sign of the tensions existing between the two countries. It is no coincidence that, despite repeated references to the sixty years of the Elysée Treaty and the spirit of collaboration that led to its signing<sup>1</sup>, not even the January summit seems to have mended the differences currently dividing Paris from Berlin (Ricard and Wieder, 2023).

Differences are also strong in the defence and security field. Berlin and Paris confirmed their support for Ukraine’s spring 2023 offensive (Corbet, 2023), the success of which they consider a condition to start credible peace negotiations with Russia. France and Germany are also reportedly working on a shared position ahead of the NATO Vilnius summit (July 11-12, 2023), where the future of Ukrainian security will be on centre stage. However, on other points, the two countries’ positions are still far apart. In a nutshell, the bone of contention is what Europe’s strategic autonomy should mean and what degree of independence Europe should have from US support: larger for France (according to a position President Macron has repeatedly taken during his mandate), smaller for Germany. This different vision reverberated, for instance, in the problems the development of joint projects such as the Future Combat Air Systems (FCAS) or the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS) met and will probably impact the debate on Chancellor Scholz’s proposal to create a new European-wide missile defence system (Herrera Witzel, 2022; Palombaro, 2022). The French and German positions also differ on the EU’s possible political future, with Berlin favouring the Union’s “horizontal” enlargement to thirty (and, possibly, thirty-six) members and Paris advocating a stop in the enlargement process to deepen the political and economic integration. So far, Chancellor

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<sup>1</sup> Signed on January 22, 1963 by President de Gaulle and Chancellor Adenauer, the Elysée Treaty put an end to the centuries-old conflict between France and Germany and outlined a cooperation agreement between the two countries in several essential areas, from security to economic and cultural development.

Scholz's "post-national" European project has met stubborn resistance in Paris and several other countries (Taylor, 2022). However, Berlin seems ready to support it with its political weight, just like it seems ready to support the notion that the Union's enlargement and the reform of its internal mechanisms must go hand in hand (Noyan, 2023).

### **US-Europe: the end of the honeymoon?**

The inauguration of the Biden administration (January 2021) led to a marked improvement in US-Europe relations, deeply contrasting with the tensions and misunderstandings of the Trump presidency. The beginning of the war in Ukraine strengthened and fuelled this process. In the first months of the war, Washington and its European allies showed largely unexpected cohesion in contrasting the Russian initiative. However, over the months, such cohesion has partly dissolved. The difficulties the US industry faces, and a constant decline in President Biden's popular favour have led the White House to adopt a string of measures that, while positively affecting the domestic situation, have raised concerns among several allies. Among others, the EU and many European countries have openly criticised the measures of the Inflation Reduction Act (and -- before that -- those of the CHIPS and Science Act), claiming that a part of them would run against World Trade Organization (WTO) 's rules. The fear is that the US measures (especially those aimed at supporting the energy transition process) could threaten the European industry and its supply of raw materials. To tackle the issue, in March 2023, the European Commission announced its willingness to propose a Net Zero Industry Act<sup>2</sup>, somewhat similar to the IRA, to respond with the same weapons to the US "green" subsidy package (Di Sario, 2023). In the same days, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced the possible introduction of a Critical Raw Materials Act (already mentioned in her 2022 State of the Union address) to structurally address the EU's dependence on imports of critical raw materials by diversifying supply channels and ensuring a sustainable national supply of critical raw materials<sup>3</sup>.

In March, Presidents Biden and von der Leyen also announced the start of high-level talks to address the issue of a potential US-Europe subsidy conflict (Blenkinsop, 2023). So far, these talks do not appear to have produced any meaningful results. Further difficulties have arisen from the entry into force of the new piece of European legislation – the Foreign Subsidies Regulation<sup>4</sup> – at the beginning of January 2023. The Foreign Subsidies Regulation allows the European Commission to investigate any financial support granted by third countries to companies operating in the EU market and, if necessary, to take corrective action against their potential distortive effects on competition. Unsurprisingly, subsidies are the main bone of contention between Europe and the US today. Despite the moratorium the White House introduced in 2021, the two parties have yet to find a solution to the problem of the aluminium and steel import tariffs imposed by the Trump administration in 2018. The start of what promises to be a long and debated campaign for the 2024 presidential election threatens to exacerbate the situation, with the Democratic administration forced to defend measures like the IRA that boost its popularity. Elections to renew the European Parliament (which will appoint the next European Commission) are also scheduled for 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing a framework of measures for strengthening Europe's net-zero technology products manufacturing ecosystem (Net Zero Industry Act), COM(2023) 161 final, Brussels, 16 March 2023. Text available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:6448c360-c4dd-11ed-a05c-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:6448c360-c4dd-11ed-a05c-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF) (accessed: June 27, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a framework for ensuring a secure and sustainable supply of critical raw materials and amending Regulations (EU) 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, 2018/1724 and (EU) 2019/1020, COM(2023) 160 final, Brussels, 16 March 2023, at the Internet address: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:903d35cc-c4a2-11ed-a05c-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:903d35cc-c4a2-11ed-a05c-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF) (accessed 20 June 2023); Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A secure and sustainable supply of critical raw materials in support of the twin transition, COM (2023) 165 final, Brussels, 16 March 2023. Text available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0474> (accessed: June 27, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> "Regulation (EU) 2022/2560 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 on foreign subsidies distorting the internal market", in Official Journal of the European Union, 23 December 2022, pp. L 330/1-L 330/45.

Although the weight of the European and US elections is not comparable, on this occasion, the Strasbourg parliament's vote will be crucial. The backdrop is the success in several countries of sovereignist and Eurosceptic forces in the May 2019 elections. If the 2024 results confirm this trend and the right-wing parties score a good result, the effects on the Union's policies and the impact on the system of US-Europe relations could be relevant.

This impact will also depend on the outcome of the US presidential vote. So far, the competition seems limited to the outgoing President, Joe Biden, and former President Donald Trump, who, despite his legal problems and doubts about his fitness for the position, is still the favourite candidate of the Republican base (Edwards-Levy, 2023). Doubts have been raised about the soundness of the existing surveys (e.g., Sonnenfeld and Tian, 2023). On the other hand, the gap between the former President from his rivals seems currently overwhelming. According to the aggregate index of the political analysis site *fivethirtyeight.com*, Donald Trump is over thirty percentage points ahead of his most direct challenger (Florida Governor Ron DeSantis), while the other candidates – such as former Vice President Mike Pence or the former US Permanent Representative to the UN, Nikki Haley – are *de facto* out of the game<sup>5</sup>. On the Democratic side, President Biden's position seems equally secure. As of mid-June 2023, the only other bids are those of two civil society figures, Marianne Williamson and environmental lawyer Robert F. Kennedy Jr., son of Robert Kennedy and grandson of former President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Although the bid of West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin (an eminent figure of the party's moderate component) is still pending, other Democratic "big brasses" such as Stacey Abrams, Pete Buttigieg, Hillary Clinton, Al Gore, Gavin Newsom, Bernie Sanders, Adam Schiff, and Elizabeth Warren have already announced they will not join the competition. This race to disengage seems to pave Biden's way to the nomination, even if doubts about his person and his choice to retain Kamala Harris as the vice-presidential candidate do not lack (Langer, 2023; Reston, Clement and Guskin, 2023; Greenfield, 2023).

### **Ukraine and the impact of the June offensive**

Age (Biden was born in Scranton, PA, on November 20, 1942) and – according to some sources – poor health conditions are the main doubts weighing Biden's bid for a second presidential term. In addition, his popular support (rating about 53 per cent at the inauguration) has significantly declined since the summer of 2021<sup>6</sup>. The economic problems of 2022 (such as a high inflation rate for most of the year) are an element to explain such a low approval rate. Surprisingly, not even the start of the war in Ukraine reverted the trend. Despite Congress's broad bipartisan support, public opinion never fully approved the White House's handling of the crisis. Moreover, after one year, the number of US citizens in favour of supplying new weapons to Kyiv has significantly decreased, dropping (according to an *Associated Press* survey) – from 66 per cent in May 2022 to 48 per cent in February 2023. President Biden has repeatedly said that the US will help Ukraine «as long as it takes» to repel the Russian invasion. However, privately, several US officials have pointed out how there are limits to the extent of the support a divided Congress and public opinion can offer to a war still lacking a clear end. From this perspective, it is worth noting that, in 2022 only, Washington already provided economic, humanitarian, and military assistance to Kyiv amounting to some 113 billion dollars (Madhani and Swanson, 2023). The bipartisan agreement reached in early June 2023 to suspend the US public debt ceiling until the inauguration of the new Congress in January 2025 is another element that can impact the amount of aid granted to Kyiv, strengthening the position of those (primarily Republican) representatives and senators who, in the past months, have pushed for its substantial reduction (Draper, 2023; Demirjian, 2023).

The outcome of the Ukrainian offensive launched in June 2023 will play a crucial role in the picture. Unexpectedly (Depenbrock, 2023; Boot, 2023), the offensive seems to have started "in a

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<sup>5</sup> <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-primary-r/2024/national> (accessed: June 27, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/biden-approval-rating> (accessed: June 27, 2023).



low key” (Ellyatt, 2023), and its results are difficult to assess. However, it seems clear that the success of Kyiv’s military initiative is strictly connected to the level of Western aid. Western aid is essential to replace the material losses, which seem to be high. Western aid is also crucial to provide adequate air support for the Ukrainian ground forces. In this regard, the Ukrainian government has long requested the supply of F-16 multirole fighters, and the US administration gave the green light to the supply in the second half of May 2023. However, the timing for F-16s’ possible deployment raises several issues related, for instance, to their maintenance and the supply of ammunition and spare parts (Lucas, Parrish, and Arabia, 2023). The need to adequately train ground personnel and build the logistical “tail” (a task made easier by the F-16’s great commercial success) could also delay their entry into service. Other problems relate to training pilots to take full advantage of F-16s’ capabilities, upgrading Ukraine’s Soviet-age airports, runways, and infrastructures to meet their technical requirements, and supplying suitable weapon systems in sufficient quantities. According to some Pentagon sources, addressing these issues and making Ukraine’s new assets fully operational will take time (possibly up to eighteen months: Martinez, 2023); however, according to the former Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe (SACEUR), General Philip M. Breedlove, the time could be far shorter, since, so far, the Ukrainian armed forces have shown remarkable skills to adapt to the technologies they have received (Gordon, 2023).

A fundamental issue is how the Ukrainian offensive will develop, its success being a potentially powerful boost to induce Western public opinion to support Kyiv’s effort. Pentagon sources have already spoken of the June offensive as a longer and more difficult campaign than those that, in the fall of 2022, expelled Russian troops from large swathes of territory in southern and eastern Ukraine. However, from Kyiv’s perspective, success is essential both militarily and diplomatically. Observers agree that not even a successful campaign will end hostilities, given the vast amount of human and material resources Moscow can throw into the conflict (Myre, 2023); on the other hand, meaningful territorial gains would strengthen Ukraine’s position at the (future) opening of the peace negotiations. The questions remain about what “success” means for the different actors and how different Kyiv’s idea of “success” is from its allies’ idea. So far, President Zelensky has not defined any explicit goal beyond the repeatedly reiterated demand that Russian troops withdraw from the whole Ukrainian territory. On their side, while sticking to the principle that Kyiv is the owner of the peace process, the US and the European countries seem to consider this outcome highly unlikely. From a more limited (but pragmatic) perspective, they see Ukraine’s success in terms of the Ukrainian army retaking and holding key swathes of territory previously occupied by the Russian troops and delivering Russia a military blow that forces the Kremlin to question the future of its “special military operation” (Barnes and Erlanger, 2023). It is difficult to reconcile these two partially diverging positions, but for Ukraine finding a credible balance is a *sine qua non* to enjoy Western support not only to win the current war but also – in the long run – to tackle its future security needs.

### Concluding remarks

The scenario for the coming months is complex, with several elements potentially affecting transatlantic relations. The Ukraine issue remains central. The outcome of the June offensive will significantly impact relations between Kyiv and the West. But even if Ukraine’s military effort succeeds, the US and its European allies are unlikely to maintain their current engagement level. The domestic problems Paris and Berlin are facing, and the approaching US presidential elections are setting new priorities for the leaders of the pro-Kyiv camp, which will also affect their stance on the Ukraine issue. The ongoing debate on Ukraine’s possible accession to NATO makes the situation even more delicate. Before the invasion, the Ukraine government was already pressing Brussels and Washington on the membership issue. Since February 2022, in the new strategic context that the Russian attack has triggered, the number of those favouring Ukraine’s entry into the Alliance has rapidly grown, especially in Central and Eastern European countries (Sanger and Erlanger, 2023). However, this growing support for Kyiv’s membership risks emphasising the divisions existing on

such a sensitive issue, which is strictly connected to the future of European and NATO security. With Finland's entry and, in the future, the formalisation of Sweden's membership, the Alliance's centre of gravity has shifted further to the northeast. The formalisation of NATO-Ukraine relations (although not necessarily in terms of full membership) would accentuate this process and fuel the fears not only of the southern members (who have long complained about their gradual marginalisation) but also of those in Western Europe, such as France and to some extent Germany, who would see their traditional role as Washington's preferred partner diminished.

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## **OPEC and the energy crisis: re-establishing a grip on the market**

### **Abstract**

The latest trend in hydrocarbon prices seems to manifest the overcoming of the extreme volatility recorded in 2022, as a result of a 'perfect storm' generated by the post-pandemic recovery in consumption, first, and by the outbreak of the Ukraine war, later. Against this background, the contribution looks at the interventions implemented by the oil-producing countries - and, in particular, by the OPEC+ - to maintain market equilibrium, ensuring a minimum selling price for the resource in a broader attempt to relaunch the Organization's role as guarantor of the market stability.

### **Introduction**

The OPEC meeting held in Vienna last 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of June – the first in a restricted format and subsequently extended to the participants in the OPEC+ mechanism – marked a significant step forward in the Organization's attempt to respond to the short- and longer-term challenges emerging from the oil market. As the last stage of a journey that began in Autumn 2022, the Vienna meeting marks the Organization's attempt to protect energy revenues in a scenario characterized by a weak demand for oil and derivatives and by the consequent risk of excess supply. At a broader look, OPEC recent activity testifies the attempt to maintain the traditional role of 'equilibrator' of the market, challenged over the last few years by the significant increase in non-OPEC production and by its weak credibility – undermined not only by traditional internal tensions, but also by the lack of reliability of the commitments on production assumed by its member countries.

### **How OPEC tackled the volatility of oil market**

2022 has been a year of extreme volatility for oil prices. Although the year opened and closed with a substantially similar Brent price – \$78/b in January against \$85/b in December – during 2022 the prices showed significant fluctuations, starting from an initial price already pushed up by the post-pandemic recovery in consumption. Thus, in January 2022 the conclusion of five subsequent quarters was reached in which the demand for oil and derivatives grew faster than production (EIA, 2021a), generating a natural upward push in prices – which for the first time returned to levels unseen since the end of 2018. The invasion of Ukraine played in an already tight market scenario by contributing to a further rise in prices, as the result of the fear that Moscow could play the "oil weapon" as apparently intended to do with gas. Thus, the expectations of a gradual downward realignment of oil prices were offset in the first part of 2022 by a spiral of constant price increases, with peaks above \$130/b – despite, in fact, Russian production and exports were and would have remained broadly unchanged over the year. The market rebalanced itself only in the second half of the year, with an inversion in price trend. This was not only the result of a drop in consumption generated by the cost of raw materials, but also of the IEA and the US government decision to revert to emergency reserves releasing 240 mb of oil on the market (Guduru et al., 2022), on the one hand, and of gloomy forecasts about the trend of the global economy, on the other. The US banking crisis at the beginning of the year, the inflationary push and the increase in interest rates in the United States and Europe combined with the specter of recession and the uncertainties about the recovery of Chinese demand further contributed, during the first half of 2023, to limit the demand for oil and derivatives, putting a brake on market volatility and causing the price of oil (and, more specifically, of the West Texas Intermediate) to reach a negative peak of less than \$70 in mid-March, never recorded since the end of 2021 (McCormick & Brower, 2023).

Central to OPEC's recent activity has been the attempt to put a floor under the fall in oil prices that began in June 2022, intervening promptly - contrary to what was done in previous moments of price crisis - to curb the fall before it had ruinous effects on national economies based on oil rents. As a result, in October 2022 OPEC announced its first decision aimed at limiting production, with a 2 Mb/d cut in production starting from November and throughout 2023 (OPEC, 2022). The effect of the decision was to set a limit to the contraction in prices, which however, after a brief upward phase following the announcement, soon resumed their downward trend, prompting OPEC main producers to a new and unexpected initiative in April 2023. On April 2, a new and voluntary production cut was announced by nine members.<sup>1</sup> The cut, starting from May and for the whole 2023, regarded 1.6 Mb/d (OPEC, 2023), which added up to the 500 Kb/d cut announced a month earlier by the Russian authorities. Added to the decisions made in October, the voluntary initiative brought the total OPEC cuts to a level equal to 3.7% of global oil demand (El Dahan & Rasheed, 2023).

An agreement on production levels also characterized the June Vienna summit, as concerns about the global economy health had canceled out the beneficial effects on prices of the decisions made in early April. Although, as expected, the members of the Organization have not decreed further cuts in production, they have nevertheless decided to extend the deadline of the quotas set in October and of the voluntary cuts in April to all of 2024, also establishing for next year a slightly lower total production level (40.46 Mb/d) than in the current year. Far from insignificant, the decision acquires importance first of all since the deadline for quotas previously fixed at the end of 2023 was seen by international analysts as one of the elements that would have ensured greater oil volumes to the market in 2024 (EIA, 2023). Moreover, in order to pre-emptily protect the market, Saudi Arabia announced a unilateral decision to cut output in July by about 1 Mb/d, bringing total production below 9 Mb/d, i.e. to levels comparable to those of mid-2021.

### **Independence, credibility of commitments and relaunch of Saudi leadership**

At a broader look, the Organization's recent activity has demonstrated, first of all, the stability of the cooperation under the expanded OPEC+ format, which, since its formation in 2016, has been based above all on the entente between Saudi Arabia and Russia. The chances for the expanded cooperation format to survive the conflict in Ukraine and the isolation of the Federation from the Euro-Atlantic community was far from obvious. All the more so because of the pressure exerted on OPEC by the White House not to aim for a rise in oil prices, with a view to support US attempt to hit Russia's energy rent and, at the same time, to help the United States to fight inflation - an element at the center of the talks held in Jeddah last summer on the occasion of President Joe Biden's visit (Abbas, 2022). The partial Saudi misalignment from the alliance with the US – repeatedly and openly criticized by Washington after October – manifests Saudi Arabia resolve to reassert the natural primacy in the oil market of both the country and of the Organization, raising the need to protect the market (and the rent) above other strategic considerations. Moreover, the proven inability of US non-conventional producers to jointly and rapidly increase oil output playing a balancer role in the market in unity of purpose with the US government signals Saudi Arabia's continued role as the main swing producer, reducing the risk of marginalization disclosed in the aftermath of the US unconventional revolution. Still, beyond the strictly economic logic underlying the Saudi and OPEC decisions, it is difficult not to place the reaffirmation of Saudi and OPEC's independence in the broader framework of the changing strategic arrangements in the Middle East and in the Gulf, characterized by a creeping power transition that sees – as in the case of the recent Iranian-Saudi agreement mediated by Beijing – the main regional politics knots escaping US grip and involvement.

Both the credibility of the role played by OPEC in the oil market and the Saudi leadership in the Organization were strengthened also as a result of another decision taken in Vienna in June.

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<sup>1</sup> Announcing voluntary production cuts were Saudi Arabia (500 Kb/d), Iraq (211 Kb/d), United Arab Emirates (144 Kb/d), Kuwait (128 Kb/d), Kazakhstan (78 Kb/d), Algeria (48 Kb/d), Oman (40 Kb/d), and Gabon (8 Kb/d).

Indeed, through a series of bilateral meetings held before the plenary session, Saudi Arabia brokered an agreement on the age-old question of national production levels used as a reference for the Organization's decisions on output (MEES, 2023: 6). The current reference levels, which determine the level of production (and cuts) of each member, are in fact based on the output levels declared by individual members in October 2018, in many cases no longer aligned – by excess or by deficiency – with current ones. This led to a series of contradictions in the Organization's decisions on cuts - which often remained only on paper - and to a series of tensions between its members. On the one hand, there are states – such as Nigeria or Angola – which, having an artificially high production baseline, are in fact unaffected by the decisions to cut output and are against a revision of the baselines; on the other, there are members such as the United Arab Emirates which, on the contrary, benefiting from a significant growth in extractive potential, required instead a revision of the baseline levels that would prevent decisions on cuts from damaging them excessively. In this context, it was decided in Vienna to review the reference quotas starting from January 2024 and to proceed, by mid-year, with a review of the baselines through independent consultants – IHS, Wood Mackenzie and Rystad Energy. Such a decision holds the potential to realign the agreed production levels to the real ones, avoiding the ‘paper cuts’ trap. This is particularly significant not only for the credibility of the Organization but also for its stability, as the Emirate's availability of a high untapped extraction potential had ended up causing doubts on the very opportunity for Abu Dhabi to remain in OPEC (Krane et al., 2023). Moreover, the revision of the quotas strengthens the position of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries within the Organization, ensuring them higher levels of output and rewarding new upstream investments – already planned in the case of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which aim to increase production capacity in the next four years respectively from 12 to 13 and from 4 to 5 Mb/d (Ghaddar, 2023).

## Conclusions

In the first half of 2023, the price trend in the oil market showed a significant degree of continuity, together with an appreciable realignment of price levels in a range between 70 and the 80 \$/b. The action undertaken by OPEC+ contributed above all to putting a floor under the fall of the oil prices. Following the October 2022 ministerial meeting, the Organization has effectively managed to protect a minimum level of rent per barrel - a traditional element around which OPEC has always shown a high capacity for joint action – manifesting the resolve to navigate with caution through the uncertainty that continues to characterize the global oil scenario. Moreover, and most significantly, OPEC+ has reaffirmed its visibility and centrality in the oil market, overcoming one of the obstacles – i.e. the production baseline – against which the solidarity between its members and the very stability of the Organization was in danger of crushing. From this perspective, the realignment of output quotas to the real production capacity of the Organization's members not only ensures its action greater credibility vis a vis operators and partners, but also reaffirms the grip on OPEC's life held by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies.

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## The threat of cyberterrorism and its limits

### Abstract

This paper aims to examine the nature and extent of the threat currently posed by cyberterrorism in our time.

After outlining the elusive concept of cyberterrorism, the text examines the limits and constraints to its actual use, in terms of capabilities and intentions of potentially interested actors.

### Interest in cyberterrorism

In our time, the threat of cyberterrorism has attracted considerable attention and concern (cf. Golose 2022; Shandler et al. 2023; Onat et al. 2023).

These fears probably reached their peak at the beginning of this century (Jacobsen 2022, p. 62); fear of large-scale terrorist attacks (at the time, especially of jihadist origin), particularly following the September 11 catastrophe, was combined with suspicions of new technologies (Weimann 2005).

In the years since, concern about this kind of threat has probably been progressively diminishing. Nevertheless, for example, as late as 2012, before the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) or *Daesh*, the results of a questionnaire administered to IT security specialists showed that 79% of these experts expected a "major cyberterrorist attack" within one year (Conway 2014, p. 103).

To date, however, it seems difficult to unequivocally mention a single act of cyberterrorism that has resulted in victims or has directly caused material damage.

Before discussing the nature and extent of the threat posed by this phenomenon in our time, it seems useful to concisely focus on the non-obvious definition of cyberterrorism.

### The concept of cyberterrorism

The term "cyberterrorism" is in fact ambiguous (Jarvis and Macdonald 2015; Macdonald et al. 2022). First of all, it is the very concept of terrorism that is notoriously elusive and controversial (among many others, most recently, Schmid 2023). Here, it can be argued that terrorism is a form of violence deliberately employed by a non-state actor (an organization, a social group or even an individual) against other people (Merari 1993; see also Marone 2013, chapter 1), on the basis of political/ideological motivations, in order to influence, intimidate or convey a message to a wider audience than the immediate victims of violence (Vidino et al. 2017, p. 38).

In light of this definition, cyberterrorism can be considered as a species of the broader genre of terrorism, based on the use of cyberattacks that result in physical violence against people.

Some scholars and experts, especially in recent years, have preferred to broaden the definition of cyberterrorism to include online practices that, although potentially linked to terrorist activities, are not immediately associated with the actual use of violence (for example, extremist propaganda, recruitment of militants, fundraising for terrorist activities, etc.) (cf. Marone 2019), or even phenomena not directly related to terrorism, such as radical forms of hacktivism (hacking + activism) for protest purposes (for example, Romagna 2020; Mazzini 2023).

As other scholars have pointed out (Kenney 2015), such definitions of cyberterrorism in a broad sense risk being imprecise and confusing. Although to date there has been nothing that could vaguely resemble a "cybernetic September 11", it is clear that terrorist organizations may be interested in taking advantage of the internet to launch destructive actions. For example, a terrorist organization might be able to compromise the computer control system of a hydroelectric plant and open the gates of a dam, producing the sudden flooding of a densely populated area (for example, Giacomello 2004, p. 397 and *passim*).

Other examples could be cyberattacks on a country's air or rail traffic control systems or other critical infrastructure (which is increasingly dependent on digital technologies), such as healthcare facilities or energy infrastructure (Venkatachary et al. 2018), including even nuclear power plants (cf. Kim 2014), with potentially disastrous effects.

In fact, according to many scholars and experts (for example, Kenney 2015; Jacobsen 2022), currently the threat of cyberterrorism seems to be “inflated” in many respects. In fact, to date, terrorist organizations, and even less individual “lone-actor terrorists” (for example, Weimann 2012; see also, among others, Hamm and Spaaij 2017; Kenyon et al. 2021), have demonstrated neither the capabilities nor the intention to launch destructive cyberattacks.

The next two sections examine the reasons why actors engaged in terrorist activities are not able and/or do not want to use this type of weapon.

## Capability

On the one hand, even sophisticated, resourceful, and influential organizations – such as the self-styled Islamic State, especially at the height of its power at the time of the self-proclaimed “Caliphate” in Syria and Iraq (2014 - 2019) – have not shown the capabilities to carry out genuine acts of cyberterrorism (Bernard 2017).

To date, the undeniable experiences and skills displayed by terrorist organizations such as IS in the field of communication and propaganda on the web have not transferred to the ability to launch destructive cyberattacks.

The most obvious reason for this fact is associated with the factor of technical skills (for example, Giacomello 2020; Jacobsen 2022).

The execution of cyberattacks capable of immediately translating into physical violence in the real world requires knowledge and skills far superior to those necessary to create and spread attractive online propaganda products or even to guide jihadist sympathizers on the web with remote “mentoring” practices.<sup>1</sup>

“Cyberterrorists” must be able to “weaponize” the targeted computer system. It is therefore not enough that they know how to detect vulnerabilities in a computer system and how to access it, but they must also possess specific knowledge about technical processes (for example, complex air or rail transport control systems) that can produce the effect of physical destruction in the real world (Jacobsen 2022, p. 63).

In principle, terrorist organizations could overcome this problem by acquiring the services of highly specialized *hackers* from the outside, in exchange for money or by other methods. However, building a collaborative relationship with these “external consultants”, so to speak, appears complicated.

On the one hand, on the demand side, due to the need to maintain secrecy (see Marone 2021; Marone 2023), the terrorist organization usually finds it difficult to build a relationship of close cooperation with external actors (in particular, Vertigans 2011; Marone 2021), especially if the organization is not in a position to control a territory (cfr. Lia 2015; Doboš et al. 2019).

Moreover, building a relationship of trust in the virtual sphere tends to be even more complex, due to opportunities for anonymity and other factors (such as the absence of non-verbal communication signals) (for example, Green 2009).

On the other hand, on the supply side, it seems generally unlikely that qualified hackers, even if already engaged in online criminal activities for profit (i.e., cybercrime), would have an interest in

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<sup>1</sup> It is well known that the Islamic State, especially during the era of its territorial “Caliphate” in Syria and Iraq, has entrusted some of its members, such as Rachid Kassim (1987 - 2017) from France, with the task of getting in touch with jihadist sympathizers in various countries on the internet, supervising their path of radicalization from a distance and guiding them even in the execution of terrorist attacks, without the need for face-to-face contacts in the real world between the two actors. In the literature, this practice is known as virtual entrepreneurship or virtual planning. See, in particular, Hughes and Meleagrou-Hitchens (2017), Cragin and Weil (2018) and Marone (2019, pp. 19-20).

taking the risk of establishing collaboration with a terrorist organization, which would also bring with it the unwanted attention of the national security apparatus (Jacobsen 2022, p. 64).

Similarly, hypothetically, terrorist organizations could also be supported by States in their use of cyberterrorism, as can already be the case for other terrorist activities (among others, Byman 2005).

Nevertheless, as has been noted, it seems rather unlikely that a State would decide to entrust this delicate task to a non-state actor, providing that organization with human and financial resources, when it could deal with it directly in a clandestine manner (Giacomello 2020, pp. 6-7).

## Intentions

In addition to capabilities, the intention to use cyberterrorism is also not well documented (Egloff 2021; see also Marone 2019). Some scholars and experts, assuming the rational nature of “terrorists” in their use of violence, have argued that, compared to other tactics, cyberterrorism is not advantageous on the basis of a cost/benefit analysis (Giacomello 2004; Conway 2014; Giacomello 2020).

According to this view, more conventional attacks, such as those involving car bombs, would be cheaper, easier to carry out, immediately more destructive and associated with greater symbolic power compared to cyberterrorism (Conway 2014, p. 118).

A reason for this apparent reluctance may be related to the well-known “spectacular” nature of terrorism (e.g., Juergensmeyer 2000); several scholars (for example, Conway 2014) have pointed out that cyberattacks would not have the same element of a “scenographic” nature. Moreover, as has been observed (Stohl 2007; Jacobsen 2022, p. 65), there may be a risk that a cyberattack may be perceived by the general population as a simple unintentional accident, frustrating the effort to promote the extremist cause. Moreover, in general, the actual responsibilities for offensive actions in the virtual arena are not always identifiable and therefore open up the general issue of claiming responsibility.

In the real-world, “offline”, a terrorist organization can already “lie” in several ways (in particular, Kearns et al. 2014): by taking “credit” for an attack it did not carry out; disavowing, on the contrary, the responsibility for an attack that it actually carried out; or even falsely attributing responsibility for an attack (regardless of whether it actually committed it) to another actor.

However, the “attribution problem” is even more acute in cyberspace (for example, Rid and Buchanan 2015).

An actor may make some online offensive activities appear to be performed by other actors, including terrorist organizations (or cyber collectives associated with such organizations), *to the detriment of terrorist organizations* (or at least *not in their interest*) (Alexander and Clifford 2019, p. 24; Marone 2019), also in the context of “false flag operations”. For example, in October 2018, the British authorities announced that the virtual group called “CyberCaliphate”, generally considered associated with the Islamic State, had actually been promoted by the GRU, the notorious intelligence service of the Russian Armed Forces (Government of the United Kingdom 2019, cited in Marone 2019, p. 14).

Moreover, recently, some scholars have advanced another general hypothesis, worthy of further reflection and empirical verification, which focuses on factors related to the social identity of actors. Military scholar Jeppe T. Jacobsen (2022), in particular, suggested that the personal inclinations of “terrorists” tend not to overlap and not to be compatible with those typical of hackers: in this view, while the former are not infrequently personally attracted by the desire to exercise physical violence against other people, even in particularly gruesome ways (as the case of the Islamic State has sadly shown: for example, Friis 2018; Lakomy 2019), the latter tend to be driven by the desire to solve a sort of technical puzzle in the virtual sphere (cfr. Mazzini 2023).

## Conclusions

The contribution examined the reasons why, to date, the threat of cyberterrorism (in the strict sense) has not materialized, highlighting the limits to the use of cyberterrorism in our time, in terms of both the capabilities and intentions of actors.

In conclusion, there are currently major constraints on the use of cyberterrorism by non-state actors. Nevertheless, it should be noted that these constraints do not appear insurmountable.

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# **Osservatorio Strategico**

## **Part Two**





## Kosovo: tensions persist

### Abstract

The lack of agreement and implementation between Belgrade and Pristina regarding the Association of Serbian Municipalities has represented another crisis that culminated in the installation of Albanian mayors in Serb-majority municipalities after the holding of an election round that was deserted and boycotted by Serbs in northern Kosovo. The episode led to the escalation of tensions and violence that resulted in clashes and the wounding of KFOR soldiers in late May

### The long crisis

Last April, following special municipal elections held in the Serb-majority northern areas of Kosovo, four ethnic Albanian mayors were elected with a turnout of less than 4 percent. The main Kosovo Serb party, the Serbian List, boycotted the elections, and the turnout was only 3,47 percent. The Serb List called for a boycott of the elections because Belgrade's key demands, including the formation of the Association of Serbian Municipalities (ASM) and the withdrawal of Kosovo's special forces from the country's north, had not been met. The results showed that Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti's Vetevendosje (Self-Determination) party won the mayoral races in North Mitrovica and Leposavic, while the opposition Democratic Party of Kosovo won in Zvecan and Zubin Potok. The low turnout immediately raised questions about the legitimacy of the election results, as well as the impact on future relations between Belgrade and Pristina.

However, Kosovo's Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, decided to go ahead with the installation of ethnic Albanian mayors in the north, who were sworn in with the protection of the country's police (KP) and police special forces (ROSU), in the Zvecan, Zubin, Potok and Leposavic municipalities.



Fig. 1. Majorities' distribution in Kosovo and Serbia

This triggered new large-scale protests by Serbs in the north. The appointment of ethnic Albanian mayors also sparked outrage in the United States and the European Union, with the United States even calling for political sanctions against Kosovo and the so-called 'Quint' condemning Pristina's moves. Finally, at the height of the crisis, on May 29, KFOR soldiers on riot deployment clashed with Serb protesters in Kosovo. More than 70 people were injured, including 30 NATO soldiers (including Italians, of the largest contingent, and Hungarians). The protests continued

afterwards, peacefully. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic accused Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti of organizing the tensions in an attempt to create a conflict between the Serbs and NATO, accusing Kurti and the entire leadership in Pristina of aiming to "expel the Serb population from northern Kosovo forever."<sup>1</sup>.

### **The role of the United States, the European Union and KFOR's relevance**

The US ambassador to Pristina, Jeffrey Hovenier, said on Tuesday that Washington will apply sanctions after the 29th of May riots in northern Kosovo. The first sanction was the cancellation of Kosovo's participation in the US-led Defender Europe 2023 military exercise.

He added that the US will also "cease all efforts to assist Kosovo in gaining recognition from states that have not recognised Kosovo and in the process of integration into international organisations".

He said that the unrest has set back efforts to bring about a normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo adding that "the crisis that has been created has been totally unnecessary, the mayors have had the opportunity to work from other administrative buildings located in these municipalities, so it was not necessary to insist on entering these buildings," the US ambassador said<sup>2</sup>.

In an interview, General Michele Ristuccia, commander of KFOR, pointed the finger at Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti for attempting to install ethnic Albanian mayors not recognized by the Serb majority, disregarding the advice of the international community and for using the police without consulting KFOR. Two unilateral initiatives that have fueled an environment saturated with unproductive and dangerous rhetoric that makes the balance achieved over the past two decades increasingly fragile and seems to be taking dangerous steps backward<sup>3</sup>.

Meanwhile, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced the imminent deployment of 700 military personnel to Kosovo, pointing out that NATO and KFOR have the forces and capabilities they need to fulfill the UN mandate.

The commander of NATO's Joint Forces Command in Naples, Stuart B. Munsch, said the deployment of additional forces is such that KFOR will have all the capabilities it needs to maintain peace and security. according to the UN Security Council mandate.

The European Council condemned the recent violence in northern Kosovo and called for immediate de-escalation. The parties should create conditions for early elections in all four municipalities in northern Kosovo. Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti confirmed that he believes it is necessary to proceed with new local elections in the four Serb-majority municipalities in the north, admitting that turnout on April 23 was very low, giving little legitimacy to the new ethnic Albanian mayors. "Failure to ease tensions will have negative consequences," reads the draft conclusions of the June 29-30 European Council meeting.

"It is essential," it further reads, "that the EU-facilitated dialogue led by the High Representative and the rapid implementation of the agreement on the path to normalization and its implementing annex continue, including the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities"<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Kosovo: Vucic accusa, Kurti vuole provocare una guerra*, Il Sole 24 Ore 14 giugno 2023 <https://amp24-ilsole24ore.com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/amp24.ilsole24ore.com/pagina/AEa18NhD>

<sup>2</sup> Xharra J., Bami X. and Dragojlo S., *US Penalises Kosovo After Unrest in Serb-Majority North*, BalkanInsight 30 maggio 2023 <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/05/30/us-penalises-kosovo-after-unrest-in-serb-majority-north/>

<sup>3</sup> Imarisio M., *Kosovo, il capo delle forze Nato: «Da due anni solo passi indietro, basta con le azioni unilaterali»*, Corriere della Sera 4 giugno 2023 [https://www.corriere.it/esteri/23\\_giugno\\_03/kosovo-capo-forze-nato-da-due-anni-solo-passi-indietro-basta-le-azioni-unilaterali-607f28c4-0241-11ee-9687-f6cb889dd928.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/esteri/23_giugno_03/kosovo-capo-forze-nato-da-due-anni-solo-passi-indietro-basta-le-azioni-unilaterali-607f28c4-0241-11ee-9687-f6cb889dd928.shtml)

<sup>4</sup> *Vertice Ue chiede l'immediata de-escalation nord del Kosovo*, Ansa 30 giugno 2023 [https://www.ansa.it/nuova\\_europa/it/notizie/rubriche/altrenews/2023/06/30/vertice-ue-chiede-limmediata-de-escalation-nord-del-kosovo\\_c64a4f1c-a868-454c-958a-1029a3470667.html](https://www.ansa.it/nuova_europa/it/notizie/rubriche/altrenews/2023/06/30/vertice-ue-chiede-limmediata-de-escalation-nord-del-kosovo_c64a4f1c-a868-454c-958a-1029a3470667.html)

## The role of the People's Republic of China and Russia

China expressed its support for Serbia's efforts to "safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity" following renewed violence between ethnic Serbs and NATO peacekeeping troops in Kosovo.

Mao Ning, a spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, blamed the violence on Kosovo's failure to respect Serbian political rights and said they support Serbia's efforts "to protect sovereignty and territorial integrity.

China, along with Russia and Serbia, does not recognize Kosovo's 2008 independence and Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning on Tuesday placed the blame for the violence on a failure to respect Serbian political rights.<sup>5</sup>

The Russian Foreign Ministry released a statement condemning the West and supporting Serbia.

"We call on the West to finally stop its false propaganda and to stop blaming the incidents in Kosovo on the desperate Serbs who are trying to defend their legitimate rights and freedom through peaceful and non-armed means," said the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Russian Ambassador Aleksandar Bochan-Kharchenko added: "Moscow has the most serious approach in monitoring the development of the situation, and we understand that this kind of development can cause a serious crisis, even an explosion in the entire region."

Since Russia's aggression in Ukraine started, Serbia has refused to implement most EU sanctions against Moscow or align more broadly with the bloc and the West's foreign policy line<sup>6</sup>.

## Final considerations

The combination of ongoing anti-government protests in Serbia and escalating tensions in northern Kosovo poses a significant risk of regional destabilization and threatens to derail the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, which has been making important progress in the past months. Additionally, the increasingly radical actions of Prime Minister Kurti in Kosovo could result in a complete failure to implement the agreements reached earlier this year, both in Brussels and Ohrid. Meanwhile, in Belgrade, the hold on power by President Vucic, who has been supported by the West as a promoter of a normalization agreement with Pristina, appears to be facing significant challenges<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> *China expresses support for Serbia in renewed Kosovo clashes involving NATO troops*, Associated Press 30 maggio 2023 <https://apnews.com/article/china-serbia-kosovo-nato-45db1658df5b57bfeca8c9354a2fff6f>

<sup>6</sup> Taylor A. and Zimonjic B., *Kosovo chaos shakes global players as Russia, China wade in*, Euractiv 31 maggio 2023 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/kosovo-chaos-shakes-global-players-as-russia-china-wade-in/>

<sup>7</sup> Giantin S., *Serbia and Kosovo experience destabilization due to mass shootings, protests and contentious elections*, NATO Defense College Foundation 1 giugno 2023 <https://www.natofoundation.org/balkans-black-sea/serbia-and-kosovo-experience-destabilization-due-to-mass-shootings-protests-and-contentious-elections/>



## **Russian lessons learned in the Syrian conflict**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this analysis is to study the main lessons learned by Russia in the Syrian theater of war since 2015 with the goal of highlighting on the one hand Moscow's growing war capabilities in the region and on the other hand the state of the art of Russian military forces that have been the backdrop to the operation in Ukraine, stressing its advantages and limitations.

### **Russian lessons in the war in Syria**

The war in Ukraine has led many experts and analysts to analyze Russian military capabilities, but less attention has been paid in past years to identifying lessons learned by Moscow in the conflict that anticipated the current one against Kiev, namely the operation in Syria that began in September 2015. With this brief study, we aim at pointing out some of the warfare capabilities that the Russians developed or improved during their involvement in Syria and then included in the operations against Ukraine in February 2022. These lessons are important because, although the difference in terms of theater of operations and type of conflict between Syria and Ukraine is obvious, prior to 2022 the Russian General Staff cited Syria to highlight the need to develop a new military capability based on flexible expeditionary forces to carry out limited actions abroad. That is, it saw the Syrian context as the most likely one for future wars.

Thus, we can draw some lessons from the experience in Syria that, in part, we can find in the operations in Ukraine.

The main lesson for the Russian military in Syria has been the need to achieve management superiority in conflicts, that is, to make better decisions, faster than the adversary and force the adversary to operate within a Russian decision-making framework, effectively taking the initiative away from the enemy. This is something that clearly ties in with modern information technology, an area where Russia was particularly lagging behind the United States and NATO and where, by contrast, it has shown marked improvements in Syria. Even with limitations, Russia was able to establish a network to support its operations by integrating precision fire capabilities, especially after the first months of its intervention in Syria.

This traces Western thinking on the OODA Loop or Network Centric Warfare with the use of modern technology in order to gain and maintain information superiority to enable better decisions to be made faster than one's adversaries in the future. This also aims to operate all combat resources in a unified and centralized system of communication and command to be able to develop actions based on faster decision-making. These improvements in command and control are also the result of the establishment of the National Defense Control Center (NDCC) created in 2014, thus before the intervention in Syria. In December 2017, General Gerasimov stated that the creation of the NDCC has «dramatically changed the approach to the management of the entire military organization» (Clark, 2021), particularly in terms of information availability and communication.

As for the Syrian scenario, the Russian headquarters in Hmeimim coordinated resources throughout Syria from a single location, dividing the country into several zones of responsibility, each managed by operational groups of 15-20 officers all based in Hmeimim.

In Syria, therefore, this more modern and technological approach has been successfully tested and implemented, but it has shown its limitations in Ukraine. The reason for this is probably twofold. On the one hand, the type of conflict is different since in the Middle East it was counterinsurgency against an adversary that was fierce and well-armed but still irregular, while in Ukraine Moscow faces a regular army supported by NATO. On the other hand, the Syrian experience itself has limitations, since as an ISW report highlights the Russians rotated many forces in Syria to make them acquire

operational capabilities, but in doing so the experience gained is for short and limited commands, thus not in line with prolonged high-intensity warfare scenarios (Clark, 2021).

Crucial to modern operations are information capabilities related to reconnaissance, and their dissemination to make forces operate in the field and strike accurately the enemy. In this context, the Russians have learned several lessons in Syria where they have operated their Special Forces (KSO), a fleet of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and the GLONASS satellite system. All of these elements are critical to ISR and all three were new to the Russian military. The KSO played a central role in the designation of targets especially the most important ones (Adamsky, 2019). However, already in the Syrian theater the coordination of the different weapons and the joint capability of the Russian Armed Forces has not been optimal and probably remains one of the biggest problems (Thomas, 2020).

Another of the most significant Russian lessons learned in Syria is the need to operate in a coordinated manner with local allies, avoiding the Syrian situation where Moscow entered the conflict without having prepared such a strategy in advance. Especially in the early stages of the operation in Syria, the Russian military had great difficulties in dealing with various allied forces present on the ground. Such problems are evident when looking at the role of Russian advisers. The latter were deployed down to the tactical level with both planning tasks and direct command of combat operations, even though preliminary plans called for providing air support and combat support elements for operations commanded and carried out by the Syrian army.

Another important issue that is also reflected in current assessments of Russian capabilities in Ukraine is related to the use of air power (Lavrov, 2020). In Syria, Russia needed to achieve air supremacy, but in the Russian conception this notion has a more limited definition than the American definition of «air superiority». In Syria, Russia did not achieve air superiority in American terms and probably lacks the capabilities to create such a situation, as the action in Ukraine seems to confirm. However, from the perspective of air power, the intervention in Syria was a watershed moment for Russian strategic thinking, as several militaries and analysts have argued how aviation has become central to modern military operations, while historically in Russia aviation has always played a supporting role (Lavrov, 2020).

The battle of Aleppo was the turning point because the air force was deployed en masse and to conduct heavy bombardment. An example of how Russian aviation improved during the conflict is the counterattack conducted by the al-Qaeda-linked group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in northern Hama on March 14, 2018, when Russian aircraft decimated an entire battle team. In that context, the Russians certainly demonstrated the ability to quickly locate and destroy hostile moving targets on a dynamically changing front line, which indicates an improvement in the Russian ability to gather and distribute intelligence.

A central theme for understanding the evolution of Russian warfighting capabilities in the Syrian theater and beyond is the use of precision weapons. The latter have been the real game changer in Syria, and their use is dedicated to hitting only selected targets rather than being an integral part of operations. However, they are unlikely to represent Russia's future arsenal, since in Syria even when they were available, the preference has been to employ older weaponry, if only for economic reasons. The Syrian theater served the Russians not only to test what was new to them, but also to develop the necessary doctrine in order to integrate that tool into their operations. However, the Russian limitations in employing this type of weapon are evident in the difficulties evidenced in hitting small and mobile targets, probably due to lack of sensors on the battlefield and the necessary integration with attacking units (Adamsky, 2019).

Undoubtedly in Syria, the Russians have gained experience with Electronic Warfare in a contested environment, and they first tested the Kalibr cruise missile from air, surface ship, and submarine launch platforms in 2015 and 2016, but another very innovative aspect is related to drones, as in Syria Russia has developed capabilities and knowledge related to: the offensive use of drones; defense from drones; and their role in terms of reconnaissance. Gerasimov said in December 2017 that Russian forces had 60-70 drones flying daily in Syria, performing

reconnaissance and with Electronic Warfare tasks. The Russian military began actively integrating experience in the use of UAVs in Syria into doctrine and training in 2018. From May 2019, Moscow began training its units in coordinated drone actions. In addition, in Syria, Russia established a counter-UAV command post in Hmeimim in late 2017, coordinating air defense and EW systems into a single network. However, this experience has limitations as demonstrated by the Turkish ability to employ drones in its operations in Idlib and Ukrainian ability to employ drones on battlefields (Thomas, 2020). In 2019, Russia also tested its first MALE-class attack drone, the Orion, similar to the MQ-1 Predator, in Syria.

A specific theme is related to lessons learned regarding urban warfare: in this case Russian tactics were to encircle and blockade a city, preventing supplies or reinforcements. Then a series of offensives were launched from multiple directions. With the defense then expanded, pockets of resistance were hammered by artillery and air strikes (Thomas, 2020). Instead, for urban fighting, special combined units supported by tanks and artillery fire were created to hit buildings before assaulting them.

Although not large, the Russian ground contingent performed important tasks and it included various units: military advisers, fire and maneuver troops, military police, Special Operation Forces, Private Military Companies. As for the advisers, the Russians took full personnel from divisions/regiments, brigades, and battalions and placed them in their Syrian counterparts. These full staffs are likely to return intact to their units in Russia in order to provide them with battle-tested personnel accustomed to working together (Grau and Bartles, 2020). Military police were the face of Russian involvement in Syria and had tasks of: providing security at bases, manning checkpoints and observation posts, ensuring passage to/from de-escalation and de-confliction zones, conducting security patrols and guard command posts. New battalions were also formed specifically for deployment in Syria, and in this case the members are all from Russian Islamic minorities (Grau and Bartles, 2020).

## Conclusions

The Russian experience in Syria is therefore significant in understanding how Moscow has upgraded its military tool in previous years and how the latter has fared on the eve of the conflict in Ukraine. During operations in support of the Assad regime, the Russians undoubtedly showed improvements, especially in terms of technological evolution and command and control, but looking at the difficulties in Ukraine those improvements are probably not sufficient to deal with a modern high-intensity war. One area where the Russians, although they have gained experience in Syria, have found themselves very much at a loss in Ukraine is certainly that of drones, both in defending against enemy drones and in using these aircraft to conduct their own operations.

On the Syrian side, however, Russian actions have been effective on several levels. Militarily they have enabled the regime to regain almost all of the lost territory, consequently stabilizing the regime. Politically by doing so, Moscow has succeeded not only in derailing Washington's political plans, but also in carving out an important role not only in Syria but throughout the region.

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## **The failure of mediation efforts in Sudan presents an opportunity for the African Union**

As highlighted by the report (OS 1/2023), the violent fighting that has been ongoing in Sudan for the past three months is deeply rooted. The rivalry between the Sudanese Army Forces (SAFs) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSFs) has a multidimensional nature involving numerous facets of the country's sociopolitical structure. The complexity of Sudan's political trajectory from 1956 to the present has resulted in a clash in which the two leaders' power ambitions, al-Burhan and Hemeti, are intertwined with old grievances generated by post-independence center-periphery power dynamics and ethnic-tribal rivalries. In this context, SAFs and RSFs see themselves as mutual alternatives despite being an expression of the power that has ruled the country for 30 years with Omar al-Bashir. The SAFs see the power achieved over the past few years by the paramilitary group RSFs as an existential threat. Likewise, the Hemeti-led militias perceive the confrontation as an opportunity to overturn the country's domestic power relations between the center (SAFs) and the periphery (RSFs) and as a struggle for survival. Consequently, the belligerents conceive the conflict as a zero-sum game from which only one of the two sides can emerge as the winner. This view implies that the warring parties do not consider any diplomatic dispute resolution as a viable route.

The rigid stances of the two factions did not prevent extra-regional actors and regional intergovernmental organizations from promoting mediation attempts. Saudi Arabia has been one of the most active players. Backed by the U.S. State Department, Riyadh promoted a series of talks between conflicting groups' delegates in the city of Jeddah. The discussions have led to provisional ceasefires that the conflicting parties have not always adhered to. In Saudi intentions, the agreements should have led to a permanent truce. The Saudi attempts did not lead to concrete developments. Instead, the series of ceasefires proved helpful in successfully evacuating foreign personnel from Khartoum. Simultaneously, the region's intergovernmental organization, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), also tried to carve out a role in mediating the conflict. Following the example of what was done a few months ago with the Ethiopia-Tigray conflict, IGAD has mandated three heads of state to follow Sudanese developments by taking action to find a peaceful solution between the parties. The IGAD delegation consisting of Kenyan President William Ruto, Djiboutian President Ismail Omar Guelleh, and South Sudanese Head of State Salva Kiir proved somewhat ineffective.

The failed IGAD attempt must be attributed to several political factors that did not allow the three delegates to legitimize themselves as impartial mediator in the eyes of both al-Burhan and Hemeti. Ethiopia has also joined the group in recent weeks to revitalize the initiative. In light of Saudi Arabia's and IGAD's challenges in persuading the two Sudanese factions to open dialogue, Egypt has decided to move alone. For several weeks, Cairo has been trying to promote a summit involving all of Sudan's neighboring states. Officially, Egypt intends to promote a meeting to address cooperatively the humanitarian issue and the management of the mass number of Sudanese refugees fleeing the conflict.

However, President al-Sisi would like to use the opportunity to create a joint and cohesive front that can convince the two conflicting leaders to stop the clashes. The Egyptian plan has an original sin: al-Sisi's role in Sudanese political affairs in recent years. The proximity and ties between the Egyptian military and the SAFs, make Egypt a less than credible interlocutor in

Hemeti's eyes. Furthermore, other neighboring states, such as Ethiopia and Chad, view Egyptian action with concern. Since the fighting began last April, both countries have dealt with the spillover effects of the growing Sudanese instability. They fear the conflict could regionalize and escalate, leading to further contagion. In other words, there is genuine apprehension in Addis Ababa and N'Djamena regarding their involvement in the power struggles between the two Sudanese factions. Consequently, both countries have shown reluctance to engage further in efforts to resolve the conflict. Only recently, Addis Ababa has shown its intention to modify this approach. However, this stance has been shared by two of the most influential extra-regional players in Sudan, such as the United Arab Emirates and China.

The various mediation attempts have proven unsuccessful in delivering tangible outcomes and have caused dissatisfaction within the African Union (AU). Without openly criticizing the actions of the involved parties, the continental organization has expressed concerns about the isolated and uncoordinated nature of these efforts, which has led to confusion. The AU expects greater inclusion in the initiatives, and in response, the AU Commission has expressed its readiness to assume full responsibility for the Sudanese situation. The AU has tasked the AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa, former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, with drafting a roadmap for diplomatic intervention.

Known as the de-escalation plan, the draft drawn up by Obasanjo in partnership with the AU Political Affairs, Peace & Security (PAPS), led by Bankole Adeoye, and shared with member states of the Peace and Security Council (PSC), aims to define an AU action plan to the Sudanese conflict. Although the details of the de-escalation plan remain unclear, AU is willing to promote coordinated efforts among local and international stakeholders involved in the conflict by establishing a Sudan Task Team. The team would be made up of experts in conflict resolution, humanitarian intervention, and military strategy. It would be directly accountable to AU Commission Chairman Moussa Faki and the other commissioners. At the same time, the possibility of promoting the intervention of a joint AU-IGAD military contingent is increasingly taking shape within the PSC. From AU's perspective, a force with rapid reaction capabilities could create the conditions for conflict resolution, support humanitarian and relief efforts, and ensure the stabilization of the entire area.

While there are numerous obstacles to overcome in implementing the de-escalation plan, this initiative aligns with the ongoing trend of capacity building within the AU. In recent years, the AU organs responsible for developing the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) have adopted a more proactive approach. The AU is increasingly seeking swift and effective resolutions to the numerous crises afflicting Africa, leading to a gradual and consistent APSA reconfiguring. As a result, the failures or difficulties encountered by external actors such as the United States and Saudi Arabia and other African bodies such as IGAD could favor the emergence of an African attempt at mediation.

## **Why China will carefully monitor the Vilnius NATO Summit**

In late June 2023 the spokeswoman of the Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao Ning, stated that the upcoming "NATO summit needs to look at how it can work constructively for peace and stability in Europe and beyond, rather than make an issue about China" (Mao, 2023b). The agenda of July 11-12 North Atlantic Council summit planned in the Lithuanian capital which will gather NATO heads of government and State also include the PRC and the Indo-Pacific again.

The recent words are only the latest evidence of a growing Chinese interest in developments occurring within the Atlantic Alliance. Indeed, during the past few months, Ministry officials as well as Chinese diplomats spoke on several occasions on NATO, which has gained unprecedented attention in political debate in the PRC in the wake of Russian aggression against Ukraine. In early June, another foreign spokesman had stated that "Asia lies beyond the geographical scope of the North Atlantic and has no need for a replica of NATO". Nevertheless, Wang accused the alliance of being "bent on going east into this region, interfering in regional affairs and inciting bloc confrontation" (Wang, 2023). In May, the other spokeswoman had reiterated similar remarks (Mao, 2023a).

In recent years, Beijing has become increasingly attentive towards the political and military evolution of the Atlantic Alliance, which it perceives as an actor increasingly capable of influencing Asian stability as well as its security.

Effectively, without prejudice for its commitment to Kiev, the North Atlantic Council in Vilnius will have to discuss how to make the Alliance cohesive towards the increasingly global projection of Chinese influence as well as lay the ground for a common – or at least non-contradictory – approach towards the Indo-Pacific. In this perspective, however, it should be noted that over the years, NATO member states have adopted strategies and frameworks related to China and the Indo-Pacific which are not always consistent between each other.

### **China and the strategic documents of NATO member states**

For the first time in a NATO document at this level, the Strategic Concept 2022 (SC-22) approved during the Madrid Summit in June last year reserved a relevant space for China. Indeed, in several paragraphs (NATO, 2022, p. 6), the PRC is recognized as a multilevel "systemic challenge" to "interests, security and values" of Alliance member countries. Of particular concern to the heads of state and government at the Madrid Summit was China's opacity and international projection through "hybrid and cyber operations" that, along with other capabilities, threaten the so-called liberal international order. It should be noted that the China dossier had already been mentioned in a NATO summit statement back in 2019, when it was becoming clear in the eyes of allies that economic interdependence provided Beijing with leverage to create technological vulnerabilities in member countries. In particular, the Alliance was looking with apprehension at Chinese supplies of telecommunications (5G) systems that were beginning to undermine allies' ability and trust in sharing classified information (NATO, 2019). In the document approved in Madrid, this topic is echoed when it mentions the "Chinese attempts to divide the Alliance", highlighting the negative external effects brought by Beijing's ties, especially economic, with many European partners. SC-22, however, fails to clearly define "how far the alliance can or should go to counter" growing Chinese influence (Larsen, 2022, p. 10).

A comparison of SC-22 with member states' strategic documents is useful to evaluate the degree of alignment between them and the Alliance's vision. First and foremost, the U.S. footprint is evident, as Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy hinges on the concept of a "free and open Indo-Pacific." In this document, NATO is mentioned along with the European Union, highlighting the allies'

growing focus on Asia and the opportunity to "align approaches" (White House, 2022, p. 25). In listing possible policy actions, however, there appears no concrete mention of the Organization as a possible forum for consultation and coordination.

At the same time, France, in its Indo-Pacific Strategy (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018) does not mention NATO, even if it virtually plays along SC-22 when it identifies access to "shared spaces" (p. 55) as a top priority, highlighting that, since 2014, French ships have been plying the waters of the South China Sea at least twice a year to preserve international norms on freedom of navigation. Worth a mention is also the French adoption of the geopolitical concept of Indo-Pacific, borrowed from U.S. doctrine – and Japan before that – and contested by Beijing.

In contrast, the UK strategic document – *Global Britain in a Competitive Age* (Cabinet Office, 2022) – describes the British government's vision of the country's global role with particular reference to the Indo-Pacific region. Here, NATO is identified as a framework for the projection of British military power in relation primarily to maritime security (p. 7), thus essential for addressing the "geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts" of which the Indo-Pacific is the focus (p. 17).

Assessing, under this same lens, Italy's International Security and Defense White Paper (Ministry of Defense, 2015) helps further highlight the varying degree of Indo-Pacific inclination of selected Alliance members. Strikingly, the white paper does not mention China or, more generally, notions, countries and approaches pertaining to the Indo-Pacific region, reiterating only the Italian interest in global freedom of navigation.

Finally, the German policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific (Federal Foreign Office, 2020) specifically mention NATO in reference to security partnerships with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea (the Indo-Pacific components of NATO's Partners Across the Globe program) (p. 41) with particular reference to cybersecurity and maritime security, two preeminent policy areas for the Atlantic approach to China. The latter is recognized in the new German National Security Strategy (Federal Government, 2023), Germany's first NSS since the end of the Cold War, as a "partner, a competitor and a systemic rival" at once (p. 12).

## Conclusions

Beijing will be watching with interest – if not apprehension – the outcomes of the upcoming Vilnius Summit as it assesses whether and how the Atlantic Alliance will conduct a rebalancing – even if only partial – of commitments, resources and guarantees towards Asia and in order to contain the PRC's growing regional and global projection. Based on which internal Alliance voice should prevail during the Summit, in fact, China's assessment of the international system will change.

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## **South Korea-Japan trade relations are back on track**

### **Abstract**

In August 2019, the diplomatic dispute between South Korea and Japan regarding the legacy of the Japanese occupation unexpectedly hit the sphere of bilateral economic and commercial ties. The Japanese government adopted export restrictions that included strategic materials for South Korea's leading industrial sectors and Tokyo excluded the neighboring country from Japan's white list of trading partners. In response, Seoul dropped Tokyo from its own white list. Since Spring 2023, the rift seems to have been partially mended following a unilateral initiative put forth by the South Korean administration of president Yoon Suk Yeol. The South Korean government has announced a plan to settle the dispute over the compensation of Korean victims of forced labor in Japanese factories during the colonization of the Korean Peninsula (1910-1945). While the trade restrictions have then been lifted and in spite of the two governments' shared commitment for a future-oriented partnership, there are still questions about the viability of the reconciliation process. Arguably, domestic politics will continue to be the main source of constraint for both governments. Hence, the strategic imperatives regarding the need to improve defense coordination to deal with the challenges stemming from North Korea and China have so far proved to be less than enough to enhance mutual trust.

### **Trade retaliation**

In July 2019, Japan introduced new export controls on a wide range of items to South Korea, which led the bilateral relations into possibly the worst phase since the 1965 diplomatic normalization. Then, Tokyo formally removed Seoul from its white list of trading partners. The decision required Japanese companies to obtain a license to export more than a thousand of items to South Korea, including three chemicals for which Japan holds almost a monopoly (90% of the world's total production) and that represent essential inputs for strategic sectors of the South Korean economy, in particular, semiconductors and electrical appliances.

In turn, Seoul excluded Japan from its own white list and filed an appeal into the WTO system. The risk of an escalation loomed large as the then South Korean President Moon Jae-in threatened to withdraw from the GSOMIA agreement that was signed in 2016 to allow for intelligence sharing between Washington, Seoul and Tokyo especially with regard to North Korean missile activity. As Kei Koga (2023) points out, president Moon turned back «largely due to US pressure» (p. 73).

Following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the global supply chains crisis, concerns that South Korea's heavy reliance on Japanese imports could cause delays in the production of South Korean chips rapidly worsened. In this context, South Korea had to diversify its supply sources and successfully managed to decrease significantly the share of Japanese hydrogen fluoride while boosting domestic production (Jung, 2021).

Eventually, the curb on exports to South Korea has had a boomerang effect on the Japanese economy. South Korean consumers boycotted some sectors of the Japanese economy such as food, tourism, automotive, and fashion that experienced whose sales plummeted. For example, in 2020 fiscal year, Uniqlo – the Japanese clothing apparel company – recorded a loss worth more than \$81 million (Lee, 2023).

### **The South Korean response**

«We will never lose against Japan again (...) we have come this far overcoming countless difficulties» tweeted Moon Jae-in on August 2, 2019 right after the announcement of South Korea's

exclusion from Japan's white list. Even the less informed observer can sense that the words of the former South Korean president were pointing to something more profound than a trade dispute that had just started. The use of the term «again» in fact referred to the much more complicated and broader issue of the suffers experienced by the Korean people during the Japanese colonization of the Peninsula (1910-1945).

The historical disputes mainly stem from the issues of forced labour, the system of sexual slavery that involved thousands of young women in the territories occupied by the Japanese military during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japanese politicians' worship of Yasukuni Shrine, the dispute over the Dokdo/Takeshima islets and how these facts are covered in textbooks. Against this background, it becomes clearer the reason why Moon called its people to resist against renewed pressures from Tokyo. Unsurprisingly, from the perspective of the South Korean authorities, the trade-related decision of then Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's cabinet was actually a form of retaliation against the ruling of the South Korean Supreme Court that had been issued months before. In October 2018, the Court had confirmed the right of individual citizens to submit compensation claims against the Japanese companies for having been forcibly employed in their plants during the colonization.

The official position of successive LDP-led government in Japan has always been that the 'Agreement on Settlement of Property and Claims Problems and on Economic Cooperation' signed with South Korea in 1965 addressed and settled all issues relating to the occupation including compensations to victims of colonial rule. For this reason, the Abe cabinet told the Japanese companies to disregard the rulings. Due to the lack of collaboration from the Japanese side, South Korean judges have ruled in favor of the seizure and liquidation of any assets of these Japanese companies that are located in South Korea (Kim, 2021).

Originally, Tokyo had justified the imposition of trade restrictions by citing alleged flaws in South Korean controls on the export of these chemicals to third countries with the risk that particularly the North Korean regime could use them for military purposes. However, Tokyo has never provided evidence of such allegations against South Korean officials (South China Morning Post, 2019). Abe himself, in an interview with the then South Korean Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon, commented that the ruling of the South Korean Court «fundamentally overturns the basis of Japan-South Korean relations» (Reuters, 2019).

It should also be taken into account that former president Moon Jae-in has represented the progressive political camp which has traditionally put historical memory at the center of South Korea's policy towards Japan. Unlike the South Korean conservatives, the liberals have constantly called Japanese officials to offer a sincere apology and to take moral and legal responsibility.

### **A «future-oriented» partnership**

In Spring of 2023, following a twelve-year hiatus, the South Korean president and the Japanese prime minister resumed their bilateral meetings. Conservative leader Yoon Suk Yeol traveled to Tokyo in March, and Fumio Kishida flew to Seoul in May. The two official visits, as well as the invitation to the South Korean president to participate as an observer at the G7 meeting in Hiroshima, reset diplomatic relations and reaffirmed the commitment of the two governments to mend the rift in support of a «future-oriented» partnership (Yoon, 2023).

The détente has been accelerated by the plan that was announced by the South Korean Foreign Minister in March to compensate Japan's forced labor victims through a public foundation that will not receive any funds from Japan (Chang, 2023). Seoul's announcement broke the stalemate and led Tokyo to lift the export controls and reintegrate South Korea among its preferential trading partners. Eventually, the Yoon government revoked the measures taken by his predecessor as well.



The restoration of trade relations between South Korea and Japan can be expected to bear fruits also in the field of defense and security cooperation. In June 2023, South Korea published its National Security Strategy which aims to mark a departure from the Moon government's posture in regional and international affairs. The current administration has invested a great amount of political capital in boosting relations with Japan to the detriment of those with Beijing (MOFA, 2023). In parallel, the United States and its two allies are working on creating a robust mechanism to more effectively monitor North Korean missile activities. The goal is to facilitate real-time intelligence data sharing since the GSOMIA has so far only allowed data transmission after North Korea's launches, causing some discrepancies in Tokyo and Seoul's assessments of Pyongyang's number and type of missiles.

## Conclusions

While the trade restrictions have been lifted and in spite of the two governments' shared commitment for a future-oriented partnership, there are still questions about the viability of the reconciliation process. Arguably, domestic politics will continue to be the main source of constraint for both governments. Hence, the strategic imperatives regarding the need to improve defense coordination to deal with the challenges stemming from North Korea and China have so far proved to be less than enough to enhance mutual trust.

As for the plan proposed by the Yoon government, skepticism is mainly due to the unilateral nature of the plan, as well as the fact that it fails to address the other historical issues that continue to fuel the antagonism between Japan and South Korea. South Korean companies will be the only ones to provide compensations, which goes against the requests put forth by the South Korean victims and their families, whereas the Japanese companies have only been invited to support on a voluntary basis a fund for the promotion of research and student exchanges between the two countries.

At the time of writing the opposition parties and civil society activists in South Korea have been protesting also against the imminent release into the sea of liquids from the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant, which is set to continue at least for two years. On July 4, the IAEA Director Rafael Mariano Grossi presented the findings of the Agency's report on the system that Japan intends to use to distill contaminated water following the 2011 earthquake. The release procedure has been assessed as in line with the IAEA's standards and with a «negligible radiological impact on people and the environment» (IAEA 2023, p. 25).

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## **Donald Trump's indictment in New York and Florida and its possible impact on the 2024 presidential elections**

### **Abstract**

In April and June 2023, former President Donald Trump was formally indicted for two charges the US authorities had been investigating since the end of his mandate. Trump is the most likely candidate for the Republican nomination in the 2024 presidential election and is credited with a good chance of success on November 5. His legal problems have, therefore, already imposed themselves as a central element of the electoral campaign, fuelling criticism from the Democratic Party and from those within the Republican Party who would like to close the cumbersome phase of Trumpism. The former President exploited the situation to fuel his fundraising campaign and revive an image as an “anti-establishment” candidate. However, several doubts remain, partly linked to the decisions of his Democratic rival. On this front, the formalisation of President Biden’s bid for a second term at the White House has been met with several reservations, albeit no credible challenger seems currently to have emerged among the Party’s leaders.

In April and June 2023, former President Donald Trump was formally indicted for two charges the US authorities had been investigating since his mandate’s end. The event aroused widespread interest in the media and among the observers inside and outside the country. Beyond the juridical aspects of the situation (and beyond tabloids’ penchant for scandal), Donald Trump is the most likely candidate for the Republican nomination in the 2024 presidential election and is credited with good chances of success in the November 5 vote. The fact that the presidential candidate (and, possibly, the future US President) is called to trial (and, eventually, convicted) by an ordinary court is a legal unicum, which opens new and uncharted scenarios for American democracy. On these assumptions, Trump’s legal problems have already emerged as a central element of the electoral campaign. In the Democratic Party, they have fuelled the well-known criticisms raised against a figure deemed unsuitable to sit in the White House; in the Republican Party, they have encouraged those who want to close the cumbersome experience of Trumpism and end its controversies to return to a more traditional conservative policy. Even the former President exploited the situation to fuel his fundraising campaign and revive his image as an “anti-establishment” candidate. According to the available data, this strategy seems to be rewarding. However, several doubts remain, partly linked to the decisions of his Democratic rival. On this front, the formalisation of President Biden’s bid for a second term in office has been met with several reservations, albeit no credible challenger seems currently to have emerged among the Party’s leaders.

There are currently two investigations in which Donald Trump is indicted. The first led to an indictment by the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office in mid-April with thirty-four charges. It relates to the illegal financial scheme designed to cover up an extramarital affair that surfaced during his first presidential campaign<sup>1</sup>. The second (potentially more dangerous) led to an indictment in the Southern District of Florida District Court in early June with thirty-seven charges. It relates to the retention and unauthorised possession of federal documents dating to the years of his presidency, which, by law, should have been deposited with the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) at the end of the mandate<sup>2</sup>. In both cases, the former President pleaded not guilty, spoke of a “witch hunt” and politically motivated accusations, and called on his supporters to mobilise. In both

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.manhattanda.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Donald-J.-Trump-Indictment.pdf> (accessed: June 27, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.justice.gov/storage/US\\_v\\_Trump-Nauta\\_23-80101.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/storage/US_v_Trump-Nauta_23-80101.pdf) (accessed: June 27, 2023).

cases, the Republican establishment has largely sided with him even if nuances (and, sometimes, discordant voices) did not lack, especially on the second charge (Kay, 2023). However, since the beginning of the judicial controversy, the Party's base seems to have further compacted around the former President. According to the aggregate index of the political analysis site *fivethirtyeight.com*, as of April 1, 2023, the gap between Trump and the most accredited competitor to the Republican nomination (Florida incumbent Governor Ron DeSantis) was 19.5 percentage points (47.6 v 28.1); on June 17, 2023, the same source scored a 33.4-points-gap (53.3 v 20.9)<sup>3</sup>. Although figures change when changing methodology, a similar trend emerges from other reliable survey aggregators, such as the well-known *realclearpolitics.com*<sup>4</sup> or *racetothewh.com*<sup>5</sup>.

People's favour is not the only aspect to take into account. Donald Trump's legal troubles can also impact large donors' and loan collectors' attitudes. Over the years, election campaigns have grown increasingly expensive. For instance, according to the Federal Election Commission, in the 2019-20 election cycle (which, from this point of view, marked a record), presidential candidates raised and spent \$4.1 billion. This figure does not include the funds raised by Congress candidates (about four billion), party committees (almost 3.2 billion) and Political Action Committees (PACs; over 13.2 billion)<sup>6</sup>. Currently, there are no reliable data on the sums available to candidates for the 2024 vote. Before his formal bid, the press credited Ron DeSantis with more than \$110 million (Contorno, 2023; Goldenberg and Piper, 2023), while his election committee boasted of raising more than eight million during the official campaign's first day (Goldmacher, 2023). DeSantis's funds are already a bone of contention, with rivals accusing the Florida Governor of having poured money collected last year for the gubernatorial race (the so-called "soft money") into the presidential race and having supported an amendment to State legislation to make the transfer legal (Breuninger and Schwartz, 2023; Moline, 2023; Dixon, 2023). Whether true or false, the story is a symptom of how sensitive the financial issue is and how much attention it raises from the electoral perspective. Unsurprisingly, even Donald Trump, after DeSantis's bid, refocused and relaunched his fundraising strategy, also leveraging the Florida indictment to solicit contributions, as happened in April after the New York indictment (Schwartz, 2023; McGraw, 2023, Yang, 2023).

According to some sources (e.g., Allison, 2023; Isenstadt, 2023; Mueller, 2023; Steinhauser and Morris, 2023), this strategy has paid off on both occasions, while others (e.g., Benen, 2023) have raised some doubts on its effectiveness. If, on the one hand, Trump's legal troubles would have been effective in attracting individual supporters (the micro-funding the former President explicitly solicited), on the other, they would risk diverting large donors' capital on less problematic candidates. Incidentally, Trump's legal problems are not limited to those for which the former President has already been indicted. In mid-May, Trump was found guilty in a civil court of sexual abuse and defamation of the journalist, author, and columnist E. Jean Carroll (a conviction now under appeal). Meanwhile, civil investigations are underway into irregularities in the handling of the Trump Organization, and criminal investigations are underway into the role Trump allegedly had in the Capitol Riots of January 2021 and into the pressure he would have exerted, in 2020, on the Georgian authorities to overturn results of that State's presidential election. Beyond the impact on the presidential campaign, the Republican leaders fear these investigations could negatively affect the Party's image and its candidates in the Congressional election (Milligan, 2023). The 2022 midterm vote showed voters preferred less divisive candidates (MacGraw, 2022). From this perspective, if Donald Trump's legal troubles can mobilise the "hardest" component of the Republican galaxy, the risk is of alienating larger swathes of voters, such as the suburban middle class, who have traditionally been a crucial constituency for the Grand Old Party.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-primary-r/2024/national> (accessed: June 27, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2024/president/us/2024\\_republican\\_presidential\\_nomination-7548.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2024/president/us/2024_republican_presidential_nomination-7548.html) (accessed: June 27, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.racetothewh.com/2024/rep?utm\\_content=cmp-true](https://www.racetothewh.com/2024/rep?utm_content=cmp-true) (accessed: June 27, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.fec.gov/updates/statistical-summary-24-month-campaign-activity-2019-2020-election-cycle> (accessed: June 27, 2023).

## Conclusions

Donald Trump's trial in New York has been scheduled for March 25, 2024, while the Florida trial should (tentatively) start on August 14, 2023. Both are open to any outcome. The nature and scope of the charges make the second the most important, as directly related to Trump's institutional duties. However, the timing of the New York trial seems more politically dangerous. In March 2024, primary elections will be underway: "Super Tuesday" is scheduled for March 5<sup>7</sup> and by March 25, some twenty-five States will have already voted. Against this backdrop, the mediatic coverage risks working against Trump. In addition, a second defamation trial brought by E. Jean Carroll is scheduled for January 15 and for January 29 is scheduled the Trump Organization trial. Unsurprisingly, the former President has already raised criticism of a scheduling he called an «interference in elections» and a violation of the First Amendment on freedom of expression (Gregorian and Reiss, 2023). It is a largely predictable reaction, just like predictable were the accompanying attacks on the «Radical Left Democrats». The question is to what extent this strategy is sustainable in the long term. Finally, the Damocles sword of ongoing investigations remains. While it seems unlikely that the Capitol riots investigation could end in an indictment, the Georgia vote investigation seems much riskier, even leading – according to some press sources – to the indictment in the first half of August (Hillyard, Gile and Gregorian, 2023). For Trump and the Republicans, this would be another critical problem, given the federal nature of the crime and its high symbolic value, explicitly involving the former president's willingness to dent the very roots of political competition.

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<sup>7</sup> "Super Tuesday" is the day in February or March when the greatest number of states hold primary elections and caucuses. Super Tuesday allocates about a third of the delegates to the Democratic and Republican conventions. In Super Tuesday 2024, votes are scheduled in Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Utah and Vermont. On the same day, the Democratic Party will also hold its primaries also in Virginia and the Republican Party also in Alaska.

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**“If it exists, we will find it”: Turkey and the exploitation of gas in the Black Sea basin**

In mid-June, Canadian company Trillion Energy announced it had successfully spudded the Alapli-2 well at the South Akcakoca Sub-Basin (SASB) offshore field, in shallow water in the western part of Turkey's Black Sea exclusive economic zone. (Trillion 2023). The exploration activity on the well twins the Alapli-1 well has not yet been put into production despite the discovery of marketable volumes of gas. More generally, it is part of a multiple drilling program that the Canadian company launched in joint venture with the state-owned company Turkish Petroleum Company (Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı, TPAO) in the second half of 2022, with a view to relaunching production from one of the traditional national extraction sites. A site which, since 2007 and together with the fields in Thrace, ensured the country a limited and decreasing annual gas production. Alapli-2, which according to the company's CEO could be put into production within 45 days (ibidem), is therefore the sixth out of ten wells that Trillion plans to drill and put into production by 2024 - when the company plans to extend the exploration activities also in the areas adjacent to the current production sites. Before Alapli-2, and starting from September 2022, the Canadian company had relaunched production in five other production sites, which together could contain gas reserves of around 3.12 billion cubic meters (Trillion n.d.) and allow the production of around one billion cubic meters of gas per year (Bcm/y), equal to approximately 2% of total national consumption in 2021 (BP 2022: 31).

Beyond the relatively limited impact that the increase in production from SASB may have on Turkey's annual consumption, the relaunch of activities at the field over the last three years is symptomatic of two trends characterizing the Turkish gas market. On the one hand, it testifies to the increased profitability of investments with a limited time-to-market, made more attractive by the rise in gas prices caused by the Ukrainian crisis. It is no coincidence that, thanks to the increase in production and prices, the company recorded a 559% increase in revenues in the first quarter of 2023 compared to the same period in 2022 (Trillion 2023b).

Secondly, the relaunch of SASB activities testifies to the broader attempt of Turkish national authorities to exploit the extractive potential of the Black Sea basin, with a view to reducing - ideally even eliminating it - the dependence on external gas supplies and, at the same time, benefiting in terms of bargaining power vis-à-vis suppliers. The first and significant successes of such an attempt provided an incentive for Trillion's decision to invest in new exploration activities and to request the expansion of the licensed area (Trillion 2021). As a matter of fact, the company's decision to relaunch activities in the Turkish offshore followed the most important discovery of hydrocarbon reserves recorded in the history of Turkey - the offshore Sakarya field, located a hundred miles north of SASB.

Sakarya is undoubtedly the flagship project of the Turkish extractive strategy in the Black Sea, whose successes it shows under three priority perspectives. First, the discovery of the field has disproved the belief, rooted among both sector operators and analysts, that the country was substantially devoid of hydrocarbon reserves. And that, in any case, due to the high geological complexity of the basin (Simmons et al. 2018), the off-shore exploration and (potential) extraction activities entailed costs and risks considered too high to be economically profitable. Secondly, the search for off-shore deposits of marketable gas marked the success of an energy strategy following an autarkic logic, revolving around the involvement and valorization of national assets (Karbuž 2023). In fact, the exploration activities at the deposit, located in ultra-deep waters, were conducted by the national energy company TPAO, which had never before undertaken activities that required such an advanced technical know-how. Last but not least, the Black Sea gamble was won by the Turkish authorities also in relation to the development of the field. Although the desire to put the field into

production by 2023 (i.e., in the centenary of the Republic) required the involvement of international companies as a partial correction of the above-mentioned autarkic principle,<sup>1</sup> the 32 months elapsing between the discovery of the field and the start of production and transport of gas to the terminals on the coast - inaugurated last April in the presence of President Tayyip Erdogan and live on television (DS 2023) - represent almost a record, all the more so for a project about which there were widespread international perplexities.

The motto "if there is, we will find it" (Dönmez 2019) guided the strategy and prospecting activities in search of marketable gas deposits in the Black Sea seabed. Four years after the start of TPAO drilling, the bet has been won. Over the next four years, the gas resources extracted from the Black Sea south-western basin may well be ensuring 15 Gcm/y of gas, satisfying a share of the country's annual consumption equal to approximately 25%.

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<sup>1</sup> In October 2021, an Engineering, Procurement, Construction and Installation contract was awarded to a consortium formed by the companies Subsea7 and Schlumberger, while a month later Saipem was awarded the construction of an underwater pipeline between the field and the onshore facilities (OT 2023).



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## **The rise of “post-organizational” violent extremism**

### **Abstract**

In recent years, in the West, various forms of violent extremism have shown an increasingly weak, if not completely absent, organizational dimension. In examining this trend, some scholars and experts have begun to speak of “post-organizational” violent extremism. This evolution can have a salient impact on both the beliefs and behaviors of violent extremists, including genuine terrorists. On the one hand, it favors processes of personal appropriation, rearticulation and hybridization of ideological orientations and extremist narratives. On the other hand, it foregrounds the activity of individuals and independent cells. Overall, “post-organizational” violent extremism poses insidious new challenges.

### **“Post-organizational” violent extremism**

In recent years, in the West, various forms of violent extremism have shown an increasingly weak and elusive organizational dimension (e.g. Mulhall 2020; Davey et al. 2021): In particular, today, individual violent extremists, including genuine terrorists, are often part of a highly decentralized network or simply do not refer to any organization.

If violent anarchist extremism has always tended to favor decentralization for obvious ideological reasons (see, for example, Marone 2015), recently other forms of violent extremism have also promoted this type of organizational structure. Global jihadism, especially following the repression suffered after the attacks of September 11, 2001, has attached great importance to the option of “personal *jihad*”, advocated by influential ideologues such as Syrian Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri (among others, Robinson 2020, chapter 4; see also Marone 2022a). A similar path has been taken by significant sectors of violent right-wing extremism at transnational level, as evidenced by the spread of the concept of “*Leaderless resistance*”, which became popular in the United States already in the early 1980s (Kaplan 1997).

This organizational evolution can have a major impact on both the beliefs and behaviors of violent extremists and terrorists.

### **The impact on violent extremist beliefs**

One of the most important tasks of an organization that promotes a violent extremist cause, including a terrorist organization, is to shape and articulate or at least to approve and “certify” the ideological orientation of its members and to control its correct observance and promotion.

On the contrary, in a context of “post-organizational” violent extremism, each individual can potentially appropriate a violent extremist ideology or narrative and can freely transform it and adapt it to his/her needs and purposes (among others, see Gartenstein-Ross et al. 2023); scholars and experts have proposed several names to describe this recent phenomenon, including those of “mixed”, “fused”, “salad bar”, “hybrid”, “à la carte”, “*pick'n'mix*” violent extremism (see, for example, Tiflati 2022). Radical conspiracy narratives can also play a central role in these efforts (see Marone 2022b).

Furthermore, this phenomenon of erosion of rigidly established ideologies tends to increase the influence of strictly personal motivations of the individual (for example, feelings of frustration, revenge, etc.), in addition to (or even in substitution of) collective political/ideological reasons.

Moreover, it can favor an apparently paradoxical process of convergence or fusion between different extremist ideologies (for example, Koehler 2021; Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman 2022;

Meleagrou-Hitchens and Ayad 2023). For example, in recent years, several scholars and experts have highlighted the emergence of thematic and aesthetic convergences between fringes of violent right-wing extremism and jihadism (for example, Argentino et al. 2023).

### The impact on violent extremist behavior

Other essential tasks for a violent extremist, or even terrorist, organisation are, of course, to select and recruit its members (see, for example, Hegghammer 2013) and to coordinate their activity (e.g. McCormick and Owen 2000); to establish internal rules; to assign roles and tasks to each individual (in particular, Shapiro 2013) in the light of the political strategy to be pursued.

In a context of “post-organizational” violent extremism, each individual can instead act alone, in the absence of roles and rules. Under such conditions, the single violent extremist or, at most, the small independent cell tend to be typically less dangerous, because they may lack the operational skills and technical skills (e.g., in relation to the construction and use of a weapon) (e.g., Marone 2021), appropriate coordination, learning skills (e.g., Ranstorp and Normark 2015) and adaptability (e.g. see Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones 2008) necessary to plan and carry out acts of violence or at least large-scale acts of violence. At the same time, these actors, not being part of organizations, are evidently more difficult to detect and stop (for example, Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001).

### Conclusions

The accentuation of a “post-organizational” dimension is one of the most relevant trends of violent extremism and terrorism in our time. This evolution poses new insidious challenges, all the more so in a context in which many responses to the threat of violent extremism and terrorism designed by States and other relevant actors (such as large technology companies) still appear to be based on a traditional “organizational” logic; one can consider, for example, the practice of formally banning individual terrorist organizations by States or Supranational organizations (Davey et al. 2021; cf. Phillips 2021). The rise of “post-organizational” violent extremism therefore requires reshaping measures and activities to deal with this sort of threat.

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## Acronyms list

\$/b: dollars per barrel  
APSA: African Peace and Security Architecture  
ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations  
AU: African Union  
Bcm/y: Billion cubic meters per year  
CMP: Coordinated Maritime Presences  
DPRK: Democratic People's Republic of Korea  
EIA: U.S. Energy Information Administration  
EU: European Union  
FCAS: Future Combat Air Systems  
FFC: Forces of Freedom and Change  
FFC-DB: Forces of Freedom and Change-Democratic Block  
FoA: Framework of Agreement  
GRU: *Glavnoe razvedyvatel'noe upravlenie* [Main Intelligence Directorate]  
GSOMIA: General Security of Military Information Agreement  
Kb/g: Thousands of barrels per day  
KP: Kosovo Police  
ICBM: Intercontinental Ballistic Missile  
IAEA: International Agency for Atomic Energy  
IEA: International Energy Agency  
IGAD: Intergovernmental Authority on Development  
IMF: International Monetary Fund  
IPMDA: Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness  
IRA: Inflation Reduction Act  
IS: Islamic State  
LNA: Libyan National Army  
Mb/g: Millions of barrels per day  
MGCS: Main Ground Combat System  
MSA: Maritime Situational Awareness  
NARA: National Archives and Records Administration  
NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization  
NCP: National Congress Party  
NFU: No First Use  
NIF: National Islamic Front  
NISS: National Intelligence and Security Service  
NSS: National Security Strategy  
OPEC: Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries  
PAC: Political Action Committee  
PAPS: Political Affairs, Peace & Security  
PLA: People's Liberation Army  
PRC: People's Republic of China  
PSC: Peace and Security Council  
QUAD: Quadrilateral Security Dialogue  
ROSU: Regional Operations Support Unit of Kosovo Police  
RSF: Rapid Support Forces  
SAF: Sudanese Armed Forces  
SACEUR: Supreme Allied Commander Europe  
SASB: South Akcakoca Sub-Basin  
SC-22: 2022 Strategic Concept  
TNW: Tactical Nuclear Weapon  
TPAO: Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı (Società Petrolifera di Turchia)  
TSC: Transitional Sovereignty Council  
UN: United Nations  
UNSC: United Nations Security Council  
WTO: World Trade Organization







## **DEFENSE RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS INSTITUTE**

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

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- ensure participation in examination boards;
- supervise the reception and orientation of students through interviews and supplementary activities.

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- Sahel, Gulf of Guinea, sub-Saharan Africa and Horn of Africa;
- China;
- Southern and Eastern Asia and Pacific;
- Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa;
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- Euro/Atlantic (USA-NATO-Partners);
- Energy policies: interests, challenges and opportunities;
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The heart of the “Osservatorio Strategico” consists of the scripts regarding the individual areas, divided into critical analyses and forecasts.





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