

# GEOSTRATEGIC PULSE

*Motto: "Opinions are free, but not mandatory" I.L. Caragiale*

"The EU is now facing the greatest geopolitical storm of the 21st century.

We ought to finally put the "Three Musketeer Principle" into practice, as we all share a common destiny which entails an authentic, rather than merely declarative or ideologically conditioned, form of solidarity"

"The only viable scenario for the future of the European project cannot be established without solidarity and cohesion"

"The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that the European Union is able to respond in such moments through solidarity."

**Diplomacy in times of Pandemic and beyond**

The role of NATO in arresting the ripple effect of ethnic conflicts. Unintended consequences of the Great Powers' influence in the Balkans and lessons learned from the previous Balkan Wars applicable today"

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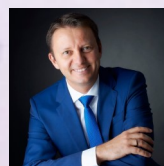
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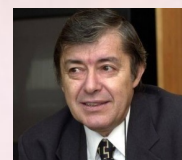


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**Motto: "Opinions are free, but not mandatory" - I.L.Caragiale**

**EDITORIAL**



**Rivalry or Cooperation?**

**Constantin IACOBIȚĂ**

Both the USA and the European Union have been aware of, and have been considering for years in their strategic approaches Asia's rise as the new "heavyweight" of the global economy and business. The EU has started to pay extra attention to Asia and made a priority out of intensifying cooperation in the fields of trade and investments with the region as a whole and with its most important regional actor – China – in particular.

However, things changed in 2019, when the EU labelled China as a "systemic rival".

Commentators and expert analysts attribute this to the following:

- The sudden and deep change in the relationship between the USA and China after Donald Trump became president, and implicitly the pressure that Washington has put on Brussels and other European capitals to join it, in what risks of becoming an economic confrontation where all parties stand to lose.
- The fact that the Europeans have included on their dialogue agenda with the Chinese political matters, besides trade and investment.
- A mix between the first two.

Apparently, because of the US pressure, the Europeans have started to limit Chinese investments in key development sectors; some capitals invoked security issues, while others did not provide any explanations.

This change of approach, where an otherwise normal economic competition gets new meanings, carries risks and asks of the decision-makers from the European capitals not to overlook some relevant aspects and elements.

Firstly, and most importantly, we are referring to the economic interdependency between Europe and Asia. Asia represents the second market for direct investments that come from the EU. On the other hand, we must highlight the fact that for the past years China contributed to the global economic growth more than any other country (with almost 50%, according to experts in the field).

Secondly, we must take into account the political component of the US change of approach and strategy in its relationship with China. The way this change has occurred proves that it can be temporary and can be related to the electoral cycle in the USA. Donald Trump announced a trade war with China during the presidential campaign five years ago. During his first four years of presidency, the USA and China ended up with a limited and carefully controlled confrontation. At the convention dedicated to his re-nomination as the Republican candidate for presidency, Donald Trump promised (23.08.2020) he would be "tougher" on China because of its trade policies. In addition, we should not forget that Donald Trump kept quiet during the protests in Hong Kong (Beijing's policies were denounced by the US President's advisors).

In conclusion, just as the ongoing trade negotiations process proves it, first and foremost, the US President is interested in increasing his country's exports to China.

As far as the EU is concerned, to the above we can add the following:

- Brexit brings to the international stage another player willing to make a stand in the global competition - both economically and politically - Great Britain.
- Overcoming the complex crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic requires, in its turn, multilateralism and international cooperation, not rivalry and, possibly, confrontation.

## INTERNATIONAL SITUATION

# Diplomacy in Times of Pandemic and Beyond

**Dr. Ion I. JINGA**

There is no single definition for diplomacy. Sir Henry Wotton, the envoy of King James VI of England to Venice, confessed in 1604: *“An ambassador is an honest gentleman sent to lie abroad for the good of his country”*. For Lord Palmerston in 1848, the mission of diplomacy was reflected by the axiom: *“We have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow”*. At the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, David Lloyd George remarked that: *“Diplomats were invented simply to waste time”*. Sir Winston Churchill reportedly said: *“Diplomacy is the Art of telling people to go to hell in such a way that they ask for directions”*, whereas for Henry Kissinger *“Diplomacy is the art of restraining power”*.



After 28 years in the Romanian diplomatic service, I reached to the conclusion that diplomats are made, not born. No one is born with the ability to practice international diplomacy, which requires to understand foreign societies, influence governments, conduct negotiations, anticipate threats and take advantage of opportunities. These skills have to be acquired.

Diplomacy is learned both from books and practice. Professional diplomatic services require proper training, career development, tools, resources and authority necessary to get the job done.

Good diplomats have more to do with sacrifice and refrain, than with champagne and caviar. They must show strong commitment to their country's interests, ability to remain calm and composed in stressful situations, capacity to absorb and process large amounts of information from different sources, communication skills, impeccable reputation and high integrity. Good diplomats do not confuse information with analyses, and analyses with judgements which come from knowledge and experience.

Good diplomats must be able to convince other people to embrace their ideas, because more powerful than the blood and money is the power of ideas. As President John F. Kennedy once said: *“A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on”*. Therefore, diplomats' training and professional development is not a luxury, but a necessity.

The arrival of COVID-19 suddenly ended the diplomatic lifestyle that has existed for decades. Diplomacy at the United Nations and elsewhere has moved to phones, emails and virtual meetings. Teleconferences and secure video have become the norm, making more difficult to engage in delicate negotiations. A global pandemic is not the best time for diplomacy and some fear that the virus crisis could fuel diplomatic atrophy, as the quarantine measures have prompted questions about the very nature of this profession.

If there is a global centre of diplomacy, it is the UN headquarters in New York. Every year it hosts thousands of meetings, not to speak about the informal diplomacy which takes place over coffee, working lunches, dinners and receptions. As Secretary General Antonio Guterres remarked in an interview in 2017: *“The UN must, first of all, be an instrument for a surge in diplomacy for peace”*. But this year important summits and international conferences have been cancelled or postponed. In September, the High Level Week of the General Assembly annual session, the celebration of the UN 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary or the Biodiversity Summit will most probably take place in virtual formats.

While the current transition to digital diplomacy may bring a sense of modernity to our profession, the intimacy in diplomatic negotiations risks to be lost. Personal chemistry between diplomats is not to be underestimated and anyone who has spent time in negotiations can confirm the added value a discreet chat may have for their outcome. Even more important, because international affairs are influenced by leaders' personalities and their relationships, changes that reduce the scope of their personal interaction can have consequences.

No one knows yet when the crisis will end, but there is no doubt that it will affect all of us. The future will rely more and more on connectivity, fluid networks and collaboration. Understanding how best to use networking is increasingly

important for countries and international organizations. As diplomats adapt to a world of virtual meetings, there is little doubt that the struggle between traditional and modern diplomacy will end with the victory of the latter. Four months of pandemic have advanced the digitalisation as during four years in normal times, and thanks to the internet we live in the age where the audience is always in the same room with us.

Information technology is already part of diplomacy and the ability to use social networks, along with having a strong market approach, will be mandatory attributes of diplomats who, in the clash between a growing international interdependence and tendencies of isolationism, may become promoters of a new concept of globalization. Despite technological advance and the Tweeter and Facebook revolutions, diplomacy will remain a center piece in listening and understanding the position of various parties.

Speaking on 24 April about the virtues of multilateralism and diplomacy in this hectic time,

the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres remarked: *“This is the biggest international challenge since the Second World War... But multilateralism is not only a matter of confronting shared threats, it is about seizing common opportunities. We now have the opportunity to build back better than in the past, aiming at inclusive and sustainable societies”*

Indeed, as every cloud has a silver lining, changes in response to global crisis can breed new norms. At the UN, complex working methods have been created over time and, once established, they are virtually impossible to change. The Coronavirus crisis may be the catalyst to update rules in multilateral diplomacy. Quoting again JFK, whose imaginative diplomacy once saved the world: *“Change is the Law of life, and those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future”*.

**Note: Opinions expressed in this article do not bind the official position of the author.**



Source: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/digital-diplomacy-states-go-online/EPA-EFE> | Ian Langsdon/Pool

## **Nicu Popescu, director of the “Wider Europe” programme: “It is important not to look only at the short - term effects of the propaganda. The sustainability of these measures is important as well.”**

### **Nicu POPESCU**

The USA’s perceived step back from its role as a global leader, along with the increasing American-Chinese rivalry, Russia’s revenge, the consequences of Brexit etc. amplify the uncertainties and complexity of an international environment currently dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, many European countries, as well as the EU as a whole are facing security problems caused by the propaganda and manipulation policies and tactics used against them by certain powers, such as Russia.

Nicu Popescu, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova and director of the “Wider Europe” programme at the European Council on Foreign Affairs analysed the challenges posed by the promotion and spread of propaganda during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their effects on security at a geopolitical level, in an interview offered to *Geostrategic Pulse Magazine*.



### **Geostrategic Pulse: How does Russia see/perceive Europe and the Western institutions?**

**Nicu Popescu:** Europe is seen as a region in decline. The EU is seen as an institution in crisis. NATO is still perceived as a threat, while the crisis in the transatlantic relationship is connected to the Trump administration and is perceived as temporary, for now. From Russia’s point of view,

the Western institutions remain solid and dangerous enough, geopolitically speaking, even if they are going through a series of crises.

Russia’s involvement in European affairs by means of hybrid and covert tactics are aimed – among other things – at eroding the public trust in those who govern them. Do you believe that Europe and the USA are similar targets to Russia?

Most certainly. Although Russia’s practices vis-à-vis Europe are more exacerbated and aggressive than those vis-à-vis the US. Obviously, we have witnessed unprecedented attacks such as the attempt in Great Britain to poison Skripal with what is, practically, a chemical weapon. Besides, most EU countries are reluctant to really respond or retaliate bilaterally against these hostile tactics implemented by Russia, as they are small countries. In the past years we have seen many incidents where Moscow has tried to influence domestic policies, including in countries that Russia used to have pretty good relations with. I am referring to countries such as Greece, Spain or Austria.

**What can you tell us about the Russian strategies and tactics targeting European countries in areas/fields such as: politics, media, economy, culture, education, information, cyber-attacks, organised crime etc?**

Russia’s interest is to weaken both the European Union and the transatlantic partnership. This objective is pursued on several levels. Attempts are made to take advantage of the splits between the countries in the EU and those between the EU and the US, as well as to deepen divisions within NATO members. Here it targets partnerships with all kinds of political forces – far-right and far-left political parties, separatist forces, as well as traditional parties. However, Russia has been employing such tactics for a long time – for over a decade. And I cannot say that they have been successful from Russia’s perspective. Russia’s behaviour has actually strengthened the unity of position towards Russia within EU. Sanctions were introduced with respect to the war in Ukraine. Very recently, and answering a call from Germany, the

EU decided for the first time to impose sanctions against Russia because of Russian cyber-attacks against the Bundestag in 2015. Even a few months ago, it was unimaginable that Germany would be the first country to ask for and obtain the introduction of the first sanctions in the history of the EU related to cyber-attacks. For the past decade, the EU has invested significantly and with success both in the economic and energy domains with a view to reduce its energy dependency on Russia. The situation is far better than it was in the 2000s. And several countries, including France, the Netherlands and Poland, changed their cyber-security doctrines in order to adopt tougher policies towards states like Russia. After 2015 the European defence budgets were increased, even though in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic there is a risk that they will be reduced again.

**What were the stakes of promoting and spreading the propaganda in order alter the power balance between Washington-Moscow and Beijing? Who are the main winners and losers in this informational battle?**

During the first weeks of the pandemic, especially in March, it became obvious that the US and the EU were somehow confused, not least on the diplomatic front, while China invested a lot in promoting its own image. I am referring to the so called “mask diplomacy”. However, things evened out somehow, since then. After China made several positioning errors and caused a number of diplomatic incidents with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, including in France and Sweden, for the past few months we have been hearing a lot about the so-called “wolf warrior diplomacy”. This term comes from a very popular Chinese action movie, which depicts a rougher Chinese diplomacy.

As the pandemic morphs into an economic crisis, it is absolutely obvious that neither China, nor Russia have and are willing to invest tens of billions of dollars to help tens of fragile states overcome the economic crisis. So, the importance of international players such as the EU, the USA, the IMF, the World Bank and other international institutions, which have the resources and are willing to help fragile states such as the Republic of Moldova, North Macedonia or Lebanon, increases once more. I believe that their ability to link their assistance with political conditions will increase once again. It is important not to look only at the short-term effects of the propaganda. The sustainability of these measures is important as

well. And in this case, the West remains even more important since it has the necessary resources to operate and invest resources in the long-term.

**To what extent does finding “scape goats” in the informational war focused on propaganda and disinformation have relevant implications on a geopolitical level, with consequences on state and non-state actors included?**

This informational guerrilla war has effects on both the public opinion and on the diplomatic interactions. However, it is important that we place them in a wider context, and try to figure out both their immediate and long-term impact. There are many situations where apparent tactical informational victories can easily turn into strategic failures, if we see them on a longer term. The COVID-19 crisis offered us such an example. Some countries could provide medical aid or promote all kinds of COVID-19 conspiracy theories, however, when these actions become too aggressive, if self-promotion becomes indecent, counter reactions with long-term effects occur.

**After blaming China for the way it presented to the international community the internal situation regarding the spread of the Coronavirus, is the USA the main global information handler?**

No. No single country has ever had that role. Nor does it exist today, anywhere.



Source: <https://www.bursa.ro/new-york-times-serviciile-secrete-ruse-acuzate-de-propaganda-in-privinta-covid-83471049>

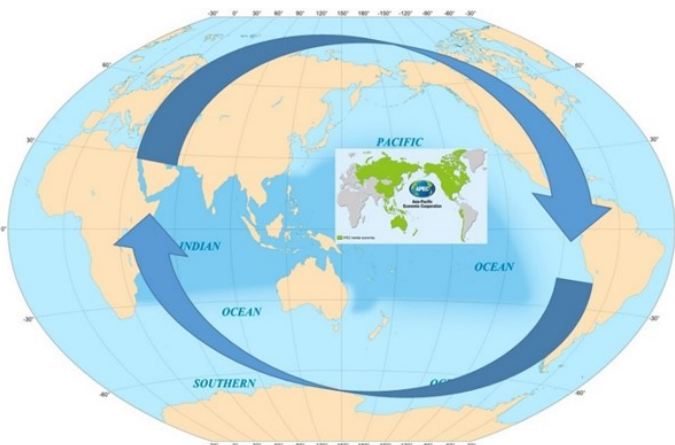
# Confluences and Divergences of Some Major Actors' Interests in the Indo-Pacific

Iulia Monica OEHLER-ȘINCAI

## Axioms of a permanently changing world[1]

The term *Indo-Pacific*, coined in the 1920s by one of the “fathers of geopolitics”, Karl Haushofer (from the perspective of the relevance of thalassocracy in this region), had been forgotten for a long time. Until recently, the conventional name of *Asia-Pacific* was the dominant one. In 2007, however, the old concept of *Indo-Pacific* was reactivated, out of a myriad of motivations not only of an economic nature, but especially geostrategic. In order to reflect this change one needs to resort to a brief review of major changes in international relations since the end of the Cold War[2] and especially after 2000, at the height of globalization, despite growing protectionist trends from 2016-2017.

For several decades, we have witnessed deep, rapid and often unexpected transformations in international relations. Emerging economies have gradually become the engine of the world economy, and in terms of international relations, they have reconfigured the balance of power, so that the triad made up of the United States, the European Union and Japan was joined by the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), but also other countries, such as Indonesia and Turkey, with ambitious foreign policy goals.



Of the developing countries, only three exceed at present the status of regional leaders: **China, India and Russia**. In literature, India and Russia are not recognized as global leaders, but several arguments entitle us to consider them so: (1) in 2019, they occupied in the ranking of countries

worldwide according to their nominal GDP, the 5<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> positions[3], respectively (China, second only to the United States), their strengths in terms of resources and capacity of the knowledge economy being indisputable; (2) geopolitically, both are noteworthy, Russia more than India, geopolitical determinants having an even more important role in shaping international relations than economic ones, especially in the context of the *New Great East-West Divide*[4], after the takeover of Crimea by Russia; (3) exceeding their sphere of regional influence is obvious, the intense participation in the trade, investment, capital flows being an undeniable proof of their internationality; (4) their activity in international organizations, correlated to the fact that they know how to defend their national interest, even when they have to say *no* to a great power, is a sign of their solid international position.

China, India and Russia are all three in the Asia-Pacific region, an area that is configured as an *axis mundi*, bringing together an overwhelming share of the world's population, gross world product, international trade and investment.

Between 2011 and 2017, the firm “US pivot” to this region was evident (through the initiatives taken by the former President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton). Instead, since 2017, during President Donald Trump's term, radical changes in the US foreign policy have marked a completely opposite direction, with the withdrawal from a series of international agreements and an indisputable anti-globalization trend, culminating in the US-China trade war, but also redefinitions of US priorities at the confluence of the two oceans, the Pacific and Indian.

## Strategic relevance of the Indo-Pacific

The concept of the *Indo-Pacific*, accompanied by attributes such as “free and open” gained true international recognition and spread only after the adoption of the US National Security Strategy (NSS)[5] in December 2017 and the reiteration of this term on any occasion by US representatives, at international meetings.

Although this notion has been reactivated since 2007 (Box 1), the attention of the international community has only been really captured by the



**Box 1: Reactivation of the Indo-Pacific concept starting with 2007**

The Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was the first to mention in the Indian Parliament the notion of the “confluence” of the two oceans, from the perspective of strengthening cooperation between Japan and India. In 2007, Japan also launched the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad” or G4), having as participants the United States, Japan, India and Australia, as a reaction to China’s economic and military rise. In August 2016, Shinzo Abe presented the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) at the TICAD[8] VI conference in Nairobi. This time not to “court” India, but to boost cooperation with the African countries. The Australian government, in turn, defined the new power relations in the Indo-Pacific in its “Defense White Paper” of 2013, followed by the “Foreign Policy White Paper” in 2017.

new connotations attributed to the concept of the *Indo-Pacific* by Donald Trump.

In the NSS, China and Russia are described as *revisionist powers*, eroding “American security and prosperity”, while India is placed in the center of the region *stretching from the west coast of India to the west coast of the United States, the most populated and dynamic part of the world*. It is a kind of a compensation for India’s unfulfilled desire to join the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum.[6] The NSS mentions *the transformation of India into a global power and strategic and defense partner for the US, with which it intends to intensify the US-Japan-Australia-India cooperation framework*, while supporting India’s cooperation relations in the region. It is a redefinition of the Indo-Pacific relations, in an attempt to counter China’s increasingly obvious role (considered an actor as “harmful” as Russia) and to attract other major players, such as India.

More recently, in the “Strategic Approach to China” (May 2020),[7] the United States once again highlighted the many challenges posed by China, *mainly in terms of economic relations, values and security*.

How correct and fair are the allegations against China remains to be analyzed on another occasion. It is clear that the already established powers are not willing to share their position as leaders with other states, even if they have dominated the world economy in the past.[9]

In his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue (Singapore) in June 2018, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi presented his own vision of the Indo-Pacific, “from the shores of Africa to the Americas,” extending even further the space defined by President Trump:

(1)the region is free, open and inclusive (encouraging the idea of a region of cooperation, not confrontation and rivalry);

(2)Southeast Asia is the center of this region;

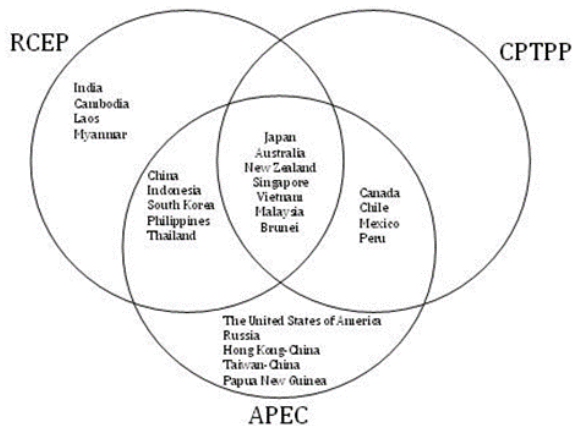
(3)there is a need for common rules to be applied, multilateralism and regionalism, respect for the rule of law; (

(4)the freedom of navigation must be ensured, so that the sea lines are “paths to prosperity and corridors of peace” (indirect reference to territorial disputes in the South China Sea);

(5)protectionism must be avoided, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) being a concrete example of joint efforts to liberalize trade and investment; (6) beyond the requirement to increase connectivity through infrastructure development, there is a need especially for trust between regional and global actors, all initiatives in this regard (hence also the Chinese New Silk Road initiative, BRI) must respect “sovereignty and territorial integrity, the principle of consultations, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability”.

The debt burden must be avoided (also a reference to the BRI, which is wrongfully labeled a “debt trap”), and India is ready to cooperate with all actors, already contributing to the capital of the newly established banks (the New Development Bank launched by the BRICS countries - Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa - and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank initiated by China).

Including in this extended area not only the countries of Asia-Pacific, but also the states of the American continent with access to the Pacific Ocean and the African countries bordering the Indian Ocean, results a group of over 80 actors, of which, however, the core consists of 25 (participants in the APEC Asia-Pacific Cooperation Forum, RCEP Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, synonymous with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ASEAN[10] plus 6 and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership CPTPP) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: “Centre” of the Indo-Pacific**

Note: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) includes in the region Asia-Pacific 53 member countries (also the United Kingdom, France, Netherlands and Turkey) and nine associate members. Among these, the most relevant are the participants at APEC, RCEP and CPTPP. (Source: Australian Government (2017), “Foreign Policy White Paper”, updated version.)

### Increasing the European Union’s presence in the Indo-Pacific

In the context revealing the influence in the Indo-Pacific as an indisputable barometer in terms of the strength of a country or a group of states, since 2016 (when the *EU Global Strategy* was adopted), one can remark the sustained efforts of the European Union towards acquiring a more relevant role in the region. But all this must be interpreted in the framework of increasingly obvious intra-EU tensions, associated with the intensification of xenophobia, nationalism and populism amid the migration crisis of 2015-2016, whose reverberations will not disappear in the near future but will probably intensify. Pursuing an expanded role should also be interpreted taking into account the priorities of the new “geopolitical” Commission headed by Ursula von der Leyen, guided by the objectives of increasing the EU’s role and influence in the world.

One should not omit the three countries that are not part of Asia-Pacific, but which have a major influence in the region from a historical perspective: Great Britain, France and the Netherlands, members of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia-Pacific (UNESCAP). The three have a history marked by the presence in Asia of the: British East India Company (1600-1857), the Dutch East India Company (1602-1799) and the French East India Company (1664-1769), but also by the multiple forms of manifestation of colonialism until 1942-1944. To these should be

added Germany, with a strong economic presence in the region.

In contrast to Germany, the three, Britain, France and, to a lesser extent, the Netherlands have reactivated their ambitions to become global powers again. Of these, the United Kingdom in particular has begun to redefine its strategic alliances with countries and groups of countries, with a view to regaining a leading role on the global stage. From the Brexit perspective, the British government had already set an ambitious vision for the Kingdom's global mission, and in this context, the reactivation of partnerships with Commonwealth[11] countries (especially India) is evident.

The EU Global Strategy of 2016 was followed by the participation of the President of the European Council in the ASEAN summits starting with 2017, the completion of negotiations for the “new generation” free trade agreements with Singapore, Vietnam and Japan and the adoption in September 2018 of a Strategy for connecting Europe and Asia.

Given the close economic relations,[12] but also the existing tensions with the US and China, the cooperation of the Indo-Pacific countries with the EU is seen in favorable terms. The EU negotiations for trade agreements with countries such as Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand continue, and the resumption of negotiations with the whole group of ASEAN countries is not ruled out in the near future.

Interregional cooperation is attractive, especially since prominent players in the Indo-Pacific are looking for partners to counterbalance China’s rise, but also to counter the high number of unknown elements in the US relationship, generated by the renewed “America First” strategy.

Although most countries in the region treasure a strong partnership with the United States in order to have a more favorable negotiating position with China, however they do not agree with many elements of the “America First” strategy. The exacerbation of unilateralism and nationalism, the withdrawal of a number of international agreements, the emphasis on protectionism and the restriction of immigration are just a few elements that can define the strategy reintroduced by President Donald Trump. At the same time, cooperation with China cannot be ruled out. India itself, which refuses to participate in the BRI, is a member of the Asian Bank for Infrastructure Investments and supports a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. For the ASEAN countries, the deep

transformations the Chinese economy is going through (increasing domestic production costs, accompanied by the relocation of production capacity abroad, the transition to a development model less dependent on exports and investment and more focused on domestic consumption) generates a number of opportunities.

It is important to note that the EU countries are committed to expanding and deepening their cooperation relations with ASEAN on the basis of “mutual respect, common interests and values shared by both parties”. At the same time, the EU relies on a credible international order based on clear rules, which is essential, not only in the field of international trade, but also in regional security and climate change.

Therefore, with the US withdrawing from international agreements (such as the Paris arrangement on climate change, but also the Nuclear Agreement with Iran, the INF Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and many others), the EU can take the lead in the Indo-Pacific where the US “abdicated”.<sup>[13]</sup>

Nevertheless, the EU’s too rigid stance on the “Asian path to regional integration”, by imposing too high standards, rejected by most Asian partners, but also the massive subsidization of some sectors of activity (such as agriculture), generate sometimes a hostile attitude from them. This reaction is reflected in practice, inter alia, by abandoning negotiations for an EU-ASEAN free trade agreement and the absence of an EU-ASEAN strategic partnership, while ASEAN has already entered into strategic partnerships with Australia, New Zealand, China, India, Japan, South Korea, but also with the US and Russia.

The trajectory of the EU is similar to that of Japan, for example. Analyzing Japan’s foreign policy strategy “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”, recent studies show that Japan has not only emphasized the importance of complying with the rules of the multilateral system, including the rule of law and freedom of navigation (regulatory issues), but it has also stepped up its efforts to provide countries in the region with concrete alternatives to China’s proposed development projects.

In fact, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations is “wooed” by all the actors in the Indo-Pacific, being attractive from the perspective of cooperation with China, which will be addressed in a separate section.

It is also interesting to point to the increase of the

EU’s presence in the Indo-Pacific, directly and indirectly, amid the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, the “Europe Team” has mobilized over EUR 800 million to fight the pandemic in the ASEAN countries. The virtual meeting of EU and ASEAN foreign ministers on 20 March 2020 and the stated objectives are evidences in this regard.

The EU’s relations with countries and groups of states in the region can be analyzed from several perspectives, beyond trade and investment flows with actors in the Indo-Pacific. In this context, we consider essential: (1) the directions of action of the EU expressed by its institutions in strategies and action plans related to this space; (2) the priorities of bilateral strategic partnerships; and (3) the EU’s position in international and regional organizations and at summits (such as the Asia-Europe Meeting and the EU-ASEAN). In the following sections we will briefly address two of these.

### **Priorities of some bilateral partnerships**

With the exception of Brazil, all other EU strategic partners are from the extended Indo-Pacific (China, India, Japan, Russia, South Korea, but also the US, Canada, Mexico and South Africa).

With regard to relations with China, the Community institutions now consider that threats and challenges prevail in the bilateral relationship, not opportunities. China is described in the Joint Communication “EU-China - A Strategic Outlook” of March 2019 as “an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance”. Of the ten concrete actions proposed by the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Security and Foreign Policy, the following are noteworthy: subsidies and forced technology transfers, public procurement, 5G security (sector where the Chinese company Huawei is the undisputed leader) and monitoring foreign investment in assets, infrastructure and critical technologies.

Bilateral tensions have gradually intensified, with current relations contrasting with the situation in 2015, when the EU and China jointly launched the *Connectivity Platform*, which would create the conditions for highlighting the complementarities between the Investment Plan proposed by the European Commission in November 2014 (the “Juncker Plan”) and the Chinese Silk Roads on land and at sea (the BRI, announced in 2013).

Although there is no confrontation of the same intensity with that between the US and China

between the two strategic partners, the EU's demands on China in terms of reciprocity and a level playing field (synonymous with the elimination of unfair competition practices) are increasingly strong. All that remains to be done is to obtain a *common position* of the member states on issues of common interest (whether it is the position on territorial disputes in the South China Sea, human rights or the New Silk Roads), which is almost impossible to be achieved.

Almost half of the EU countries have signed a memorandum of understanding with China for their participation in the BRI. [14] With a few exceptions (Greece, Italy, Portugal), the old EU Member States remain skeptical and critical when it comes to recent Chinese initiatives (such as the New Silk Roads and 17+1), considering them a way to divide Europe. They have repeatedly exerted pressure on the largest emerging economy in terms of: reciprocity of market access, labor and environmental standards, human rights, reduction of overcapacity and subsidies to state-owned companies, which are only some of the many requests that fall into the category of sensitive topics in the bilateral relationship. Definitely, the position in the Eurosceptic current or, on the contrary, in the Euro-optimistic one, greatly influences the attitude of the EU Member States towards China.[15]

The Chinese authorities highlight the benefits of the participation of countries in the world (including the EU ones) in the BRI. [16] Thus, the Joint Communiqué of the leaders of the countries participating in the BRI Forum of May 2017, signed by 30 countries, highlighted as basic principles of cooperation the following: *consultations on equal positions, mutual benefit, inclusion, cooperation based on market mechanisms, balance and sustainability*. Emphasis was placed on existing infrastructure and complementarities, promoting trade and investment and strengthening cooperation in the field of innovation. At the same time, the 30 signatory countries reaffirmed their *commitment to an open economy, free and inclusive trade and the rejection of all forms of protectionism*.

By contrast, recent studies[17] draw attention to the "debt trap" that accompanies the implementation of the BRI. At the same time, in countries such as Germany and France, suspicion regarding the BRI predominates, with companies in these countries fearing China's competitive leap.

It is interesting to note that the President of

France, Emmanuel Macron, organized on March 26, 2019 in Paris a summit on global governance and the challenges of multilateralism, which was attended by President Xi Jinping, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the President of the European Commission at the time, Jean-Claude Juncker. On the one hand, it is a clear signal to China that the EU's core is showing unity in achieving its economic and political goals in relation to China (which, in fact, it expects from other member states, too). On the other hand, the message to China is that the EU wishes to play an active role in the BRI, but with China taking into account Brussels' demands. The theme of the meeting also draws attention to the fact that, given that the US led by Donald Trump no longer supports the multilateral system, China represents for the EU a potential partner for strengthening multilateralism.

Conversely, the 22nd EU-China Summit by videoconference on 22 June 2020 revealed the essence of the disagreements between the two sides: "we do not share the same values, political systems, or approach to multilateralism. We will engage in a clear-eyed and confident way, robustly defending EU interests and standing firm on our values".

While the EU's relations with China have become increasingly strained starting from 2016-2017, the EU's partnership with **India** has entered a beneficial phase. First, at the 13th bilateral summit on 30 March 2016 in Brussels, the Action Agenda 2020 was adopted, with specific initiatives in areas such as politics, security, human rights and global challenges. Second, following the Joint Declaration adopted at the 2016 summit, the EU and India announced in July 2017 the creation of a mechanism to facilitate *EU investment in India*. Third, at the 14th bilateral summit, held in New Delhi on 6 October 2017 (the year in which the two partners celebrated 55 years of diplomatic relations), India and the EU expressed their commitment to strengthening the bilateral economic partnership and, at the same time, the intention to relaunch the negotiations for the broad-based and mutually beneficial Free Trade Agreement (BTIA), while announcing *the launch of a platform for energy and climate change cooperation and a partnership for sustainable urbanization*. The bilateral strategic partnership focuses on economic issues, such as trade, investment, energy security, technology transfer, sustainable urbanization, but also the principles of global governance (including the need to support a

multipolar order).

For its part, the 15th EU-India online summit on 15 July 2020, at which the document “EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap for 2025” was adopted, underscores the intensification of the EU’s cooperation with India.

### **ASEAN’s position towards China**

The strategic partnership between ASEAN and China dates back to 2003. Subsequently, bilateral strategic partnerships with China were signed by: Indonesia (2005), Vietnam (2008), Laos (2009), Cambodia (2010), Myanmar (2011), Thailand (2012) and Malaysia (2013). Brunei and the Philippines entered the group of China’s strategic partners late (bilateral relations were elevated in November 2018 to the ranks of *strategic cooperation partnership* and *comprehensive strategic cooperation*, respectively). Singapore is the only ASEAN country that does not have a clearly defined strategic partnership with China, and one factor that may explain this situation is its position as the most important strategic partner for the United States in the region. However, China-Singapore bilateral cooperation is intense, and the latter is one of the promoters of strong ASEAN-China ties, as well as the successful conclusion of trade negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (ASEAN plus China, South Korea, Japan, India, Australia and New Zealand).

ASEAN countries support the BRI, but, in accordance with the principles of the organization, prefer a multilateral initiative led by several actors. Most ASEAN members have signed a memorandum of understanding, a joint statement or other forms of cooperation documents with China, attesting their support for the BRI. All the ten countries are members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and are currently negotiating / implementing projects under the BRI.

All ASEAN countries have a pro-growth and pro-development agenda and, with the exception of Singapore, need additional resources to finance their infrastructure development, as well as other priorities included in their national development plans. It should also be noted that nine of the ten ASEAN countries were represented by their Heads of State/Government at the second BRI Forum in Beijing in April 2019, and the Indonesian President was also likely to have attended that forum, if he had not been engaged in important activities related to his re-election. In terms of trade in goods, China is the main trading partner for eight of the ASEAN coun-

tries and the second for two of them (in the case of the Republic of Laos, Thailand dominates bilateral trade flows, with 51.6% of the total in 2018, and for Brunei the first trading partner is Japan, with 22.8% of the total).

China’s importance for the ASEAN group of countries has increased in recent years in terms of foreign direct investment (FDI). A marginal investor ten years ago, China became the third largest foreign investor for ASEAN, after the United States and Japan, in terms of FDI stocks.

Among the ASEAN countries, one can identify four categories, depending on the specific of their relations with China within the BRI. First of all, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam stand out, five of the six ASEAN countries with the highest nominal GDP (in current prices). In general, they pursue their national interest and have the ability to negotiate with their partners, even with China. Second, there are the least developed countries, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. The first two are in the category of BRI supporters, while in Myanmar there is already a new trend of imposing more conditions such as transparency, social and environmental responsibility and the protection of the national interest. Third, it stands out Brunei, which in November 2018 was included in China’s group of strategic partners and signed a memorandum of understanding for cooperation within the BRI. Given the declining oil and gas reserves and the decreasing of long-term revenues from the exploitation of natural resources, the Sultanate of Brunei is focusing on economic diversification, and China is one of the relevant partners in this regard.

Brunei is the second richest country in ASEAN, with a GDP/capita of over \$ 30,000 (after Singapore, with over \$ 65,000/capita). With an insignificant public debt to GDP ratio and major current account surpluses, Brunei can afford to reform its economy, with China being an important partner in this regard. Fourth, Singapore, unlike other ASEAN members, is a high-income, highly competitive country, one of the world’s financial and technological centers. It is therefore a valuable partner for China in the BRI in this regard and also a source for partnerships with third countries (consultancy for infrastructure).

### **Chinese school of thought and relational theory**

In trying to get closer to the region that concentrates most of the international economic activities and which, through its organizations and the role

played by some countries on the regional and international stages has become the core of the contemporary world, we can use the perspective of a newer paradigm in the theory of international relations, namely the **Chinese school**, with representatives such as Qin Yaqing, Zhao Tingyang and Yan Xuetong, along with other important Chinese theorists.

In the **relational theory**, Qin emphasizes the following. The relations between the actors participating in international relations are constantly changing and have an ontological significance. In the Confucian doctrine, the middle path (中庸) of moderation and harmony is dominated by three virtues that lead to the stability of social relations: wisdom (zhì 智), kindness (rén 仁) and courage (yǒng 勇). The extremes are not excluded, but are complementary, thus denying the dual structure “or-or”, instead promoting the “and-and” approach.

The way of solving the problems is deeply rooted in the culture of each participant in the social action therefore the relations between the states, as well as the interpersonal relations have a strong cultural load. That is why the role that countries such as China and India are currently playing in international relations is accompanied by new visions of global issues, coming into confluence with the Western thought, which has dominated the world since the great geographical discoveries. However, this should not be a frontal collision, but a confluence.

In this context, a practical example deserves to be mentioned, as it brings to mind the relational theory mentioned above. A key moment marking major changes in international relations was the informal meeting of the US and Chinese Presidents Barack Obama and Xi Jinping in Sunnylands, California, on June 7-8, 2013. On that occasion, China proposed a “new model of major-country relations”, called in the literature also a “model of relations between the *great powers*”. The features of this model, supported by China at present, are: (1) the absence of conflicts and confrontations, (2) mutual respect and (3) cooperation for the benefit of all. China has repeatedly stressed that: its development is peaceful, it does not intend to take the US position in the world, it is to the advantage of both partners to rely in bilateral cooperation on complementarities and their actions need to lead to increased mutual trust. But neither the US, nor the EU, nor Japan were convinced, their attitude towards China, Russia and India (US and EU, critical of China and Russia, but lenient with India, Japan hostile to China, but open to cooperation with Russia and India)

representing one of the major factors shaping the increasingly complex relations in the *Indo-Pacific*.

The essence of the Indo-Pacific relations in all their complexity is differently understood in the West and the East. In general, the West (in this category including also Japan) tries to impose its own values and rules (of course, not unitarily with all partners, with some being tougher, with others more conciliatory), while the East is more permissive, undemanding, but without sacrificing the national interest.

### Conclusions

This article summarizes the essence of relations between states and groups of countries in the Indo-Pacific. The Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated existing trends in the region and globally, with escalating protectionism and intensifying tensions.

The most obvious international transformation in the second decade of the 21st century is reflected in **China's new vision of global development and governance**, which marks the end of the *tāo guāng yǎng huì* (韬光养晦, *conceal one's strengths and bide one's time*) philosophy and propels China into a position of a real key global player. China thus overcomes the already ambitious framework outlined by the institutionalization of the BRICS group in 2009, at the initiative of the Russian Federation, with the undeclared goal (but highlighted in joint statements and documents) of *reorganizing the world order for all countries, not just to the advantage of the “Western powers”, thus contributing to the increase of multipolarity*.

The Chinese initiative, unexpectedly ambitious, has as its major objectives economic development and accelerated investment (in energy, infrastructure, production capacity, technology, Internet), but also contributes to supporting China's reform and opening-up process. With an inevitable role in strengthening China's regional and international position, the BRI has led the established powers to form a common front against it. The harsh criticism from countries such as the United States, Japan, India and Australia (Quad), but also from the institutions of the European Union and some EU Member States were accompanied by the outlining of alternative Silk Roads, such as: Asia-Africa growth corridor, launched by Japan and India (2017), the US vision for the Indo-Pacific (2018), the US-Australia-Japan Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific Infrastructure Financing (2018) and the EU Strategy for Connecting Europe and Asia (2018).

So far, they have not generated far-reaching effects as compared to those associated with China's New Silk Roads hence the recourse to resounding "labels" in order to denigrate China and the BRI: "debt trap", "Chinese colonialism" and "yellow peril".

In contrast, other countries, small or medium-sized powers, such as the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), similar to other emerging and developing economies, are in favor of a balanced attitude. This position is defined in the literature as "hedging", which includes both confrontation and cooperation with China.

All this reveals the complexity and variable geometry of international relations, in which cooperation and conflict coexist. Thus, realist, neorealist (defensive and offensive) and rational currents still dominate the theory of international relations, and the way China comes to solve global problems, including through Confucian principles, has to wait until it is understood and accepted.

#### Footnotes

[1] The present article is a synthesis of the study "Economic Relations of the Great Powers in the Indo-Pacific in the Current Geopolitical Context", Oehler-Şincai, I.M. (2019) (coordinator), Institute for World Economy, Romanian Academy, November, 211 pages.

[2] Although there are voices indicating a new Cold War, we consider that the current West-East relations have not cooled down at a degree similar to the previous stage, not even if we take into account the background of the US-China trade war and the tensions generated by the current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. There are trends in this direction, but they still do not justify yet the term „second” Cold War.

[3] International Monetary Fund (2019). *World Economic Outlook Database*, October.

[4] West and East are defined mainly by values, principles and norms, not necessarily by geographical position.

[5] The White House (2017). *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December.

[6] India has been formally applying for the APEC membership since 1993, but it has been rejected due to its limited participation in the regional economic integration agenda. Subsequently, six other countries were accepted as members of APEC: Mexico and Papua New Guinea in 1993, Chile in 1994, Peru, Russia and Vietnam in 1998. In 1997, a moratorium was imposed on the admission of new members to the organization until 2007, action justified by the need to focus on achieving the Bogor Goals (1994) and the Osaka Agenda for Ac-

tion (1995) on supporting regional economic integration, by liberalizing trade and investment (Gupta, 2015, Seshadri, 2015). After another three-year extension of the moratorium, it was lifted in 2010, after which India was invited to attend the summits as an observer, until the consensus of all 21 members of the group could be reached for its acceptance as a member.

[7] Please consult <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/united-states-strategic-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

[8] The Tokyo International Conference on Africa's Development (TICAD) was initiated in 1993 by the Government of Japan to promote Africa's development, peace and security.

[9] China and India, until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Under the impact of a composite of exogenous and endogenous determinants, both were set aside.

[10] Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Philippines, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

[11] An intergovernmental organization consisting of 54 states (mostly former territories of the British Empire), which continues its activity, among the member states being: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, Malaysia, Singapore, Bangladesh, Brunei, Pakistan and South Africa.

[12] The European Union, as a group of countries, is the first or second major trading partner and investor for many countries in the region.

[13] Lillehaugen, M. (2018). *The 'Free and Open' Indo-Pacific: A Call for European Partnership*, Asia Dialogue, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 22.

[14] Hungary, the first country which signed such a memorandum in 2015, followed by Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and Slovakia in the same year, Latvia in 2016, Croatia and Estonia in 2017, Greece, Malta and Portugal in 2018 and Luxembourg and Italy in 2019. Finland and France each signed with China joint declarations in 2017. <https://www.belroad-initiative.com/memorandum-of-understanding-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

[15] <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/publications-ifri/ouvrages-ifri/political-values-europe-china-relations>.

[16] China and 29 other countries were represented at the level of president/prime-minister, the rest of them, including Germany, France and the United Kingdom, at ministerial level.

[17] <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/examining-debt-implications-belt-and-road-initiative-policy-perspective.pdf>.

## THE EUROPEAN UNION

**Interview with Teodor Baconschi, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania:  
“The EU is now facing the greatest geopolitical storm of the 21st Century.  
We ought to finally put the ‘Three Musketeer Principle’ into practice,  
as we all share a common destiny which entails an authentic, rather than merely  
declarative or ideologically conditioned, form of solidarity”**

The multitude of cleavages that have become increasingly apparent across the European space in recent years underscores the need for a paradigm shift in the way that the European Union relates to its citizens. The United Kingdom’s exit from the EU, the success of Eurosceptic and populist discourse, the radicalization of public opinion, as well as the persisting differences in the developmental trajectories of EU countries highlight the need to (re-)think the European project in order to provide member states with a common sense of direction.

The diplomat, theologian and anthropologist Teodor Baconschi, former Minister of Foreign Affairs (of Romania), answers questions regarding the EU’s post-pandemic future in an interview offered to *Geostrategic Pulse Magazine*.



**Geostrategic Pulse:** Lately, political and institutional cleavages have become more apparent within the European Union. The declining level of cooperation, the lack of solidarity at the institutional level, the widening developmental gaps among members states – all these seem to support the idea that Central and East European states are still inferior – economically, politically, and socially -- vis-à-vis their Western counterparts. To what extent

**should we still contemplate the idea of an EU of nations, where each member state, regardless of its size or geographical position, could expect to benefit from economic support and fair treatment on behalf of its partners?**

**Teodor Baconschi:** The EU can be described as a massive supranational bureaucratic framework that governs over a mosaic of member states, whose behaviors and interactions are shaped by the principles and norms enshrined in the EU’s treaties. Unfortunately, the gap that separates Europe’s Western and Eastern fronts has not yet been bridged. Even though the newest member states have made considerable progress in getting up to speed with the “Carolingian” core of founding states, there are good reasons to believe that reaching full convergence will require at least three additional decades. The mounting Euro-skepticism displayed across the political and mediatic landscapes of European countries, and particularly within the Visegrad Group, is, paradoxically, empowered by the very fact that Central and Eastern European countries are closing in on their Western counterparts in terms of living standards. One can only afford to criticize a given system when one counts oneself among its vital components. This attitude is noticeable in Romania as well: the boost in economic growth that we experienced in the aftermath of our country’s adherence to the EU in 2007 led to the emergence of various sovereigntist voices, who have nevertheless remained relatively tame, as Romania still lacks a strong enough economic foundation to justify a genuinely aggressive stance towards the European affairs.

I, for one, do not believe that the principle of juridical equality is sufficient to mitigate the economic, demographic, and cultural imbalances between member states. This principle does work in practice, but only when we acknowledge the major



differences that separate the Big Ones (Germany, France, Spain, Italy), from the medium-sized yet strong (The Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, etc.), the medium-sized yet fragile (like Romania and G4, minus Poland, ahead of the group), and the very small states (the Baltic countries, Slovenia, Malta, Cyprus, etc.).

**Can Ursula von de Leyen's mandate at the head of the European Commission bring about important changes to the European economic architecture?**

I believe that Germany's rotating presidency comes in at the right time... And I am convinced that it will facilitate synergy between Berlin and Brussels, and in particular, between Chancellor Merkel and her former colleague, Ursula von de Leyden. We hope that this German-German cooperation will clarify the EU agenda in its entirety, in full transparency and responsibility. Many of the sectoral strategies promoted by the EU over the two past decades were implemented poorly, precisely because they had set an overly optimistic target for collective ambition. How much did we ultimately achieve from the 2020 Agenda? What is the regional relevance of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region? How realistic is the Green Deal that is currently being promoted by Brussels, given that 80% of electric car batteries are produced in China? Examples abound. On the other hand, the EU – born from the ruins of two world wars and raised on a Christian-Democratic foundation during the Cold War – has contracted the mania of restorative ethical exemplarity, apparent in the tacit adoption of a multiculturalist ideology whose limits have evidently been reached, yet who the Eurocrats continue to endorse (out of inertia and convenience more so than dogmatism). This diffuse, unofficial yet persistent (and increasingly more compulsive) ideology has devitalized the link between the techno-structure of the EU institutions and the electorates of the member states, who often resent the EU's elites for failing to address their real grievances (jobs, pension system, defense, immigration, economic competitiveness, the future of research and education, etc.). After all, the much-criticized wave of "populism" that emerged in almost all member states in recent years can be interpreted as an alarm signal from an electorate that has become increasingly frustrated by the superficial rhetoric of the European Commission and Parliament. I believe the EU would benefit from greater self-awareness

and willingness to address its own flaws, instead of the arrogant self-sufficiency that some of its representatives have displayed in the aftermath of Brexit.

**Against the background of Brexit, the crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the prospect of elections that will take place this year in several EU member states, can we expect a more integrated, united and supportive Union, or conversely, more division?**

I am genuinely convinced that national selfishness – exacerbated by internal electoral considerations – can jeopardize the historic success of the Union, either through the renationalization of key policies or through the promotion of a "multi-speed" model of European integration. Indeed, it is very difficult to maintain balance between subsidiarity and the objective need to develop common Taxation and Defense strategies. The EU is now facing the greatest geopolitical storm of the 21st century. It has an existential need not only for cohesion but also for the facilitation of consensus-building mechanisms when making strategic decisions. The creation of a functional European system cannot be carried out in the absence of upward homogenization or through the antagonization of new member states, some of whom have rather precipitously been labelled "illiberal". Europeans ought to finally put the "Three Musketeer Principle" into practice, as we all share a common destiny which entails an authentic, rather than merely declarative or ideologically conditioned, form of solidarity".

**The European Union can become a global actor if it continues to maintain, even under current circumstances, a high degree of involvement in the economic development, at regional and global levels. However, in order to become more influential, it needs to improve in certain fields. What are the areas where the EU is still weak but that can improve vis-à-vis the other global actors?**

Returning to the theme of "moral exemplarity", which is either utopian or self-limiting, it is interesting to note that after Brexit, the EU no longer has any universities in the top 25. We are running the risk of falling behind in the technological race with the US and China. The EU no longer produces smart phones and computers, we are deeply dependent on the infrastructure of American digital giants, we relocated far too many

industries, we cannot implement 5G technologies on our own, we have failed to find a common voice with regard to foreign policy, just as we have failed to build a European army, in support rather than opposition to NATO. We should also be thinking about the revitalization of our relationship with the US: we should not let circumstantial factors (such as the current American president's communication style) deteriorate our transatlantic partnership.

**What is the best course for the EU to navigate in order to ensure its citizens' security and prosperity, amid competition from Russia, China and even the US?**

If we wish to avoid a *Pax Sinica*, we need not compete with the US, but rather cultivate a climate of strategic cordiality with our American partners. Unfortunately, the current cultural war that is raging between progressives and conservatives, which has surreptitiously been imported from the US into the EU, will continue to undermine the political cohesion of the Western world: moderate and rational voices from both camps have an obligation and interest to put an end to this self-destructive ideological conflict and emphasize instead the importance of bipartisan logic in the process of democratic negotiation. Let us not forget that we do not have the luxury of historical "breaks" – the processes through which the West's democratic-capitalist hegemony is challenged are in full offensive, even they are masked by the seemingly benign pretext of a "multipolar world"...

**Romania is located in a particularly complex region, where actors and interests relevant to national, regional and European security and stability, like Russia, Turkey, China, the US, etc. face off. Given that it also represents the eastern border of two organizations, NATO and the EU, Romania must combine its efforts with those of its allies to consolidate an eastern and southeastern flank, common to the Union and the Alliance, that will guarantee stability in this part of Europe. What are, in your opinion, Romania's main vulnerabilities and opportunities, and what do you see as optimal Romanian policies (national or as an ally) in the short and medium term?**

I believe that Romania is right in advocating greater transatlantic cohesion and consolidating NATO's eastern flank (Kogălniceanu, Deveselu, Câmpia Turzii, allied exercises in the Black Sea and the commitment to allocate 2% of its GDP to

modernize the armed forces). On the other hand, the world has changed and we have the obligation to strengthen the Romanian state in order to transform it into a meaningful regional actor: there are many ways in which this goal can be accomplished, these include mobilizing domestic capital to promote economic development, facilitating investments and carrying out structural reforms in the fields of education and research, as well as putting an end to counterselection and replacing it with the meritocratic selection of the elites. We debate a lot, often using outdated mantras, but we have not yet managed to halt the brain drain, the proliferation of impostors with faked diplomas and the intensification of partisan divisions. Declaring ourselves a haven of predictability will not give us a more favorable position in the Euro-American equation.

**Lately, and in the context created by this pandemic and by the restrictions imposed on religious cults, the special importance EU Member States as well as the US attach to the subject of religious freedom has gained prominence. Why do you think there is a lack of interest in this topic, and why does it have no place in the public agenda in Romania?**

In our case, we are experiencing a false "modernization". We have no modern highways or hospitals, we don't even have a single university in the top 500, we are struggling to lower the rate of functional illiteracy, but we are increasingly convinced that religion (which remains the moral, historical, and anthropological anchor of Europe) is, in fact, the root cause of all our developmental woes. Instead of confronting and shaping reality, we enable and promote self-denial, anti-clericalism, as well as superficial clashes of ideas, which find battling ground on social media, and ideologically charged accusations. Secularism has undoubtedly been a source of economic development (as it promotes individual autonomy), but this does not mean that we should discard the important spiritual, patrimonial and social role played by Churches in society. Neither should we seek to replace our Christian roots with post-modern corporate micro-cultural implants. The state's religious neutrality is a condition of democracy, but it must not be converted into an official atheist policy. Didn't we have enough of the "scientific atheism" of the communist decades?

## Luminița Odobescu, Romania's Permanent Representative to the EU: "The only viable scenario for the future of the European project cannot be established without solidarity and cohesion"

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a series of threats to the resilience of the European bloc at an extremely rapid pace, forcing it to adapt, equally rapidly, to the new challenges. The economic, social and political crisis could therefore be seen as a defining moment that puts to test the European solidarity and cohesion.

Ambassador Luminița Teodora Odobescu, career diplomat with a PhD in international economic relations at the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, is Romania's Permanent Representative to the European Union. In the interview she gave to the *Geostrategic Pulse* Magazine, Ambassador Odobescu analysed the perspectives of, and the challenges faced by, the EU's resilience in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.



**Vladimir-Adrian Costea:** Now when most of the world mulls its post-pandemic future, how do you see the future of the EU? Has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the EU's capability to adapt to the new challenges?

**Luminița Odobescu:** The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is, without a doubt, a lesson we had to learn fast, adapting as we went along to a situation unprecedented in our recent history. As always, the most trying moments also force us to reflection – which is absolutely necessary both for the evolution of our society and of the Union. We are only at the beginning of this period of reflection, as the crisis has numerous repercussions – economically, socially, financially, and also globally, in terms of our positioning vis-à-vis our strategic partners.

We all know that the initial response was hesitant,

difficult sometimes, and this should be attributed rather to an instinctive reaction of the member states to protect their citizens through domestic actions, given that, it must not be forgotten, health is an issue under national competence. It soon became obvious, however, that the virus had no borders, that we were dependent on each-other and that coordination and, most of all, solidarity were mostly needed.

The European Union understood that a paradigm shift was needed, so it recalibrated its approach; and the results did not fail to appear. More than ever, it became obvious that solutions could only be found by working together – a conclusion that is relevant not only in relation to the current crisis but also to all the challenges the contemporary world is currently facing. Furthermore, it became clear that this approach is necessary not only in managing the current sanitary and economic crisis, but also as part of the Union's general medium and long-term strategy. The Union's response capability must be redefined, as must the degree of flexibility of its responses, in order to adequately respond to potential crises.

Perhaps the most relevant example of the post-pandemic perspective on our common future is provided by the two EU support package proposals, aimed at responding to this crisis. The first package represents an immediate measure, amounting to over 540 million euros. Additionally, there is the European Commission's recently proposed Plan for EU economic recovery, an ambitious and very complex plan whereby the Recovery Fund harmonises with the Multiannual Financial Framework, in full compliance with the basic principles of the European project – solidarity, inclusiveness and cohesion. The objective is to ensure the long-term resilience of the Union.

As I have mentioned, it is too soon to draw any conclusions for the time being, since there are clearly still many lessons to be learned and the whole process is far from over. However, we can assume that the EU's resilience will eventually depend on our ability to find the right balance between, on the one hand, the need to be flexible and pragmatically adapting to new circumstances, and, on the other hand, the full preservation of the

principles and values that form the foundation of the European project.

**To what extent did the current European mechanisms facilitate cooperation and a quick response?**

After the first rather difficult couple of weeks, with restrictive measures taken at national level and a series of approaches that seemed to question the European solidarity, the European institutions (mainly the European Commission), as well as the governments of the Member States realised that an individual approach would be far from enough to tackle the crisis – on the contrary, our increased interdependence and our common goals are forcing us to work together in a fast and coordinated manner. Once more, the European framework has thus come up with political and practical solutions.

Work methods also had to be adapted, with ministers and experts resorting to videoconferences. The ambassadors of the Member States kept on meeting face to face throughout the whole period (observing health rules): this was reflected by the decisions taken and by the way the institutions and national governments eventually managed to coordinate their work. Even procedural rules have been adapted in order to enable decision taking without physical presence.

During a crisis, it is the ability to react and the efficacy of measures that matter. While there may have been difficulties and delays in reacting to the crisis initially, all these have been gradually remedied, and the decisions and measures taken have eventually proved effective.

The list of measures taken by the EU using the instruments already in place is very long and complex. I will give only a few examples, which hopefully will be a relevant indicator of the measures taken:

- The Commission launched five common acquisition procedures for protection equipment, under the Early Warning Response System, used for cross-border health threats, in which most Member States were involved.
- Regional medicine stocks have been created. As you might already know, Romania was the first member state to host one of the EU's strategic reserves of medical equipment. During the crisis, several member states, but also third countries, have benefited from significant amounts of equipment coming from this reserve.
- Together with international partners, a large scale online fund-raising event was organized to ensure universal access to testing, treatment and vaccination against the Coronavirus, which has already raised 9.8 billion euros (way over the initial target of 7.5 billion). This initiative will continue with another fund-raising event, the so-called *Global Pledging Summit*, due to take place on the 27<sup>th</sup> of June and involving a series of artists and international personalities.
- A first economic package, amounting to 540 million euros, was adopted; as part of this, I would single out the SURE programme, amounting to 100 million euros, proposed by the Commission, through which countries are due to receive financial assistance in the form of advantageous loans, in order to protect their work force and reduce the risks of unemployment in emergency situations.
- Measures were adopted regarding funds for the cohesion policy, within the “Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative”, which enabled the quick mobilisation of sums from the 2020 budget and their redistribution to finance prevention operations and purchase material and equipment needed to ensure the functioning of the emergency and medical systems, but also social and economic package to support the population and small enterprises.
- Provision, through the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived, of food and basic assistance to individuals in dire economic situation.
- Using the European Social Fund – a proposal that is part of the “Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative” for emergency situations and covering the damages caused by the COVID-19.
- Supplementing by 3 billion euros the financial commitments in order to reactivate the Emergency Support Instrument through a 2.7 billion euro (commitments), as well as to strengthen the EU Civil Protection Mechanism/RescEU.
- Making rules pertaining to accessing European funds more flexible, thus mobilising and redistributing them more easily to fight the Coronavirus (through equipping hospitals, acquiring medical equipment, supporting the medical staff, and countering the negative economic and social effects by giving support to vulnerable groups

- and to those in technical unemployment).
- Using all available EU channels of action and coordination that are managed either by the European Commission (the Civil Protection Mechanism), the European External Action Service or the Council, to offer consular assistance. All this facilitated the rapid exchange of information and cooperation among the member states and optimised joint actions.
  - Supporting EU partners in their fight against the pandemic – here I would like to mention the “Team Europe” package, amounting to 15.6 billion euros, launched at the beginning of April, which stipulates coordination of EU efforts, of the European financial institutions and of the member states.

Additionally, I would recall once again the recent proposal for economic recovery of the European Commission, consisting of a 750-billion-euro recovery plan and a 1,100-billion-euro proposal for the future Multiannual Financial Framework. These are unprecedented measures, both in size and in complexity. They are currently part of a very intense negotiation process, but they are already indicative of the level of ambition in facing this challenge.

I would like to stress, however, that the list above is not comprehensive; there are many other measures that have been taken at the level of the Union – for example, the set of measures allowing greater flexibility to a series of existing rules (for example, in the field of state aid, of excessive deficit procedures etc.) or those that have been adopted in tackling “fake news” or disinformation.

**What are the scenarios regarding cooperation and solidarity between countries, in the context of the economic and social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic? Are there any new rifts or splits "vis-à-vis" the affected countries?**

As previously mentioned, I believe that this crisis represents also an opportunity for self-evaluation and repositioning. They say that a crisis can also be an opportunity. It is up to us to turn the current challenges into an opportunity for economic growth and resilience not only as regards our health systems, but also the European society and the Union as a whole. Or resilience – I believe it is obvious to all of us – is not possible without solidarity. It is becoming clearer by the day that, having in mind the reality of our contemporary world, the solution lies only in cooperation.

Let us not forget that one of the European Union’s founding principles is solidarity – conceived, following the trauma of World War II, as a recovery and peace-consolidating solution made possible through strengthening mutual trust and setting common objectives to the benefit of all. A generous idea that has led to prosperity and has ensured the European peace for the last 70 years.

I believe that the Union will emerge stronger from this difficult period, with stronger values, with clearer objectives and with more coherent courses of action.

We should acknowledge that in the absence of all the complex measures taken at EU level, without a coordinated course of action and without constant dialogue with the other member states, it would have been far more difficult for us all to manage this period and get over it. The same approach is needed over the upcoming period, just with even greater scope. Indeed, for decades this particular method has enabled us to enhance joint mechanisms that engender shared values and objectives.

I thus believe that the only viable scenario for the future of the European project cannot be conceived without solidarity and cohesion. The only way to overcome the current challenges is to work together, and, I believe, this is clear to everyone.

**What main actions do you consider viable for an increased cooperation among countries?**

I have briefly mentioned earlier some of the measures taken at the European Union level in dealing with the effects of the pandemic. I believe that apart from their immediate role – to identify solutions to various sanitary, economic, or other problems posed by the Coronavirus – these measures have been a way of working together, coherently and in coordination.

The actions the EU has taken so far, from the sectorial ones to the post-pandemic recovery plan, which I have already mentioned, provide, I believe, a coherent action framework with common courses of action, which serve the interests of all member countries, and those of the Union, in its entirety.

Currently, the Union’s major priorities are, on the one hand, a coordinated exit from the pandemic, and on the other, just as important, the economic recovery. The measures proposed for both objectives – many currently under negotiation – are complex and cover multiple sectors.

For example, for a sustainable exit from the crisis and for a long term tackling of the pandemic, the

production and swift distribution of an effective and safe vaccine is essential. Thus, building on the talks some member states had had with certain vaccine manufacturers, the European Commission launched last week, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, a common strategy for the development and production of a vaccine against COVID-19. The goal would be the production of a sufficient number of vaccines in the EU and their fair distribution among the population.

Thus, the member states that wish to take part in this initiative will authorise the European Commission to negotiate with the manufacturers on their behalf, with the aim of finding a vaccine. Specifically, in order to support the companies to quickly develop and produce a vaccine, the Commission will sign contracts with individual manufacturers and, in exchange for the right to purchase a certain number of doses, it will finance, through the emergency support instrument, some of the initial costs needed for the development of these vaccines. This financing will practically be considered a down payment for the vaccines that will eventually be bought by the member states.

Another very important measure taken to strengthen cooperation envisages the complete removal of internal border restrictions (hopefully by the end of June), followed by the gradual removal of external border restrictions. Discussions are taking place within the Council of the European Union to establish a transparent strategy based on the epidemiologic situation that will not endanger the progress achieved in the fight against the pandemic within the EU.

The increased cooperation may be best illustrated by the previously mentioned economic recovery package proposed by the Commission. It is the greatest extra-budgetary effort that the European Union has ever made. The 750 billion euros added to the classic EU financial framework of 1,100 billion euros represent extra money that is to be financed through loans borrowed by the European Commission on the capital market.

The details of this plan are currently under negotiation, yet, irrespective of the final compromise, it will provide a real chance of economic recovery to all the member states, while maintaining the cohesion objectives. With a major grant component, this economic recovery plan will bypass the over-indebtedness of the countries that are most affected and most vulnerable.

Through these funds, the EU will be able to finance reform and investment projects that facilitate the recovery of national economies after

the crisis, at the same time facilitating the transition to a green and digital economy.

We are talking about funds that can be invested in projects that Romania truly needs, such as: digital and modernization projects; investing in the health system; developing green transportation, even the railroad system; investing in water and sewerage, education or renewable energy.

It is worth mentioning the considerable additional funds from the Just Transition Fund, dedicated to projects meant to support the workers who are most affected by the transition towards a climate neutral economy, such as those in coal regions.

These are just a few examples, but the list goes on.

**To what extent does this latest threat, represented by the COVID-19 pandemic, bring to the fore opportunities that have not been exploited enough, so far?**

It has been often said that the world will not be the same after this pandemic. I believe this to be the case with any major crisis. Inevitably, assessments and analyses are made, conclusions are drawn and solutions are found for the future. This inherently brings a series of opportunities.

For example, the COVID-19 crisis catalysed Europe's "go green" and digital tendencies, given that the Recovery Plan proposed by the European Commission sustainably supports the recovery of the economies affected by the pandemic, integrating the green/ecological and digital transitions.

I believe it is important to mention, under these circumstances, that the Romanian Government signed a declaration regarding the use of investments from the European Ecological Pact as a key element in the European Union's recovery plan, which proves our country's commitment to support the transition towards climate neutrality and towards building a more sustainable and resilient Europe.

Another aspect highlighted by the crisis is the importance of having access to medicine, which is why the European Commission is now preparing a European strategy for the pharmaceutical industry, which has recently held public consultations. This new strategy aims at improving access to safe medicines, at affordable prices, accessible to the citizens, as well as supporting innovation in this obviously vital field to the European economy. Of course, the pharmaceutical strategy will have to be

closely related to the European Industrial Strategy, considering the difficulties related to the regular supply chains and Union medicine stocks of the past months.

There is more and more talk about ensuring the strategic autonomy of the EU in key areas, by supporting this double green and digital transition that I was referring to, while, at the same time, following the principles of an open economy, including those of free and fair trade. Strengthening strategic autonomy does not mean that Europe will isolate itself, but that we will better protect our strategic interests, including by mobilising the financial resources necessary to support them. An example in this direction would be the reindustrialization of the Union, which can contribute to its strategic autonomy.

At the same time, the current crisis has created the environment for a more visible EU at a multilateral level – seen as a major objective, while preserving the energy dedicated to the promotion of European values and to the continuation of cooperation and coordination with its strategic partners. As far as our security and defence are concerned, the development of a common strategic culture can be enhanced and improved only by synchronising the European efforts with those exerted by international organizations, such as the UN, ensuring complementarity with NATO and asserting the essential role of the transatlantic relation.

**Is the populist rhetoric within the European Union a major obstacle for the support offered to the countries seriously affected by this pandemic? What is, in this case, the possibility of populism becoming once more a threat in the EU?**

It is true that particularly in times of crisis, populism, fuelled by aggressive disinformation campaigns, may find the fertile ground to spread. When inherent difficulties appear, such as those caused by the current pandemic, the citizens' views may be negatively influenced and the spread of false, erroneous or ill-willed information represents an element that can sabotage even the most generous intentions and actions.

Under the current situation we have not been spared by this kind of phenomena. The Union's initial hesitations were a good pretext for such approaches, the main purpose of which is, after all, undermining the solidarity and the fundamental values of the European project.

However, as the efforts of the Union materialised

into actions with positive effects, which sent a strong solidarity signal, I believe that the seduction power of the populist messages got diluted. Moreover, at the level of the EU, the need to communicate properly with regard to the whole reconstruction effort, has been fully acknowledged and this we hope, will be reflected by public opinion as well. All European institutions have mobilised accordingly in this respect.

Thus, the European External Action Service activated the Rapid Alert System, which facilitates the quick exchange of information regarding the disinformation campaigns within the EU.

Furthermore, at European Council level, within the EU Integrated Political Crisis Response framework, representatives of the EU member states have constantly assessed the situation and proposed measures to be taken for public communications, so that the European citizens could have access to accurate and high-quality information. In turn, during the European Council of March 2020, the European leaders committed to counter disinformation through regular, transparent, fact-based communication.

Moreover, at the beginning of June 2020, the Commission and the EU High Representative presented a joint communication titled "Tackling COVID-19 disinformation – Getting the facts right", which evaluates the main challenges to countering disinformation in the context of the pandemic. The commission thus proposed several concrete actions to create a stronger and more resilient Europe, which are about to be implemented in the forthcoming period. The proposed actions will contribute to future EU activities regarding disinformation, especially to the European Democracy Action Plan and the Digital Services Act.

Apart from all these measures, the best obvious way to combat populism is to find the proper solutions to overcome the crisis, especially its economic aspect. Today, however, even the best actions, unless accompanied by effective, active and real-time communication will fail to be convincing enough.

The odds that populism (as well as its favourite tool – disinformation) could be successful depend, however, on each of us. We all have an important part to play so as not to fall prey to manipulation. Aside from the vigilance with which we must learn to choose our sources of information, we must permanently remember what are the values on which we wish to build our society.

## MEP Siegfried Mureşan, Vice-Chair of the EPP: “The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that the European Union is able to respond in such moments through solidarity.”

Faced with the new challenge represented by the need to manage the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing pressure of the Eurosceptic populist movements, the European Union was forced to provide both an immediate response, which could reflect the ability of the Member States to act according to the principle of solidarity and a medium term solution as part of the Multiannual Financial Framework for the years 2021 to 2027, a solution reflecting the vision of the 27 Member States on the future of the European construct.

The MEP Siegfried Mureşan, Vice-Chair of the European People’s Party Group (Christian-Democratic), member of the National Liberal Party, Chair of the European Parliament Delegation to the EU-Moldova Parliamentary Association Committee, analysed the perspectives and challenges related to the management of the EU budget in the context of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, in the interview offered to Vladimir-Adrian Costea for the *Geostrategic Pulse* Magazine.



**Vladimir-Adrian Costea: Mr. Mureşan, now more than ever, reaching consensus over the European budget is imperative and has a major impact on the future of the EU as well. In the current context, how do you assess the financial allocations resulted from the lengthy**

**negotiations in the European Council? Do these allocations meet the current needs of the European project and, at the same time, do they counter the populist and Eurosceptic rhetoric?**

**Siegfried Mureşan:** The agreement reached by the European Council a month ago is a good one for Europe and a very good one for Romania. It is a historic agreement that will provide the Member States with European funds over €1.8 trillion for the next years.

It is a historic agreement because the European Union has never had before an investment plan as substantial as the one the heads of States and governments have just agreed on. This is a fact and no Eurosceptic populist politician can deny it without being considered ridiculous.

The success of this agreement is the result of the unity between the main European political families and the main European leaders in the face of a common crisis.

The agreement reached after negotiations in the European Council during the month of July represents a vital step; however, it is not the last one. The final version of the budget agreement should be approved by the European Parliament. Moreover, the final vote on the budget will be cast in the European Parliament after negotiations with the Council. Once the vote is cast in the Parliament, the budget is adopted.

Our position in the European Parliament is clear: we are totally in favour of the funds allocated to Romania and the other European countries. The final negotiations will not change the sums that have already been allocated to the Member States. What we will ask for is raises of budget lines that are not allocated by country, but at the level of the entire European Union, for the future policies: digitalization, research, innovation, “Erasmus” scholarships, defence, security and border protection. These projects are important for Europe in its entirety, therefore they are important for Romania as well.



**To what extent does the Multiannual Financial Framework and the recovery instrument *Next Generation EU* set the ground for overcoming the economic, social and political challenges that the EU is currently facing?**

The Economic Recovery Plan, which amounts to €750 billion, was adopted in order to support the economic recovery of the European countries, following the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The funds will become available starting with the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2021 and will last for four years. These are new funds, in addition to what was planned to be received from the European Union. This is why the impact of this recovery plan is huge. It is the most ambitious programme to counter the pandemic and its effects because it aims at supporting every European citizen affected by the COVID-19 crisis, whether we are talking about employees, farmers, small entrepreneurs, doctors, researchers or vulnerable social groups.

The first and most important component of the European Recovery Instrument is the Recovery and Resilience Facility, with a budget of €672.5 billion, out of which €312.5 billion are non-repayable funds and €360 billion are favourable loans. I am the European Parliament rapporteur on this Facility and I am currently working on the draft law that will tell us where the money goes.

Overall, our objective is to allocate the budget of this instrument to support the Member States finance their own economic recovery objectives.

The focus will mainly be on investments to modernise the EU Member States. The money will be used for digitalization, a green economy, modernization of hospitals and schools. The purpose is to become more productive and more competitive.

So, the two instruments at our disposal, and mostly the Recovery Plan will help us cut short the economic recovery period by also investing in the priorities of the future.

**Cutting down the funds for cohesion and development is a step that has upset the developing Member States, such as Romania. Do you find reasonable the criticism highlighting the risk of deepening economic, social and territorial disparities between various regions and members of the European Union? To what extent will the persistence of these disparities intensify the perception of an EU with several speeds?**

The final result is a good one, as it brings more European funds than ever to the Member States for

investments, including cohesion and reducing economic differences.

The agreement reached in July 2020 by the European Council on the cohesion funds largely maintains the allocations proposed in February, that is 22% for the cohesion policy - a decrease of 12%, compared to the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020.

Despite this cut, the *Next Generation EU* instrument includes an important component focusing on cohesion – *REACT EU* – which will add 47.5 billion euros to the cohesion funds available for the Member States.

Overall, we are advantaged. Indeed, some Member States have advocated a decrease of the cohesion funds, but in the end, the result was good, especially for Romania.

Compared to other countries from Central and Eastern Europe, Romania is the big winner of these negotiations. Hungary, Poland had cut-backs, while Romania received increased allocations.

**Relating to the current disparities in development, to what extent do the EU budgetary policies for 2021-2027 correspond to the EU integrated development strategies? What are the main financing lines that you see necessary in the context of the debates on the EU reform after Brexit?**

Firstly, we should continue to defend the policies that are working well, such as cohesion, agriculture, and fishing, since they allow us to achieve economic prosperity at the level of the entire Union. Secondly, we should insist on additional strengthening of the policies for the future, such as research, digitalization, education, small and medium-sized enterprises, the fight against climate change, defence and security. Moreover, investments should finance the EU's long-term objectives, such as decarbonisation and digitalization, and also increase the competitiveness of our economies.

We should place digital transition at the same level with climate transition. The period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us how important digitalization is in all sectors and fields.

**How much has the outbreak of COVID-19 changed the European citizens' expectations and fears? Are they reflected in the EU budgetary philosophy and its Economic Recovery Plan, respectively?**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact

on the lives of citizens in the European Union. As a consequence, their fears started to focus on job security and business operation; however, there are concerns related to health care and the policies related to this area.

The agreement reached by the European Council sends a strong signal to all EU citizens: we will get over the current health crisis, we will keep and create more jobs and will make Europe's economy competitive and future oriented. The €750 billion Economic Recovery Plan is a proof that Europe's answer to this unprecedented crisis is based on solidarity, democracy and responsibility. This instrument represents the main support for all European citizens affected by the COVID-19 crisis and seeks to meet all the related needs. Firstly, it will supplement the funds allocated for the cohesion policy, the common agricultural policy and those included in the Just Transition Fund. It will also stimulate private investments. The recovery plan also includes a health component – the *EU4Health* programme – that will invest in prevention and training for future crisis situations, as well as in procuring medicine and essential equipment.

**Taking into account the European citizen's expectations and fears, to what extent do you believe that the EU and its Member States have the necessary resources and policies to manage the moments of crises and setbacks in the European area over the past few years?**

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that the European Union has the ability to respond to crises through solidarity. We have seen how European countries have supported each other and sent help where it was needed. We have seen that the EU institutions support each other and, most of all, support the European citizens. All the European institutions have mobilised quickly in order to find solutions and provide help for all the Member States.

The agreement reached by the European Council is yet another proof that only together we can do more. This will be seen not only in the budget allocated to the Member States for the next seven years, but also in the support offered to the European countries for the economic recovery following the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic while enhancing the European Union's capability to prepare for, and counter any future crises.

**How do you see Romania's position in the**

**negotiations over the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027? To what extent can we identify Romania's objectives and interests in the structure of the EU budget?**

The €80 billion that Romania is going to receive in the following years represent the success of the negotiations.

And this success was also possible because, for the first time in many years, the Romanian President, the Romanian Prime Minister and Ministers have addressed to Brussels in one voice and have negotiated towards the same objectives, for Romania. This made possible the accomplishment of Romania's main objective in the negotiations with the European Council: the defence of our country's allocations for agriculture and for the Cohesion Policy.

We should also mention that the Investment and Economic Recovery Plan announced by the Romanian Government in the beginning of July is completely in accordance with the European Union's €750 billion Recovery Plan. The funds allocated to Romania through the Economic Recovery Plan will finance our country's investment plan.

**What are the main opportunities that need to be taken advantage of with a view to ensure a high level of absorption of European funds, at the same time with their use in an efficient way and with a direct impact on the living standard of every citizen?**

For the next seven years, Romania will receive €80 billion European funds, compared to the €45 billion over the past seven years and the €30 billion in the years 2007-2013. We will receive more funding than we have ever had, and this money will be used for projects destined for modernization, such as freeways, railroads and the countryside infrastructure. All these actions will attract investors; hence, more jobs will be created. People will have well-paid and steady jobs. Higher wages mean more money to the budget to be invested in schools, hospitals, for pensions and salaries.

More focus will also be put on projects and investments to combat climate change and protect the environment.

During this period, we have seen how important technology and digitalization are, but also how much we need to keep investing in research, innovation and digitalization. The good news is that digitalization is among the priorities of the next financial cycle. So, we will be able to do this by accessing European funds.

## Interview with the MEP Iuliu Winkler, European People's Party:

**“The recovery plan should help the less developed member states more, as well as those that have been most affected by the pandemic.”**

The coordinated response of the EU to the multiple threats and crises came in support of the member states that were significantly affected and confronted with domestic tensions and turmoil. Solidarity and cohesion were the strongest tools that the EU used to establish a common approach at the level of the European bloc, an action that was also a real challenge regarding reaching a mutual understanding. The difficulty of reaching common ground, agreed upon by all member states, delayed the EU's reaction most of the time. The COVID-19 pandemic represents a new turning point in the history of the EU, in a political, economic and social context, where it is absolutely necessary to take actions that are mainly aimed at strengthening the concepts of solidarity and cohesion at the European level.

The MEP Iuliu Winkler, member of the European People's Party group (Christian-Democratic orientation), member of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania, vice-chair of the European Parliament Committee on International Trade (EPCIT), permanent rapporteur for the EPCIT, as a member of the Delegation for relations with the People's Republic of China, analysed the perspectives and challenges regarding the European Union Recovery Plan, in the context of the crisis caused by COVID-19, in the interview he offered Vladimir-Adrian Costea for the *Geostrategic Pulse Magazine*.



**Vladimir-Adrian Costea: Mr. Winkler, the shock of the Coronavirus is a new challenge for the EU, whose resilience has been strongly tested lately. Terrorism, the migratory crisis, the rise of populism and extremism, to which we add the imminence of Brexit, place the EU member states in a vulnerable political, economic and social context. How do you see the future of the EU at the present? What are the options/scenarios that are still sustainable after this pandemic?**

**Iuliu Winkler:** The Coronavirus pandemic deeply changed the public agenda of the entire European Union. A multitude of very important subjects disappeared from the public eye. One of the victims is the debate regarding the future of the European Union, whose official signal was given in March 2017, when the Commission led by Jean-Claude Juncker hoped that such a debate could take place and end with the European elections in 2019. At that time, the European Commission proposed five scenarios for the future of the European Union – from *business as usual*, or the scenario of low expectations, where we only kept the common market, and became a plain economic cooperative, to the most complex scenario, where all 27 countries decide to integrate all the way. Three years after this proposal we find ourselves in the same spot regarding the debate about the future of Europe, and the tensions between the various groups of member states have increased. The pandemic has placed us at a turning point. We are at the hour of our biggest decision and the variables are simpler. Deepening our cooperation or starting our disintegration – these are the two options and the months to come will provide an answer.

The French-German proposal to create the economic recovery fund amounting to 750 billion euros guaranteed by the EU's multiannual financial framework is the ultimate test. For the first time in its history, the EU can decide to borrow money from the financial markets in the name of all its member states and to finance immediate actions for the benefit of our future generation.

We need this economic recovery, and most of the member states need the recovery to be supported by non-refundable funds. We will thus avoid losing a new generation of young people, after the one we lost in 2009-2010.

Of course, possibility also means responsibility. Today's loan will have to be paid back in the period between 2027 and 2057, so the task falls into the hands of the future generation. However, with a wisely managed recovery fund, we will start the road to our future prosperity today. This is why I believe that intense cooperation represents the future of the EU.

How did the EU manage the crises and the unrest that have occurred in the context of the complex social and economic changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic? To what extent does the solidarity between the member states allow the establishment of a common front at a European level?

Carefully considering the state of the Union, we may see that all that unrest, all that distance that are making themselves acutely felt today, were already there before the pandemic. The Coronavirus did nothing but generate an unprecedented situation, which further highlighted European misunderstandings. During the first weeks of the crisis the response was a national one, each member state taking emergency measures without taking into account its neighbours or the EU27 in its entirety. The lack of solidarity was obvious, however, fortunately, short lived. I think that the European Parliament plenary session on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March was the trigger that showed the need to restore solidarity. After that, every week, we bore witness to better coordinated actions taken at the EU level.

The necessary common front is functional today. It came up with new financial tools and even new institutions that will be able to respond effectively to the next similar challenge, even if it is not health related, but rather one of the asymmetrical threats we are all aware of.

The optimism of this evaluation will be confirmed during the next few months, if the member states and the European Parliament agree on the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework and on the economic recovery programme.

**To what extent was the political agenda of the European institutions and of the member states subjected to significant changes, in order to dampen the shock caused by the Coronavirus?**

The spring of 2020 brought significant changes in

the official agenda of the European institutions. The work schedule of the European Commission was updated. Some priorities have been postponed, such as the European Strategy on adaptation to climate change, or the new EU forest strategy. There is a possibility that the elements of the European Global Pact for the Environment could be included in the priorities of the "Next Generation EU" recovery plan, alongside the elements of the digital transition. This actually means a repositioning, not a waiver. Numerous international engagements and commercial negotiations have suffered because of the quarantine and the impossibility of keeping to the planned agenda.

Generally speaking, the conclusion drawn from the months where the activities were carried out online, via videoconference and email, is that technology helps democracy, but cannot replace it. Democratic debates, dialogue, brainstorming and the entire complex procedure regarding the direct mediation of conflicting ideas requires direct confrontation. This is why once the public health situation improves, we must go back to the well-known mechanisms of dialogue and direct negotiation.

**The Commission's recovery plan, "Next Generation EU", highlights the idea of an ecological, digital, social Union and focuses on resilience, for the sustainable future of the EU. Are the economic measures included in the Plan enough to achieve these objectives? To what extent does this Plan help with reducing the differences in the development of the member states?**

The structure of the recovery plan is based on three pillars: the tools necessary to support the economic recovery of the member states, measures to incentivise investments and enterprises, and the consolidation of those European programmes that support the single market. The two horizontal priorities that are the focus of the entire recovery plan are the green and digital transitions.

Therefore, we have a complex structure, which risks diffusing unless we comply with the principles of the cohesion policy. We must concern ourselves with the future, without tearing ourselves from the present. The recovery plan must help the less developed member states more, as well as those that have been most affected by the pandemic. This is the principle of solidarity. This is why the recovery plan cannot only offer loans. Just like the French-German proposal was conceived, most of the financial support must be non-refundable for

those who need it the most.

**How can member states obtain and efficiently manage the funds of this recovery plan? In Romania's case, what is the lesson we must learn, if we are to reach a high level of absorption of these European funds?**

The recovery plan's life span is well defined, starting with 2021 and lasting up until 2024. The same time span will be given to the flexibility of the budget that the European Commission has introduced as a response to the crisis. I believe the main challenge of all member states is to quickly develop viable projects that meet all the necessary requirements of "Next Generation EU".

Jobs are a priority, because without new jobs, we will not have the desired economic and social effects.

As far as Romania is concerned, our issues are old: poor administrative capability and lack of social cohesion. It is imperative that we wake up and become aware of the fact that without dialogue between the business and administrative environments and the educational system, we will not be able to mobilise properly, and become effective. Our objective should not be spending European money. Our real purpose is modernising Romania and placing our society on the path towards European integration.

**What are the opportunities presented to the economic actors from the EU member states?**

The future is green and digital. The recovery plan provides all European companies the opportunity to use their funds for this necessary transition to sustainability and digitalization. The responsibility of the institutions that will manage the financial resources of the recovery plan is that of ensuring the effective distribution of the sums. I do not believe that our savings have anything to gain from saving companies whose business models are still anchored in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It would only be temporary and the money would be wasted.

**To what extent does the EU's management of the COVID-19 pandemic represent a proper answer to the populist and extremist rhetoric which has become increasingly visible in the EU?**

There is a historical connection between the success of populism and economic uncertainty. This is the history lesson that Europe was able to learn in the '30s of the past century. Deepening inequalities and asymmetrical economic development do nothing but worsen the situation. We must be careful because populism and demagoguery might win. The European Union has mobilised itself to better inform its

citizens and is on the path to building social resilience against disinformation. However, we must be aware of the fact that we have only taken the first steps on a very long road. Changing the way a society reacts to disinformation takes a generation and the quality of the education system is essential in this fight. In Romania we will have to take urgent and radical decisions to be able, in the coming years, to ensure a critical thinking mindset, a high level of understanding and openness towards cooperation, skills that young people need in order to be able to cope with disinformation, manipulation and the contradicting influences they are subjected to.

**In the current situation, can getting out of the EU lead to bankruptcy? How does Brexit affect the relationship between the United Kingdom and the EU27?**

In a study carried out by Oxford University, the subjects were requested to mention the best and worst EU episode. In first place for positive answers came the fall of the Berlin Wall, while the negative episode was the Brexit referendum. These answers are significant to me for the way the UK's decision to leave the EU is perceived. However, four years after the referendum, we must understand that for British politicians Brexit is now a country project. Paradoxically, the pandemic acted as an unexpected rescue mechanism for British politicians, since in the years to come any economic problem can be pinned on this crisis.

For the EU27 Brexit is economically problematic and politically dangerous, because it is for the first time in its history that the EU, otherwise in constant expansion, loses a member.

As far as the technical stage of the negotiations is concerned, taking into account Prime Minister Boris Johnson's refusal to extend the transition period, the EU27 is facing an impossible mission – renegotiating 759 agreements by the end of 2020.

The priority is the future economic relation between the two partners, which poses extremely difficult challenges: fair competition, the domain of fishing and the judicial institutional framework.

We must notice the exceptional proof of solidarity coming from the EU27 during the entire course of these difficult negotiations. This display of European solidarity creates the premise for future success.

A commercial, economic and cooperative relationship with our British partners is important and desirable for the entire EU. At the same time, however, it cannot be better outside than inside, so the United Kingdom cannot benefit from the common market without undertaking the related obligations.

## Interview with Iulian F. Popa, associate professor at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca: "The future belongs to 'digital highways' (as well)."

The need to maintain a physical distance during the COVID-19 pandemic brought back into the spotlight the issue regarding easier online access. Becoming aware of the opportunities and threats that the online environment poses, is an important aspect when taking advantage of the potential that digitalization has.

Iulian F. Popa, associate professor within Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, where he teaches cyber security and cyber security governance, analysed the perspectives and challenges of the digitalization in the EU, during the COVID-19 pandemic, in an interview he gave Vladimir-Adrian Costea for the *Geostrategic Pulse* Magazine.

**Vladimir-Adrian Costea: The COVID-19 pandemic suddenly turned a need into a necessity for important fields, where socializing became virtual. How well were we prepared, both on a national and on a European level for this change? Overall, how developed is digitalization in the EU?**

**Iulian F. Popa:** First of all, I don't believe that the pandemic suddenly turned a need into a necessity. Both the need, and especially the necessity, were present before the pandemic. I would rather say that we are referring to these tendencies as accelerated, at least as far as the need for online interaction and digitalization is concerned. We now see things differently, expectations are way higher, however, we are basically referring to the same situation. To use a technical term, the online worked as backup and we all saw that there is „life online” as well – I take credit for the use of this term. I still believe that not much has changed, we only became aware of the fact that under the influence of certain disruptive factors (fear, physical distancing and the uncertainties caused by the spread of the virus) digitalization has been playing a more important part in our lives. I feel sorry that it takes a tragic scenario to make us aware of this. If we are to refer to Romania and to the national context, I cannot but see that we are a country of contrasts when it comes to digitalization. On one hand we have a very good electronic communications infrastructure, which met the challenges posed by the traffic during the state of emergency, while on the other, we are the last in the EU from the DESI point of view. I couldn't say that we have been or that we are prepared, but I am convinced that as far as we are concerned, things will

turn out for the better in the upcoming period.

**To what extent do discrepancies in digitalization overlap the social cleavages existent on a national and European level? What was in this case the reaction of the authorities?**

To put your question into context, I believe that the discrepancies in digitalization do not overlap social cleavages, but they rather increase or decrease them depending on the situation. This is why I believe we must be very careful when we sort out our priorities on matters of public policies. On a national level, just as I have seen during the state of emergency, it is very clear to me that certain delicate situations regarding the access to the internet and to the public electronic services must be improved immediately, especially in underprivileged or rural areas. It is not my place to evaluate the reaction of the authorities, but I believe it is good, even if I wanted it to be more “digital” than “printed”.

**Does the need to quickly adjust to remote interaction by using digital tools contribute to the change of mentalities regarding digitalization, or, on the contrary, does it highlight the stereotypes that we see among those who were more reluctant?**

Your question is very good. I wish I could provide you with a concrete answer. As I have already said, online interaction definitely changes certain habits, but I am reluctant to believe it changes mentalities. We have been interacting from a distance very well for the past 20 years, however, most of the mentalities and stereotypes change equally slow. I cannot see a direct relation in this case and I cannot find solid arguments to be able to believe it is there. We are actually referring to everyone's reaction to change. The fact is that that everyday life doesn't migrate towards the online environment – and I say this despite the fact that the time spent online has increased – instead we are acknowledging that we can use the online environment in a manner we didn't think possible before the pandemic. To provide you with an example in this direction, I believe that the employment market will look so much differently in a short while. *Work from home* will become a mainstream concept very soon, even with less expected professions.

**During this time access to education is a stringent matter for pupils and teachers who do**

**not own a device connected to the internet. What do you believe are the necessary steps to help these people? Furthermore, how do you see the actions taken on a European level to facilitate the online access to education?**

Firstly, I believe that a great deal of these aspects is a national responsibility. I wish the state became more actively involved in this matter. I am referring to its role as a facilitator, to its ability to encourage a vision and projects that have multiple effects on an economic and a social level. Basically, I expect the state should continue and speed, if the case be, the development of the electronic infrastructures and networks. Infrastructure comes accompanied by even more competitiveness, economic growth and mobility. The future belongs to the *digital highway* (as well). As far as the actions taken by the EU to facilitate the access to education and to the improvement of digital competences (after all this is what it is all about) I cannot but see that there have been designated policies for a long time, and the pandemic provided the proper environment for this matter to hit the spotlights.

**Do you believe that remote activities draw more attention on the opportunities and risks particular to digitalization? To what extent do we understand the way we build an identity online?**

I will draw a parallel and make things easier. Digitalization resembles, to a certain extent, to riding a bicycle. One cannot forget it and it is very difficult to reverse it. So as far as risks and opportunities are concerned – to continue this comparison – I believe we can assimilate them and become aware of them mostly by practicing. It sounds very ironic, but if we come to think about it, this is where we stand. Which is improving our reflexes and habits as a result to our risk exposure, however, in a manner where we “get a taste of” those opportunities. As far as the online identity issue is concerned, if I understood your question correctly, I will try to give you an analyst’s answer, because I wish to leave the core of the matter to sociologists and psychologists for a more accurate answer. I may surprise you, but I do not believe that the online identity is different from the actual identity of an individual. And I am referring to typical, common cases, where the online environment is used peacefully. I believe that the online environment (that is being online) is a means to an end, not the actual end. To this regard, I believe we use the online environment more as a tool. So, we must be very careful how we use that tool. In theory, the online environment is a non-Euclidean space that is a space where everyone is a neighbour to everyone, where physical distancing and time are almost irrelevant. This is why opportunities, but

threats as well, are very near to us. I believe this is an issue that substantially influences the way we each see the online identity.

**To what extent do European and national IT systems have the necessary mechanisms to make them resilient in the face of cyber-attacks, as we have become addicted to the online environment?**

The matter regarding cyber-security is very dear to me and I appreciate the fact that this conversation led us there. I am one of those who believe and argue that cyber-security is a new security dimension (despite the idea according to which classic security dimensions, as they have been theorized by various schools of thought, have a cybernetic dimension), that is cyber-space is a strategic field, just like land, air, naval and space. It is the starting point of our entire conversation. Actually, I believe this is the mindset that should guide the way we approach the matter of increasing our resilience when facing cyber-attacks. I do not know the European context in detail; however, on a national level we are OK. I would like to remind you that Romania is a net provider of IT security and knowledge on a European level, and I am not referring only to government structures, but also to the local cyber-security industry, which is very well placed.

**After the pandemic, what are the prospects of (re)defining the paradigm of digitalization of services in the European Union?**

The way things are at present in the European Union, I cannot see a shift in the paradigm, neither on a short, nor on a long term. The paradigm of digitalization as I see it, means more prosperity, competitiveness, transparency and, depending on the context, even more security. I do not believe that the pandemic and especially the needs we will have at that time will change this truth. What I see instead is the gradual and significant decrease of the European states dependency on knowledge and technologies necessary for digitalization originating from outside the European Union. Most likely, seeing the large-scale use of potentially disruptive technologies, we will witness an increase in European protectionism. Strategically speaking, it is a long-shot and a subject difficult to digest, however, Europe cannot afford to lose the global battle regarding this matter.

## THE WESTERN BALKANS

## The role of NATO in arresting the ripple effect of ethnic conflicts. Unintended consequences of the Great Powers' influence in the Balkans and lessons learned from the previous Balkan Wars applicab

*Roxana ALLEN*

One hundred and eighteen years ago, the First Balkan War started initiating an unstoppable spiral of events leading to the Second Balkan War of 1913 and the Balkan Crisis of 1914 and the global World War I. What are the key lessons to be drawn from how the small Balkan states were able to drag the more powerful states into their ethnic conflicts? What are the principal unintended consequences of the influence of the Great Powers in the Balkans? And how can this provide an example of why NATO plays a crucial role in arresting the ripple effect of ethnic conflicts?

The Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 show the unintended consequences of the influence of the Great Powers in the Balkans. In attempting to restrain each other and promote their own interests in the collapsing Ottoman Empire, the Great Powers of Great Britain, Germany, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and sometimes Italy, created and reinforced their web alliances and exacerbated ethnic conflicts in the Balkans.

acquiring an outlet to the Adriatic Sea. Russian anger at this act led to creation of the Balkan League.[1] Supported by other Great Powers as a buffer against future expansion of the Habsburgs in the Balkans, the Balkan League was composed of Serbia and Bulgaria – Russian satellites – and Greece and Montenegro.[2]

Encouraged by the Italo-Turkish War in which Italy seized Ottoman Mediterranean possessions, instead of providing a shield to the north, on 8 October 1912, the Balkan League attacked to liberate the territories of Macedonia, Albania and Thrace from the Ottoman Empire. Since the Balkan League treaties did not fully flesh out the division of prospective conquests, the members left territorial disputes for Russia to arbitrate.[3] The Greeks took Salonika and the Serbs occupied two-thirds of Macedonia, while the Bulgarians faced trench warfare in Macedonia against the main Turkish forces defending Istanbul.[4] Motivated by its desire to gain a port on the Adriatic, Serbia joined Montenegro and Greece in invading Albania.

Before the Ottoman Empire's final defeat in the First Balkan War, the great powers of Europe met in London on 17 December 1912 to try to repair the damage done by the Balkan League. In doing so, they almost started World War I. Austro-Hungary and Italy were concerned about Serbia and Montenegro's occupation of Albania as they feared the Serbs would give the Russians a naval base on the Adriatic. The Serbs refused to relinquish their claims and Russia and then Austria-Hungary began to mobilize their forces. Both France and Germany pledged support to their respective allies. Britain delayed the war between the Great Powers when it secured an agreement on Albanian independence. [5]

The May 1913 Treaty of London – imposed upon the Balkan League by the Great Powers – ceded all the Ottoman Empire's European possessions to the Balkan allies, with the exception of a small area of Thrace and Albania. Unfortunately, the treaty mandated no territorial division. Occupying their



Photo: Balkans in 1912; Fundatia Europeana Titulescu; titulescu.eu

In 1908, Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina to fight Serbian terrorism in the province and halt Serbia's geopolitical objective of



own and most of Bulgaria's share of Macedonia, the Serbs and Greeks expelled Bulgarian Macedonians from their territories. Denied Albania by the Great Powers, the Serbs and Greeks demanded even more of Bulgaria's share of Macedonia.[6] Russia, by default, supported the Serbs in not acting as an arbiter between Serbia and Bulgaria.[7] After Bulgaria attacked Serbia in June 1913 and began the Second Balkan War, it was quickly defeated. Bulgaria relinquished most of the territory it gained in the First Balkan War to Serbia, Greece, Romania, and Turkey under the Treaty of Bucharest.

The Great Powers actions during the Balkan Wars led to both the reinforcement of the European alliances and nationalism in the Balkans. This set the stage for future Great Power disputes and ethnic conflicts. The emergence of a strengthened Serbia on their southern flank tilted the balance of force in Europe against Germany and Austria-Hungary and resulted in the two Central Powers accelerating both their military recruiting and joint training.[8] They also reinforced their alliance with Istanbul and established one with Bulgaria. The Turkish defeats in the trenches of Thrace led to the apotheosis of a viable Turkish nationalism that focused on preserving the Turkish heartland rather than the dying empire. This nationalism would mobilize manpower for the defense of Gallipoli and prevent the British seizure of Istanbul. It also would lead to the Armenian Genocide.[9] Bulgaria's alliances with Germany and occupation of Macedonia in the subsequent two world wars came because of Russia's support for Serbia in the Second Balkan War and the political influence of vengeful Macedonian refugees in Sofia.[10]

After the Balkan Wars, the Great Powers continue with some success to restrain a strengthened Serbia's national aspirations. "Rogue state" behavior in Bosnia-Herzegovina such as the 1914 Sarajevo assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand contributed to Germany and Austro-Hungary's First World War, and later the 1992-95 Sarajevo siege that led to 1999 NATO's "preventive" war against the Serbs.[11] Both the Central Powers and NATO assumed that the Russians would not back their only Balkan ally, Serbia, for its involvement in ethnic driven terrorism. But only NATO was right. Italy stopped Serbian dreams of dominating Albania by occupying the kingdom. During World War II, Italy expanded its Albanian possessions into Kosovo by "liberating" the Albanians there.[12] In addition to the Kosovar Albanians, Italy – like NATO in the

1990s – also supported Croat and Macedonian separatists against Serb domination.[13]



Photo: Bosnia and Herzegovina; [https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/europe/bosnia\\_pol\\_2002.jpg](https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/europe/bosnia_pol_2002.jpg)

In preserving the distinctive national identities of the Macedonians and the Kosovar Albanians in the 1990s, in the Great Power tradition, the international community continued to revive ethnic conflicts. The Western backed independence of Macedonia revived Balkan War era irredentist fears of the Greeks, who claimed that the new country harbored designs on Aegean Greece and Salonika. Subsequently, the international community referred to Macedonia as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (changed to the Republic of North Macedonia in 2019 before achieving NATO membership in 2020, ending a 28-year territorial dispute between the Southeast European countries of Greece and Macedonia between 1991 and 2019). Another more serious ethnic conflict within Macedonia itself was an Albanian insurgency sponsored by the Kosovar Albanians, who were liberated in 1999 by NATO's Operation Allied Force.[14] This led to the withdrawal of Yugoslav armed forces from Kosovo, and establishment of a UN peacekeeping mission in Kosovo.

The Balkan Wars, like subsequent wars on the Balkan Peninsula, were the result of the Great Powers' intervention in ethnic conflicts. Although the Great Powers created new states and established and reinforced alliances with existing Balkan states to satisfy their geopolitical interests, these

nationalist states took advantage of the larger states to satisfy their own national aspirations. Since the Great Powers could not uniformly restrain the small Balkan states, these states were able to drag the more powerful states into their ethnic conflicts, subsequently engendering new conflicts that drew in other powerful states.



Photo: George Robertson (UK), the 10<sup>th</sup> Secretary General of NATO and Nicholas Burns, the US Ambassador to NATO and a SAIS Alumn, Johns Hopkins University SAIS, Washington DC, 2003.

Today, NATO plays a crucial role in arresting the ripple effect of ethnic conflicts. Once highly controversial, in the post 9/11 world, the West's successful intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina through NATO's Stabilization Force (SFOR) and the somewhat successful "nation-building" by the International Community can now be seen, like NATO enlargement, as an example of how to stop ethnic conflicts and entrench Western values of free market, civil society, and democracy. Thus, NATO's security planners should expand NATO's strategic focus beyond a purely military function to look at cultural, political and economic aspects.

NATO's intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina and initial enlargement of NATO were the first steps of the implementation of a vision that embraces the promise of the "end of history" (as Francis Fukuyama envisioned in the post-Cold War era with the dissolution of the Soviet Union), and avoids the perils of the ethnic conflicts. This vision's scope has been further expanded and formalized by the events of September 11th and the global war on terrorism. Only through peacekeeping and enlargement by a NATO with strong enforcement mechanisms that guarantee both Western norms and security can the vision of "several Europes" and that of the "clash of civilizations" finally disappear.



Photo: NATO Assistant Secretary General Dr. John Manza with KFOR and local armed forces representatives on the strategic role of KFOR in maintaining a safe and secure environment and freedom of movement throughout Kosovo under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

<https://2lonline.com/file/2017/06/3.-Ministri-i-FSK-së-zoti-Haki-Demolli-priti-zëvendës-ndihmësin-e-Sekretarit-të-Përgjithshëm-të-NATO-s-zotin-John-Manza-20.06.2017.jpg>

**NATO Assistant Secretary General Dr. John Manza** had this to say about the substance of The North Atlantic Treaty: *"It's good to start by looking at The Washington Treaty itself, which makes it clear that NATO is not only a military alliance; it's a political-military alliance. It's an alliance built to defend democratic values. Having them (new allies and partners) at the table with all other democracies in one room consulting with each other. I think in Operations certainly it provides a venue for us to take a functional approach. These allies are all working together not just in the NATO Headquarters sitting around the big table, but they are in field together, developing relationships, sharing ideas, going through each other's schools which is extremely important. So, all that cross fertilization, from lieutenants up to ministers of defense, it's a great way to keep allies in check and following democratic rules."* [15]

Although NATO is the most successful political-military alliance in our history, the Alliance is facing more and emerging challenges. NATO's traditional role to defend member states from threats by communist countries shifted to maintaining global peace and security and promoting democratic values and institution building. Thus, NATO facilitates political and military union and peaceful conflict resolution.

The impact of emerging threats on NATO leads to the need to optimize new organizational structures to support rapid information exchange, intelligence and data sharing, bringing national security issues at a supranational security level. The cost of security, including in cyber space, will increase and all allies must participate with 2 percent of GDP

quota for defense according to Membership Action Plan. Another impact is re-thinking and developing new partnership program with Indo-Pacific partners and continue exercises in the Black Sea and Baltic Sea. There is a need to develop a security policy function, in addition to the evaluation of the partnership policy to optimizing NATO's interaction with all partners in Western Balkans and beyond.

NATO's continuous enlargement as a risk management safeguard will ultimately temper the unintended consequences of the influence of the Great Powers in the Western Balkans. Without the Great Powers interference, could we assume the Balkans would be without wars or ethnic conflicts? Would the Ottoman Turks still be in charge? Or would it be some other multi-national empire?



Photo: Bosnia and Herzegovina Areas of Responsibility for SFOR 1997  
[https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/bosnia/bosnia\\_sfor\\_97.jpg](https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/bosnia/bosnia_sfor_97.jpg)

**Footnotes**

- [1] J.M. Roberts, *The Penguin History of Europe* (London: The Penguin Group, 1996), 503.
- [2] Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and Great Powers, 1804-1999* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1999), 224-225.
- [3] Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars 1912-1913* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 99.
- [4] Ibid. 14.
- [5] Glenny, 242-3.
- [6] Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghost* (New York: Vintage Departures, 1993), 63-64.
- [7] Hall, 104.
- [8] David G. Hermann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton,

NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 198.

- [9] Glenny, 325-331.
- [10] Kaplan, 64.
- [11] Hermann, 198.
- [12] Hall, 142.
- [13] Glenny, 431.
- [14] Glenny, 656.
- [15] Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Jim Townsend, and John Manza, "Dr. John Manza on NATO Readiness, NATO's Iraq Mission, and Challenges Facing NATO Today," Brussels Sprouts On-line Interview, 15 February 2019; available from <https://player.fm/series/brussels-sprouts/dr-john-manza-on-nato-readiness-natos-iraq-mission-and-challenges-facing-nato-today>; Internet; accessed 5 September 2019.



Photo: George Robertson (UK), the 10<sup>th</sup> Secretary General of NATO, and Nicholas Burns, the US Ambassador to NATO, Johns Hopkins University SAIS, Washington DC, 2003.

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Photo: Roxana Allen with her team amid 1999 field office evacuation due to extremist attacks, ethnic war in Kosovo and NATO air strikes, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE Field Office Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

## Greece - Egypt Maritime Deal Aims to Shackle Turkey's Mediterranean Designs

**Eva J. KOULOURIOTIS**

In early August, the foreign ministers of Egypt and Greece signed an agreement in Cairo on a preliminary plan for maritime borders between the two countries in the Mediterranean.

The map, which was published at the time of the announcement, showed that the agreement was in fact only partial, and lacks key details. While some were surprised by the speed of the announcement, the truth is that consultations between the two countries date back to the time of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. They then returned to the forefront at the end of 2014, while almost taking shape again at the beginning of 2018.

What is most surprising, however, is the timing of the agreement, which came days after the announcement that Ankara would suspend all research activities in the eastern Mediterranean, following German Chancellor Angela Merkel's initiative to control tensions between the two neighbours and open a window for a new round of negotiations.

This sudden agreement between Greece and Egypt is the spark that could further ignite tensions, and possibly conflict, in the eastern Mediterranean.

Negotiations which began under Mubarak were complex, former officials in the Greek energy ministry told *The New Arab*, with Cairo making high demands to reach a comprehensive agreement. Under Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi talks became significantly smoother, with Cairo making concessions on border demarcation in 2014 negotiations. At the time, however, the Greek government faced pressure from Europe and postponed all discussions.

The issue reopened in early 2017, as talks proceeded with the same pattern of Egyptian concessions in order to quickly start gas and oil explorations. At that time, the Greek side showed procrastination related to the reluctance of the Syriza government led by Alexis Tsipras to increase tensions with Ankara. This Greek slowdown and lack of seriousness has now changed

with the new administration of Kyriakos Mitsotakis. However, it comes at the wrong moment.

Today, the Greek government is heavily influenced by Paris. President Emmanuel Macron took the reins in France at a time when Europe had no clear leader, with the British disembarking the European ship and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany facing internal divisions and health issues.

Greece at the time required urgent European support, both financially and politically, in light of the growing regional role of Turkey, and Mitsotakis, prime minister since July 2019, turned to France in Europe, Israel regionally, and Abu Dhabi in the Arab world. The weak position presented by the Greek government was exploited by Paris to control Greek foreign policy in great detail.

Greece, for the first time, chose sides in conflicts within the Middle East and North Africa, sending Patriot missiles and troops to Saudi Arabia and hosting Libyan National Army (LNA) leader General Khalifa Haftar to provide diplomatic cover in a visit coordinated with Paris. Finally, the most important announcement was the demarcation of the sea border with Egypt, part of a French-Emirati plan to put pressure on Turkey in the Libyan conflict.

In June, when forces of the Government of National Accord (GNA) advanced on Sirte, located near the most important economic and geopolitical region of the country, Haftar's allies in Paris, Abu Dhabi and Moscow felt the country had begun to slip from their sphere of influence, given the strong Turkish military, political and economic support for the GNA. This development pushed them into action.

The first move was from Cairo, with the Egyptian parliament approving a military deployment in Libya under the pretext of protecting Egypt's national security. The move came under pressure from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), who promised that the financially weary Egyptian government would have a stake in the Libyan pie.

The second move was made by Russia, which has recently faced an increase in tensions in northern Syria, mainly around Idlib province. Moscow is pushing more Syrian regime forces to the area around Idlib, sending a clear message to Turkey that it could further complicate the situation in the north.



Greek-Italian maritime deal sends clear message to Turkey as Mediterranean tensions rise

Finally, the Cairo agreement on the demarcation of the maritime border between Greece and Egypt was the third move, fuelling tensions between Greece and Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean and increasing external pressure on Ankara on more than one front.

### Cairo agreement through Greek eyes

In the media, the Greek ruling party, New Democracy, presented the accord as a historic victory that solves a decade-old problem and reinforces the map of the maritime borders that Athens signed with Rome. Many Greek officials have confirmed that the agreement will be a major bulwark against the Turkish - Libyan memorandum signed late last year.

The reality, however, is that any negative impact of the agreement on Greece, both internally and externally, have been omitted by the official Greek media. It did not, for example, draw the entire border but only a small part of it, and a new Egyptian government could nullify it and return to previous arrangements.

Additionally, the plan does not include the island of Kastellorizo, which is the spearhead of the dispute with Ankara, raising many questions about the reasons why Athens strongly demands it for the negotiations with Turkey but removes it from the map of the border with Egypt. This can be considered a major diplomatic defeat for Athens internationally.

Going back to the basics of politics, the order of priorities determines the negative or positive effects of any move. Today, with Greece economically and politically tired in the shadow of the Covid-19 crisis and the end of the tourist season, the priority must be to move away from any external tensions. The agreement with Cairo, however, will not bring any immediate benefits to Greece and reduces its chances for any new investment plans. Moreover, the move will damage trust between Athens and Berlin, as the former's lack of respect for the German request for calm can be characterised as political futility.

The scene today is more dangerous than ever. Greece and Turkey are two NATO member states, which prevents them from clashing with each other. But relying on this to limit any tension is unrealistic.

Today, with its growing influence in the region, Turkey feels obliged to protect its prestige even if it is forced to go to a military conflict with its neighbour. On the other hand, the Greek government feels more confident than it should that its French ally will protect it in any future military conflict.

The situation today in the eastern Mediterranean is complex and interrelated. The possibility of a limited conflict is still present, but only the Turkish and Greek people will lose out.

**NB.** The article was first published on 12 August 2020 in *TheNewArab* (<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/8/12/greece-egypt-maritime-deal-aims-to-shackle-turkeys-mediterranean-designs>).

## THE MIDDLE EAST

# The Third Peace in the Middle East - from Abu Dhabi to Tel-Aviv. And yet...

*Ambassador Professor Dumitru CHICAN*

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of August, nine days after the “earthquake” that hit Lebanon in the Port of Beirut, another piece of major news drew the attention of the entire international political, social and media community – with very different meaning and consequences – and turned the eye of the media and daily news consumers. At that time, from the Oval Office, President Donald Trump announced, *urbi et orbi*, that following a personal initiative, managed by his son-in-law and presidential advisor Jared Kushner, there have been negotiations between the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and the Crown Prince of the United Arab Emirates, Mohammed Bin Zayed, and that they have agreed the normalization of relations between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel.



Mohammed Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, UAE Crown Prince

As far as the roadmap regarding the peace-making process between the UAE federation and Israel is concerned, it sets the following coordinates, course of action and objectives:

- Normalizing the relations between the UAE and Israel worldwide.
- Establishing diplomatic and consular relations and opening embassies, both in Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem, run by resident ambassadors.
- Establishing direct airlines, including freedom to fly over for commercial aviation.
- Allowing Emirati citizens increased access to sacred Muslim sites, including the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.
- Encouraging direct mutual investments between the two countries.
- Negotiating and signing cooperation

agreements in various sectors of activity, such as tourism, security, communications, advanced technologies, energy, medicine, culture, environment, water and so on.

Following the rhetoric and hyperbole that characterises the political discourse of the Donald Trump Administration, the draft official document that would be signed – in its final form – early September, at the White House, was described as historic. President Trump even joked about it, saying that the historic document should be named after the current White House resident, who didn't hesitate to suggest that his “numerous accomplishments” should be awarded with old Alfred Nobel's prize. The document was eventually given the code-name *Abraham*, as a symbol of peace.

Having the same enthusiastic, dithyrambic discourse, the head of US diplomacy, Mike Pompeo, chose to step outside the lines and quote the apostle Matthew, who said “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God”. So, we come to the conclusion that the authors of the “Abraham Agreement”, that is President Trump, the pious Mohammed Bin Zayed, Bibi Netanyahu and the younger “peacemaker”, Jared Kushner, will be known as the “children of God”. This is something, especially during a presidential campaign.

If during this time (three weeks) the agreement is signed (and there is not any reason this formality should not take place), the UAE will become the third Arab, Muslim country in the history of conflicts in the Middle East to sign a peace treaty with Israel, after Egypt (Camp David 1979) and Jordan (the peace treaty in Wadi Araba/Arava in Hebrew – 26<sup>th</sup> of October 1994).

Looking back at history, the normalization of the relations between Israel and the UAE is not that historical and there are at least two reasons why. The road to Arab-Israeli peace, as far as the Arabs are concerned, was set by Anwar Al-Sadat, was carried on by the late Jordanian monarch, King Hussein Bin Talal, and was continued, without having been completed, by Yasser Arafat and then by the Palestinian National Authority, led by Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen). Besides, for the past few years we have been witnessing several Emirati

discourses and endeavours regarding the initiation of a peace process with Israel. Anyway, this royalist Emirati peace trend was set by the Saudi conductor, especially after the internal Saudi chessboard witnessed the rise of the royal son, Mohammad Bin Salman – a “peacemaker” as well, this time in Yemen, while competing against the Iranian “peacemaker”. The UAE and the other four Gulf monarchies – Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman – are members of the sub-regional organization titled the Gulf Cooperation Council (Qatar used to be a part of this organization; however, it was expelled once the Saudis and the Emiratis invaded Yemen). So long as, and as we well know, the *de facto* leader of the Council is Saudi Arabia, it is easy to see that the Emirati government could have not made a move towards peace with Israel without receiving the green light from Riyadh – the same Riyadh where the tempestuous Crown Prince, Mohammad Bin Salman, advised his Palestinian “brothers” to “stop complaining and return to the negotiating table with Israel (former “Zionist enemy”)”.



The spectacular announcement of the normalization of the official relations between the UAE and Israel can be associated – in the most pragmatic way possible – with the old popular saying “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. If the Emirati federation decided – upon the insistencies of the Trump Administration – to take a giant step towards the political and diplomatic recognition of the Jewish state, following years of confidential security and economic cooperation, it is – before all – only due to the national and collective interests of the Arab Gulf countries to consolidate as much as possible the front against the assiduous regional influence of the Iranian theocratic regime. And this is reflected in the common policies and apprehensions between the United States and what Donald Trump called “America’s greatest friends in the Middle East”, Israel and the UAE.

We do not believe it is an exaggeration to state that the step taken by the *de facto* leader of the Emirates, Mohammed Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, may be seen, under these circumstances, as an endurance test or a “feasibility study”, according to which this experience can be gradually mimicked by the other Arab monarchies in the Gulf, starting with Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait (that cannot forget that its existence is due to the United States, which freed the country from the occupation of Saddam Hussein’s armed forces), ending with a similar decision, which will be made official by Saudi Arabia. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August, the King of Bahrain offered high praises to the benefits of the Emirati-Israeli Agreement for the peace, security and stability of the Middle East, but not for the solution for the Palestinian issue based on the “two state” vision. We will not refrain from appreciating that the small Bahraini kingdom is the Arab country that President Trump had in mind when he stated that in a very near future “another Arab country will follow Abu Dhabi’s example concerning the normalization of relations with Israel”.

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According to the principles and norms of international law, and also the logic of the relations within the international community, it is worth mentioning at least two things. We are firstly referring to the fact that among the rights and functions of a country is first and foremost the sovereign right to choose how and with whom a country establishes its cooperation, coexistence and dialogue. The promotion of this principle is the decisive factor that exchanges conflict and war for conciliation and peace. This is the equation that has been ignored for centuries and that has maintained the Middle East in its long and damaging abnormality known to our world’s history as the “Arab-Israeli conflict”.

From this point of view, the decision taken by the UAE cannot be but welcome to the peaceful, stable and prosperous future of the Middle East in its entirety.

Secondly, we are referring to the principle, which became a custom, according to which any peace and any normal relation between countries should be accepted and promoted willingly, should be equitable and durable and not in the least should it damage the interests and rights of others.

Provided that before its signing in the beginning of the September, the American-Israeli-Emirati tripartite agreement will be more thoroughly read in order to achieve perfection, we must draw attention



to a few aspects regarding its present shortcomings, which left unattended would risk turning this agreement into what the Arabs call a “limping goose” – *waza ‘arja*.

1. During the centuries that were marked by the “conflict in the Middle East”, the Arab community had two reference points that governed the attitude of unity in matters of peace and war – the principle of the “common Arab initiative” that defines the role and the purpose of the Arab League – and the “Arab peace initiative” established by Saudi Arabia during the summit of the Arab League that took place in Beirut in 2002. This initiative meant that the entire Arab world recognised Israel as an independent country and established global peace relations in exchange for the latter agreeing to recognise the rights of the Palestinians to have their own independent country. The Saudi proposals were not literally agreed upon by the Israelis, and the current tripartite agreement was the exclusive result of mediation coming from the Trump Administration, without taking into account the “common Arab initiative” and that of the Arab League, a symbol of Arab unity. Is the entire Arab nation ready to follow the example of the Emiratis? To what extent can we even refer to an Arab unity in a more and more divided world?

2. Official, officious and public comments on the tripartite agreement assiduously highlighted the concept that its occurrence was possible only because the UAE asked Israel that in exchange for normal relations, it would be willing to end the plans of the Netanyahu government to impose Israeli sovereignty on the Jewish settlements in the

West Bank, the Jordan Valley and some other territories in the north of the Dead Sea, which meant their annexation. The tripartite communiqué on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October dedicates the following paragraph to this issue: “Thanks to this diplomatic action, upon the request of President Trump and with the support of the United Arab Emirates, Israel will suspend declaring sovereignty over the territories described in the document referred to as *Donald Trump’s vision for a comprehensive peace agreement* and will concentrate its efforts towards enhancing its cooperation with other Arab and Muslim countries.”

It is difficult to believe that the Palestinians are mainly interested in Israel’s enhancing the relations with the Arab-Muslim world, so long as the “good-will” of the Jewish state comes down not to giving up annexing the Palestinian territories, but postponing this action. This fact was confirmed by the Israeli Prime Minister, Netanyahu, who stated that they “were referring to temporarily delaying our programmes concerning the territories”.

Perhaps during the three weeks before the official signing of the agreement, the parties will shed necessary light on how the so-designed Emirati-Israeli normalization “will establish peace and implement the vision of the two countries” as a fair instrument for finding a solution to the Palestinian brief.

As far as we are concerned, we welcome the third Arab-Israeli peace and we keep on waiting for a Godot who can explain how a bilateral relations document will be able to deliver the Palestinians their long-promised country.

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# The War in “Arabia Felix”: Five Years of “Restoring Hope”

*Ambassador Professor Dumitru CHICAN*

On the night of the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2015, under the code name *Asifat Al-Hazm* (“Decisive Storm”), later changed to operation “Restoring Hope”, a multinational coalition consisting of 150,000 people, led by Saudi Arabia, started a devastating war in Yemen. Its declared purpose was to stop the rebellion of the secessionist group *Houthi* and restore the leadership of the president Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi, removed from power after the Houthi militias took over the capital, Sanaa, and the presidential palace. Initially, the coalition led by the Riyadh monarchy was comprised of the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Morocco, Egypt, Kuwait and Sudan, and the operation was supported by the USA, Turkey, Senegal, Mauritania, Somalia and Djibouti.



## Why?

The conflict between the Houthis and the gerontocratic regime of the Yemeni president, Ali Abdallah Saleh, was but a resumption of the various conflicts between the factious Shiites in the northern part of the country, at the southern border of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the governing regime. This time, however, the “Decisive Storm” was one of those of the “Arab Spring”, which was the main reason the Saudis decided to take immediate extreme measures and start their military aggression in Yemen.

- We are first referring to the fact that the operation initiated by the Saudis was conceived as a measure to prevent the “Spring’s” revolutionary flow from reaching the Wahhabi kingdom. To the Saudi monarchy, but also to the other monarchies in the Arabian-Persian Gulf, which orbit, just like satellites, around influential Saudi Arabia, the Arab

Spring represented a major threat to the survival of the traditional conservative regimes in the tip of the Arabian Peninsula.

- During Abdallah Saleh’s 30-year-old governance, Yemen was led by a consensus between the General People’s Congress, a secular republican party, and by the Islamic movement The Muslim Brotherhood, represented by the “Islah” Party (no longer in the good graces of the Riyadh monarchy) – Jihadism’s spiritual and ideological leader, and supporter of the “dream” to rebuild the Muslim caliphate, which would remove the Saudi monarchy from the self-claimed position of keeper and manager of Islam’s holy grounds and the centre of the global Muslim community.
- We are finally referring to another element, maybe the most important, which was the needed incentive for the Saudi intervention in Yemen, that is the fact that by being part of the Shia Zaydis – a branch called the Fivers, separated from the Iranian Twelvers, the Houthis benefited ever since the beginning from massive military, logistic and financial support and so on from the theocracy in Tehran. Related to the fierce conflictual competition between the Saudis and the Iranians, this particularity turned the internal Yemeni conflict into a proxy war between two of the greatest regional powers in the Middle East, between two expansions, two Muslim confessions, both as belligerent in the area as well as outside it.

## The Present Day

After five years of war, excessive bombings and use of the most sophisticated equipment, and far from restoring legitimacy and hope in the old “Arabia Felix”, the campaign led by Saudi Arabia has caused huge material damages, loss of innocent human lives, cholera, famine, chaos and the change of this country into an “Arabia Infelix”, reduced to a state that the United Nations described as “the most dramatic humanitarian crisis in modern history”.

In opposition to the initial optimism of the attackers, the Houthi rebels seem more dynamic now than in any of the other stages of this civil war, exerting more and more pressure on the Yemeni

forces assisted by Saudi Arabia. A Saudi Arabia that lately, more specifically since the end of the month of Ramadan, in June, has been thinking of sensibly getting out of this conundrum, without finding itself in a situation where it has to admit to its political failure and to that of the one who started this war – the belligerent and ambitious royal son, Prince Muhammad Bin Salman, nominated on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June 2017 as the heir to the throne.

Analysts believe that since the beginning of the intervention the coalition hasn't managed to achieve any of its declared goals, especially "restoring legitimacy" by reinstating the official government of the president Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi, overthrown by the Houthi rebels in September 2014, a failure caused mostly by the erosion and break-up of the initial coalition. The first split that affected the unity of this alliance took place in June 2017, when, as a result of its conflicts with the Saudi monarchy, Qatar was expelled – by Saudi veto – from the Gulf Cooperation Council and from the expeditionary coalition. Almost 1000 Qatari soldiers were withdrawn from the front, as well as their weapons and equipment. In October 2019, the Sudanese interim government announced its withdrawal from the alliance. In the beginning of 2020, out of the 40,000 Sudanese soldiers mobilised in 2015, only 657 were left, in case of need. The United Arab Emirates followed suit; they had engaged the 15,000 men in arms only to achieve their own purpose – that of maintaining a permanent presence in the island of Socotra and supporting the Yemeni armed forces in Aden that fight to restore the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

Under such circumstances, and despite several failures of the Saudi strategy, the decision makers in Riyadh have been looking more and more insistently lately for an "honorable way out" of the Yemeni hive, a way out that could, first of all, cover Saudi Arabia's political failure and especially that of the initiator of this campaign, heir to the throne and minister of defense Muhammad Bin Salman. It is difficult to see the course that meets the desires of the 80-year-old Saudi monarch. This is because on one hand the Houthi rebels are well positioned on the domestic front, and on the other, one may say that they are at a point where the civil war has become an overtly implacable war between Wahhabi Sunnism and Iranian Twelver Shiism, a war where the supporters of Imam Khomeini wish to prove at any cost the superiority and infallibility of the Islamic Revolution, not only in its

confrontation with the Saudis but also with the "Great Satan" from the other side of the Atlantic.



Muhammad Bin Salman

At the end of 2019, after missiles deployed by the Houthis struck the oil facilities of Saudi colossus ARAMCO, Saudi Arabia sent out the first signals regarding its intent to withdraw from Yemen. Thus, the front has seen a progressive decrease of air raids and the Saudis have officially expressed their willingness to sign a ceasefire preliminary to a peace treaty. The initiative was welcomed by the international community, but it was categorically dismissed by the Houthi rebels. Furthermore, earlier this year, Riyadh's peace intentions were shattered by a powerful offensive organised by the rebels in northeast Yemen. Nevertheless, the Saudis reiterated their intentions of peace, announcing on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April a complete ceasefire during the entire sacred month of Ramadan. The Houthi rebels offered an even bolder counterproposal – a global peace treaty with Riyadh. The proposal was rejected, because it meant taking out of the equation the Yemeni official government led by Mansur Hadi, and recognising the fact that the Yemeni war is a war waged between the separatists and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Thus, the peace talks in Yemen have been postponed indefinitely, in anticipation of another round of political negotiations. Meanwhile, military operations have gone on even more ardently.

### A Mosaic of Belligerents

In the five years of armed conflict, the structure of the Yemeni front has been defined by its mobility, volatility and by the temporary lines between the combatants. At present, with the exception of some scarce and insignificant enclaves where several jihadist elements are still active – what is left of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and of the Islamic State – the territory of the Yemeni front is divided

into what one might call “military regions”, each under the control of one of the parties on the front of operations.

- I am firstly referring to the National Army of the government led by the president Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi that controls parts of the western half of the national territory, based in the strategic city of Ma’arib, and in the territories in the south-east and south-west with the centre in the Ta’izz governorate.
- The rebel militias control the capital Sanaa, the northern governorates along the border with Saudi Arabia, and a part of the Ta’izz governorate.
- The southern Yemeni secessionists, politically represented by the Southern Transitional Council, and mostly supported by the United Arab Emirates, control the former territory of South Yemen, and are based in the port-city of Aden.
- A fourth belligerent party is represented by the militias referring to themselves as the National Resistance Forces, which share control over the coastal cities of Mokka and Hodeida with the Houthi rebels and are made

up of combatants from forces established and commanded by the former Yemeni president, Ali Abdallah Saleh.

It is considered that out of all these armed groups, the least effective and least organised is the National Army. Besides, it has been affected by disagreements between the factions that come from the Islamic entourage of the Muslim Brotherhood and those made up of soldiers from the national army under the command of the former president, Saleh.

\*

For five years the Yemenis have been waiting for the legitimacy and hope they had been promised. So far, none of the attempts to bring the belligerents at the same negotiating table have managed to open the door towards peace. The supply chain of weapons and money that the regional powers have kept open for the “franchises” fighting in Yemen, will have an effect none other than that of an even more dramatic split between what is left of the Yemeni society. And the “Arabia Felix” of old will helplessly continue to observe today’s killer misery, waiting for reason to awaken and bring the promised hope back to life.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



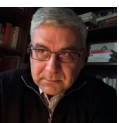
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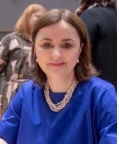
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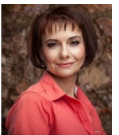
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**INGEPO Consulting - Bucharest**  
**[www.pulsulgeostrategic.ro](http://www.pulsulgeostrategic.ro); Tel: +4-031 1011934**  
**J40/4984/2019, CUI RO19298677**

**Editor-in-Chief:**  
**Constantin IACOBIȚĂ**

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ISSN: 1844-167X

Cover: Self Editing

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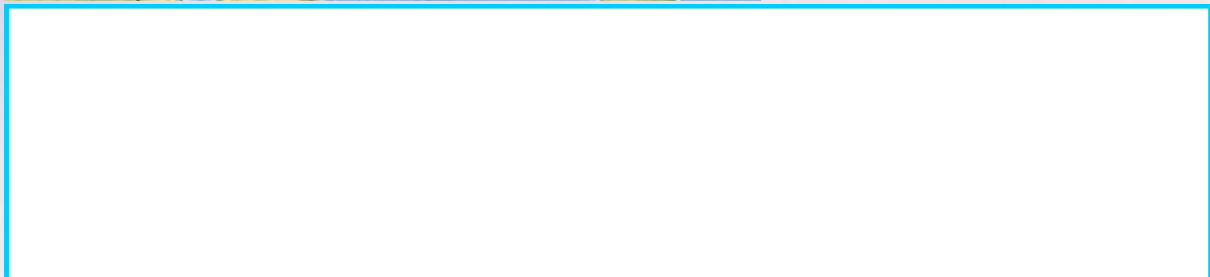


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