

GEOSTRATEGIC PULSE

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

Robert Adam: "Populism is consubstantial with democracy. It is the Iron Mask of representative democracy, the hidden twin. It cannot just vanish, as it is part of democracy's DNA"

S.O.S. The Global Commons

"The Great Reset": Between Humanism, Posthumanism and the Human Cyborg

Laura Vansina: "Kremlin's ability to deal with the vulnerabilities of its foreign policy will determine whether the «Russian Phoenix» will continue to fly"

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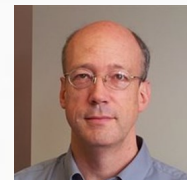
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EDITORIAL



The US is Reassuming International Leadership

Constantin IACOBITĂ

A number of recent decisions and steps taken by the Biden administration have clearly announced the US' intention to reassert its position as an international leader that leads responsibly and by example.

The most important step, given its global implications, and the most anticipated one consisted in the US re-joining the Paris Agreement on climate change, and in President Biden convening around 40 global leaders – the fourth week of April 2021 – for a virtual summit on climate change where he called for the US to make a 50% reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions by 2030.

Shortly after, on the 24th of April, also known as the Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, President Joe Biden read a statement where, for the first time an American administration used the word "genocide" to characterize the events that had taken place during the campaign conducted by the Ottoman Empire against its ethnic Armenian citizens, starting with 1915.

Finally, yet preceding the above, the Biden administration announced – on the 15th of April – it would impose on Russia a broad array of new sanctions, with the main goal of making it more difficult for Moscow to borrow money from global markets. Washington made it clear that the sanctions were meant to punish Russia for interfering in the (American) presidential elections in 2020, for cyber hacking government agencies and companies, and for its destabilizing campaign at the borders with Ukraine.

The steps described above represent – both by their content and in terms of symbolism – a clear departure from the course set for the American foreign policy during Donald Trump's administration and even before that (on the matter of the Armenian genocide).

To what extent will the Biden administration succeed in reinstating America as a global leader – a role it badly needs but that is as difficult to obtain? And we should not forget that, in order to secure their cooperation (China's on climate) or prevent possible escalations (mostly with Russia but also Turkey – on the Armenian genocide) the Biden administration has approached the relevant international players in advance.

The first major challenge for the US, after four years of isolationism, "America First", and absence from the climate fight, is regaining its credibility. In his speech at the opening of the weeklong climate summit, secretary of state Anthony Blinken emphasized and warned, at the same time: "If America fails to lead the world in addressing the climate crisis, we won't have much of a world left." On the other hand, the Chinese Foreign Ministry let the world know where Beijing stood: "The US choses to come and go as it likes, with regard to Paris Agreement". And, according to the Chinese side, the American-Chinese talks in Beijing, preceding the summit ended with an agreement to cooperate on climate crisis, but no new pledges promised.

And yet, the US credibility proves to be a matter related not only to the international relevant players' perceptions and behaviour. It is also related to the specifics of the alternating Democratic and Republican administrations, traditionally accompanied by deep divisions in the Congress – including over investments in clean energy.

As far as Russia is concerned, which has proven its potential and ability to threaten Europe's stability and security as well as the transatlantic link, Vladimir Putin responded to the recent American sanctions by escalating in the Black Sea area. And, illustrative for the effects of this escalation on the overall equation of the US-Russia relations, the day Vladimir Putin spoke with President Biden on the phone (April 13) Washington cancelled a planned naval visit to Ukraine (in the Black Sea).

INTERNATIONAL SITUATION

Robert Adam: "Populism is consubstantial with democracy. It is the Iron Mask of representative democracy, the hidden twin. It cannot just vanish, as it is part of democracy's DNA"

Politically speaking, the rhetoric of populism triumph, in a world where the threat is global, is indicative of the rise of political populist movements. Such narrative existed and will continue to exist independent from the nature and size of threat.

Robert Adam, a diplomat, political scientist, and op-ed author, has offered his views on Populism in Times of Pandemics in the interview given to *Geostrategic Pulse Magazine*.



Geostrategic Pulse: *For about a year now, the coronavirus pandemic has captured the headlines of the global media. Faced with a global crisis, populist leaders have meant, through their narratives, to take advantage of the growing fears and splits in the communities most affected by the pandemic. To what extent was the populist rhetoric intended at discrediting, in this context, the trust and image of experts, especially those in the medical/health field?*

Robert Adam: Populists thrive by cultivating the dichotomy between 'real people' and the elites. But, as Princeton historian Jan-Werner Müller wrote in an op-ed for *The Guardian*, the current trend is to denigrate only those elites who claim authority based on education and special licensing (doctors, lawyers, professors). During the pandemic, health experts rose to prominence and challenging their expertise was an easy way to

flatter the public opinion. Nobody likes bad news and health experts had to 'sell' them. In hard times, siding with the 'people' and discrediting the opinion of medical experts was a straightforward strategy to keep the approval ratings up. However, COVID-19 deniers like Boris Johnson, Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro eventually caught the virus. Tanzanian president John Magufuli, another virus-sceptic, even died. This prompted most leaders to act cautiously. The conspiracy theories and the attacks on medical /health experts remained the preserve of fringe politicians. Disgruntled individuals, against the background of fear and economic downturn, are more likely to lend a benevolent ear to such a discourse than in normal times. On social networks, negative emotions trigger six times more engagement than positive ones. The criticism of experts is used as a highway to political influence by many newcomers or marginal political actors.

In the fight for resources and survival, the narrative based on supremacy and competition has criticised and challenged the idea of increased cooperation and solidarity at a supranational level. Has this approach proved to be a winning one for populist leaders?

'No man is an island' English poet John Donne wrote almost four centuries ago, in a famous poem about the social nature of the human being. However, in a pandemic age, the complex of the besieged citadel is scaling up. Disoriented citizens expect protection from the nation-state, which is a fair requirement, part of the social contract. This includes quick access to vaccines. However, very few countries are for instance able to produce vaccines on a large scale. Only by pooling scientific, financial, and technological resources were vaccines so quickly developed, approved, produced, and distributed. Smaller international actors can hardly access vaccines.

The proponents of the 'supremacy' narrative

would need to both: a) be able to provide quick and credible protection exclusively with in-house resources (only the USA, China and the EU have the critical weight to envisage such an option); b) secure at all costs the missing resources abroad and afford the blame for selfishness in a global crisis (no country or block can). This narrative seemed tempting for Donald Trump or Boris Johnson, but their respective economies are highly globalised, and the reputational costs would have proven too high. Nevertheless, there is everywhere a segment of the population which favours national solutions to all problems and crises tend to expand it. But they are not in a position to shape policy decisions.

Crises always propel populist leaders. They come up with simple solutions for complex situations and very few are those who can really take into consideration enough aspects to make informed political choices. But a pandemic requires responsible leaders able to make unpopular decisions. Pandemic populism was either too cynical: ‘the virus only kills the weakest, no need to cage everybody’ or too conspiracy-based: ‘it is just a flu’ to draw enough support. The saviours shall arrive after the crises, when those who made tough decisions shall pay the political price for them.

Prone to inherent criticism because of the severe social and economic crises, traditional parties and institutions have managed, at least for now, to diminish the rise of the populist movement, incapable of coming up with sustainable measures. What seems to be a paradox, at the level of public opinion in the countries seriously affected by the pandemic, the citizens' expectations were not met by the populists' proposals that played on change and not on stability and safety. That given, did the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have the necessary impact to trigger a reconfirmation of the social contract between citizens and their countries/governments?

The question might be: beyond the possible opportunity to seize power, were populist leaders really interested in taking over in such a context? For political leaders who tried to play down the pandemic, harsh reality hit them quick and hard (the cases of Trump, Bolsonaro and Johnson). For the populists in opposition, the opportunity was rather to capitalize on the crisis and sow the seeds of future electoral gains. Only the gambit was sometimes too obvious. Societies where the level of trust and social capital is higher fare better in the pandemic, a study shows. In these societies, the social contract shall emerge reinforced. On the contrary, in countries with chronic political problems, the social tissue shall tear apart more easily.

At the same time, was the reluctance to change accompanied by even more exigency towards the populist narratives or, on the contrary, it represented the proper environment for the rise of political leaders who present themselves as saviours?

S.O.S. The Global Commons

Dr. Ion I. Jinga

When I was a teenager keen to discover the world, I learnt the Morse alphabet for remote communication. In the Morse code, the emergency signal is an unbroken sequence of three dots / three dashes / three dots – the equivalent for the letters "SOS". Being first used by vessels in distress, it is often associated with the phrase "Save Our Ship". SOS indicates an imminent crisis and the immediate need for action.

Scientists have suggested that there are some 70 quintillion planets (7 followed by 20 zeroes) in the universe, but most of them are unlikely to support life. The *Blue Planet* - with its mix of land, ocean, rivers, forests, atmosphere, biodiversity and climate, all vital to our survival - might rather be a statistical anomaly.

The term "Global Commons" is traditionally used to indicate the Earth's shared natural resources beyond the national sovereignty of any state. It historically refers to the global ocean, the atmosphere, the outer space and Antarctica. More recently, climate change, biodiversity and the Arctic region have also been included among the global commons. In the last couple of years, discussions arose if the Internet, as a global system of computers interconnected by telecommunications technologies, is a global commons. The answer is rather "No", as this network is largely private owned (the debate on Internet governance is in progress). However, Cyberspace, on the other hand, is viewed as part of the Global Commons because its definition is related to freedom of expression.

Around the world, natural resources are overexploited, at a massive cost to the environment. This reality is sometimes labelled as "the tragedy of the Global Commons". The global economy has increased fivefold since 1970, and the food crop production by 300%. At the same time, fertilizers entering coastal ecosystems have produced "dead zones" greater than the size of the United Kingdom. As the world population is approaching ten billion, food consumption is expected to increase by more than 50% by 2050. To produce this food, an area twice the size of India is expected to be converted from other uses into agricultural land. The world is losing 10 million ha of forest – the size of Iceland – every year. Deforestation affects the fresh water system, reduces forests capacity to store carbon and

amplifies natural disasters. Water scarcity may soon become the new normal in some parts of the world, risking to affect 5.7 billion people by 2050. Diseases caused by air pollution cause some 6.5 million premature deaths every year.

Due to global warming, one million of the planet's estimated 8 million plant and animal species are at risk of extinction. We now have the highest quantity of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere in the last million years. In 2019, a study by the US National Academy of Sciences projected that, in a low emission scenario, the sea level will rise 69 cm by 2100, relative to its level in 2000. In a high emission scenario, the rise will be 111 cm. Because the sea level is rising, entire island nations are at risk of disappearing. We live in a "Global Village" where no country is immune to pollution, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss or spread of infectious diseases, and no single state has the means to remedy this situation alone.

The solution is to reverse the negative trends in climate, biodiversity and oceans, and move towards a sustainable global economy. This requires behavioral change and structural transformations. In June 2020, Klaus Schwab, Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum (author of "The Fourth Industrial Revolution"), pointed out that: "The pandemic represents a rare but narrow opportunity to reflect, reimagine, and reset our world to create a healthier, more equitable, and more prosperous future." As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, this is possible when no other choice is left. In the case of the pandemic it is about wearing masks, cleaning hands, keeping social distance. Avoiding "the tragedy of the Global Commons" is about changing bad habits in relation to nature, reducing food and water losses, reaching zero emissions by 2050.

Structural transformations are also needed: decarbonize power; electrify transport and industry; improve energy efficiency; shift from road to rail and shipping transport; protect forests; restore degraded landscapes; stop the overexploitation of species; stop marine pollution and clean the oceans; ensure that new buildings are zero carbon; adopt circular economy models; use regenerative materials; restore freshwater systems; include the digital revolution in people's daily life.

To reach these goals, the social contract between people, governments and big corporations has to

become more inclusive and fit-for-purpose. Strengthening the rule-based global order and reinforcing compliance with International Law will contribute to addressing the lack of trust between countries. Confidence-building measures are necessary not only on security matters, but also in the management of Global Commons. In such a paradigm, multilateralism remains the most efficient approach, and the United Nations system has a key role to play. Building more inclusive and resilient societies is possible with multilateral solutions which focus on a green, digital and sustainable global recovery and take advantage of the twin revolutions of *InfoTech* and *Biotech*.

In June 2019, a partnership of more than 50 of the world's most forward-looking organizations in philanthropy, science, media and business, called "*The Global Commons Alliance*", was formed with the goal to create a network for science-based action to protect the people and planet, restore the Global Commons and promote systemic change. More than 1200 companies already committed to these targets. In September 2019, France and Germany launched "*The Alliance for Multilateralism*", a forum for promoting joint solutions to global challenges by strengthening multilateral cooperation. Romania joined this initiative in 2020.

Speaking in February 2021 at the launching of United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) Report "*Making Peace with Nature*", UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres noted: "*For too long, we have been waging a senseless and suicidal war on nature. The result is three interlinked environmental crises: climate disruption, biodiversity loss and pollution that threaten our viability as a species. Without nature's help, we will not thrive or even survive. It's time to re-evaluate and reset our relationship with nature. The path to a sustainable economy exists – driven by renewable energy, sustainable food systems and nature-based solutions.*"

Epilogue. The value of the Global Commons was firstly considered in financial terms. For decades, the focus was more on exploiting and extracting profit, than on protection and preservation. Now we are realizing that the mankind is a big world on a small planet, using more resources than the Earth can sustain, and approaching the point of no return. We may eventually survive without money, but it would certainly not be possible without ecosystems capable of supporting human life. This is a distress

signal, a "*Save Our Ship*" message indicating an imminent crisis and the immediate need for action. There may be 70 quintillion planets in the universe, but the *Blue Planet* is our home and the ship we travel through the intergalactic space. By protecting the Global Commons, we protect our future. Only by acting together we can make the Earth a sustainable planet.

As the President of Romania, Klaus Werner Iohannis, remarked from the rostrum of the UN General Assembly in September 2019: "*Today we are, all of us, profoundly interconnected by multilateral governance. Solutions of these interlinked economic, social and environmental challenges can only be found through a renewed commitment to multilateralism and a rules-based international order with the UN at its core.*"

Promoting national interests requires both patriotism and global cooperation. Professor Yuval Noah Harari (author of "*Homo Deus: A Brief History Tomorrow*") argues that there is no contradiction between nationalism and globalism: "*Nationalism is about loving your compatriots. And in the 21st century, in order to protect the safety and the future of your compatriots, you must cooperate with foreigners. So, in the 21st century, good nationalists must be also globalists. Globalism means a commitment to some global rules. Rules that don't deny the uniqueness of each nation, but only regulate the relations between nations.*"

Post Scriptum. On 1st April 2021, I will join a group of fellow ambassadors to the United Nations for an open conversation, in our personal capacities, on "*The Global Commons in the 21st Century*".

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

“The Great Reset”: Between Humanism, Posthumanism and the Human Cyborg

Ambassador Professor Dumitru CHICAN

After more than a year of the COVID-19 pandemic, with all its global consequences, producing predictions and prognoses on how the world would look like after this storm is over proves to rather be a race of suppositions and uncertainties. The fight against this disease strongly depends on unpredictable and instable factors.

How long will it last and how many waves will there be? How deep and long-lasting will the aftermath of the containment measures be? What sort of instruments will we use to assess the loss of human lives, unemployment, bankruptcies, educational unbalance? How far will the political governance systems infiltrate societies, economies, fundamental rights and liberties? These are just a few basic questions on how our immediate future will look like either on a global level, or on a national level, and how will societies cope. The magnitude and rhythm of these actions is yet unknown.

What we can assume, without the fear of making mistakes is the – already present – reality that all the shortcomings, failures, missteps and flaws in the global security system that fights against the rising tide of the pandemic and its adjacent crises, will be sensed directly and gradually by all economies, policies and societies. They will also make the recovery more difficult and more expensive when it comes to institutions, structures, systems and entities that have not had the ability to join the global apparatus that manages the challenges of the pandemic, challenges which are still here and will linger.



An institutional reset and revival involve and will require rethinking and redefining priorities in the field of international relations.

Such a process does not come easy; however, it is vital and it must include a joint will and effort to re-establish the balance of the way the political decision-making and the implementation of these decisions in relation to relevant threats (from threatening conflicts, to bio-security of the global human community and climate change) are prioritized and done.

Except for the two world wars, the coronavirus pandemic can be regarded as the most serious crisis that has hit this planet simultaneously, without discrimination and from all sides in all sectors – social, medical, economic, communicational, educational and governmental. Under such circumstances, concerns and uncertainties are justified. Also justified is the insidious pressure that makes us wonder about a world order where “the world after” will be forced to survive and protect its existence, values and identities.

Anticipating the Global Future

For the past decade the world has faced a series of crises more or less dramatic, which all had in common an unpredictable (and *ipso facto*), shocking occurrence that came with the inability or unwillingness to predict and anticipate prevention measures.

Looking back at the last century and excluding the apocalypse of the two world wars, we can safely say that the coronavirus pandemic is the most serious crisis that has occurred so far, a sad series of events that the generations of this historical period are forced to experience, a period that viral voices of our time accurately call “postmodern era”.

Let us recall – just to refresh our memory – some of the shock-waves that have impacted us recently:

- The crisis that in 2010 affected the entire European area, with a huge impact on the security systems and a high degree of austerity and social and institutional alienation.
- The popular riots that, one year later and under the name of “The Arab Spring”, took over the entire Middle East and Northern Africa and produced, at the same time the reconfiguration of the regional system, when national and nationalist interests emerged and when foreign powers widely intervened because of the swift rise of jihadi Islam.

- The migration boom in 2015 and the increase of the flow of refugees that was accompanied, on the most part of Europe, by the rise of populist and nationalist-chauvinistic national political current which challenged the liberal international order and favoured a nationalist separatism that was highly prejudiced.

- The start, in 2016 of the mandate of the Donald Trump administration, which meant four years of American isolation disguised under nationalist slogans, such as “America First” and “Make America Great Again”, and a turbulent foreign policy strategy uncooperative with the global community, international organisations and treaties.

The fact that the world is under pressure, along with the scepticism that often makes political decision-makers ignore prediction efforts should not mean that the prognosis and prediction endeavour is to be abandoned. On the contrary, it should be regarded as priority for all joint global multidisciplinary efforts. Analysing the future does not mean predicting concrete events and evolutions, but rather drawing the attention of the decision-makers on possible evolutions and trends, which, at some point, can become challenges and threats.

But even the accuracy of these prognoses and warnings will be affected and lose value as long as the recipients of these prognoses – political planners and decision-makers – are influenced by subjective or mercantile factors, such as ideology, the power and influence struggle, or the tendency to make decisions based on the rapacious need for personal or clan gains, at the expense of fundamental values, such as: equal opportunities, liberty, justice, the benefit of the entire social construct, or lack of discrimination.

Looking forward to a post-pandemic world whose construct can only be imagined or left to our expectations and ambitions, the efforts to draw a near future as accurately as possible will have to focus on rethinking and reinterpreting the need to appeal to the potential of prediction and introspection of non-state actors from various cultural backgrounds, actors who are really familiar with realities that are usually masked and hidden behind official political discourses. Such efforts, if associated to cooperation, inclusion and global perspectives, would only bring a valuable contribution to improving paradigms and narrowing down the rifts, cleavages and conflicts that divide the contemporary world, and to smoothening the road towards the “normal world” of tomorrow.

“The Great Reset” – A New World, the Same People?

In 1992, the American political theorist Francis Fukuyama shook the intellectual and cultural world with his best-seller *The End of History and the Last Man*.

The main idea developed by the author is that the end of the Cold War and the Fall of the Berlin Wall marked the victory and the absolute and irreversible supremacy of liberal democracy and capitalism, over all other political ideologies, as well as economic and governance systems. Despite the acclaim it gained, Fukuyama’s book was not deprived of criticism. One of those critics, who was very direct, was the French philosopher of Algerian origin Jacques Derrida (the main advocate of the deconstruction theory), to whom, “The End of History” is nothing but a depiction of the very decorative display of a prevailing capitalism (especially the American capitalism) where the “New Man” lives - a “New Man” that Derrida sceptically and sarcastically compares to the new man promoted by the Marxist communist avatars.

If Fukuyama’s theory succeeded a historical crossroad – the world ceasing to be divided in two hostile halves – the European East on one side and the “free world”, the Western hemisphere on the other, the crisis of the COVID-19 global pandemic set the ground, ever since its outbreak, for the *ante factum* spread of the cold and triumphant theory regarding “the end of history” and the fundamental “reset” of a new world. And we are referring to the viral theory called *The Great Reset* for the English-speakers and *La grande réinitialisation for the French speakers*. *The Great Reset theory and the ideas it includes were, at least during the past few years, at the top of the topics of the annual sessions of the World Economic Forum, whose founder and executive chairman is the German economist Klaus Schwab. The Forum is also known as the Davos Economic Forum, after the Swiss city bearing the same name, where the first annual reunion of this organisation took place, a non-profit organisation/foundation dedicated to continuously improving the world order, while focusing on its economic sectors and mechanisms.*

The 2021 session of the Davos Economic Forum which took place in January as a webinar (because of the pandemic) was different because of its online format and because the participants were for the first time presented an agenda of guidelines for global reset, just like the one included in Klaus Schwab’s most recent book *COVID-19 the Great Reset*, which joins three other works on the same subject:



Klaus Schwab

Stakeholder Capitalism – A Global Economy, Shaping the Future of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Stakeholder Capitalism – A Global Economy that Works for Progress, People and Planet. All these volumes are visibly under the sign of the slogan of the author himself, who said that “the COVID-19 outbreak is the first step towards an unprecedented control over mankind”.

After all, what does *The Great Reset* really call for, as its theorists and supporters claim?

In short, according to Klaus Schwab, this process is seen as a cluster of global reform strategies and practices meant to create a better economic, social, political and environmental world, that is less divided and destructive, more inclusive and just.

Nothing could be better, critics say, if the road to hell had not been paved with good intentions. Moreover, even before these experts, those who started questioning this theory were leaders taking part in the Forum, future managers of the *Great Reset*, as well as prestigious newspapers. Let us hear what they had to say:

- *Wall Street Journal* wrote: „To claim that great businessmen could, besides making profit, build a better world, means listening to counter-arguments eventually leading to the conclusion that business leaders could actually make the world worse than it already is – which is exactly what Mr. Schwab wants.”

- Manuel Macron, the French President said: “We should focus on inequalities caused by capitalism, as they provide the solution to come out of the pandemic”.

- The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel stated: “Do we really need Schwab’s *Great Reset*? Yes, or no?”

- To Vladimir Putin, “Klaus Schwab’s theory is simple and hypocritical, similar to a dark anomaly”.

This dystopia where the elements of a living

organism are chaotically rearranged has led, for the time being, to the spread of the criticism aimed at Klaus Schwab’s vision, who is being accused of wanting to praise “the triumph of capitalism” that Fukuyama was referring to, and to plot “a conspiracy of the global elites”, that would eventually lead to a new system of global governance.

Those who, without being accused of conspiring, disagree with a new world order, insufficiently defined and not so convincing, wish to know the answer to this vital question: “Who are those who will execute *the Great Reset* and who or what are those who will fall in the category of the *resetees*?” The question is all the more relevant as it is related to Schwab’s claim we mentioned above: “*the COVID-19 outbreak is the first step towards an unprecedented control over mankind*”. Nevertheless, hasn’t this first step or half of it been already taken before the days of the pandemic?

Taking a closer look at the ideas of the German theorist of the universal “reset”, we will see that we are facing a conundrum that is neither newly born, nor conceived overnight. We are referring to the adapted version of an older obsession. The concept of global governance is old, and has been altered through the ages and given different names. The famous magnate John Rockefeller ardently supported the idea of a “world government”, Zbigniew Brzezinski focused on the “grand chessboard” and foretold the “disappearance of the national sovereign state”, George Bush launched in the ‘90s the idea of a “new world order”, and the 46th US president, Joe Biden plans a “recalibration” of the international relations.

Yet, in this euphoria of resets, restarts, recalibrations, and cyclical pretences, where do people fit in?

“...The Measure of All Things”

Whether we find ourselves in the mythical chapter of the Genesis, or in Darwin’s materialistic evolutionist discourse, man’s road through existence was built on two fundamental coordinates that were, at the same time, two long and ascending processes of evolution – the *hominization* process of biological development, and the *humanisation* process, of cultural development. Many ages passed before the ancient philosopher Protagoras uttered his famous dictum, according to which *Man is the measure of all things*. Going through the phases of our evolution we proudly thought ourselves to be *centrum mundi*, *homo faber*, *homo erectus*, and *homo cogitans*, before discovering that this anthropocentrism proved to be a conceited illusion of a bipedal living in a universe that changed from a geocentric one to a

heliocentric one, he himself travelling through space together with a piece of galaxy, lost in its turn in chaos, alone among thousands and thousands of universes that we know very little about. *Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas (Vanity of vanities, all (is) vanity: earthly life is ultimately empty.)* decided the Ecclesiastes long before the occurrence of these successive revolutions – Renaissance, Enlightenment and Humanism – the ages of *homo nudus*, *homo invictus*, of the rebellion against the almighty, centuries-long, theocratic tyranny, the times of reason and unleashed free-will.

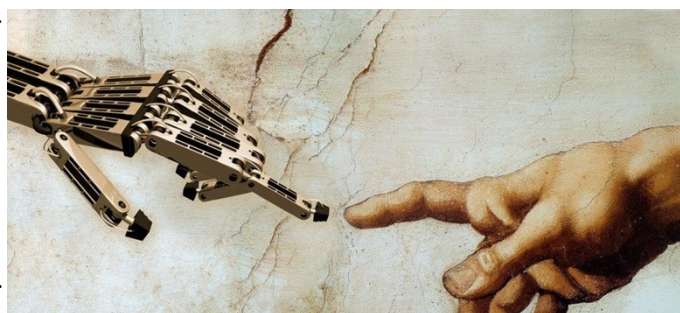
The numerous stages of our anthropological chronicle have been summed up in an obsessive suffix, added at the end of the basic word: *-ism*. Its dynamic spread did not spare mankind, and, on its way to evolution and self-improvement, everything that we have known to be human, humane, every value, aspiration, the positivity of the universal message that “man is the measure of all things” ended up being known as “humanism”.

Humanism, Transhumanism, Posthumanism, the Human Cyborg

In the history of ideas and civilisation – mostly Western – humanism was divided in two fundamental ways of expressing itself, known as two co-existing trends. We are foremost referring to the humanism that depicts the human being as the master of the world and of the universe, sometimes becoming God, the measure of all things, the source of all values, the supreme purpose of the evolution. Secondly, we are referring to the humanism described by Montaigne (“Every man is my compatriot.”) and improved by Montesquieu, who stated that “should I choose between my country and mankind, I choose the latter”. In 1789, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen defined humanism’s universality, stating that every member of our species is a human, proclaiming mutual respect for each other and establishing the principles of brotherhood and love as the basis of our human identity.

Today, when the *-isms* took over the ideational speech, harmoniously linked to the very evolution of our society, and projected us into postmodernism, and its current theories – many utopians, and others managing to start trends and schools – the mere essence of anthropological values is being questioned, values that apparently have lost their appeal and usefulness. This implies the complete conceptual reset of the human being and their humanism. Therefore, we are currently living in the age of transhumanism, posthumanism, and even hyper-humanism, which are only conceptualised at

the level of visionary imagery.



Transhumanism, just as its name suggests, represents a stage in a transitional process – from a historical anthropological state to a post humanistic one, which inspired by science fiction and nourished by the tumultuous progress of futuristic sciences and technologies intends to “reset” the human being and slowly turn them into a machine, into the human cyborg, the machine-man, an artificial intelligence, the man-god, the digit-man, a uniform mass (the pandemic advertised the idea of the “mob”, adopted from “reformist” theories as the archetype of the future structure of the “recalibrated” society), and in the end, into a dehumanized man.

If transhumanism considers the human condition as being the age of the absolute interference of high-end science and technology in the intimate circle of the anthroposphere, posthumanism claims to be the most ardent critic of the humanism built on anthropocentric beliefs, and proposes the removal of all hierarchies and boundaries that separate the thinking man and his technological environment, until he becomes the machines’ uncensored employee.

Applied to the theories of the *Great Reset* and to those of the fourth industrial revolution ideologically founded by Klaus Schwab, the above aim at an anamorph globalisation where the individual becomes a number, a docile entity free of “daily concerns”, such as feelings, free-thought, sense of ownership, sense of identity, and without human rights and liberties. A state of things that Klaus Schwab himself put into words as follows: “You’ll own nothing. And you’ll be happy about it”.

Instead of conclusion, a question addressed to future Davos participants: How many of the citizens of this planet will rush to give up their own identities, their own wealth and domestic “bliss”, in exchange for the great happiness promised by Klaus Schwab?

US-Turkey Relations: CAATSA and Beyond

Eugene KOGAN

By becoming the first elected executive President of Turkey, Erdoğan has also transformed Turkey from a secular, democratic and reliable Western allied regime guarding NATO's south-eastern flank to an Islamic, nationalist and autocratic regime. Erdoğan's policy is undermining the foundation of US-Turkey relations. This article outlines three cases that highlight the undermining of this relationship.

S-400 vs. F-35

Undoubtedly, Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air-defence system has severely harmed relations between the US and Turkey. What is often overlooked is that the purchase of the S-400 affects not just the US but also other NATO members and US coalition partners such as Australia, Israel, Japan, Singapore and South Korea which have all purchased the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). As a result, the US views Erdoğan's unbending position as a betrayal of the North Atlantic Alliance plus the other allies' values of unity, cohesion and interoperability.

As a result, the US removed Turkey from the F-35 JSF Programme in July 2019. The Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Ellen Lord, said at the time that "At this point, the Turks have made a decision. We have said that the F-35 and S-400 are incompatible. We will work forward at this point to unwind the relationship."



Photo: via author

The US considers Turkish acquisition of the F-35 to be incompatible with parallel acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defence system.

Furthermore, Erdoğan's firm position on standing up to the United States and activating and testing

the system on 16 October 2020 has further accelerated a rupture between the two countries. What is more, Ismail Demir, the head of Turkey's Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB), the country's defence procurement organisation, revealed on 8 June 2020 that the country was in discussion for the procurement of a second batch of S-400s with further discussion on joint production and a technology transfer to Turkey as part of the negotiations.

In October, Erdoğan said that the tests "Have been and are being conducted. Whatever your [namely the US] sanctions are, don't hold back." Therefore, Erdoğan threw down the gauntlet to President Trump.

The same month it was reported that the next military partner to receive the F-35 could be the Greek Air Force. What is more, the six F-35s that could be heading to Greece are the same aircraft that were originally destined for Turkey. That would represent a US snub to Erdoğan's Turkey and send a clear signal that such irresponsible behaviour on the part of Turkey would not go unpunished.

Finally, on 14 December 2020, the Trump administration imposed sanctions through CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) on NATO ally Turkey over its purchase of the S-400. It should be stressed that it is the first time that CAATSA has been used to penalise a US *ally* [author's italics]. Matthew Palmer, a senior official at the State Department's Bureau of European Affairs said "imposing sanctions on a NATO ally is not something we take lightly."

Under the sanctions, Washington is targeting the SSB. Blocking sanctions and visa restrictions through the Department of Treasury's Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDN) List were also announced against the SSB's president, Ismail Demir, and three other senior officials. Through the SDN listing, property and property interests within the US are blocked and US persons are generally prohibited from transacting with them.

The US has also launched a prohibition on granting export licences for all goods or technology transfers to SSB, prohibiting loans to the SSB greater than US\$10 million from a US financial institution in a 12-month period, a requirement for

the US to oppose loans benefitting the SSB by international financial institutions, and a ban on support from the US Export-Import Bank for exports to the SSB.

Former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, said in a statement, “Today’s action sends a clear signal that the United States will fully implement CAATSA Section 231 and will not tolerate significant transactions with Russia’s defence and intelligence sectors.”



Turkish President Erdoğan insists he was forced to purchase Putin’s S-400 system after Washington refused to sell it the US Patriot system.

Apparently, President Erdoğan underestimated the reaction from the US, hoping that because of the strong rapport between him and President Trump, the US administration would not impose sanctions. Nevertheless, Turkey seems to be unwavering under the sanctions and is maintaining its course on keeping, deploying and discussing the procurement of a second batch of S-400s with Russia. This suggests that the tensions between the two sides will continue to increase.

The Return of the Prodigal Son

A number of options exist about how this might all eventually end up. The first one is the ‘Return of the Prodigal Son’. In this scenario, President Erdoğan’s administration transfers the S-400s from its territory to Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Qatar or Ukraine, and ends discussion with Russia for the procurement of a second batch of S-400s. It should be stressed that sanctions may also affect the aforementioned countries if they were to agree to have the S-400s on their territory. Therefore, this option looks very unrealistic.

The second option foresees giving a second chance to Erdoğan. The S-400s would be

dismantled and put back in crates. This solution would require a joint Turkish-American control mechanism under US supervision. If the proposed control mechanism dissatisfied the Turks, the imposed sanctions would be reviewed with the coordination of other NATO Allies six or 12 months after their imposition. After that, the Biden Administration would need to decide upon the next step that may lead to a second review.

And finally, the imposition of further sanctions might be another option, albeit not a very promising one. If, however, after the second review, the position of Erdoğan’s administration remains unchanged, further CAATSA sanctions would be imposed on Turkey. In other words, the US must exert pressure on Turkey.

Justice Has to Be Served

An additional flashpoint between Washington and Ankara is the ongoing sanctions evasion case in the Southern District of New York (SDNY) against Halkbank, a public lender, majority-owned by the Turkish Government. When Biden was Vice-President, Erdoğan reached out to him in the hope that the Obama administration would stop the investigation into the role that Turkey had played in Iran’s sanctions evasion schemes. The effort failed when Biden reminded his Turkish counterpart that “If a US President took legal matters into his own hands, he would be impeached for violating the separation of powers.” In other words, the US justice system is independent from any interference and no plea of this kind would help. Furthermore, Biden’s answer clearly showed Erdoğan the difference between the US justice system to that of Turkey’s.

One possibility would be if Biden allowed the US justice system to run its course with potential convictions and fines that would not only hurt Turkey’s ailing economy, but also US-Turkish relations. It is understandable, but justice has to be served whether we refer to the Turkish or any other government. Such a decision also sends a clear message to other governments that no lenience or cover up from the US justice system can be expected.

Rights and Freedoms

Finally, there are three foreign service national staff members to be considered, namely Turkish citizens working as US Consulate General employees, who became targets of politically-motivated charges and a smear campaign. Since

2017, all three have been convicted on unsubstantiated terrorism charges, terminology that usually masks the real charges. Two of them remain imprisoned serving five-year and eight-year sentences, respectively. The third was released from house arrest in June 2019, but barred from leaving the country during his trial. Although Trump remained indifferent to their plight, Biden is likely to be more proactive in efforts to free them.

Without their release from prison, others who continue to work for the US Consulate General service will remain under the constant threat of being imprisoned, while those who are interested in working for the service may be reluctant to apply for positions as a result of these circumstances.

Without the protection of the rights of Turkish citizens working as US consular employees, the image of the United States as a protector of rights and freedoms will be severely damaged.

In conclusion, the next two years will be of crucial importance to US-Turkey relations. The S-400 issue will hang over the relationship like a Sword of Damocles while two other flashpoints will demonstrate the Biden's administration willingness to resolve tricky issues without giving in to Erdoğan's demands.

Note: The article was first published in European Security & Defence, 3/2021

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RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Laura Vansina: "Kremlin's ability to deal with the vulnerabilities of its foreign policy will determine whether the «Russian Phoenix» will continue to fly"

The multitude and diversity of the new military conflicts that have captured the international scene in recent years have produced strong reverberations over the way Russia foreign policy has been built. In an unstable geopolitical context, with increasingly strong and visible tensions in the international arena, Vladimir Putin's election as President of the Russian Federation was a turning point, offering new meanings to security and defence concepts.

Laura Vansina, a PhD Candidate at the Brussels School of Governance (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and the University of Warwick, has offered her views on *Identity formation and foreign policy in Russia* in the interview offered to Vladimir Adrian Costea for the *Geostrategic Pulse Magazine*.



Laura Vansina / photo ies.be

Geostrategic Pulse: A genuine Homo Sovieticus, Vladimir Putin embodies the recurrent ambitions of an empire shaping the depth of the Tsarist and Soviet history. A promoter of limited sovereignty, the leader in Kremlin has transformed the Russian Federation once more into a major player on the international stage. Following the annexation of Crimea and its involvement in the Syrian conflict, has Russia managed to "rise like a Phoenix"?

Laura Vansina: Before delving into Russia's geopolitical ambitions, let us first say a few words

about Putin himself. Contrary to popular belief, Putin is not a mastermind chess player planning ten steps ahead of his rivals to revive a Tsarist or Soviet Russia. Rather, he is a power-hungry opportunist. His big strength lies with his eye for situations he can exploit in favour of his own seat of power and the return of Russia as a great power. This on-the-spot advantage-seeking explains why Russian actions sometimes seem strange, even contradictory. In that sense, I agree with Mark Galeotti, who rather describes him as a judoka.

Back to the question: has Russia managed to 'rise like a Phoenix?' Yes and no. One cannot deny that Putin, in the past two decades, has played a relatively weak hand very well. He has succeeded in making the Russian Federation a necessary partner in a number of global challenges, ranging from the Middle East to energy supply. However, its assertive foreign policy has also left Russia isolated. Western sanctions hamper economic integration. Military innovation programs and the annexation of Crimea have increased pressure on Russian resources. Its increasingly authoritarian regime and economic downturn make it unattractive to foreign investments and accelerates a brain drain.

The question thus remains whether the phoenix will continue its flight or turn back to ashes. Today, Russia is generally seen as a country in decline. The Covid-19 crisis has put even further pressure on an economic downturn that has been going on for almost a decade. At a certain point, Russia's domestic situation will make it hard to convey credible international assertiveness. However, Russia remains a country with huge potential. A more pragmatist and cooperative foreign policy linked with economic modernization could boost its strength both internationally and domestically. Russia's economic resources remain valuable for international economy. If the regime would steer towards economic deregulation and privatization, a competitive market could thrive. Russia has, for example, huge human potential in engineering and mathematics, valuable sectors in a world that is increasingly dependent on technology. Other

untapped potential is Russian diaspora abroad: part of the brain drain, and currently pursuing successful careers in the West. Economic modernization could bring these brains back to Russia, or help with the further integration of the Russian economy in the international network.

Naturally, this all depends on the governmental will for change. On the one hand, Putin is an opportunist and pragmatist, not an ideologist. If this is 'the price to pay' for power and domestic stability, he might not hesitate too long. On the other hand, of course, his circle of loyal cronies, who help keep him in power, have built their fortune thanks to the current political and economic constellation. Losing their backing might not be the smartest move if Putin wants to remain president.

To what extent is Putin's Russia being rebuilt on the myths of the former Soviet Empire? In other words, how was Russia's foreign policy designed in relation to its identity and its connection to the imperialistic memory?

Putin's reference to the dissolution of the Soviet Union being 'the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century' is indeed quoted often. The same is true for his remark that 'he who does not wish for a return to the Soviet Union has no heart'. However, people often disregard the context of these quotes. In the first case, for example, Putin is talking about the economic and internal instability that followed the breakup of the USSR, and the fact that ethnic Russians suddenly found themselves outside the borders of the Russian Federation. In the second case, he follows up his assertion with 'he who wants to return to it has no brain'. Medvedev said in his 2009 'Go Russia' article that 'nostalgia should not guide [Russia's] foreign policy'.

We should thus never think that Putin's upbringing and KGB past has somehow led him to wanting a return to Soviet times *strictu sensu*. Always be careful with parallels. Putin does not wish a return to communism, nor a reunification of the former post-Soviet republics. However, this does not mean that (imperialistic) memory plays no role in Russian foreign policy. Putin does want Russia to be a great power once again, as it was during his formative years in the USSR. His great power conception is rooted in 19th century tsarist Russia, where a great power has a sphere of influence and a guaranteed seat at the negotiation table. This comes forward very clearly in his foreign policy.

Apart from the influence memory has on Russian

foreign policy, it is also an instrument used to legitimate domestic and foreign policy behaviour. Drawing upon glorious episodes from the past, Putin cherry-picks from history to his heart's content. Ranging from the baptism of Prince Vladimir in the 10th century over Tsarist Russia's victory in the Napoleonic Wars to the Great Patriotic War, the Kremlin has constructed a highly selective historical narrative that frames the Russian Federation's great power status as a historical continuity. This narrative is used to propagate unity, patriotism and strength. It depicts Russia as a country constantly under siege but strong when it's united. Rather than saying that tsarist and Soviet times are the main inspiration, it is thus a certain type of past, rather than a period, that is instrumentalized.

"If we have Putin, we have Russia. If Putin is gone, so is Russia." The description the Russian politician Vyacheslav Volodin, a close friend of Putin's, made in the Russian Parliament in 2014 reflects the nature of the Kremlin regime even today. With regard to Putin's vision and ambitions, how much has Russia's foreign policy changed in the past 22 years?

If we want to understand Russian foreign policy, we need to understand Russia's foreign policy goals. These have not changed since 1992: international recognition as a great power. What has changed, however, are the means. Throughout the 90s, the focus lay with internal reforms to achieve domestic stability, and consequently a great power status. Think about liberalist reforms in the economy, moves towards a democratic structure and the Chechen wars to ensure political and territorial unity. Since Putin came to power, however, the means changed. It is not domestic instability standing between Russia and its great power status, but the West. We need to see Russia's assertive foreign policy behaviour of political and military provocation against this paradigm shift.

Since Putin assumed office, the goal has thus not changed. However, the means have fluctuated. Starting in 2000, Putin already wielded a nationalist discourse emphasizing Russian interests, but he was also very pragmatic. Although not necessarily wanting to join the Western democratic framework, he nevertheless showed interest in developing a working relationship with the West. The 2007 Munich speech was a turning point - although earlier signs were visible in earlier years, instigated by Western criticism on the Chechen War and

NATO's eastward enlargement. The 2009 relations reset by the Obama administration failed to consolidate a more fruitful relationship between Russia and the West. This was proven made pretty clear by the annexation of Crimea five years later. Today's allegations of the West meddling in Russian internal affairs regarding Navalny's conviction show that better relations are...well... not quite there yet.

As a sidenote: we should be careful in equating Russia with Putin. Voices are starting to whisper that he is getting tired of being president and wants to step down. However, the scenario he wants to avoid at all costs is that he would somehow be prosecuted once he leaves office. When Yeltsin stepped down, for example, the first thing Putin did was sign a decree that Yeltsin was granted lifelong immunity from prosecution. The Duma has recently legislated legal immunity of former presidents and granted them the status of senator for life. Putin thus seems to have started preparing a life post-presidency. The billion-dollar question, of course, remains who would take his place... (Shamelessly deviating from the question: I do not think this will be Navalny, especially in the short term. His domestic support is very exaggerated by Western media. Since Navalny started down the political path, people rallying behind him are not necessarily pro-Navalny. Many are rather anti-Putin, driven by reasons ranging from LGBT rights to corruption.)

In 2005, Vladimir Putin described the dissolution of the Soviet Union as the largest catastrophe of the past century. Educated under the influence of Brejnev's doctrine, Vladimir Putin's main objective has been the preservation of the Russian Federation's influence in its neighbourhoods, buffer zones against China and the EU. Supporting authoritarian regimes on the eastern flank and destabilizing countries on Russia's western flank were the main strategies adopted by the leader in Kremlin. From this point of view, has Russia's foreign policy become the main instrument to preserving peace, unity and security on a domestic level?

I find the debate on Russia's search for domestic unity and security through its foreign policy very interesting. Is Russia's meddling in the post-Soviet space and beyond expansionist or security inspired? The way I see it, Russia has always depended on its size as the first line of defence against foreign powers. Think about the Napoleonic wars and the Second World War, where Russian/Soviet troops

could retreat until the dreaded Russian winter finished the invaders. The expansion of NATO and constant innovations in military and cyber domains have put pressure on this advantage of geographical depth. Putin's Russia thus searched for an alternative, which it found in a combination of geographical and psychological buffers. Russia's asymmetrical warfare, which to a large part boils down to grey zone operations flirting with the blurry boundary between war and peace (disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, frozen conflicts, military snap exercises...), serves as a way to secure a geographical buffer. The active promotion of the Russkiy Mir, in combination with conservatist and orthodox values, support psychological depth.

As for peace and unity, it is indeed true that Russian assertive action abroad has served as a lightning rod for domestic troubles in the past. After the annexation of Crimea, Putin's approval rates soared to +80%, which was the highest since the 2008 Georgian Five Day War. But this tide seems to be turning. Russian domestic stability has in part been secured by an 'unspoken social contract' between the Russian population and the government. As long as the latter ensured economic and social stability, the former would tolerate the state's authoritarian character. However, the continuing economic decline, a number of unpopular economic and social reforms and laws further curtailing freedom of speech have put pressure on the domestic kettle. Public discontent over the constitutional changes that allow Putin to stay in office until 2036 has been worsened by the Covid-19 crisis. Navalny's trial made a mockery of the Russian rule of law. This begs the question if an assertive foreign policy will continue to suffice to maintain domestic peace.

Taking into account the prospective revival of the Transatlantic Partnership, once Biden returned to the White House, Putin's moves seem to remain predictable. For instance, this February Vladimir Putin met with Alexander Lukashenko and had a phone conversation with Recep Tayyip Erdogan, when he reasserted his foreign policy guidelines: Belarus remains Russia's main strategic partner, while Turkey is an important regional partner. Under the current circumstances, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Putin's Russia has made the Sputnik vaccine the main instrument of Russian diplomacy. Consequently, could Russia strengthen and extend its influence in Europe and Asia?

A lot of countries are currently pursuing a 'vaccine diplomacy'. Russia actively uses the Sputnik V vaccine, which has not yet been approved by the European Medicines Agency, as a means to 'divide and conquer'. By late March 2021, the country had offered more than 50 million doses to Europe. The EU has been slow in its rollout of Covid-19 vaccines, despite its intention to use the joint vaccine procurement plan to showcase strength after the initial uncertain collective response last year. This has caused frustration with member states hit especially hard by the pandemic. In an attempt to score domestically by accelerating the vaccination process, some of these countries have reached out to Russia (or China, for that matter) to discuss the import of their vaccine. Hungary, for example, will receive a supply of at least two million doses of Sputnik V by the summer. Countries such as Austria, Slovakia and the Czech have equally had talks with Russia on buying the Russian vaccine. Generally speaking, and in line with what I said earlier about opportunity exploitation, Russia has been successful in using Covid to bolster its public relations with the EU. Remember for example the 'From Russia with love' operation, when the Russian Federation sent medical supplies and military medics to Italy at the beginning of the pandemic. Apart from Europe, Russia has also sent vaccines to Latin-America and Asia, to 20+ countries in total. Interestingly, its active vaccine diplomacy has led to a shortage of vaccines for the Russian population...

Vaccine diplomacy will definitely aid Russia in expanding its influence in Europe and Asia. However, it is just one more new instrument in Russia's soft power toolbox and is dwarfed by, for example, Russian arms sales (South and Southeast Asia account for over 60% of Russia's total arms exports). In this sense, the pandemic and the opportunities it brings for authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China mainly provide new ways of extending influence and accelerate ongoing evolutions.

The EU High Representative Josep Borrell's humiliation during his visit to Moscow highlighted the irreconcilable policy of the Kremlin leader. What are Russia's limitations/vulnerabilities with concern to its foreign policy?

The largest vulnerability of Russia's foreign policy is its economy. In this sense, we may to some extent draw a parallel with the Cold War,

when the economic costs of the arms race accelerated the collapse of the Soviet Union. This comes back to what I said earlier: the Kremlin's economy, domestic stability and foreign policy are all heavily intertwined. To back its assertive foreign policy, the Kremlin needs a healthy economy and domestic stability. If the it wants to maintain domestic stability, it needs the Russian economy to work. And for the economy to work, it needs at least one of the following two things: integration into the international economy and modernisation. The West offers a market for Russian gas and oil, as well as for technology and investments for modernisations. But sanctions are isolating Russia. Years of gas and oil revenues have quelled the need for economic modernisations. But falling oil prices and climate action will continue to diminish Russia's revenues from this sector. China provides an alternative. But Russia does not like to play second violin. And competition with China in Asia might not turn out the way the Kremlin would like it to. To turn its economic situation around, the Kremlin needs to shift its domestic and foreign policy stances – and even if it does, the question remains if that might not be too late for Putin. The Kremlin's ability to deal with the vulnerabilities of its foreign policy will determine whether the Russian 'phoenix' will continue to fly. And with that, I think we have come full circle in this interview.

A New Factor in the Ukrainian-Russian Confrontation

Major General (ret) Volodymyr HAVRYLOV

Seven years have passed since the start of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine. Today Russia continues to occupy Crimea and parts of the Donetsk-Lugansk region in Eastern Ukraine. There is still no significant progress in the implementation of the Minsk agreements.

The reason is obvious. Putin in no way wants to lose control over Ukraine. An independent, democratic and prosperous Ukraine poses an existential threat to Russia's current regime. Moscow will do everything possible to prevent this.

At the same time, by March 2021 Moscow had exhausted most instruments of its hybrid pressure on Ukraine. Those instruments included:

1. A pro-Russian "fifth column" associated with the Ukrainian oligarch and politician Viktor Medvechuk who has a longstanding and trusting relationship with Putin.
2. TV channels controlled by pro-Russian political parties and oligarchs.
3. Corrupt elements in the judiciary.

Agents of influence in the inner circle of the President of Ukraine and in government agencies.

In January-February 2021 the National Defense and Security Council (NDSC) of Ukraine approved a number of measures which substantially limited these forms of Russian hybrid leverage in Ukraine. Viktor Medvechuk was included in the Ukrainian sanctions list, on charges of financing terrorism. Several TV stations related to him and his party were shut down. President Zelensky also initiated changes in the legal system and revived the judicial reform process.

This means that Moscow is now left with only special and military options in its strategy of pressuring Ukraine. All that Russia can do now is to keep Kyiv in a state of constant anxiety over a possible Russian invasion, thereby draining resources from the Ukrainian economy.

At the same time, Putin cannot carry out an open invasion of Ukraine without a reason that he might think is justifiable before the international community. For him, any attempt by Kyiv to return the lost territories by force could provide such justification.

The current Russian military build-up on the border with Ukraine

A gradual build-up of Russian military on the



North-East, East and South borders with Ukraine began at the beginning of March 2021.

By the end of April, Russia is expected to have 54 battalion tactical groups (BTG) next to Ukraine: 20 on the North-East operational direction (+10 BTG); 13 on the East operational direction (+1 BTG); 21 on Crimea operational direction (+15 BTG). The overall number of personnel will increase from 89 thousand to 107 thousand.

Russia has also been deploying additional command and control elements in Crimea and the North-East operational direction.

The Ukrainian military consider two possible scenarios for the current Russian military activity:

1. A demonstration of force as a warning to Ukraine not to try to liberate the occupied territories by force.
2. An escalation of hostilities in the East of Ukraine followed by Russian attempts to expand the area of occupation. In this case, there could be a limited Russian military operation in the Southern operational direction to resolve the critical issue of the water deficit in Crimea.

Both scenarios are quite realistic given the history

of Russian involvement in Georgia in 2008. But the deployment of additional troops on the Western direction, including the area around Ukraine, could be a part of the traditional Russian response to the NATO 'Defender Europe 2021,' exercise - the largest one of its kind in the past thirty years which started in April 2021 and will continue until June. This year there are concerns in Moscow that the exercise could be used as a backup for a Ukrainian offensive in the East.

Russia has not yet recovered from the shock it received from the catastrophic defeat of its ally Armenia in Karabakh in November 2020. After that, the Russian leadership become more suspicious, nervous and conspiracy-prone. Now they are not so sure about what might be the outcome of any possible military intervention in Ukraine. And that is a new deterrent factor.

Time is against Putin in regards to his adventures in Ukraine. Ukraine will inevitably recover with the support of the international community and the energy of its civil society. But there are no prospects for Russia's "recovery" as a world leader if it continues to remain in Ukraine.

Macron, Merkel, Zelenskyy Meet to Defuse Russian War Scare

Vladimir SOCOR



Presidents Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine and Emanuel Macron of France, Paris, April 16 (Source: AP)

On April 16, in Paris, French President Emmanuel Macron hosted talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in person and with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who joined by video-link midway through the conversation.

The three leaders' shared goal at this juncture is to defuse the perceived threat of Russian military action against Ukraine. The Kremlin has

orchestrated this war scare by concentrating massive forces near Ukraine's borders and in occupied Crimea, with high publicity and dire rhetorical threats. The aim is to intimidate Ukraine into compliance with the 2015 Minsk "agreements" and have Berlin and Paris ratify that compliance through the quadripartite Normandy process (Russia, Ukraine, Germany, France).

Macron's ambition is to replace the exit-bound Merkel as the primary European actor in the Normandy process and use it to position himself as Russia's primary interlocutor in Europe. This would require some semblance of a compromise with Russia in Ukraine's east - be it a partial or interim solution - to sideline this problem and clear the chessboard for working with Russia on higher-priority issues from France's perspective. While Merkel positioned herself most of the time as speaking for Europe (the Nord Stream Two natural gas pipeline being a glaring exception), Macron has attempted, in vain, to act as an intermediary between Europe and Russia.

The April 16 meeting's German and French readouts (Bundeskanzlerin.de, April 16; Elysée.fr, April 17) reveal the following positions:

- “Both sides must fully implement the Minsk ‘agreements.’ ” This would seem to ignore Ukrainian diplomacy’s efforts to have those documents revised by mutual consent.
- The conferees “ascertained the risks of military escalation” (French readout; no attribution of that risk). “Concerned about the growth in Russian troops along the Russia-Ukraine border and on the unlawfully annexed Crimea,” the conferees urge a “downscaling of those troop reinforcements, with a view to achieving a de-escalation” (German readout). No reference appeared to Russia’s incendiary threats of war.
- The December 2019 Normandy summit’s communique “remain[s] fully pertinent and require[s] that Russia engage with Ukraine in order to facilitate implementation” (French readout). Those terms require the Ukrainian parliament to adopt a new framework law on the “special status” of the Russian-controlled territory in Ukraine’s east, to incorporate the so-called Steinmeier Formula in that law, and to prepare “elections” in that territory (see EDM, December 11, 12, 2019). Kyiv has resisted those demands to date. President Zelenskyy is aware that yielding to those demands could trigger a severe backlash. Nevertheless, Berlin and Paris along with Moscow would not grant Zelenskyy’s ardent wish for another Normandy summit unless he fulfills the terms of the December 2019 summit.
- Macron will take up the matter of military de-escalation directly with President Vladimir Putin (French readout, reflecting Macron’s ambition for a mediator’s role).

United States President Joseph Biden’s rushed outreach to Putin (April 13) can make Macron’s own attempt look less controversial than it would otherwise have been in the European arena. Macron hastened to endorse Biden’s move on *CBS*: “I am definitely in favor of discussion with Russia in an open, quiet, respectful discussion. [...] I fully share your president’s willingness to dialogue. And I am sure that President Putin can be ready to reopen the dialogue” (Face the Nation, April 18).

Zelenskyy had set the stage for his Paris visit with a lengthy interview in *Le Figaro* (April 16): “It is Macron, precisely Macron who can now, right now, breathe new life into the Normandy process... Macron’s support is needed first and foremost.

Then, let us hope, Russia will be willing.” Zelenskyy still hopes for a Normandy summit with Putin’s participation: “I am keen that all four of us connect and discuss security in Ukraine’s east and the de-occupation of our territories, because it is at such meetings that those issues can be solved” (Ukrinform, April 16). The track record shows the opposite, however.

According to President Zelenskyy’s top advisor, Andriy Yermak, “There were no positions expressed [in Paris] that would be at variance with Ukraine’s interests. [...] Real friends would not even attempt to do this. Ukraine, France and Germany agree on continuing the Normandy process” (Ukrinform, April 16). This claim is misleading, since the process continues at top speed on the basis of the “Clusters” document, heavily favoring Russia (see below).

The four Normandy leaders’ top political advisors convened by video-conference today (April 19) to start discussions on possible refinements to the Franco-German proposals. Titled “Key Clusters for Carrying Out the Minsk Agreements,” the document’s latest version was leaked by Putin’s envoy Dmitry Kozak to the Russian press last month, apparently in order to force the Ukrainian side to respond negatively, so that Kyiv would look intransigent and alienate Berlin and Paris. Indeed, the Franco-German document closely adheres to the Russian-imposed Minsk Two “agreement” while tinkering with the sequence of steps at the margins (see EDM, March 30).

It seems highly untimely for Paris and Berlin to force the pace of talks on the basis of such a document in the shadow of Russia’s massive military deployment and before any de-escalation measures that the Paris meeting was supposed to seek from Russia.

NOTE: The article was first published in Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 18 Issue: 62.

WESTERN BALKANS

What Russia Wants in the Balkans

Zlatko HADŽIDEDIĆ



Popular narratives on Russia's geopolitical interests in the Balkans point to two rather divergent directions. One of them, inherited from the 19th-century strategic thought, says that Russia, as a landlocked empire, must expand into the Balkans, so as to gain access to the Mediterranean sea. According to this narrative, the Balkans is treated as an empty space, regardless of the ethno-religious identity of the inhabitant population. The other one, which can be traced back to 19th-century romanticist pan-Slavism, but which has been popularized in its present form after the publication of Samuel Huntington's theory of „the clash of civilizations“, says that Russia conceives its influence in the Balkans through the cultivation of fraternal relations with the region's Orthodox Christians, using common religious identity to project its geopolitical ambitions.

Facts on the ground, however, do not support either. Russia's influence in the region, from the early 19th century to present day, could never compete with the influence of the Anglo-French axis, exercised through the channels of Serbian and Greek nationalisms, constructed on the anti-Ottoman/anti-Islamic and anti-Habsburg/anti-Catholic foundations, in accordance with strategic interests of the two West European powers to dismantle the declining empires and transform them into a number of weak nation-states. Although these nationalist movements used Orthodox Christianity and a popular folklore motif of fraternity with Orthodox Russia as effective tools

for mobilizing the targeted populations on the anti-Islamic and anti-Catholic grounds, their elites always remained clearly detached from Russia, being continuously oriented towards their true patrons in London and Paris.

The Russian motive in mobilizing Serbian nationalism in the 1990s was, of course, quite convenient for London and Paris, having concealed their continuous support to the Serbian military invasion of Bosnia and Croatia, which produced a gigantic campaign of ethnic cleansing of the non-Serb population in the occupied areas, with more than 100.000 dead and over one million expelled. That was one of the reasons why the British propaganda, both diplomatic and public, insisted on the alleged Russian support to Serbia and its military expansion as a reason why the Western powers could not intervene in the war in Bosnia and prevent further bloodshed. Another reason, much more important from a strategic point of view – indeed, the reason why the Serbian campaign of genocide and ethnic cleansing was supported by London and Paris in the first place – was the global promotion of Huntington's theory of „the clash of civilizations“ as „the next pattern of conflict“. According to that pattern, future geopolitical blocs would be formed on the basis of religious identities, acting as „civilizations“ in ineradicable conflicts. As a model of such conflicts at a micro-level was the one launched in Bosnia, in which Catholics, Muslims and Orthodox Christians were pushed to the point of mutual extermination, in an attempt to form „ethnically cleansed“ areas. This scheme was imposed on these communities' self-appointed leaders (Izetbegović, Karadžić, Boban) by the European Community's negotiator Lord Carrington at the conference held in Lisbon in 1992, several months before the war. The widely promoted narrative of the alleged Russian support of the Serbian aggression on Bosnia, and the alleged pan-Islamic support to Bosnia's defenders (with the deliberate media characterisation of all Bosnians, whatever their religion, as „Muslims“) served the purpose of transforming the world into one of clashing „civilizations“. The ultimate goal was to generate an analogous conflict between Orthodox Christians and Muslims on the macro-level, which would eventually push Russia into a lasting armed conflict with the former Soviet republics populated

by Muslims, and then into a global conflict with the rest of the Islamic world. Needless to say, such a development would have created a significant strategic advantage for the Anglo-American powers and a great strategic loss for both Russia and the Islamic countries.

Yeltsin's foreign policy at the time did not show too much understanding of that geopolitical game, allowing for a public image of Russia as a promotor of pan-Orthodox ideology and a sponsor of the Serbian aggression in the Balkans. However, it must be noted that Russia was not drawn into any major conflict that would fit the pattern of Huntington's „clash of civilizations“, although the local conflicts in Chechnya and Nagorno-Karabakh, in which it was directly or indirectly involved, did possess some elements of that model. In contrast, Putin's foreign policy was based on a much deeper understanding of global relations and geopolitical games at play, so that eventually the Anglo-American strategy of drawing Russia into inter-religious conflicts in Central Asia, in line with Huntington's theory, did not bear much fruit. And so did the constructed image of Russia's involvement on the Serbian side gradually wither away.

Yet, paradoxically, in the last couple of years Russia has played the role, previously insinuated by the Anglo-American propaganda, of a protector of Serbia's efforts to create a Greater Serbia out of the territories of the neighbouring countries with a Serb ethnic minority population (Bosnia, Montenegro, Kosovo). It is difficult to imagine anything more destructive for a country, which is a home to more than 190 ethnic groups, than to adopt the principle of ethnic and religious homogeneity. However, contrary to the principles of ethnic diversity applied in its own territory and in the broader area of the former Soviet Union, Russia's attitude in the Balkans has shown open support to the Greater Serbian programme of uniting all Serbs into a single, ethnically homogenous state. Russian foreign policy of open support for the Serbian efforts to cede the Serb-populated renegade province of Bosnia to Serbia is self-contradictory, to say the least. It is also self-defeating, if taken seriously and applied to Russia itself and the neighbouring countries with a Russian ethnic minority. Can anyone imagine today's Russia in permanent efforts to cede parts of all post-Soviet republics populated with Russians, so as to unite them in some mythical Greater Russia? Or, can anyone imagine Russia attempting to ethnically cleanse its own territory, so as to expell or

exterminate all those 190 ethnic communities, in the name of an ethnically homogenous Russian nation-state? Of course not. Yet, that is precisely the policy of Serbia towards its neighbours and towards its own population that Russia now openly supports on the international scene. Therefore, one has to rightfully ask, what is it that Russia wants in the Balkans?

In the first place, it is highly questionable how influential Russia really is in Serbia, despite its public support for it. For, the very existence of Serbia, from a semi-autonomous principality within the Ottoman territory in the 1830s to the creation of the Kingdom of Serbia in 1882, to its expansion into other South Slavic territories in the form of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) at the Versailles Conference in 1919, always had explicit support by London and Paris. The dissolution of the communist Yugoslavia, which Serbia used as a convenient opportunity to implement the Greater Serbia programme, was also clearly backed by London and Paris, with no relevant participation by Moscow. Under these conditions, it is difficult to imagine a strategic shift from the centuries long Anglo-French influence to that of Russia. It is also difficult to identify Russian strategic interests in the Balkans, given that Russia's foreign policy was not designed to exert control in the zones outside the territory of the former Soviet Union.

Yet, if Russia has no real influence on Serbia, then the current Russian support of Serbia's continuing hostile policy towards its neighbours may well be a simulation of influence. Even if such a simulation cannot deceive the foreign policy circles in London, which are quite familiar with the extent of their long-term control over Serbia, it may well deceive such circles in Washington, which are commonly persuaded that Moscow's influence can be detected everywhere. For what purpose? If the Balkan region is of strategic importance for the US, not only as a link between the West and the Middle East, but also in terms of its natural resources (e.g. Kosovo), then the simulated Russian influence in the Balkans might serve as a leverage against the American influence in zones of true strategic importance for Russia. What first comes to mind, of course, is Ukraine and its aspirations to join NATO: if a tactical simulation of Russian influence in the Balkans, as a zone of traditional strategic influence of the West, turns out to be successful, then it might be possible to push Washington to reduce its ambitions in Ukraine and leave it outside NATO structures.

There is also another purpose for which such a simulation might serve. Not so many analysts, diplomats or politicians are aware of the tacit strategic alliance between Russia and Turkey, which has elevated Turkey to the status of great power. This alliance has already been tested in Libya, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh. In Libya, Russia and Turkey simulated a possibility of mutual military confrontation, each supporting one of the warring parties, while in reality they agreed to divide the spheres of influence, using the Libyan warring parties as their respective proxies. In Syria, under the pretended confrontation, the new allies also divided the spheres of influence. Still, the most interesting game was played out in Nagorno-Karabakh, where Turkey openly supported Azerbaijan in its efforts to restore sovereignty over this region. On the other side, Armenia was persuaded by Western powers, namely France, to go to war over Azerbaijan's region under the pretext that Russian military support to Armenia was a geopolitical inevitability. However, Azerbaijan, with Turkish military support, took the region over, with no opposition from Russia's part. Russia thus returned to the principle of inviolability of post-Soviet borders and finally abandoned the principle of ethnically homogenous greater states, advocated by Armenia and its patrons in Paris and London. Is there a possibility for Russia and Turkey to play a similar game in the Balkans? Is there a possibility that Russia and Turkey want to generate an illusion among the Serbian nationalist elites that Russia would unquestionably support their attempts to cede parts of Bosnia and Kosovo, at the same time leaving Turkey with a free hand to extend its military support to Bosnia's and Kosovo's efforts to prevent Serbia from questioning their sovereignty? Is there a will in Russia to return to the principle of inviolability of borders in the Balkans, too, thereby abandoning the principle of ethnic homogeneity advocated by Serbia and its sponsors in London and Paris, the most harmful principle for Russia's own interests? Is there a will in Russia to follow its own geopolitical interests, in cooperation with Turkey, along the same lines and with the same implications as in Nagorno-Karabakh? Really, what is Russia doing in the Balkans?

Note: This article was first published by Modern Diplomacy on 14 February 2021.

MIDDLE EAST

The US-Saudi Relations

Ambassador Professor Dumitru CHICAN

1

On the 26th of February 2021, five weeks after officially taking office, Joe Biden drew the attention of the daily news consumers through two moves he made in less than a day – his first orders with regard to the US foreign policy, as the US President at the beginning of a mandate.

We are firstly referring to an air raid that targeted several locations of the pro-Iranian armed militias located at the Eastern border between Syria and Iraq. Commentators interpreted Joseph Biden's order as a "tough" message the new Washington Administration sent to the theocratic regime in Tehran at a difficult moment in time, when the US-Iranian dispute is at a crossroad, especially with regard to the "nuclear crisis" and to the fate of the 2015 agreement – the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" – that the USA withdrew from, a decision taken by the former US President, Donald Trump.

The second step was taken when, at his initiative, the US President had a phone conversation with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud. What came as a surprise this time, was not how reluctantly the US leader approached the head of the Wahhabi monarchy, one of USA's oldest allies in the Middle East – after all that reluctance was seen when he approached another fundamental regional ally, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – but the context and the content of the conversation.

Firstly, the most surprising fact was that when he addressed the 80-year-old king, Joe Biden distanced himself from the approach adopted by Donald Trump, to whom, the constant dialogue partner was the royal son, and heir, Mohammad bin Salman, the true force and the *de facto* leader of the Saudi Kingdom, as well as the spiritual leader of the Yemeni war. Obsessed with his desire for power, he became famous due to the futuristic-reformist actions he took for the Saudi society and politics, as well as due to another fact, completely ignored by Donald Trump and his advisors, however, known to the US intelligence services – he was suspected of having ordered the assassination of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, murdered and dismembered by a Saudi commando, on the 2nd of October 2018, inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul.



Mohammad Bin Salman (www.daily-sun.com)

During the conversation Joe Biden had with the monarch in Riyadh, he insisted on highlighting the fact that the USA would stick to the strategic and security partnership it has with Saudi Arabia, and, at the same time, he informed him that Washington intends to declassify and publish a report of the US intelligence services, concerning the "Khashoggi case". The Administration itself insisted on the need to "recalibrate" the bilateral relations, so that they do not violate human rights and are in accordance with the values and principles of the US people.

Joe Biden kept to his word and the incriminating document became public, unleashing a mayhem that foretold the imminence of a storm. The royal council protested ardently, labelling the American initiative as "inconclusive and counterproductive", as it "prejudiced the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its leadership". A phrase that was adopted by all oil monarchies in the Gulf, which stood together to defend the "sovereignty of the Saudi Kingdom and its leadership". They were joined by Egypt, Sudan, the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Nayef Fallah Al-Hajraf and even by the Arab League, through the voice of its Secretary General, Ahmed Abul-Gheit.

Coincidence or not, all this was prefaced by a long series of cold showers that Joe Biden directed at the Saudis, and caused confusion, raised oppositions and concerns at the top of the ruling pyramid in Riyadh. The first step was the decision taken by the US Administration to suspend all military supply deliveries for the Saudi ally and the Yemeni campaign, where the monarchy and Islamic Iran

have been engaged for the past six years, in a fierce proxy war. Then Joe Biden revoked the decision adopted by Donald Trump that designated the Houthi rebels – supported by Iran – as a foreign terrorist organisation and included them on the list made by the US Department of State. Last but not least, there came the sanctions imposed by the USA on more than 70 Saudi officials and entities, among which the “High Readiness Reaction Forces” – a military elite corps whose mission is to protect the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman – the Lieutenant General Ahmad Al-Asiri, a close confidant and advisor to the Crown Prince, former deputy of the Saudi Intelligence Service, former spokesperson for the coalition that is engaged in Yemen, suspected of having been involved in the assassination of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi.



Lieutenant General Ahmed Al-Asiri
(Source: me-confidential.com)

Finally, according to the White House spokesperson, Ned Price, the US Administration asked the Saudi government to proceed immediately to the dissolution of the High Readiness Reaction Forces, after the US had enforced sanctions on them.

In this succession of events, neither President Biden, nor his secretary of state, Antony Blinken ever mentioned the name of the Crown Prince, Why?

Aside from mobilising the media sector, the Saudi diplomatic corps took two political actions, clearly ignoring the “US Connection”. And we are referring to a first intervention from the Saudi Permanent Representative to the UN, Abdullah Moallemi, who was outright and to the point in declaring that the document that the US intelligence services declassified was irrelevant, and consequently Saudi Arabia saw this matter as closed. Then, on the 2nd of March, the same diplomatic representative pathetically appealed to the UN Security Council (not to the White House) to ask the international community to act in order to

end the actions and aggressive attacks of the Yemeni Houthi rebels on Saudi Arabia’s territory and air space.

2

Will there be hard times for the relations between the first Great World Power and for the world leader of the oil market? There may be, however not necessarily. 76 years ago, on the 14th of February 1945, aboard the US cruiser “USS Quincy”, the US President Franklin Roosevelt and the founding King, Ibn Saud agreed that the USA should engage in guaranteeing the security of the Saudi Kingdom and the stability of the Wahhabi monarchy. In exchange for this protection, Saudi Arabia committed to satisfy – under the USA’s own terms – its need for hydrocarbons. Ever since then, the bilateral relation would meet numerous ups and downs, tensions and uncertainties, for various reasons, pertaining either to the Americans, or to the Saudis. However, the bilateral relations have never been interrupted, or threatened by long-lasting crises.



Jamal Khashoggi (Getty Images)

Today, the bone of contention is Jamal Khashoggi, a dissident Saudi journalist and columnist for the “Washington Post”, assassinated on the 2nd of October 2018, inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. The investigations ordered by the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan as well as other investigations ran by the US intelligence services, suggested that the order to end the journalist might have been given by the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, himself. The authorities in Riyadh strongly denied it. In Washington, the conclusions of the investigations led by the National Intelligence Community were classified by order of the former US President, Donald Trump. By the end of February, during the “detrumpization” process, the

new president, Joseph Biden declassified them. The reaction of the Saudis was immediate. "The Saudi Government completely denied the erroneous, harmful and unacceptable conclusions of the report concerning the leadership of the Kingdom", highlighted a communique of the Foreign Ministry in Riyadh. While other official sources, taking a formal step back, accepted the fact that Jamal Khashoggi had been murdered, stating that the assassins had been Saudis who had acted on their own. A Saudi court organised a discreet trial, where five Saudi citizens were sentenced to death, and another three to prison, serving for various periods. Subsequently, their death sentences were changed. Officially, to the Saudi Government the Khashoggi issue had ended.

The USA did not see it the same way. The US Senate, who had access to the conclusions of the intelligence services, decided that the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was responsible for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. The new president, Joe Biden let the Saudis know, at the highest level, that the US Administration decided to act in order to "recalibrate" and re-establish the relations between the USA and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

3

President Biden did not elaborate on the meaning of the "recalibration" about which he had warned King Salman. However, we can attest to two things. Firstly, on one hand, the new president – who before coming to the White House stated that Saudi Arabia "must be considered a pariah", while the royal son and heir to the throne was labelled a "drifter" – wanted a conceptual and pragmatic change of the arbitrary despotism vis-à-vis the rights and liberties of the Saudi civil society. He wanted them to be in accordance to the universal values and principles the American democracy was built on. Secondly, the new President's harsh tone directed at the Saudis, can be regarded as his attempt to establish a reasonable balance between his approaches, taking into account the rising tensions in the Gulf area in general, and between the theocratic Iranian government and the Saudi Sunni monarchy, in particular.

The clouds that darken the sky of the relations between Washington and Riyadh are a certainty, which – taking into account the previous differences and the primitive ego of the purest Arab descent of the Al-Saud family – may take a while. However, it is hazardous to say that the "Khashoggi affair" will lead to a rupture. The relations between the two countries belong to a geopolitical reality

that came to be because of strategic needs, but also because of economic, energy, and military interests, an area where the kingdom is and will remain an absorbent and stable market for the American military industries. To this, we add the USA's interest to have, when needed, permanent access to the Saudi military bases in Taif and Tabuk, or to the naval base in Yanbu, at the Red Sea.

Under such circumstances, we must not rule out the possibility that the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman – "MBS" to everyone – could be cast aside, which would question his ambitions to succeed his father to the Wahhabi throne.

To the Biden administration Saudi Arabia remains an important element of the political and geostrategic equation, but also in the equation of peace and war, including in the ending of a destructive conflict such as the one between the Sunni Saudi Wahhabism and the revolutionary Iranian theocracy. However, at least in the light of the declarations and the decisions adopted by President Biden during the first month of his mandate, the new head of the administration in Washington wishes to end the artificial paradigm that dominated the US regional policy in the past years – starting with the two Bush (Senior and Junior), all the way up to Clinton, Barack Obama, and especially Donald Trump. A paradigm that, out of mercantile and, often enough, hypocritical reasons, under the light of the "universal beacon of democracy and liberty" that the USA pretends to be, promoted intense relations that ignored the declarations of principles with regard to totalitarianism, despotism, human rights and liberties, women's rights, the civil society – unknown issues to the actions and mindsets of the ultraconservative Saudi regime that Joe Biden wishes to erase through "re-establishing", and "recalibrating" the relationship, in a way that puts an end to the discretionary autarky, in exchange for material conjuncture advantages.

In order to accomplish this, Joe Biden must have clear answers and take decisions that can be seen through. Limiting himself to timid sanctions on pawns that do not play decisive parts, and delicately going around the real sources of evil do not and will not help to achieve the "re-establishment" that Joe Biden is aiming at.

The meteoric steps of Greece in the Middle East

Eva J. KOULOURIOTIS

In a harsh statement, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias condemned the rocket attacks launched by the Houthi militia in Yemen against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Especially the attack at the end of last month against its capital, Riyadh, is considered the most dangerous after that on Aramco in September 2019 and came a few days after the removal of the Houthi militia from the US terrorist lists. This was seen as a sign of weakness by the militia and the green light to raise the level of its demands and confirm its ability to harm its opponents, especially Saudi Arabia.

revolution to spread throughout the region. Over the past four decades, Tehran has managed to build alliances with various forces in the region, while the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has sought to resist Tehran's rise. This conflict was reflected in a series of crises such as the one in Lebanon with the support from both sides of the country's opposition forces. The militarization of the Syrian revolution created a new field for the ongoing conflict between Tehran on one side and Riyadh and Abu Dhabi on the other. The last battlefield, Yemen, which has been in a state of ongoing war since 2013, manifested in the civil war but is in fact a chronic regional conflict.



Nikos Dendias (source: Voliatki.gr)



Source: telegraph.co.uk

Back in Greece, the Greek Foreign Ministry statement expresses a change in Athens' policy on the Middle East in general. Although Nikos Dendias did not blame the Houthis or Iran, it is a new addition to Greece's handling of the events taking place there. Despite the scale of the Aramco attacks and their negative effects on Saudi Arabia and the international community as a blow to global energy, Greece was one of the few countries that did not issue a statement on the incident. This was done in the context of the policy adopted by previous Greek governments in order to keep distance from the sensitive scene of the Middle East. However, it seems that this statement of condemnation will not be the last, given the escalation of tension in one of the most complex areas of the world.

First of all, it should be noted that the conflict between Iran and the Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, has its roots in Khomeini's arrival in the Iranian capital, Tehran, on February 1, 1979, with the success of the Islamic Revolution, the overthrow of the Shah's rule and the announcement of the goal of the leadership of the Iranian

This battle-laden situation, following the arrival of Biden at the White House, who has limited ability to deal with conflicts, can gradually develop into a snowball and a state of polarization that is more dangerous than ever. This charged atmosphere cannot be separated from another conflict on one side of which is Tehran and on the other is Israel, which is worried about Iranian expansion in the region. In the midst of this scenario, Athens has chosen to normalise its relations with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh on the one hand and Israel on the other, a step whose results are in doubt.

Athens has always chosen to build friendly relations with the countries of the Middle East in general, as well as to be neutral in any conflict that occurs in this complex region. Greece is one of the safest countries in the world and with the fewest enemies. During the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it built peaceful relations with Israel and good relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization. On the one hand, it prepared an official visit for former Greek President Prokopis Pavlopoulos to Riyadh in February 2017, while

allowing the reopening of the Saderat Iran bank in Athens and training Israeli pilots in the Greek south.

The shift to the above policy is radical but tacit. Today, the Greek army participates through a Patriot battery in the protection of Saudi Arabia's air security from external attacks, while the frigate Hydra of the Greek navy patrols in the Arabian Gulf in coordination with Paris to protect the security of the region. Until the joint military defence agreement between Athens and Abu Dhabi came to confirm a new reality, namely that Greece is now part of a Sunni Arab alliance, whose first and only enemy is Iran, which puts Athens in a similar hostile position to Tehran. This new reality, however, has another chapter related to Tel Aviv.

During a hurried visit, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis met with his Israeli counterpart Netanyahu in Tel Aviv, under the public title of cooperation between the two countries to combat Covid-19. But a Greek diplomatic source assured that this visit has a significant dangerous military aspect. The two sides stressed the need to expand military cooperation between them and Athens requested the lease of two drones for military use for a period of three years, while the final touches were made in the agreement for the construction of an air training base in Kalamata by an Israeli company. This sensitive visit and military rapprochement between the two countries was reflected in statements by Israeli Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi when he placed Greece at the top of Tel Aviv's list of allies against Iran and its allies. In this way, Athens is again in the position of Tehran's enemy.

countries that give another impression. But we cannot deny that the new military strategy recently adopted by Athens, will soon have new chapters, all aimed at supporting countries that are openly hostile to Tehran. In the same context, discussions have begun within the Greek-Arab-Israeli diplomatic line for the creation of a new alliance in the near future that will include Arab countries hostile to Iran plus Israel, in which Greece may also participate.

If this is done, it could be interpreted as a lack of confidence by members of this alliance in Washington's new Democratic leadership, led by Biden, which clearly does not want to take a hostile stance towards Tehran. The Greek side will use it internally as an acquisition of allies against Ankara and its plans in the eastern Mediterranean.

Given that we are at a time when war is closer than peace, increasing the level of relations between Greece and the rich countries of the Gulf is considered reasonable and its economic return can help Greece in its economic difficulties. Correctly. Certainly, these countries will not impose conditions for military cooperation in Athens in exchange for this economic cooperation. However, the truth is that the desire of the current Greek government to play a greater role in the region pushes it to dangerous and hasty steps, the negative medium and long-term consequences of which can be catastrophic. Gambling in an area that hardly passes through a decade without a war shows either naivety or ignorance of danger.



Source: middleeasteye.net

Indeed, the public diplomatic relations between Athens and Tehran remain calm and stable and there are no statements from officials of the two

AFRICA

Professor Chris Alden: “African development economists have always been interested in ideas, experiences and models from both inside and outside the continent”

The development and modernization of the countries in Africa has always been a priority for BRICS countries and their African counterparts. Given the significant degree of economic dependency and high levels of poverty at independence, the development of countries in Africa has been largely intertwined with the relationship with the former colonial powers. The rise of leading emerging economies like China and India have had made a strong impression on Africans, both for their direct influence on African economies but also for the ideas and models of development.

Professor Chris Alden of London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), specialized in International Relations and Director of LSE IDEAS, has offered his views on *Emerging Powers in Africa* in the interview offered to Vladimir Adrian Costea for the *Geostrategic Pulse Magazine*.



Professor Chris Alden / photo lse.ac.uk

Geostrategic Pulse: The African markets have once more become attractive to the emerging powers. The collaboration within BRICS and, at the same time, the competition between China, India, Brazil, South Africa and Russia is visible on a global level, especially in terms of redefining the power balance. How do you see the current dynamic of the commercial flows to and out of

Africa?

Chris Alden: Emerging powers have seen in African resources and, to a lesser extent, African markets a host of economic opportunities. This has shaped much of their approach to the continent in the last two decades. Contemporary commercial flows remain focused first and foremost on leading BRICS countries like China and India as importers of resources from Africa. The problem that this poses for Africa is this relationship does not change substantively their position in the global value chain, aka, as a provider of basic commodities and an importer of finished goods which has of course featured in Africa’s relationship with traditional economies in the West.

To what extent the economic interests of the emerging powers and the resources that the African countries have at their disposal can cause new regional conflicts, taking into account the nature of the political regimes in those countries?

Resources in themselves do not cause conflicts but the management of those resources – both domestically and in regard to external powers – can fuel or trigger conflicts. Those African governments which are not able to distribute the revenue gains from resources into concrete economic improvements for their populations will always be accused of potentially courting domestic instability. This situation can lay the seeds for external intervention as local factions or movements collaborate with external actors to pursue their respective agendas.

Where do the USA, the UK and the EU stand with regard to this simultaneous economic and political competition with BRICS?

The focus of the US, the UK and the EU has been on competition with BRICS countries in selected sectoral areas – provisions for energy or mining resources in Africa, for instance – in the economic sphere while engaging in political competition over regional and global issues like international

intervention and human rights. Some of these political disputes arise out of efforts to win African support at multilateral institutions for BRICS positions or to counter Western efforts to censure BRICS countries. Vaccine diplomacy is the latest example of a combined effort at promoting closer ties between BRICS countries and Africa. At the same time, there have been a number of initiatives pursued by the West to encourage cooperation at ministerial levels or in response to specific crisis, for example the Ebola crisis of 2014, which saw strong cooperation between Western governments and China in particular.

To what extent could the economic growth models of the emerging powers be sustainable in order to be applied to underdeveloped or developing countries? Does such a model really require a different governing model on a local level?

What successful emerging economies all have is leadership, strong local institutions, an economic plan for the allocation of limited resources to foster key sectors and strategic engagement with external partner countries to secure market access and FDI. None of this implies adoption of specific governing model; indeed, despite the contemporary assumptions that single-party regimes are necessary for rapid modernisation, the evidence overall suggests that authoritarian states with their lack of accountability and transparency have had some of the poorest track records in delivering development to their domestic populations. What is overlooked regarding the emerging power economic models is that they have been largely been export-oriented, so they require a functioning and open international trade system and in particular cases relied on preferential access to key industrial country markets like the EU and the US. The shakeup of this international trade system over the last few years demonstrates how vulnerable emerging market economies are to changes in access and openness.

Are the countries in Africa open to outside coordination so as to apply a development model, or do they really want to make their own way?

African development economists have always been interested in ideas, experiences and models from both inside and outside the continent. African governments have at different historical junctures sought to coordinate their economics, notably from 1980 onwards through the creation of regional

economic organisations like ECOWAS and SADC to improve their economic power. Currently a new initiative, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, is being ratified and is set to promote intra-regional trade across the whole region. Outside coordination of course has featured three areas: in the enduring and continuing legacies of the former colonial powers in African economies; the post-Cold War imposition of neo-liberal policies; emulation of emerging power – China in particular and to a lesser extent Brazil – examples of development.

How do you see China's assertiveness towards Africa? And, do you think the Chinese strategy to invest heavily in infrastructure (digital included) and manufacturing, set technical standards, lock countries into carbon-intensive power generation, have greater influence over countries' political decisions and acquire more power-projection capabilities for its military could be countered by the US and EU? If so, how?

China's influence in African economies is undeniable and is gradually reshaping their orientation not only in trade terms away from the EU (and to a degree the US, but the changing energy profile in US more influential in diminishing economic involvement) but in longer term structural economic engagement as well. There is evidence that this is influencing African positions in multilateral settings to support Chinese interests. If the US and EU wish to counter China's growing influence, they will need to provide equivalent development initiatives (loans and grants, infrastructure) on better terms than those provided by China. Demonstrating that these provisions align more directly with the African Union's continental development plan, Agenda 2063, and the UN's SDGs might be a good place to start.

Western Sahara from Trump to Biden: the American Game

Ali El AALLAOU

The self-determination process in Western Sahara accumulates a series of cases that result in a successive violation of collective and individual rights, which has been repeated for years. It is this situation that leaves the great powers like the United States to use their power to ally with Morocco, behind the backs of the Saharawi people without any consideration either humanitarian or legal.

In this sense, Trump's American position in favour of the Moroccan thesis over Western Sahara, and that of his successor Joe Biden who takes the middle baton are counterproductive and draws a new American policy in the Maghreb.

Western Sahara non-self-governing territory

To this day, the UN maintains a list of 17 territories considered as non-self-governing – territories that have yet to be decolonized. All, except one, are islands, the vast majority administered by the United Kingdom; the smallest, Pitcairn, has just 43 residents. By far the largest by population (582,000 inhabitants) and land area (266,000, 00 sq. km) is Western Sahara.

In 1960, the UN passed Resolution 1514, which declared, "All peoples have the right to self-determination." In 1965, Western Sahara was recognized as a non-self-governing territory, after Spain renounced its sovereignty. In 1990, the UN General Assembly reaffirmed that Western Sahara was still waiting to be decolonized and that its future should be determined by its people.

Unfortunately, the UN has not yet fulfilled its commitments towards the Saharawi people to determine their fate. The decolonization of Western Sahara has remained an endless game that has now been joined in full force by the United States, Israel, and by the territory's new colonizer, Morocco.

From a legal point of view, there is no doubt about the legal status of Western Sahara. The International Court of Justice, in 1975, ruled that neither country which had claimed the territory, Mauritania and Morocco, had any sovereign rights over it. The United Nations considers Spain's agreement the same year to transfer sovereignty to Morocco and Mauritania invalid.

Refuting Morocco's claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara, the ICJ established that the Saharawi people have sovereignty over the territory and have the right to decide, through the free and genuine expression of their will, the status of the territory. In 2006 the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted that no member state-recognized Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara.

Further support for the right of the Saharawi people to determine their future came from the European Court of Justice. In 2016, the Court ruled that, according to the UN Charter, Western Sahara is not part of the sovereign territory of Morocco and that no agreements signed between the EU and Morocco could be applied to Western Sahara without the agreement of its people.

Who represents the Saharawi people? The Polisario Front. It is their only legitimate representative, as affirmed by UN resolutions 34/37 and 35/19 which recommended the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro, its full name, as the representative of the people of Western Sahara, and should thus "participate fully in any search for a just, lasting and definitive political solution to the question of Western Sahara".

Indeed, the United States itself has never formally recognized Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, and it refused to apply free trade agreements between the United States and Morocco to the territory.

But then came President Trump's decision. On December 10, 2020, the White House twisted the history of Western Sahara, by declaring Moroccan sovereignty despite that act's lack of standing under international law.

Trump and the barter policy with Morocco for Western Sahara

The presidential proclamation recognizing the illegal Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara made initially on Twitter, had a strange birth; being tied umbilical to the simultaneous announcement Morocco would normalize relations with Israel.

Immediately there was a backlash from former senior U.S. government officials who rightly saw the president's decision as contrary to international law.

Two UN Secretary-General special envoys, James Baker and Christopher Ross reached the same conclusion: that only a referendum on self-determination is compatible with international law. Western Sahara could not just be an asset for the U.S. to barter with Morocco for the benefit of its Israel policy.

America has tried once before to definitively sell out Western Sahara to Morocco.

Throughout recent history, both France and the U.S., as Rabat's historical allies, have attempted to tip the balance in favour of Morocco by accepting informally its claims to Western Sahara. However, in the mid-1970s, Secretary of State of the United States, Henry Kissinger more actively colluded with the annexation plan instigated by Morocco's Hassan II, and consistently showed complete "indifference" to the wishes of the Saharawi population.

A referendum on self-determination was and is a basic requirement to chart the future of the territory. A UN peacekeeping mission established in 1991, with Morocco's agreement, to ensure the vote took place. But over the last three decades, Morocco has managed to remove the referendum issue off the agenda of the international community.

Somewhat than suffering any material diplomatic or reputational loss from this undemocratic obstructionism, Morocco has won itself a privileged partnership status among the parties who should be ensuring its compliance mainly Spain, France, the United States, the monarchies of the Gulf, and dozens of African countries. In this context, Morocco exploits the "no peace, no war" status quo to steal the natural resources of Western Sahara with their complicity.

Morocco is illegally occupying the territory of Western Sahara. That is why Trump's decision to recognize its sovereignty is so extraordinarily helpful for Moroccans, bolstering their intransigence, threatening any future good faith mediating role for the U.S., undermining international law and institutions, including a UN peacekeeping mission, and encouraging the persistence of the conflict in Western Sahara with its consequent instability and insecurity for the region.

Then-candidate Biden accused Trump, in the March 2020 issue of "Foreign Affairs," of taking the word of autocrats while showing disdain for democrats."

President Joe Biden and the respect of international law in Western Sahara

So how far can the Biden administration roll back the tide on Western Sahara, pivoting away from transactional, unilateralist Trump foreign policy towards a doctrine of democracy, self-determination, and respect for international law?

Trump's deal, linking U.S. recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara to Morocco normalizing ties with Israel, was both strange and characteristic of his administration. It is a non-normative form of diplomacy that will remain outlier and ephemeral as long as Biden acknowledges it as such and takes steps to limit or reverse its damage. That will require a firm stance against determined lobbying by Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, who benefitted greatly from the Morocco deal and who, like Kissinger, is entirely indifferent to the collateral damage to the Sahrawi people.

For the Biden presidency to make good on its promise to uphold democratic values and abjure autocrats, it must state firmly that a democratic solution for Western Sahara is not only necessary but also inevitable. And it needs to happen soon before another war starts.

Tensions are already rising in the region. In mid-November last year, Moroccan troops entered and illegally annexed an area in the south of Western Sahara which is patrolled by UN peacekeepers. The

Polisario Front immediately called it an "illegal violation" of the 1991 UN-brokered ceasefire agreement and declared a war of self-defence on the Moroccan military. Since then, the two sides have regularly exchanged fire.

This new geopolitical reality requires a restructuring of American diplomacy in the Maghreb. There are numerous ways that the Biden administration can strengthen relations with Morocco and with the Polisario Front, Algeria, and Mauritania, for the sake of economic growth and America's strategic interests, but all those approaches must share an insistence on democracy and self-determination.

Biden is above all a pragmatist; but he also recently voiced positions that set human rights as a core foreign policy priority, and veer more towards the positions of the Bernie Sanders camp, one of the most fervent defenders of the right of people to self-determination.

And it's not only the people of Western Sahara who look with expectation at the new U.S. administration reversing Trump giving carte blanche to Morocco: Algeria and South Africa would back such a reversal, too.

It is likely that, in looking for a compromise solution for Western Sahara, the Biden administration will resuscitate the Baker Plan, otherwise known as the "Peace Plan for the Self-determination of the Inhabitants of Western Sahara." Negotiated in several versions and over several years in early 2003 by former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, in his capacity as UN special envoy, the plan gives each of the parties something of what they want, although perhaps not all they want.

Baker suggested an autonomous period of five years under Moroccan sovereignty which would then lead to a referendum. He suggested the model of Puerto Rico, a self-governing but unincorporated territory of the United States.

However, Rabat rejected the Baker Plan. It seems that Morocco insists on a single criterion of "winner takes all." That has guaranteed the failure of United Nations diplomacy up to now and will do so in the future too unless challenged.

It is up to the Biden administration to clarify to Morocco, in the strongest terms, that the United States is returning to normative, not transactional, foreign policy, and that its bilateral relations will be founded not on expediency and incongruous linkages, but justice, human rights, and international law. And that the United States is committed to the endlessly deferred decolonization of the largest subjugated territory in the world.

NOTE: The article was first published on 8 March 2021 in Center for Nationalism Studies.

INDO-PACIFIC REGION

Good fences make good neighbours - building resilience in the Indo-Pacific region.

Guy BOEKENSTEIN local drivers and conditions.

Good fences make good neighbours. This line from Robert Frost's famous poem *Mending Wall* is often misunderstood. Some take it to mean that having hard barriers in place will keep neighbours apart and therefore prevent problems. However, in the poem the very action of rebuilding the fence together every year is what brings the neighbours closer. By spending time together, talking and repairing the fence the two characters become better neighbours.

Our future is deeply intertwined with our Indo-Pacific neighbours and we have an enduring interest in the sovereignty, stability, security and prosperity of the region. This benefits all who live in it. Resilience refers not simply to safety or security, but to the capacity of a system to recover from changes and shocks in its environment. These shocks can be internal or external. Building national resilience in Australia should not only be seen through the lens of strengthening domestic systems, economic settings, critical infrastructure and other programs. It is also about ensuring we have a resilient neighbourhood.

The Australian Government has a long history of capacity building initiatives across the region with this objective in mind. The initiatives are delivered through aid programs, defence cooperation programs, medical and health projects, academic and professional exchange programs etc. These seek to help build stronger communities and more stable governments so that Australia can improve its own economic and security interests, therefore become more resilient.

However, this policy approach, while well intentioned, is not always matched with well-designed practical initiatives and engagement. This is sometimes due to a lack of country-specific literacy and programs being designed and delivered in an Australian-centric manner. Therefore, we need to build a deeper understanding of the region within our government policy makers, business leaders and academic institutions (secondary and tertiary). Anyone who understands the region will know that key to success is underpinned by personal connections and networks. These take time to develop, patience and a strong understanding of

To explore how simple, well-designed programs can succeed let's look to one of our largest, most important, diverse and dynamic neighbours – the Republic of Indonesia.



Source: reneweconomy.com.au

Australian politicians of both persuasions regularly state that Indonesia is one of Australia's most important strategic partners. What this actually means in terms of Australia's foreign policy priorities and practices is, however, often contested. While there have been some excellent achievements – most recently with the finalisation of the *Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement* for which the Morrison and Widodo governments should be applauded – misperceptions and misunderstandings remain on both sides.

Looking back a decade, in his historic 2010 speech to the Australian Parliament, former Indonesian President Yudhoyono highlighted the dangers posed by the perceptions that Indonesians and Australians have of one another. He said “*I was taken aback when I learned that in a recent Lowy Institute survey ... there are Australians who still see Indonesia as an authoritarian country, as a military dictatorship, as a hotbed of Islamic extremism or even as an expansionist power*”. The president highlighted a key element to overcoming

these barriers is through better people-to-people linkages.

Progress has been made, but I would argue that we need to continue to strengthen these people-to-people linkages. Below are two small, but important, practical models that could be followed.

In 2011, the Australian Department of Defence launched the *Indonesia-Australia Defence Alumni Association* or IKAHAN (www.ikahan.com). The purpose of IKAHAN is to foster relationships across the large, diverse, and sometimes misunderstood, bilateral defence relationship. It provides a platform to exchange ideas, interact in new ways, build relationships within the future leaders on both sides, dispel myths and encourage dialogue between the senior leadership.

Notable Australian members include former and current Governor-Generals of Australia, former senior Australian Defence Force leaders, leading academics and thought leaders. There is a similarly impressive membership on the Indonesian side. Senior leadership is important, but likewise is future leadership and IKAHAN boasts a large cohort of junior members. The simple act of establishing a vehicle to better promote understanding and engagement that resonates for both sides has added a depth to the bilateral relationship not imagined before.

Coincidentally, in 2011 the Northern Territory Cattleman's Association established an exchange program to bring Indonesian animal husbandry students to northern Australia to learn about Australian cattle production systems and foster greater cross-industry understanding of the unique challenges faced by producers in both countries. The Indonesian students typically spend eight weeks in Australia gaining practical hands-on training working alongside Australian stockmen and women on northern cattle properties. Several of the Australian host families then visit Indonesia to reunite with the students they hosted in Australia and to learn more about Indonesian agriculture and its requirements as a market.

Many of these Indonesian students go on to become leaders in their field. These relationships cannot be valued in dollar terms but hold an immeasurable value in one of Australia's most important live export markets.

Both programs continue today and both are in important sectors that have been tested in the past and will likely be tested in the future. The philosophy and approach taken to weather proof these sectors can be applied across the Indo-Pacific



Source: australianfintech.com.au

region. By adding ballast to our bilateral relationships through people-to-people linkages we can better manage future shocks and therefore add resilience to Australia and our neighbourhood.

Practical first steps that we can take to help build this ballast include, increasing the capacity and depth of Asian studies programs in our schools and universities, designing genuine collaborative government programs and projects (which will often require to do things differently to the Canberra norm and mindset) and building Asia capable business leaders who better understand our northern neighbourhood – which equates to almost 60 percent of the global population.

As we move out of the pandemic, Australia has the opportunity as a middle-power to match our rhetoric with practical action. We have the opportunity to become a good neighbour, let's not let it pass us by.

Duterte's Independent Foreign Policy Befalls to "Philippinedization"

Dr. Chester CABALZA

Populist Filipino president Rodrigo Duterte, almost at the twilight of his regime as he exits his presidency on June 2022, espoused a blurry 'independent foreign policy' as the chief architect of the Southeast Asian state. It draws a thin line of hallucination from Suharto's reincarnated 'free and active' foreign policy in circumventing conflicts among major powers or Jawaharlal Nehru's 'wisdom of nonalignment'.



President Rodrigo Duterte (Source: ft.com)

When he redesigned the architecture of Philippines' foreign policy, carrying a prominent promise for an independent foreign policy in 2016, with expressed articulation coded from the land's supreme law, he slowly detaches the Philippines from the United States and yields to China's want.

The Philippines could have shaped the world order if Rodrigo Duterte, the feisty first Filipino president from Mindanao, continued the fight of his predecessor in containing China. After all, it was a bluff. A blunder that has trapped him in his ambitious, yet unclear independent foreign policy which primarily lacked Ferdinand Marcos'

sharpness in foreign policy and Benigno Aquino Jr.'s knack on law fare.

If the sequence of an analytical, rational, and sequential Philippines' foreign policy strides in a strong policy institutionalization, and not in a skewed six-year term survival, Manila may have gained a robust respect in the region, that even Hanoi and Jakarta, could have emulated its maritime battle against Beijing.

Yet, the gullible reverberation of Manila's policy options since June 2016 ignored a syndetic foundation of confronting the military might of Asia's most powerful state as Duterte dined-in to Xi Jinping's banquet in Beijing of August 2019, his last official visit before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic that originated from China. It was a symbolic tribute mission to discuss the volatile sea row and harvest unfulfilled economic pledges from the Middle Kingdom.

But what happened to the archipelagic Philippines leaves a symbolic scar of hedging defeat despite a conquering landmark case of maritime ruling in the region that leads to the ascent of Philippinedization. This leaves the Philippines to a scant mendicancy of China's mercy at the peak of its flawless grand strategy exuded in the South China Sea.

But Manila's triumphant legal victory on July 12, 2016 from The Hague ruling sowed a meretricious rhyme of the beginning of an end. While the Philippines swept an overt unanimous award in the South China Sea (SCS) arbitration case, covert economic and diplomatic rapprochements with Beijing at the strategic level gives rise to Philippinedization.

It paves a way for Philippinedization as a conceptual framework more workable for equipoising Beijing and Washington over Manila's own mix of everything in its flip-flopping foreign policy. In layman's term of William Van Orman Quine's popularized belief of 'hold come what may', Philippinedization pursues a fatalistic approach of anything happens and whatever comes about in resolving situational problems it faces in the aqua-blue waters of the South China Sea.

In this gargantuan case, it is "how to solve the problem like the West Philippine Sea?"

The cardinal inquiry paves a way for Philippinedization that bids for a higher echelon of competition while maintaining geopolitical flexibility of combined calculated agreement for

trade advances and simultaneous military buildup.

The rise of Philippinization visualizes Manila's potential precarious inertia that recreates robust policy experimentation and innovation or the reconstruction of a whole-of-alliance approach. If prudently navigated, a wide foresight of its own crisis management in territorial defense could generate positive economic and security externalities. Contrary to a neorealist Waltzian approach that may incubate a structural realist's *realpolitik* in the depiction of anarchic and Darwinian protectionist behaviors of claimant states in the South China Sea.

The Philippines' pivotal role in the South China Sea's continuing saga scrawls a strategic importance between the two competing Argonauts in the region. In spite of being dwarfed by hegemony, Manila carries a hoof position of incredulity that cannot be discounted even by Hanoi or Jakarta or Taipei.

Beijing and Washington's combined astuteness in warm foreplay of grand strategy need adroit arbitration using Manila's spasmodic ethereal concoction of strategic dilemma; a genial ambiance of betting approach on alliance and partnership, less achieved in a sybaritic dream of naval independence from flexed and muscled American or Chinese navies.

For instance, the fear factor that Beijing's camouflaged China Coast Guard reintroduced to the regional security complex, after a heated ratification of the China Coast Guard Law last February 1, 2021, brought some silver linings in the lethal use of force of white ships. The xenophobic attitude of China's larger coast guard vessels simultaneously guarantees it to flex muscle on foreign vessels' entering Chinese maritime jurisdiction.

The manner of reaction has caught indispensable loathe from moniker vassal states and rival naval big powers. This leads one vocal nation to sway another denouncing China's aggressive regional expansion and global ambition in the sphere of maritime domain. As a defense mechanism, the Philippines came in as the first country to file for diplomatic protest, equating China's sea vanguards' new maritime law as a verbal threat of war.

This Duterte's act withdraws from the paradigm shift of pursuing an independent foreign policy despite the enshrouding objectivist analysis of Philippine reality reflecting its economic condition, concomitant problems, geographical features, socio-cultural divides, and history of internal conflicts

when personal politics pollutes a national security direction.

It came to a point when Duterte triggered to shelve the termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) that operationalizes the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) between Manila and Washington on June 3, 2020 from a mere cancellation of the US visa of his senator ally, the chief implementer of his contentious drug war.

Although, Duterte's rebuttal to the White House in 2019 on the validity of the MDT made an impact when the US under Donald Trump made a serious rebalancing act in spite of American foreign policy overtures in the Indo-Pacific region. The US' indecisiveness of an Asia-centered security strategy to contain China headed to conceivable reason of Manila's toning down of expectation from US pledge that resorted to pragmatism by hedging against perceived threats.

But on March 10, 2021, the US' charm offensive has not waned yet when it sent a list of weapons and military hardware to gratify the demand of payment of the most powerful nation to Asia's one of the weakest armed forces in exchange for retaining the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) as part of the Philippine military's second phase of modernization program.

The checkmate moves of Manila and Washington that surprised Beijing last April 16, 2021, when the two allied forces activated to massively send its strongest response yet against China's expansionist militarization into the West Philippine Sea. The Philippines sailed four of its most advanced warships that include the two brand-new missile-guided frigates, the *BRP Jose Rizal* and the *BRP Antonio Luna*; while the US deployed a formidable assault ship, *USS Malkin Island*, with escorts of submarines, destroyers, and cruisers to the contested feature of the Whitsun Reef.

This, despite a scenario of lessening Manila's dependence on Washington while maintaining historic alliance brought by indecisive abrogation of the VFA and other defense treaty with America could sizably affect the enhancement of operability to conduct joint operations with allied forces. This will have a chilling effect for a year to come before the next presidential election, given Duterte's flip-flopping foreign policy as a result of a volatile and ambiguous regional security, this may be attributed to the ascent of Philippinization, a newly-concocted framework that sophisticatedly downplayed during his tenure as the Philippines' controversial contemporary leader.

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“GEOSTRATEGIC PULSE” - founded in 2007
Bilingual Publication of Geopolitical Analysis, edited by
INGEPO Consulting - Bucharest
www.pulsulgeostrategic.ro; Tel: +4-031 1011934
J40/4984/2019, CUI RO19298677

Editor-in-Chief: Constantin IACOBÎȚĂ

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ISSN: 1844-167X

Cover: Self Editing

SUBSCRIPTIONS (1 Year) - 599 LEI

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