



Joining the dots and making sense of the key geopolitical developments in Europe, Eurasia and MENA

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Geopolitical Trends (Re-)Emerging from the Reversal of “Trump-ism” in US Foreign Policy

Key points:

- 1) Could climate change make a difference in global geopolitics?
 - 2) Is a “geopolitical vacuum” emerging from the imminent US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan?
 - 3) How the unravelling of “Trumpian heritage” to the Middle East is reshaping regional geopolitics
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On January 20th, 2021, Joseph R. Biden Jr. was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States. Starting from his very first day in office, President Biden unleashed a full-scale assault on his predecessor's legacy while sweeping aside Donald Trump's landmark domestic and external policies. As highlighted in our last couple of issues, President Biden's foreign affairs and national security teams have launched a structural overhaul of America's policies. As such, the arrival of President Biden at the White House appeared as the most consequential event of international politics at the beginning of 2021. The current issue continues to explore some other geopolitical trends (re-)emerging from the reversal of "Trump-ism" in U.S. foreign policy.

1) Could climate change make a difference in global geopolitics?

On April 22-23, President Joe Biden hosted a virtual global "Summit on Climate Change", where he invited the leaders of the 17 countries in the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate (Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, the EU, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, the UK, and the US), as well as a selection of countries who demonstrated strong climate commitment and activism. Notably, the summit included the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, and Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, countries which had been officially acknowledged by the U.S. as "rival autocracies" ("Interim National Security Strategic Guidance", <https://www.whitehouse.gov>). The invitation of the Chinese and Russian leaders might have appeared in stark contrast with the global perspective of this administration on the ongoing competition between democracies and autocracies. What did this global Summit mean for the potential role of climate change in squaring off a 21st century multipolar world order that would be rather manageable at the global level than split into new

"spheres of influence"?

According to "The Washington Post's" editorial of April 23rd: "*President Biden took the first step Thursday [i.e. the inaugural day of the summit] to kick-start a new era of climate-centered geopolitics.*" Indeed, in a tweet of April 22nd, President Biden recalled that: "*No nation can solve the climate crisis on our own — all of us have to step up. Today's Leaders' Summit on Climate is our first step to set our world on a path to a secure, prosperous, and sustainable future.*" (<https://www.washingtonpost.com>)

The visit of the U.S. climate envoy, John Kerry, to China (April 14-17) might have specifically aimed to indicate that Washington was prepared to advance climate diplomacy, while de-escalating tensions resulting from other foreign policy areas¹ by focusing on advancing complementary goals, such as technical cooperation and aid for vulnerable countries. (www.chathamhouse.org) In response to President Biden's call, Chinese President Xi Jinping said at the Summit that his country (currently, the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases) would phase down coal consumption in the second half of this decade. He has also reiterated China's commitment to act through multilateral frameworks to promote a fair and equitable system of global environmental governance for win-win cooperation. For instance, China had made of ecological cooperation a key part of its "Belt and Road Initiative" that would cover green infrastructure, green energy, green transport, and green finance. (<https://www.china.org.cn>)

Just prior to the summit, during his "State of the Nation" speech, President Putin called on the Russian government to reduce emissions to below the level of the E.U. by 2030- a dramatic scaling up of Russia's ambitions. In his speech at the Summit, Putin commented: "*Our discussion today has*

¹ See item 1 of the [EGF GT, No.13/February-March 2021](#)

demonstrated our deep mutual concern over climate change and our interest in stepping up international efforts to resolve this problem." He further added that Russia was willing to propose several joint projects and discuss possible incentives for foreign companies interested to invest in clean technologies in Russia. (<https://www.intellinews.com>) In fact, the Russian President has highlighted his country's readiness to work with the U.S. and with the European partners on mitigating the negative consequences of global climate change, despite the numerous disagreements and tensions piling upon Russia's relations with Western countries over the last years. However, some critics have questioned Russian president's genuine interest in, and commitment to, cooperation on climate change, given Russia's diverging interests as large exporter of fossil fuels, as well as in opening new Arctic shipping routes because of the climate change. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com>)

In the wake of four years of Trumpian climate change isolationism, President Biden's global "Summit on Climate Change" has been a diplomatic success highlighting U.S. return to global leadership in this specific area. Multilateral climate diplomacy boosted by the attendance of such many world leaders, including the presidents of China and Russia- the largest rivals of the U.S., has created a new momentum against a global challenge indiscriminately affecting every international actor. The Summit clearly showed there still was some political will in the international system to buffer/alleviate ongoing great powers' rivalries, and to delay/evade the onset of a multipolar world order completely broken into "spheres of influence". Considering the geopolitical trend potentially leading into a Concert of Powers², the Summit exposed that the 21st century multipolar world order was still manageable at the global level,

at least while addressing specific global challenges, such as climate change. Whether or not the Summit would also have some practical consequences on the way climate change is going to be approached in the future is still to be seen.

2) Is a "geopolitical vacuum" emerging from the imminent US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan?

On April 14th, President Biden announced that the U.S. will withdraw troops from Afghanistan by September 11th, the day of the 20th anniversary of the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks, which triggered the "war on terror" by former President George W. Bush. He stopped short of declaring a military victory, but he acknowledged instead that America must focus on a different constellation of security threats and risks than that of about two decades ago. Biden said: *"I'm now the fourth United States president to preside over American troop presence in Afghanistan. Two Republicans, two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth."* (<https://www.washingtonpost.com>)

This decision came just a couple of weeks before a May 1st timeline for the withdrawal of most of the U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan set by the "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan" signed with the Taliban by the Trump Administration, in Doha, on February 29th, 2020 (see more on: [EGFGeopoliticalTrendsMarch2020\(8\).pdf](#)).

Fourteen months after the signature of the Doha Agreement, its implementation by the Taliban is anything but tedious and murky, given the latter did not meet their commitments to pursue an Afghan power-sharing agreement among all relevant political forces, and to cut their ties with Al-Qaeda and with the remnants of the Islamic State. Nevertheless, the U.S. and its allies have decided to remove most of their forces from Afghanistan as *"The costs – both human and financial – vastly*

² Ibidem.

exceeded the benefits. Moreover, if the Taliban succeed in regaining absolute power in Kabul and invite Al Qaeda and even ISIL to set up structures and training camps in the country, we will be back to square one in terms of the global campaign to contain terrorism.” (J. Shea-[Afghanistan: if it costs this much, there has to be a better way - Friends of Europe](https://www.friends-of-europe.com))

To mitigate those risks at a price that NATO allies and partners would be willing and able to pay, Shea suggested a new approach consisting of six main lines of effort.



From <https://www.quora.com>

To somewhat sweeten the “bitter pill” of the imminent U.S.-led military withdrawal³, secretary of state Antony Blinken visited Afghanistan on April 15 to reassure the Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, and his government of U.S. continued support to the “security partnership” with Kabul. *“Military withdrawal should not stop the United States and its partners from assisting Afghanistan’s security forces and supporting its development, with a special emphasis on protecting the gains that women and girls have made over the past 20 years”* (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com>).

³ Most recent reports foresee it might be done by mid-July in order to minimize operational risks (<https://www.nytimes.com>).

What happens next is unclear. The civil war might escalate further. The Taliban have little or no interest in participating in the multi-ethnic political process set up by the current government in Kabul. And whether the Taliban will keep from disrupting the U.S./NATO withdrawal is also unclear. (<https://www.brookings.edu>)

On the other hand, the critics of Biden’s decision on the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan fear that *“We are not ending a war; we are leaving the battle space to our adversaries. Who are they? The Taliban and al-Qaeda, those who brought us 9/11. [...] It maybe that they no longer seek to attack the United States. But Biden’s announcement leaves that decision in their hands, not ours. That is a very bad place to be.”* (<http://carnegieendowment.org>)

Indeed, U.S. and allies’ security experts are still struggling with figuring out how/where from to continue to provide operational support to the Afghan governmental forces to prevent the Taliban win the civil war and possibly restore terrorist bases on freshly captured land.

Consequently, Afghanistan is most likely to become again a “geopolitical vacuum” at the “heart of Asia”. From a geopolitical perspective, this is a direct result of U.S./NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan reflecting a dramatic change of their strategic priorities in Eurasia: a move away from Mackinder’s Heartland (enshrined in Z. Brzezinski’s focus on the “Eurasian Balkans”) to the Rimland, that might be motivated by the strategic imperative to contain Russia and China. And this structural change is likely to impact the geopolitical approaches of most, if not all, regional powers who would be maintaining economic, political, security, or ethno-cultural interests in Afghanistan: China, Russia, Iran, Turkey, India and Pakistan, as well as the local players (neighboring Central Asian post-Soviet republics) who might feel emboldened to fill in, one way or another, the newly emerging “geopolitical vacuum”.

A large question mark is looming on whether the regional powers and local players would be willing and able to establish a kind of Consortium (under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization-SCO?) aiming to manage a joint diplomatic framework to facilitate and guarantee the intra-Afghan peace process. Or will each of those prefer to play on various competing Afghan proxies (warlords) and try to better isolate themselves from the potential fallout of an escalating civil war? The shared Taliban and terrorist threat might be suggesting the former, but recent (1989-1996) historical and practical experience could rather result in the latter.

In conclusion, the outcome of the 20 years-long war against terrorism in Afghanistan would suggest that Afghans could be hardly subdued by foreign powers, whatever their agendas. That should be a lesson to be learned by all those who might have an interest in taking advantage from filling in the emerging “geopolitical vacuum” in Afghanistan. From this perspective, Afghanistan should be better helped to turn itself into a stable neighbor, that would leverage its geo-economic potential as a bridge between Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East, rather than being left again to transform itself into another “blackhole” brewing terrorism and other transnational security threats.

3) How the unravelling of “Trumpian heritage” to the Middle East is reshaping regional geopolitics

On April 6th, the U.S. and Iran have started indirect talks in Vienna on their return to compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal (known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action- JCPOA). Former president Donald Trump had announced the U.S. withdrawal from the deal in May 2018, and subsequently levelled a blanket of new sanctions over Iran. In response, Teheran has stopped to abide to the provisions of the abandoned nuclear deal. The goal of the current talks consists in agreeing on a road map toward lifting U.S.

sanctions that were imposed under President Trump, and recommitting Iran to its agreements under the accord. That is much easier said than done. While the Iranians are demanding that they be allowed to keep the advanced nuclear-fuel production equipment installed after May 2018, the Biden administration are saying that restoring the old deal is just a steppingstone. It should be followed immediately by an agreement on limiting missiles and support of terrorism — and making it impossible for Iran to produce enough fuel for a bomb for decades. (<https://www.nytimes.com>) The active, brazen obstruction by Israel of restoring the nuclear deal, and the prospective outcome of the upcoming (on June 18th) presidential elections in Iran (where a hard-liner judiciary chief- Ebrahim Raisi- is likely to prevail) could make the successful completion of the ongoing talks even more problematic. Apparently, this first pillar of the “Trumpian heritage” to the Middle East is going to die hard, if ever, for the diverging ambitions and political interests of various actors involved, and the changed realities in the field are hampering negotiators’ best efforts.

The second pillar of the “Trumpian heritage” was the Middle East Peace Plan (so-called “Deal of the Century”) which was disclosed in January 2020 (item#2, [EGFGeopoliticalTrendsMarch2020 \(10\).pdf](#)). The logic of that Peace Plan revolved around the fact that Israel had essentially won the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that the terms of the new peace should necessarily favour the victor. Naturally, Israel hailed Trump’s Middle East Peace Plan, while the Palestinians, Egypt, and Jordan have rebuffed it as “unilateral” and “merely endorsing the post-1967 territorial status quo”. The other Arab states have received it more cautiously or simply ambiguously. However, many external observers have concluded that the new Peace Plan showed the Palestinians, and the “two-states solution” were largely abandoned. The change at the helm of the White House, last January, has

“killed” this second pillar of the “Trumpian heritage”, while, ironically, the Palestinian question was resurrected again by a strange combination of Jewish far right provocations, and Palestinian militants’ over-reactions, which eventually resulted in eleven days (from May 10th to May 20th) of violent clashes between the Israeli forces, on the one hand, and the Gaza-based militants of Hamas, and the Israeli Palestinians, on the other hand.

The third pillar of the “Trumpian heritage” to the Middle East has only been aired in the last months of the presidential mandate: the normalization of diplomatic ties between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, known as the “Abraham Accords”. Seen as “*a pivot of history,*” by the Israeli prime-minister Benjamin Netanyahu, they appeared as a “*dispense with nearly two decades of Pan-Arab consensus on Israel by normalizing ties before a meaningful conclusion to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was reached*”. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com>). The “Abraham Accords” reflected the decreasing relevance of the Palestinian predicament in the eyes of political elites in several Arab countries. The growing regional influence of Iran, and of political Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the prospects of an U.S. ever less prominent geopolitical role in the MENA region, the structural weakness of the E.U. as a geopolitical actor, the missing political will and military capabilities of the European powers, and the emergence of newer, but hardly predictable, geopolitical players, such as Turkey, Russia, and increasingly China have strengthened Arab interest for developing relations with Israel. However, even if the “Abraham Accords” seemed to have survived the recent Israeli- Hamas/Palestinian violent clashes, their geopolitical prominence has become increasingly questionable, particularly within the Arab public opinion.

What is next in terms of possible Middle Eastern geopolitical trends under the Joe Biden presidency?

In response, one could consider two scenarios:

1) **“Back to the Future”**⁴: This scenario would be paraphrased by Thomas L. Friedman’s call to President Biden in an Opinion Column of May 23rd: “*You may not be interested in Middle East peace-making, but Middle East peace-making is interested in you.*” (<https://www.nytimes.com>) According to this, the U.S might resume a bolder role in keeping the regional balance of power, at least up to the level of involvement of the second B. Obama administration. In that case, the focus would be on a partial return to the nuclear deal with Iran, that would hardly exceed the terms of the JCPOA. With a hard-liner presumably taking over the Iranian presidency it would be difficult to envisage the negotiators succeeded in bringing to a halt Iran’s missile programs, or its support for militant proxies across the Middle East. U.S. relations with Israel might become bumpy, and they could likely backfire in the domestic arena (particularly in the Congress, where diverging positions might stall any decisive moves by the administration). Within this scenario, president Biden might need to resume efforts to replace D. Trump’s dead Middle East Peace Plan with something else. That would not be easy to achieve as long as B. Netanyahu and his far right political allies rested at the helm of Israel. Nor could it be feasible by working with a divided, corrupt, and illegitimate Palestinian Authority, which did not control the whole territory envisaged for a possible future Palestinian political formation within a confederative Israel or separate from it. The happiest, but highly unlikely, end of this scenario might consist in “Adding an Ishmael Track to the Abraham Accords: How to pursue détente between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE” that would be tolerated by Israel (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org>). More likely is that this scenario might result in the Biden administration struggling to manage the

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

geopolitical changes in the Middle East, while attempting to better integrate efforts with some other interested actors (E.U., Turkey, friendly Arab states, maybe India and Russia) in mitigating the propensity for regional violence and in preventing the outbreak of an all-out war between Israel and Iran.

2) “Look the Other Way”: At the opposite end of the level of the U.S. involvement, this scenario would assume that the Biden administration would ignore, to the largest extent possible, the endemic problems of the Middle East and will continue to shrink its regional geopolitical role, leaving/encouraging other regional and global actors to take the lead in managing the regional conflicts. In this scenario, negotiations with Iran on the return to the nuclear deal would fail, tensions between Iran and its proxies, on the one hand, and the Arab monarchies and Israel, on the other hand, would periodically (and quite often) outburst in various hotspots (Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq, Syria, Yemen). Against that background, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might be also boiling out from time to time, and clashes between Israel and Hamas (or involving some other Palestinian militant groups) might continue intermittently. Ad-hoc coalitions of international peace makers would struggle to mediate temporary ceasefires until the next outbreak. Outside actors, such as the E.U., Turkey, Russia, China, India, might have to be increasingly involved/take responsibilities in the mediation of the ceasefires and in sustaining some other forms of conflict management. Unless a major regional war broke out, the U.S. might wish to be only marginally involved.

In conclusion, the “Trumpian heritage” to the Middle East is rapidly fading away. His geopolitical vision was predicated on *“a vague, shrunken future Palestinian state with limited sovereignty and no capital in Jerusalem proper.”* Meanwhile, *“the Abraham Accords should speed a realignment of*

regional politics, one in which Arab countries friendly to both Israel and the U.S. would discard their concerns for the Palestinians in favour of greater trade and security cooperation with Israel.” (<https://washingtonpost.com>)

Besides dismantling two (withdrawal of the nuclear deal 2015, and the Middle East Peace Plan) of the three pillars of the “Trumpian heritage”, the Biden administration still needs to fill in the geopolitical and strategic gaps in its Middle Eastern policy. The temptation to go “Back to the Future” might be huge. And by “Looking the Other Way” the chances to end up embroiled in a major regional war against Iran are significant. Finding a “third way” to deal with regional conflicts and politics, largely based upon using maximum of diplomatic means and allowing a minimal military involvement, is becoming the largest challenge for President Biden’s policy making in the Middle East.



About EGF

The European Geopolitical Forum (EGF) was established in early 2010 by several independently minded practitioners of European geopolitics, who saw a certain vacuum in the information flow leading into the European geopolitical discussion. EGF is dedicated, therefore, towards the promotion of an objective, Pan-European geopolitical debate incorporating the views of Wider-European opinion shapers rather than simply those from the mainstream European Union (EU) member states. EGF seeks to elaborate upon European decision makers' and other relevant stakeholders' appreciation of European geopolitics by encouraging and effectively expanding the information flow from east to west, from south to north. In order to achieve these objectives, the European Geopolitical Forum was established as an independent internet-based resource, a web-portal which aims to serve as a knowledge hub on Pan-European geopolitics. EGF's strength is in its unique ability to gather a wide range of affiliated experts, the majority of whom originate from the countries in the EU's external neighbourhood, to examine and debate core issues in the Wider-European geopolitical context. Exchange of positions and interactivity between east and west, south and north, is at the heart of the EGF project. Please visit our website for further information at www.gpf-europe.com.

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