



**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) *Is the Black Sea Going to Become a Platform for U.S. Strategic Re-Engagement with Eastern Europe, and the Middle East?*
  - 2) *How to Pursue a (New) Nuclear Deal with Iran while Preserving the Arab-Israeli Recent Realignments?*
  - 3) *Shifts in Turkey’s Foreign Policy: from Military-driven Islamism towards Economic-driven pan-Turkism?*
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On January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Joseph R. Biden Jr. was sworn in as the 46<sup>th</sup> 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. Hours after his inauguration ceremony, Mr. Biden signed 17 executive orders, memorandums, and proclamations from the Oval Office, including orders to re-join the Paris Climate Accord and to end a travel ban on Muslim and African countries. A couple of weeks later, on February 4, 2021, during his first major foreign policy speech, the new president said he intended to: *"send a clear message to the world: America is back. [...] Diplomacy is back [...] We're going to rebuild our alliances. [...] We're going to re-engage the world."* He further promised to work with allies on issues like the pandemic and climate change, and to rebuild *"the muscle of democratic alliances that have atrophied over the past few years of neglect"*. (<https://www.nytimes.com>)

Making good on his promises during the electoral campaign, President Biden has launched a structural overhaul of America's domestic and foreign policies. As such, the advent of President Biden at the White House appeared as the most consequential event of international politics at the beginning of 2021. It was therefore the aim of the current issue to explore some geopolitical trends (re-)emerging from the reversal of "Trump-ism" in U.S. foreign policy.

### **1) Is the Black Sea Going to Become a Platform for U.S. Strategic Re-Engagement with Eastern Europe, and the Middle East?**

The "44 days war" between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has resulted in major geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus (Eastern

Black Sea). The rising regional prominence of Turkey, which asserted itself as a key broker of peace on par with the Russian Federation, and the fading power and regional influence of the U.S. and Europe incurred from their association with the largely ineffective conflict resolution multilateralism of the OSCE, have reshuffled the distribution of regional power. This new geopolitical dynamics in the Eastern Black Sea is sucking Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan away from the U.S. and Europe into a Wider Middle East geopolitical cauldron, where the Russia-Turkey-Iran triangle is gaining steam (see, for example, the "six countries regional cooperation platform"<sup>1</sup>).

This regional powershift came on top of the geopolitical fallout from the Belarusian political crisis in the aftermath of the August 2020 allegedly rigged presidential elections that displayed the lack of leverage of the E.U. over the contested president A. Lukashenko, in stark contrast to the almost exclusive political leverage of Moscow over Belarussian politics. The latest bilateral energy trade deal signed at the end of December 2020 by Belarus and Russia has underscored that in the wake of the ongoing political crisis in Belarus, Minsk has become politically, economically weaker, and thus much more obedient to Russia. (<https://jamestown.org>)

Meanwhile, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have been confronted with significant political, socio-economic, and pandemic upheavals, partly emerging from the deadlocked negotiations over their protracted conflicts/standoffs with Russia over maintaining their territorial integrity without granting regional autonomy and "self-governance rights" to Russian-backed breakaway formations.

For example, Georgia: *"Perhaps the biggest change in Georgian calculus will take place in the military strategy, which in turn could influence Georgia's foreign policy thinking. With a growing Russian*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/6-country-regional-cooperation-platform-win-win-for-actors-in-caucasus-erdogan-says>

*military presence, the Georgian borders are now encircled by Russian troops. For Georgia this means a further limitation on NATO/US military projection into the region. This also means fewer chances for Tbilisi's membership prospects."* (<https://caucasuswatch.de>)

From this perspective, the latest announcement by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili over his full, permanent withdrawal from Georgian political life (and the informal leadership of the ruling Georgian Dream party) might be interpreted as an act meant to blunt Western critics' argument on "informal governance in Georgia". (<https://jamestown.org>) Consequently, the Georgian government might have just stated its readiness to eventually become a linchpin of Western (post-COVID 19) return to the Wider Black Sea region. The same might have been the case with the forced departures from local politics of Moldova's oligarch V. Plahotniuc, and Ukraine's oligarch and former president P. Poroshenko.

This grim geopolitical situation might be particularly worrying for some influential political lobbies in Washington DC, who have recently multiplied their efforts to draw the attention of the Biden administration that it was high time to address it at the highest strategical levels.

For example, in a December 2020 op-ed published in "The National Interest", general (ret.) Philip Breedlove and Michael O'Hanlon have pondered over how America can avoid a great-power conflict in the Black Sea while competing with the rising Russian and Chinese influence in the region: "America needs to be present. It needs to be a part of the leadership in this region. [...] the incoming Biden administration should recognize the Black Sea as a region of importance, requiring a focus on diplomacy and economic engagement." (<https://www.brookings.edu>) Few weeks later, general (ret.) Breedlove further elaborated in an article published by the Middle East Institute: "the Black Sea needs three things from the U.S.: strategic

*leadership, continued military support, and focused infrastructure development. Military engagement with Ukraine and Georgia is critical".* (<https://www.mei.edu>)

Meanwhile, in January 2021, gen (ret.) Ben Hodges published a Strategy Paper on "The Black Sea ... or a Black Hole?" with the Washington-based Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA). While defining the Black Sea region as the place where Russia, Europe, the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Caucasus come together, gen. (ret.) Hodges concluded that "We need greater focus, vision, and willpower. This region must now be where NATO and the West compete: holding the line against anti-democratic forces, taking the initiative, establishing our influence, and protecting our strategic interests." To do so the West would need to outcompete Russia and China across four key domains: diplomacy, information/strategic communication, military, and economy. First point in his 12-step military-strategic plan read: "Immediately invite Georgia into NATO and put Ukraine on a fast track to membership." He farther admitted there were serious obstacles to following his proposed four-dimensional Black Sea strategy by citing the controversial focus on Turkey, diverging U.S. global priorities, and the lack of sufficient support from the E.U. and European allies and partners. However, he eventually conceded that "the alternative is defeat. Growing Russian (and Chinese) influence in the BSR would affect wider Western interests in the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and South-West Asia (A.N. read Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon)". (<https://cepa.org>)

Having retreated from Central Asia and from much of the Middle East over the last decades, America might set its South-East European outposts on the new "Grand Chessboard" of the 2020's in the Black Sea region. In a post-Trumpian world, bringing back the Black Sea region at the core of American strategies in Eastern Europe, Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean would make strategic sense as an attempt to rein in the declining Western

influence in the European neighbourhoods. That might be aimed at preventing a China-backed *de facto* condominium of the regional powers. However, due to a unique combination of strategic advantages and economic weaknesses powered by a hyper-active, though controversial president, Turkey remained the most likely trump card in the geopolitical game of the Black Sea region.

## 2) How to Pursue a (New) Nuclear Deal with Iran while Preserving the Arab-Israeli Recent Realignments?

The new administration of U.S. President Joe Biden has proposed for Iran and the United States to return to full compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). However, unlike on the other quick fixes of the damages incurred to the U.S. international standing by the erratic decisions of former president Trump, the new administration clearly signaled it was not going to rush on it. At his confirmation hearing in late January 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the U.S. would wait until it was convinced that Tehran was scaling back its revived enrichment operations and returning once more to compliance with the pact. (<https://washingtonpost.com>).

Meanwhile, since the final weeks of the Trump administration, Iran seemed determined to seek faster U.S. sanctions relief while grappling with a new dilemma: how to be perceived aggressive enough to have the incoming Biden administration prioritize nuclear talks on returning to full compliance with the JCPOA, while mitigating the risks of any U.S. or Israeli punitive strikes, as well as of a longer-term hardening of third parties' positions (including Israel, Arab monarchies, and the other external stakeholders of the JCPOA). Within such a complicated strategic context, Teheran stepped up the enrichment of uranium at five times the rate permitted under the nuclear deal, while, last November, the Iranian parliament

passed a law that would restrict U.N. inspectors' access to key nuclear facilities in the absence of U.S. sanctions relief. (<https://www.friendsofeurope.org>) In early January 2021, foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tabled the Iranian position on restoring the JCPOA in an op-ed for "Foreign Affairs": "*The [US] administration should begin by unconditionally removing, with full effect, all sanctions imposed, reimposed, or relabeled since Trump took office. [...] In turn, Iran would reverse all the remedial measures it has taken in the wake of Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal.*" He added that a "*return to the table will be jeopardized*" if Western allies insisted on linking the return to compliance to other regional security concerns (including Iran's ballistic missile program and ongoing support for proxy militias elsewhere in the Middle East). (<https://foreignaffairs.com>)

Domestic and external pressures have made the current stalemate over pursuing a (new) nuclear deal with Iran by the Biden administration even worse. On the one hand, many Republicans and U.S. regional allies (most notably Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) have blamed the new administration for being soft on the Iranian regime, and even for an alleged abandoning of regional allies in the name of an "*old Obama policy of elevating Iran at the expense of Israel and Sunni monarchies*". (<https://besacenter.org>). On the other hand, the new U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned that Iran was only months, or perhaps only weeks away, from being able to produce a nuclear weapon. In addition, Iran would have also recently tested a new satellite launching rocket that could easily be adapted to a warhead carrying an intercontinental missile. (<https://www.friendsofeurope.org>) Meanwhile, Iranian hardliners, who might replace the current government of President Hassan Rouhani as of next June, would be reluctant to pursuing any nuclear deal with Washington.

To break the current deadlock on pursuing a nuclear deal with Iran, both its supporters and its critics (irrespective of whether they are American, Iranian, or others) should realize that the new deal on the return to the implementation of the JCPOA is just about setting up a legal instrument aiming to prevent nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. It could hardly solve any other regional security risks and challenges, including those emerging from the rising power of Iran. On the other hand, the recent re-alignments of U.S. regional allies, initiated by the Abraham Accords and furthered by the broader U.S.-backed Arab-Israeli rapprochement, aim precisely at curtailing the growing Iranian regional influence. As such, they should work as a complement rather than a substitute for the new nuclear deal. The danger is that the Americans and their regional allies might continue to confuse the purpose and potential utility of two different types of instruments and repeat past mistakes (most notably those by the Obama administration- as President Biden is working with many former Obama high level officials) that had been made by the U.S. in Libya, Syria, and in Yemen. For what they were worth the Arab-Israeli re-alignments should not be thrown to the drain just because they had been put in place by the Trump administration.

That being said, one could imagine several ways to overcome the current diplomatic stalemate on the nuclear deal with Iran, and to coordinate U.S. positions with those of the regional allies, and with other stakeholders of the JCPOA that would enable a swift, trustful, and realistic return to the implementation of the key provisions of the 2015 nuclear deal<sup>2</sup>.

### 3) Shifts in Turkey's Foreign Policy: from Military-driven Islamism towards Economic-driven pan-Turkism?

In the wake of the July 2016 failed *coup d'état* against president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's relations with the U.S and the E.U. have become more volatile and multi-layered, with repeated ups and downs triggered by specific domestic or international events. Several episodes of those troubled relationships have been discussed in previous issues of this publication, as well as in older "[EGF Turkey Files](#)". Meanwhile, Turkey's relationship with Russia has been more pragmatic: the two regional powers have had to cooperate due to each other's vested, though not necessarily coincidental, interests in the Wider Black Sea. As they have both expanded their regional reach from the Wider Black Sea towards the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) having set military strongholds in Syria and growing their political and military involvement in Libya, Turkey-Russia relations have become even more convoluted. In geopolitical terms, Turkey's foreign policy so far appeared like a walk on a tight rope in the attempt to play Russia against the United States and Europe. And it was seen by "Stratfor" experts as building upon "*The still-unbalanced nature of the multipolar world system [that] gives Turkey more room for maneuver as U.S. and European interests often diverge. [...] None of the big powers wants to completely alienate Turkey, despite Ankara's contrary actions, and none has the strength or interest to force Turkey down a single path.*" (<https://www.stratfor.com>)

Nevertheless, the current reshaping of U.S. foreign policy by President Biden's team is also likely to shift Turkey's foreign policy. The first signs of change emerged at the end of last year, when President

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Amos Yadlin, Kepteseam Al-Ketbi- "The United States Must Move Forward, Not Back, on Iran" in Foreign Affairs, from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021->

[01-27/united-states-must-move-forward-not-back-iran](https://www.stratfor.com); Jamie Shea- "Bringing Iran Out from the Cold", on Friends of Europe, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/bringing-iran-in-from-the-cold/>.

Erdogan vowed to make of 2021 the “year of reform” to spur confidence in the country and attract foreign investment. On December 25, 2020 he publicly floated improving ties with Israel after years of icy relations over the 2010 killing of Turkish activists in Gaza by Israeli forces. The next day, he promised to carry out “radical” judicial and economic reforms to help propel Turkey’s recovery from COVID-19. He further offered to hold talks with the new administration in Washington on Turkish plans for the Russian S-400 missile system purchased in 2019. And on January 25, 2021 Turkey held exploratory talks with Greece aiming to ease tensions over their disputed waters in the Eastern Mediterranean. (<https://www.stratfor.com>)

Turkey’s relations with the E.U. are also likely to change for good. On the one hand, President Biden’s commitment to strengthening the Trans-Atlantic relations and to work closely with the E.U. would diminish the room for maneuver allowing Ankara to benefit from the former U.S.-E.U. frictions. On the other hand, the expected growing diplomatic/multilateralist involvement of the U.S. in the European neighborhoods would largely blur the perceptions of emerging *power vacuums* that have incentivized Turkish (and other) Islamist influences in the MENA region. As Kadri Tastan and Ilke Toygur have put it into a recent op-ed: *“The power vacuum left by the United States in Turkey’s immediate neighborhood allowed the latter to unilaterally pursue an assertive and militarized foreign policy there. Consequently, Turkey’s actions in Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and most recently in Nagorno- Karabakh have deepened the rift with the EU.”* (<https://www.gmfus.org>)

In addition, the Turkish foreign policy might be more seriously affected by President Erdogan’s domestic vulnerabilities enshrined in his autocratic approach to democracy, rule of law and human rights. This is likely to become a liability for Turkey that might be leveraged against him and his Justice and

Development Party (AKP) by both Western allies and domestic political adversaries.

In the wake of the war on Nagorno-Karabakh in the fall of 2020, Turkey’s growing regional influence in the Caucasus, and closer Turkish-Azerbaijani relations under the new paradigm “one nation, two states” might have created the premises of a foreign policy pivot away from the MENA region to the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Such a foreign policy shift would bode well with the return of American diplomatic activism in the MENA, the re-alignment of several Arab monarchies (including Qatar, a close Turkey supporter) with Israel, and the re-building of Turkey’s ties with the E.U. and its key member states. *“Turkey is expanding its influence in Caucasia; it will do more so in the future. [...] Turkey does not play the card of Islam and Middle East orientation anymore, but now [it is] more nationalistic, a Turkish [kind of] nationalism.”* said Huseyin Bagci, head of the Ankara-based Foreign Policy Institute. (<https://www.voanews.com>)

Several very recent developments might herald Turkey’s growing geo-economic Eastward influence: 1) on December 10, 2020, during his visit to Azerbaijan where he attended the ceremony of the “Victory Parade”, president Erdogan proposed a six-country regional cooperation platform including Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, Georgia and Armenia; 2) Russia's Kommersant newspaper has published a map showing transportation corridors (<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4640957>) and railways in the South Caucasus, the opening of which was agreed upon by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia during a meeting in Moscow, on January 11, 2021. This new infrastructure network was designed to link together mainly Russia, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran; on January 21, 2021, Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev announced the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on the development of the Dostlug oil field. This was a real

breakthrough since the two Turkic states had spent 30 years on failed negotiations on how to jointly exploit this disputed hydrocarbon field situated in the middle of the Caspian Sea. This agreement has also raised the larger matter of the Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP), which would aim at bringing Turkmen gas across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan for export to Europe via the Southern Gas Corridor-SGC crossing Turkey from East to West.

It might be too early indeed to draw realistic conclusions on Turkey's foreign policy changing pivot to the South Caucasus and Central Asia, in the post-Trumpian world. What it is noticeable though is that under strong domestic and external pressures, President Erdogan is changing tack in external relations. His critics are suspicious this will not last too long. Nevertheless, Turkey's complete retrenchment from the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean regions is highly unlikely. Probably, Ankara's tone and preferred policy tools are going to change though.



### 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](http://www.gpf-europe.com).

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Mr. George Vlad Niculescu is originally from Bucharest, Romania, and is currently acting as the Head of Research of the European Geopolitical Forum. He is also currently acting as co-Chair of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group of the [PfP Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes \(PfPC\)](#). In October 2019, he has successfully defended his PhD thesis on "[SECURITY SCENARIOS PLANNING IN THE GEOPOLITICAL AREA FROM THE BALTIC SEA TO THE WIDER BLACK SEA \(INTER-MARIUM\)](#)" at the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration (NSPSPA) Bucharest. He has also academic experience as a member of several other PfPC working groups, as well as assistant professor and/or visiting lecturer at the NSPSPA, "Dimitrie Cantemir" University, NATO Studies Centre, and the PfP Training Centre from Bucharest (1997-2004). Mr. Niculescu has been involved in several international research projects sponsored by the German Marshall Fund of the United States (Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation), the European Commission (HiQSTEP Project), and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. His full CV and list of publications could be found [here](#).

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