



**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) In the wake of a stormy US-China high level meeting, where might be the new world order going?
  - 2) EU-Russia relations at crossroads: geopolitical relevance or mutual ignorance?
  - 3) Next episode in the “battle for Ukraine”: could “de-oligarchization” buy broader external support for overturning the Minsk 2 Agreements?
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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. As highlighted in our [previous issue](#), while 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 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) In the wake of a stormy US-China high level meeting, where might be the new world order going?**

On March 18, in Anchorage (Alaska), the first meeting of U.S. state secretary Anthony Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan with their Chinese counterparts, Wang Yi and Yang Jiechi, has sent cold shivers across the international media due to an apparently hostile exchange of mutual blames: have we witnessed the down of a new Cold War opposing, this time, the U.S. and China?

The tone, and the sharpness of the argument of both sides in front of the international media have hinted to such an outcome: while secretary of state Blinken expressed: *"deep concerns with actions by China, including in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, cyberattacks on the United States, and economic coercion toward our allies. Each of these actions threaten the rules-based order that maintains global stability"*, the Chinese delegation deplored that *"the United States has exercised long-arm jurisdiction and suppression and overstretched the national security through the use of force or financial hegemony [...], and the United States has also been persuading some countries to launch attacks on China."* (<https://www.brookings.edu>)

A few days later, on March 23, the foreign ministers of China and Russia, Wang Yi and Sergey Lavrov stated at their meeting in Nanning, China: *"Interference in a sovereign nation's internal affairs under the excuse of 'advancing democracy' is unacceptable"* and that sanctions brought by the E.U., U.K., Canada and the United States against Chinese officials over human rights abuses in China's Xinjiang region were drawing Russia and China closer together in accusing the West of *"imposing their own rules on everyone else, which they believe should underpin the world order."* (<https://apnews.com/>) Previously, president Xi Jinping of China had warned during the 2021 World Economic Forum from Davos of last January: *"To build small circles or start a new Cold War, to reject, threaten or intimidate others, to wilfully impose decoupling, supply disruption or sanctions, and to create isolation or estrangement will only push the world into division and even confrontation"*. (<https://nytimes.com>)

An initial conclusion has been drawn by most global politics watchers from this series of tough public discourses: *"the world is increasingly dividing into distinct if not purely ideological camps, with both China and the United States hoping to lure supporters."* (<https://nytimes.com>) A similar message was also outlined by president Biden's statement at his first presidential news conference (March 25) where he presented his foreign policy based on geopolitical competition between models of governance, while calling the challenge ahead *"a battle between the utility of democracies and autocracies, in the 21st century"*. ([Ibidem](#)) Likewise, during his first trip to Europe, the U.S. state secretary Blinken, in his meetings with his NATO counterparts and the E.U. leaders, repeated: the United States is back, and Europe is a key ally in the historical competition between democracies and autocracies. Consequently, as M. Baranovsky concluded in a very recent Transatlantic Take op-ed: *"The Biden administration aims to rebuild its alliances with democracies in Asia and in Europe. It does not see*

*purely a power struggle with China, but also a quasi-ideological struggle between the systems of democratic government and autocratic rule”.*

<https://gmfus.org>

However, not everyone has seen president Biden’s global foreign policy inflexion point in the same way. For example, for G. Friedman this series of mutual public blames might have been just a diplomatic manoeuvre whereby president Biden attempted to build himself diplomatic leverage for an upcoming political and economic bargaining with China by posing an apparent hostility against it: *“some have said it [i.e. the blame game plaid out between U.S. and Chinese high level officials in Anchorage] sets the tone for the next four years, but it doesn’t. It sets the stage for the first month, after which everyone, having the opportunity to sniff and growl at each other, settle into reality [...] The best read is that the U.S. knows that bargaining is coming and is therefore posing as hostile to it.”*

<https://geopoliticalfutures.com/>

A similar point was made by J. Shea in an op-ed written in March, several days before the meeting in Anchorage. At that time, he claimed that *“nothing suggests that the old Sino-Soviet alliance is going to make an inevitable comeback as a new ‘Axis of the Authoritarians’.”* (<https://www.friendsofeurope.org>)

As China and Russia may likely continue to work together to what they see as power balancing a reinvigorating alliance of democracies, the U.S. and Europe may each struggle with older dilemmas on how to best triangulate their respective relations with China and Russia, at the regional level (in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific) in a “Kissingerian” way.

However, the strongest rebuttal of the emergent “Cold War 2.0” theory has been given by R. Haass and Ch. Kupchan in their latest article in “Foreign Affairs” ***“A New Concert of Powers- How to Prevent Catastrophe and Promote Stability in a Multipolar World”***. They noted that while history made clear that periods of great powers’ contests over hierarchy

and ideology had invariably led to major wars, the Western-led liberal order that emerged after World War II could not prove its ability to secure global stability in the twenty-first century. Therefore, they proposed a global “Concert of Powers” bringing together China, the E.U, India, Japan, Russia, and the U.S. into an informal *“steering group that could curb the geopolitical and ideological competition”* accompanying multipolarity in a global world: *“Democracies and nondemocracies would have equal standing, and inclusion would be a function of power and influence, not values or regime type.”* (<https://foreignaffairs.com>)

Does the operationalization of this new “Concert of Powers” belong to the upcoming political and economic bargaining alluded to by G. Friedman? Is the global “Concert of Powers” a possible platform for “Kissingerian” triangulation for the members of this great powers’ group?

Those are key questions whose answers are not yet apparent in the public domain. Nevertheless, the biggest challenge stemming from the geopolitical trend (be it Cold War 2.0, Concert of Powers, World War III, or anything else) initiated by the stormy US-China high level meeting in Anchorage might focus on whether or not the 21<sup>st</sup> century multipolar world order would be still manageable at the global level. Otherwise, the world might need to be split into smaller pieces (in most likely disruptive and divisive “spheres of influence”) designed either upon geopolitical and ideological criteria or by the fortunes of the Roman god Mars. The global and regional crises that would determine the next developments of this geopolitical trend were still to emerge, and the implications for the ongoing process of globalization would be overwhelming.

## **2) EU-Russia relations at crossroads: geopolitical relevance or mutual ignorance?**

On February 6, as the E.U. High Representative (HR) for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, was sitting in a room with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, it

was announced that Russia was expelling three diplomats from Germany, Poland and Sweden who would have attended pro-Navalny demonstrations in Moscow. This announcement took the E.U. high level delegation by surprise, and it was unfairly labelled in both Brussels and in most other European capitals as a “diplomatic disaster” where *“the EU first diplomat became part of a show in which he was humiliated by his hosts”*. (<https://www.euractiv.com>) During the subsequent press conference with H.R. Borrell, Foreign Minister Lavrov called the E.U. *“an unreliable partner”* and said it was acting more and more *“like the United States”*. On February 12, in a TV interview, minister Lavrov acknowledged that Moscow was ready to sever relations with the E.U. if sanctions were imposed that would threaten Russian economy in connection with the jailing of opposition politician Alexei Navalny: *“We assume that we are ready [to break relations] if we see again as we have often felt that in some areas sanctions are imposed, creating threats to our economy, including in the most acute spheres”* (<https://intellinews.com>) Later, foreign minister Lavrov clarified that while Russia was prepared to negotiate on various issues, it was not willing to do so under the threat of sanctions. Subsequently, the Kremlin quickly reassured the E.U. that Moscow was not going to be the first to sever mutual ties, and several Russian pundits explained that relations with the E.U. institutions would continue across a broad range of issues, from natural gas exports to the nuclear deal with Iran. Russia would simply refuse to listen to European “lectures” on human rights (<https://jamestown.org>).

Responding to his numerous critics, E.U.’s H.R. Borrell made clear on his blog the purpose and the outcome of his recent visit to Moscow: *“I went to Moscow this week to test, through principled diplomacy, whether the Russian government was interested in addressing differences and reversing the negative trend in our relations. The reaction I received points visibly in a different direction. So, as EU, we will have to reflect on the broader*

*implications and chart a way forward. We are at a crossroads.”* (<https://eeas.europa.eu>)

Indeed, in the interpretation of most analysts the Russian foreign minister’s latest tough statements and “unorthodox” diplomatic procedures in relations with the E.U. have reflected a hardening of the Russian positions in the post-Trumpian era. Moscow has made it crystal clear to everyone in the West that it would no longer tolerate any interference in what it considered its domestic affairs.

In fact, for seasoned E.U.-Russia watchers the approach of the current crossroads in relations was hardly a surprise. For example, D. Trenin has underscored for years that European’s policy goal favoring a *“European Russia”* (thereby Russia was constrained by European rules and standards), as well as Russian preference for building up a so-called *“Greater Europe”* (*“a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok, built on an arrangement between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union; a security architecture centered on the OSCE, with NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization partnering; and a visa-free regime between Russia and the European Union”*) (<https://carnegie.ru>) were both far-fetched and proven elusive.

In 2020, the alleged poisoning of Mr. Navalny has broken the backbone of the Russo-German relations (which had been essential to keeping E.U.-Russia relations alive), while the promises of the new U.S. president, Joe Biden, to repair relations with the E.U. and to create a joint Western front against Russia (and China) have rendered outdated the former European and Russian policy goals. Consequently, the shift of the E.U.-Russia relations from relative estrangement, since the wake of the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014, to sheer adversity was hardly unpredictable.

Within the current dynamics of the global and regional geopolitical trends, what would be the way ahead for the E.U.-Russia relations?

In the wake of his recent trip to Moscow, H.R. Josep Borrell argued for a new policy triad, when it comes to dealing with Russia: “*push back, contain, and engage*”. Under this new possible E.U. policy (meant to replace the five-pronged “guiding principles” of his predecessor, Ms. F. Mogherini) “*the E.U. should seek to reclaim regional influence in its neighborhoods and constrain the capacity of other powers, including Russia, to act against its interests*”. (<https://ecfr.eu>) This policy triad would hopefully lead the E.U. to abandon the “European Russia” chimera. Instead, the E.U. should focus on rebalancing toughness and restraint in relations with Russia, as well as on wisely combining Trans-Atlantic cooperation with stronger European strategic autonomy. The new E.U. Russia policy should also re-prioritize relations with the Eastern Neighbors (in particular, with the Associated states) over support to democratizing Russia itself. (<https://www.ceps.eu>)

From a Russian perspective too, the way out of the current labyrinth might aim at agreeing upon a new, more realistic policy goal that would ensure the continued geopolitical relevance of the E.U.- Russia relationship. That would require specific targeted cooperation and a safe management of the regional power competition in the European neighborhoods. As suggested by D. Trenin, this new policy goal could be “*neighborliness*”, which he described as consisting of 1) mutual respect for the other’s diversity; 2) clarity with respect to the lines—including in cyberspace—between what is acceptable and what it is not, and sufficient security to provide self-confidence; 3) building and managing relations essentially on a transactional basis; 4) possible cooperation on transborder issues; 5) economic interdependence. (<https://carnegie.ru>)

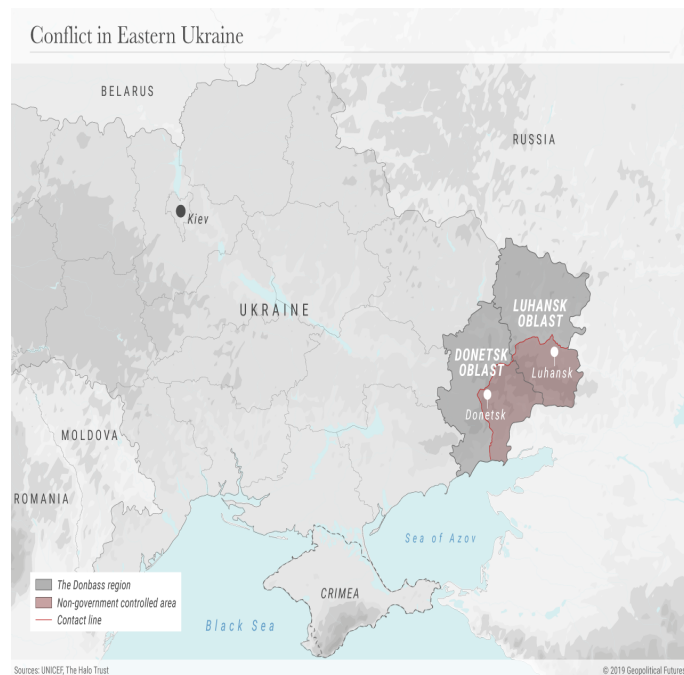
On the other hand, for the Valdai Club Program Director, Timofei Bordachev, the readiness to cut relations with the E.U. expressed by foreign minister Lavrov reflected the apparent lack of Russian interest in maintaining ties with an allegedly irrelevant geopolitical actor. It was then for bilateral ties with those European countries that continued to do business with Russia to remain the backbone of Russo-European relations. (<https://valdaiclub.com>) That would be a mistake since neither Russia nor the E.U. can afford to ignore each other when it comes to promoting and defending their economic, security, and geopolitical interests in highly dynamic and mostly competitive neighborhoods. The longer-term risk of a short-sighted perspective from both Brussels and Moscow would consist of letting the Russo-European relations revert to being a function of U.S.-Russian relations, that was reminiscent of the Cold War model. That would be a major diplomatic setback, indeed.

### **3) Next episode in the “battle for Ukraine”: could “de-oligarchization” buy broader external support for overturning the Minsk 2 Agreements?**

Seven years after the conflict in Donbas broke out, the ongoing diplomatic stalemate in the implementation of the Minsk 2 agreements has raised military tensions along the Russian-Ukrainian borders. At this stage, one could hardly assess accurately the risk of renewed military fights between Ukrainian armed forces and the Russia-backed separatists in Donbas with strong support from the Russian armed forces. The *de facto* border of Crimea with mainland Ukraine is hardly safer from possible outbreaks of violence.

In our [July 2020 issue](#), we noted a fresh deadlock in the implementation of the Minsk 2 agreements emerging at the “Normandy format” meeting held in Berlin, on July 3-4, 2020. Its main cause was the so-called “pro-active approach” of president Zelensky’s negotiation team, which consisted of combining older elements of the “nationalist approach” of

former president Poroshenko with “innovative” moves aiming to “de-monopolize” the representation of Donetsk and Luhansk “republics”, and to persuade Moscow to concede being a party to the conflict. As expected, Moscow dismissed the new Ukrainian “pro-activism” for it worked against the provisions of the Minsk 2 agreements, as well as against the subsequent agreements on their implementation. At the time, we rightly concluded that *“Ukraine’s state building aspirations risk to largely depend of, and potentially fall victim to, the growing geopolitical fragmentation and great power rivalries in Europe.”* Which it looks like it is just about to happen.



Since July 2020, three new trends have emerged in Ukrainian domestic politics: president Volodymyr Zelensky was unable to deliver on either his promises to resolve the Donbas conflict or to perform substantive anti-corruption reforms; consequently, last fall, pro-Russia and oligarch-sponsored political forces have gained serious political ground in regional parliaments to the detriment of president Zelensky’s “Servant of the

People” party and allies; the ensuing political backlash compelled president Zelensky to prosecute pro-Russia oligarchs, to close pro-Russia TV channels and newspapers, and eventually launch a “de-oliharkhizatsia”/“de-oligarchization”<sup>1</sup> campaign. (<https://geopoliticalfutures.com>)

In a December 2020 New York Times interview, president Zelensky observed that president-elect Joe Biden *“knows Ukraine better than the previous president”* and *“will really help strengthen relations, help settle the war in Donbas, and end the occupation of our territory.”* (<https://brookings.com>) What he didn’t probably know at that time, was that his support for the Ukrainian positions on Donbas and Crimea would be conditional to Kyiv making significant progress in fighting against corruption and in strengthening the rule of law. *“The threat from within [Ukraine] is corruption . . . a lack of institutions that can effectively manage the country”* said secretary of state Antony Blinken during his confirmation hearing in January. (<https://washingtonpost.com>)

The nexus between “de-oligarchization” (as the key element of the fight against corruption) and Ukraine’s battle to get broader external support for overturning the Minsk 2 agreements has been operationalized over the last couple of months.

On the one hand, in early February, Russia and Ukraine have escalated their stalemate in Donbas to the brink of a new war. *“As the Ukrainian authorities announced sanctions against pro-Russian politicians and media, Moscow responded with harsh criticism and state propagandists called on the government to annex the Donbas separatist republics. The acrimonious exchange immediately resulted in new peaks in the number of ceasefire violations between the Ukrainian army and separatists.”* (<https://carnegie.ru>). By mid-February, President Zelensky announced a summit planned for August

<sup>1</sup> “A renewal of the long-held goal — and sometimes only faint hope — to free the country’s political system of domination by the ultrarich”. (<https://washingtonpost.com>)

2021 to inaugurate the “Crimea Platform, a multi-level framework for devising actions that would raise the costs of Russia’s occupation and contradict Moscow’s thesis about the irreversibility of its hold on the peninsula.” (<https://www.jamestown.org>). Notably, the U.S. became the first international partner to endorse the “Crimea Platform” initiative. On the other hand, in early March, Ukrainian presidential spokesperson Yuliya Mendel posted a blog on the U.S. Atlantic Council’s website claiming that Ukraine has launched a major “de-oligarchization” campaign, while the U.S. government pressed economic and travel sanctions against the Ukrainian oligarch Ihor Kolomoysky. (<https://intellinews.com>) However, president Zelensky’s personal commitment to pursuing the promised democratic reforms was still questionable. For example, at the end of March, a German Marshall Fund of the U.S. Transatlantic Take on “**Biden Administration Support for Ukraine Is Strong but Is There a Partner in Kyiv?**” concluded: “President Biden and his administration need trusted interlocutors in Ukraine who are ready to implement reform commitments. Right now, policymakers in Washington are wondering if they have a real partner in Kyiv.” (<https://gmfus.org>)

Meanwhile, in early April, military tensions on the frontlines have grown dramatically high, while the U.S., NATO, the E.U., and the U.K. have pledged “unwavering” support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity amid concerns of a military escalation in Donbas or a possible new offensive after recent Russian troop movements around the Ukrainian borders. (<https://www.theguardian.com>)

The Russian side is holding the new U.S. administration responsible for the rising tensions with Ukraine: “the current flare-up in Ukraine is just another element in what Moscow sees as a new anti-Russian offensive by the United States: a predictable follow-up to American support for the jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and the new crisis in Russia-Europe relations.” (<https://carnegie.ru>)

Against a highly volatile strategic environment along the current Russian-Ukrainian borders, two main conclusions could be drawn, at this stage:

1) The U.S. and the West more generally are using the recent military escalation around the Ukrainian borders as leverage on president Zelensky and his government to eventually proceed with the long-awaited “de-oligarchization” of Ukraine. In parallel, the West is sending strong diplomatic signals to Moscow that it would not just sit on its hands and watch Russia invading some other territories of Ukraine, beyond Crimea and the separatists-controlled parts of Donbas. The main geopolitical goals of those moves might include sitting the U.S. in the “driver’s seat” of Western support to Ukraine.

2) Russia is facing a new strategic dilemma emerging from the new U.S. administration claim for acquiring a key role in the peace process in Ukraine: EITHER it would “**accept it**”, and implicitly agree to renegotiate the Minsk 2 agreements, to open negotiations over the legal status of Crimea, as well as on U.S.’s standing role in European security affairs, OR it would “**reject it**”, and escalate the conflict in Ukraine to test the Western resolve to defend Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to better position itself in negotiations with Ukraine’s future leaders.

In fact, the new geopolitical trend brought up by the post-Trumpian shift of U.S. foreign policy on Ukraine consisted of intertwining the domestic “de-oligarchization” (read “Westernization”) of Ukraine with the growing geopolitical fragmentation and great powers’ rivalries in Eastern Europe. Its outcomes are still to be seen, and they may largely depend on the moving political balance between Ukrainian nationalists, and oligarchs. It is also becoming increasingly clear that the approaching endgame in Ukraine’s strife for building a viable post-oligarchic state may dramatically shape the new Russia-West division line across Eastern Europe.



### 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).

### About the Author

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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