



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

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**Key points:**

- 1) Is the Trump era in international relations coming to an end?*
  - 2) The battle for controlling the WHO: geopolitical strife or information warfare?*
  - 3) In Turkey, the corona virus pandemic is leading to increased domestic vulnerabilities and external opportunities*
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## Is the Trump era in international relations coming to an end?

Two years ago, in an op-ed called [“Is America Changing the European Power Play?”](#), we noted the contradictions of the theory and practice of American foreign and security policy. In theory, US policy suggested a new containment jointly with its allies and partners against Russia and China. Meanwhile, president Donald Trump’s practice: reflected the demise of the old world order; questioned the Trans-Atlantic relations in the name of the old Westphalian balance of power; ignored the legitimate interests of its worldwide allies and partners, under the disguise of the nationalist slogan “Make America Great Again (MAGA)”; and strived to undermine the unity of the European allies, including on issues in the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods.

Very recently, in the wake of three overlapping U.S. domestic crises: the COVID-19 pandemic, the ensuing socio-economic aftershocks, and the turmoil sparked by racist abuses of police officers, those contradictions might have turned upon president Trump’s head, while raising the vulnerability of US strategic interests abroad, and potentially threatening regional and global stability.

For example, Richard Haas noted: *“Where would-be foes are tempted to advance, allies will feel anxious, with some choosing to defer to a powerful neighbour and others choosing to take matters into their own hands by accumulating or using military force. [...] The danger is that foes will see a United States weakened and distracted and move to take advantage.”* ([www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com))

This point was reinforced by others who noted that *“Iran, Russia, China, Turkey celebrate ‘collapse’ of US”* while pushing forward narratives

gloating over the chaos unfolding in the United States. ([www.jpost.com](http://www.jpost.com))

From a much bolder perspective, Thomas Wright blamed president Trump for mismanaging the American foreign and security policy over the past years: *“President Trump is stuck in a vicious downward spiral. The worst possible crisis arrived in COVID-19, one that tugged at every weakness of the president and the nation. After three chaotic years, we have finally arrived at the final phase of the Trump era, the long-feared crisis and unravelling.”* ([www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com))

Furthermore, former C.I.A. Director and US Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, deplored the over-militarization of the foreign policy by the Trump administration at the expense of non-military forms of international power, including diplomacy, economic multilateral tools, foreign aid, strategic communications, cyber warfare. *“Washington has become overly dependent on military tools and has seriously neglected its non-military instruments of power, which have withered and weakened as a result”.* ([www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com))

All of this analysis points once again at the looming end of the US-led world order, while deploring/blaming president Trump’s break off with the tenets of more than seven decades of US foreign and security policy. In the wake of three and a half years of presidential “Twitter diplomacy”, the international outlook of America is somewhere between grim and disastrous. The tenets of president Trump’s foreign policy<sup>1</sup> generally proved controversial, if not counter-productive, from Europe to the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA), and from the Americas to the Asia-Pacific. Instead of effectively responding global and regional challenges, the often inconsistent, and

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<sup>1</sup> For details, see [“Is America Changing the European Power Play?”](#)

sometimes ambiguous foreign policy decisions led Washington towards picking ever tougher fights with China and Russia, as well as to mere photo ops or sheer havoc in relations with North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela. Protracted military conflicts where America was involved for years, such as in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, or Libya remained either in the same state of *limbo* as four years ago or have seen America's adversaries taking the strategic initiative. Patchy cooperation with key allies, such as Turkey, Germany, France, Japan, South Korea, Canada, or the Gulf monarchies did not prevent the erosion of their trust in the current US administration's competence and intentions. Not least for it has been too often squandered by a plethora of presidential statements, quarrels, and rebuffs. Of course, there have been also few exceptions of happier US allies, such as Israel, most notably.

Ultimately, it is for the American voters to decide next November whether the ongoing triple domestic crisis will bring the Trump era in the international relations to an end. However, irrespective of whom would be sitting in the Oval Office over the next years, capitals around the world must prepare to embark on a dangerous new global geopolitical journey towards an unknown destination built upon a plethora of regional swamps and moving sands. Meanwhile, the U.S. leaders would struggle with strategic dilemmas enshrined in preparing their country for fighting a most likely new global (cold/hybrid?) war or, at worst, for having it retreated into self-defeating neo-isolationism.

### **The battle for the World Health Organization (W.H.O.): geopolitical strife or information warfare?**

On May 29, 2020, president Donald Trump stated he was "terminating" the United States' "relationship" with the W.H.O., which he portrayed as a puppet of the Chinese Communist

Party. The president, who previously halted funding to the organization, repeatedly blamed the W.H.O. and China for mishandling the coronavirus outbreak in its early stages. His statement came 10 days after the W.H.O. Assembly, consisting of representatives of all member states, approved a comprehensive review of the experience gained, and lessons learned from the W.H.O.-coordinated international health response to COVID-19. On the same occasion, Chinese president Xi Jinping had announced China's commitment to spend \$2 billion in the global fight against the pandemic, while exposing the United States' international isolation in calling for an urgent overhaul of the organization. Obviously, complaining about China "having total control over the W.H.O." is an obvious contradiction of president Trump's unilateralist foreign policy since *"Mr. Trump's retreat from the global stage has created the openings for China, which has been seeking to reshape multilateral institutions long dominated by Washington."* ([www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com))

This highly mediatized global affair clearly displayed the excessive politicization of the daily work of the W.H.O., while turning it into a glaring episode of geopolitical strife at the expense of effective multilateral response to a genuine global crisis: *"The institutional and political vulnerabilities that COVID-19 has exposed in multilateral organizations are real. But to blame such vulnerabilities on a lack of effort or expertise in the institutions themselves mistakes the symptom for the cause. At the heart of the problem is the failure of the world's leading powers, starting with the United States and China, to invest in and empower the multilateral system"*. ([www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com))

Remarkably, the lack of global leadership in fighting the COVID-19 exposed by the U.S. and China was partly balanced by an ad-hoc group of

“middle-powers”, including Australia, European states, India, Japan, and South Korea, which were instrumental in making the W.H.O. Assembly decision, while setting a possible precedent for protecting multilateralism against global powers’ rivalry in the future.

Why did president Trump’s attempt to coalesce the world, and in particular the “middle powers”, against China fail? One part of the answer might be related to his personal approach to foreign policy (see previous item), which has largely sacrificed America’s global interests and alliances for the sake of his M.A.G.A. electoral slogan, and personal unilateralist whims. The other part of the answer might be related to a widespread perception of president Trump’s fight against the W.H.O. as part of a personal information war. Make no mistake, the U.S.-China geopolitical rivalry is real, and it is hardly limited to information warfare. However, the argument that the Trump administration has conducted its own investigation of China’s role in spreading the corona-virus as an effort to shift blame away from its own mishandling of the pandemic in the U.S. is broadly shared within the global public opinion.

In early June, new evidence emerged showing that president Trump’s allegations that “*China has total control over the W.H.O.*”, and that “*both China and the W.H.O. tried to cover up what was going on in the first weeks of the novel coronavirus outbreak*” were wrong about the actions of the W.H.O..([www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)). Original recordings obtained by the Associated Press showed W.H.O. officials struggling, at the time, to get more information from China about the COVID-19 outbreak. Indeed, W.H.O. officials tried to coax China into providing more information, including by praising in public its “collaboration”. Although in retrospect this tactic had appeared flawed, it was also wrong to indict the W.H.O., on that basis, of intentional coverup. Neither were

Trump administration’s charges that the W.H.O. would have failed to “enforce the rules concerning transparency and disclosure in dealing with China” realistic. In fact, the W.H.O. does not have the means for enforcing its regulations over the member states that would ensure its independence from their voluntarily shared information.

In conclusion, while the geopolitical rivalry between the U.S. and China is real and seems inevitable, imposing it over the W.H.O., or indeed over any other existing multilateral organization, is wrong and even counter-productive for preserving a minimal world order. Not only was information warfare distracting the organization from its usual work at a time of pandemic crisis, but “*having control*” over a multinational bureaucracy would hardly serve any geopolitical strife in spite of incurring rather high financial costs. Luckily, this time, the “middle powers” took their role at the W.H.O. more seriously than the U.S. and China did.

### **In Turkey, the corona virus pandemic is leading to increased domestic vulnerabilities and external opportunities**

Since the first corona virus case was diagnosed in Turkey on March 10, 2020 the number of confirmed cases has reached beyond 173,000 (as of June 11), which placed it among the top 12 worst affected countries in the world.

Turkey’s response to the pandemic crisis has been marked by tensions between the scientific approach, promoted by the group of medical scientists under the Ministry of Health, and president Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s political priorities: ensuring his re-election in 2023 by saving the economy, and keeping his Islamist and nationalist power bases happy. ([nationalinterest.org](http://nationalinterest.org)) Those tensions reached their peak in mid-April when the government, in a unique practice around the world, announced

curfews for thirty-one provinces solely for weekends and holidays. ([www.brookings.com](http://www.brookings.com))

But even this partial lockdown has taken a steep toll on Turkey's economy and financial stability. In April, the International Monetary Fund projected that Turkey's economy would shrink by 5% in 2020, and unemployment would rise over 17%, as tourism dried up and shops have closed. Turkey's lira has also slipped to 7 liras to the dollar, surpassing its lows during the August 2018 currency crisis. ([worldview.stratfor.com](http://worldview.stratfor.com)) This grim socio-economic picture emerging from the partial lockdown practiced by the Turkish government has left president Erdogan facing a political and moral dilemma between saving lives and saving the economy.

On the domestic front, critics of president Erdogan's authoritarian rule noted increasing political vulnerabilities due to the deteriorating socio-economic situation, such as: continued repression against domestic criticism and opposition; undermining and blocking of the efforts of opposition mayors in Istanbul and other metropolitan cities to fight the pandemic, while opening criminal probes against them; staving off competing coalitions of new political parties formed by former AKP leaders, Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoglu; rolling out more assertive public diplomacy and foreign policy to feed the interests of the nationalist power base of the governing coalition. ([brookings.edu](http://brookings.edu))

On the public diplomacy front, the objective consisted of using the pandemic to support countries in need and improve Turkey's image on the international stage. Meanwhile, on the foreign policy front, Turkey has strengthened its regional power role from the Persian Gulf to North Africa and the Red Sea, and from the Balkans to the Caucasus and Central Asia. To that end, Turkey has: built a more powerful defence sector to strengthen its military forces; projected military

power in Libya, Qatar, Somalia, and Syria, and across the former Ottoman territory; challenged the Eastern Mediterranean order both by redefining maritime boundaries through a deal with Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) and by conducting gas drilling operations in contested areas off Cyprus.

A geopolitical trend showing regional powers, such as Turkey, seeking to capitalise on the increasing fragmentation of the global order by asserting leadership in their "backyards" has been widely noted (including in our past issues). Meanwhile, the domestic consequences of the coronavirus crisis might yield, at least in the short term, serious uncertainties regarding Turkey's ability to sustain the expansion of its regional influence. Therefore, Turkey's need to "walk on a tight rope in the attempt to play Russia against the United States and Europe" might come once again into the play. In our [March issue](#) we explained in more detail how this geopolitical power play could work in defending the Syrian province of Idlib against combined attacks by the Syrian government's and Russian forces. A similar argument was made by Sinan Ulgen, a well-known Turkish expert quoted by the "New York Times": *"The Russian aggression in Idlib was a turning point in pushing Turkey into a closer cooperation with the United States."* However, this shift would not mean that Turkey turned its back on Russia since *"Turkey is conducting a balancing act"*.

In Libya, Turkey plaid out another power balancing act, thereby Ankara's intervention in favour of the GNA, apparently coordinated with the U.S., has paid a decisive push back against the Libyan National Army (LNA) forces supported by Russia, Egypt and the U.A.E. According to recent media reports: *"Libya is the latest place where Mr. Trump effectively greenlighted Mr. Erdogan's military intervention, which has reshaped the conflict."* ([www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com))

If it proved successful, this Turkish gambit in Libya might have positive implications not only for opening a new era in bilateral relations with the U.S., as president Erdogan would have admitted in a recent interview. But it could also lead to opening new opportunities for a productive multilateral dialogue in the Eastern Mediterranean on defining maritime borders and gas drilling rights. However, there still might be, at least, two stumbling blocks ahead of Ankara's rapprochement with the West: the activation of the S-400 air defence missile system, and the ideological contradictions with the European states, underpinned by Turkey's increasing domestic vulnerabilities.



### 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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