



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

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Key points:

- 1) A newly packaged, old Ukrainian approach to negotiations resulted in new deadlock in implementing the Minsk II Agreements*
 - 2) The European Union and Turkey: time for a reset of a strained relationship?*
 - 3) How Israel's plans to annex parts of the West Bank might change the geopolitical outlook in the Middle East?*
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1) A newly packaged, old Ukrainian approach to negotiations resulted in new deadlock in implementing the Minsk II Agreements

In the [March issue](#) of this publication we wondered whether a “pragmatic” approach by recently appointed Ukrainian and Russian lead negotiators on the implementation of the Minsk II Agreements, A. Yermak and D. Kozak respectively, could be effective in overcoming the five years long deadlock. Unfortunately, their diverging approaches resulted in a new deadlock at the latest “Normandy format” meeting, held on July 3-4, 2020 in Berlin. On that occasion, the Russian envoy, D. Kozak, announced a pause in the Normandy negotiation process, pending “clarifications to Ukraine’s positions.” In that context, he questioned: the current Ukrainian interpretation of the Minsk II Agreements on whether they contained binding obligations for Ukraine or not; the timing for submission of the constitutional amendments to state-decentralization; Ukrainian commitment to engage in negotiations with representatives of Donetsk and Luhansk on their special status; Kyiv’s willingness to incorporate the Steinmeier formula into the law on the special status, and into the Constitution. (www.jamestown.org)

Apparently, the Russian position came to the dismay of the Ukrainian delegation headed by A. Yermak, who might have expected that this latest Normandy meeting could both “reward” Ukraine’s new “pro-active” approach to negotiations, and clear the path for President V. Zelensky to another summit in the “Normandy format”.

For seasoned experts the outcome of this latest meeting was not a surprise. This new Ukrainian approach to negotiations was defined by Mr Yermak: “Our conduct will be proactive, Ukraine will come forward as the initiating side, the dominant side in the negotiations” (www.ukrinform.net). It consisted of: appointing pro-Ukraine refugees from Donetsk and Luhansk to represent those territories

in the Minsk Contact Group; raising the level of its delegation to the Minsk Contact Group from semi-official to senior-level governmental and parliamentary delegation; burying the Russian proposal to create a “Consultative Council” (details in [April issue](#)); demanding the withdrawal of foreign forces, the disarmament of unlawful formations, and ensuring Ukrainian control of the border as pre-conditions for holding elections in Donetsk-Luhansk; declining to work on a roadmap for restoring the social-economic ties with the breakaway “republics”, but calling for restoring the Ukrainian legislation and its monetary and tax systems; ascertaining the situation of state-owned and privately owned enterprises and other economic assets illegally expropriated by the current Donetsk-Luhansk “authorities” (<https://www.president.gov.ua/en>).

This “pro-active” Ukrainian approach to negotiations combined older elements of the nationalist approach of the former president Poroshenko with “innovative” moves aiming to “demonopolize” the representation of Donetsk and Luhansk “republics”, and persuade Moscow to beef up its delegation to the Minsk Contact Group in a way that would implicitly substitute its proxies in Donetsk-Luhansk.

As it could have been easily foreseen, this re-packaged old Ukrainian approach was totally unrealistic and bound to maintain the implementation of the Minsk II agreements into a deadlock. Hopes that “the coronavirus-provoked economic crisis in Russia and the collapse of energy prices might affect Russian policy toward Ukraine” have proved futile, while president Zelensky’s “apparent concession in March to Russia and its proxies in the occupied territories to enter direct negotiations with the latter triggered a domestic backlash” (www.carnegie.ru). Unfortunately, the President wasn’t able to explain and sell to the public and to the members of the Ukrainian

Parliament this backlash, which resulted in the said “proactive” approach.

In conclusion, at this time, Ukrainian policy on Donbas conflict resolution looks increasingly aimed merely at getting photo opportunities for President Zelensky with his counterparts in the “Normandy format” rather than starting a realistic political and security negotiation process with Russia. While backpedaling on agreed steps forward made in his first months in office by an enthusiastic (but unrealistic) chief of the presidential administration, Kyiv seems currently bent on maintaining the *status quo* in Donbas at the expense of freezing European and American relations with Russia. It remains to be seen for how long Western leaders will continue to accept making their relations with Russia hostage to this geopolitical conflict at the core of Eastern Europe. Consequently, 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.

2) The European Union and Turkey: time for a reset of a strained relationship?

On July 13, 2020, the EU Council of Foreign Affairs reached consensus that the current EU-Turkey relations have been strained for some time. European foreign ministers called on Turkey's unilateral actions, in particular in the Eastern Mediterranean which run counter to EU interests, to the sovereign rights of EU member states and to international law, come to an end. They further called on Turkey to contribute actively to a political solution in Libya and to respect the commitments it had taken in the framework of the Berlin process, including the UN arms embargo. Since the Turkish decision to convert Hagia Sophia back to a mosque was perceived as undermining efforts at bilateral dialogue and cooperation, there was also broad support within the Council to call on the Turkish authorities to urgently reconsider and reverse this move (consilium.europa.eu). Within such a tense

situation, whether the EU-Turkey relations? Would a reset of those relations be necessary and possible?

The relevance of improving the EU-Turkey relations, including within the European neighbourhoods, has been mutually acknowledged. For example, during his trip to Ankara, on July 6, 2020, Mr. J. Borrell, EU High Representative for foreign and security affairs, stated: *“Turkey is not only a close neighbour for the European Union, [...] but it is a key partner, it is a candidate country for accession, and the fact that we in Europe discuss extensively and frequently about Turkey just reflects the importance that we attach to this relationship.”* (eeas.europa.eu) Turkey’s foreign minister M. Cavusoglu responded in a recent article for Politico: *“Our borders are Europe’s and NATO’s external borders and we, too, want to build state and societal resilience. Turkey carries much of the burden in separating the Western stretches of the Eurasian landmass from the volatile ecosystem that surrounds Europe. [...] In the future too, Europe will be safe and prosperous with Turkey’s contributions.”* (mfa.gov.tr)

On the other hand, Turkey has not only entrenched its fundamental values and interests away from Europe, but it has strived for its return to a historical prominence within its neighbourhood dating back to the Ottoman rule (see also our [June issue](#)). Driven by an Islamist agenda, Turkey has expanded its geopolitical horizons towards the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region. Having built strongholds in Syria, and in Libya, Ankara has taken advantage from a declining regional role of the US and Europe. As one Turkish pro-government columnist explained: *“The Turkish geopolitical power axis is now felt from the Persian Gulf to North Africa and the Red Sea, from the Balkans to the Caucasus and Central Asia.”* (carnegieeurope.eu)

Those changes have dramatically altered the geopolitical outlook of EU-Turkey relations, as they were shaped during the post-Cold War era. Consequently, Turkish interests have inevitably

clashed with some of the EU member states' strategic interests. For example, Greece, Cyprus, and more recently France have been seriously angered by the clash of their interests and regional policies with Turkey's perceived unilateral strides to regional prominence in the MENA region.

The inability of the Europeans to restore Libya's statehood a decade after engineering the fall of Colonel Qaddafi has been a clear proof of their geopolitical divisiveness backfiring into growing (Russian and) Turkish ambitions to get their hands on the Libyan steering wheel. The EU should make good on its promises for a common foreign policy to address the lack of regional leadership in restoring Libyan statehood. To that end it needs to effectively leverage Turkish strategic involvement in its Southern neighbourhood (carnegieeurope.eu).

Albert Einstein once said: "*in the midst of every crisis, lies a great opportunity*". The EU should also grasp the opportunity ensuing from its currently strained relationship with Turkey to find a way to reset it on the basis of *principled pragmatism*¹.

To that end, aware of the geopolitical, economic and security vulnerabilities and constraints of Turkey's walk on a tight rope in its attempts to play Russia against the United States and Europe, the EU (as the US has already started to do) should learn to leverage relations with Turkey as it is today: Islamist, more nationalistic, less democratic, but mostly authoritarian ruled; geopolitically more assertive, but economically volatile; strategically essential at both the Eastern and Southern flanks, but more than a difficult NATO ally and EU partner.

Obsessed with the authoritarian rule in Turkey, Europeans might have hoped to be saved from its Islamist regional expansion by waiting for a regime change. However, it would be probably much wiser

for them to sync their Turkey policies into a change of strategic tack striving to engage Ankara into "positive sum game" deals rather than quarrel for each and every point of contention.

The starting point of any prospective reset in EU-Turkey relations should start with both sides rising above the largely regretful experience of Turkey's EU membership aspirations. Hence, in the 2020s, a new political, economic and security association/partnership legal framework should be envisaged for being developed jointly with the new Turkey.

3) How Israel's plans to annex parts of the West Bank might change the geopolitical outlook in the Middle East?

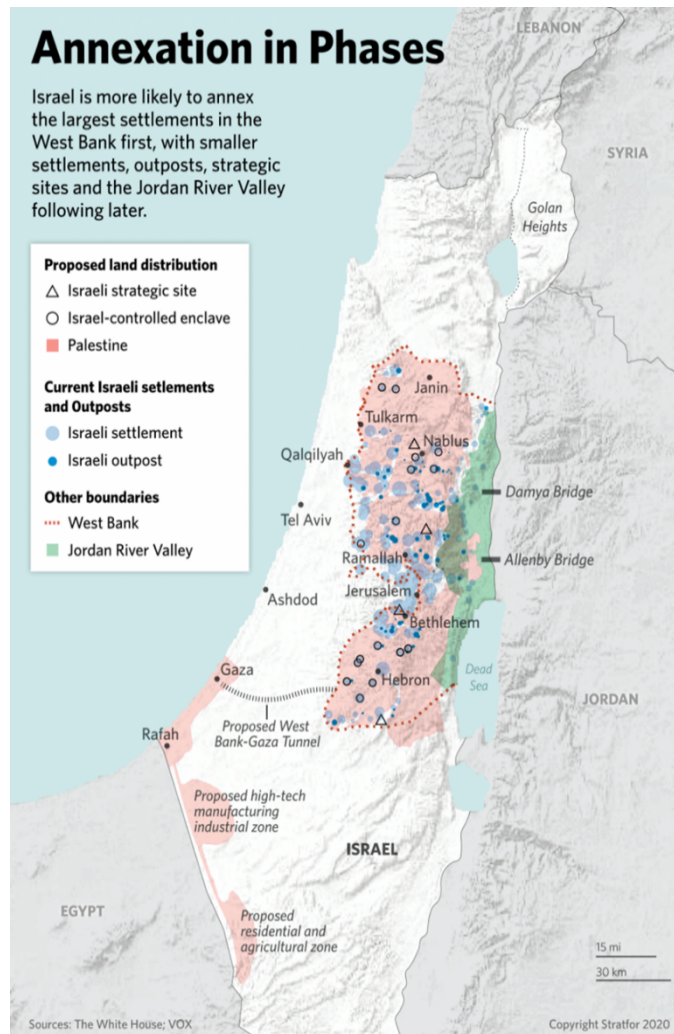
After signing a unity government deal in April 2020, Israeli Prime Minister, B. Netanyahu, was expected to begin annexing large parts of the West Bank on July 1, 2020. However, as of July 17, the Israeli government had delayed/slowed down its annexation plans in the face of a COVID-19 resurgence and possible future changes to the White House, in the wake of the November 2020 U.S. presidential elections. President D. Trump, the Godfather of the "Deal of the Century" ([March issue](#)) allowing for an Israeli annexation of large parts of the West Bank and the Jordan River Valley, has seen his approval ratings slide significantly against his challenger, former vice-president Joe Biden, who is a strong opponent of the annexation.

Nevertheless, experts agree that it is most likely that the Israeli government will go ahead with its plans to extend Israeli sovereignty over parts of the West Bank in spite of broad Palestinian, regional, and international opposition. The main problems with this annexation stem from its unilateral character, and that it might lead to the irreversible end of the Palestinian statehood project, and the "two-states

¹ According to the 2016 EU Global Strategy: "principled pragmatism is stemming as much from a realistic assessment

of the strategic environment, as from an idealistic aspiration to advance a better world.

solution” agreed with the Palestinians in 1993 in line with the Oslo Accords.



Amid the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East, how might Israeli plans to annex parts of the West Bank change the regional geopolitical outlook? The answer to this question might be construed against the following trends:

- In the wake of the 2018 U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the main fault line in the Middle East has been drawn between the U.S. and its staunch regional allies Israel, Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., Bahrain, on the one hand, and Iran, seconded by its proxies Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Syria, on the other. This fault line is likely to deepen and sharpen due to the prospective annexation

by adding another element to an already long list of existing points of contention. *“There are good reasons to believe that this [Israeli] détente with Arab Gulf states will endure: Saudi and UAE concern about a rising Iran; Arab frustration and exhaustion with the Palestinians; and the desire, especially in the Gulf, to maintain close ties to a Trump administration that shares Israel’s anti-Iranian views have all helped align Israeli and Arab state interests”.* (foreignaffairs.com)

- Against the backdrop of growing global rivalry between the U.S., China and Russia, the Middle East may also witness increasing geopolitical polarisation across the main axis of conflict. Those countries, which so far strived to maintain relatively balanced relations with both Israel and Iran, might have/be tempted to choose more consistently one side or the other. The European triangle (France-Germany-United Kingdom), China, Russia, Turkey, Iraq, and Qatar might be the main cases to this point.
- The U.S. adversity against Russia and China, and the unilateral decision underlying the Israeli annexation of Palestinian territory might push Moscow and Beijing closer to Teheran’s positions. In contrast, the Europeans might be more conciliatory towards Israel, in particular due to their core security interests to maintain the Trans-Atlantic backbone able to withstand outside pressures in the European neighbourhoods. Therefore, *“Europe is unlikely to impose sanctions on Israel, but rather will stick to symbolic diplomatic measures to express its opposition”.* (<http://worldview.stratfor.com/>)
- In light of their Sunni Islamic background (just partly, in the case of Iraq), and historical ties with the U.S., the most difficult geopolitical choices might be faced by Turkey, Qatar, and Iraq who might find that diverging interests would pull them closer to one or another of the geopolitical poles, on a case by case basis.

- From a longer-term U.S. perspective, a key uncertainty is whether or not Israel would prove capable to undertake the central role in maintaining the balance of power in the Middle East. In light of the U.S. "indirect warfare" strategy (discussed in more detail in recent issues of this publication) aiming to facilitate the relocation of the U.S. strategic pivot to Eurasia would need a regional pro-American leader in the Middle East. According to G. Friedman: *"There are now three power brokers in the region. One is Turkey. [...] The second is the United Arab Emirates, which has a significant air force, a small but effective ground force, and an effective intelligence service. The third and most effective is Israel. Israel is economically viable. And so, it will be Israel that will take the place of the United States."* (geopoliticalfutures.com) The outcome of the annexation plans of parts of the West Bank might also depend on how successful would Israel cope with a new role as major regional power broker.
- Israel itself would have to choose between maintaining the Jewish or the democratic character of their state. Under Prime Minister B. Netanyahu, it would most likely opt for the former, which would dramatically heighten the risk of violent clashes with Hamas and Islamic Jihadists on the West Bank.
- Jordan would most likely have to support by all means the Palestinian Authority (P.A.) and enter in conflict with Israel, although it might maintain an active dialogue with the U.S. congressional opposition to the annexation. King Abdullah told the German publication "Der Spiegel": *"if Israel really annexes the West Bank in July, it will lead to a massive conflict with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan."* (jpost.com). The P.A. might continue to govern what was left under its authority from the West Bank, if the Israeli government allowed it, or would move towards underground or exile forms of government.
- Hamas would be the main winner from the marginalization of the P.A. due to the Israeli prospective annexation. Hamas spokesman Abu Obeida said on June 25 that Israel would "regret" the application of sovereignty, which would constitute a "declaration of war." Meanwhile, Hamas may try to activate terror cells in the West Bank (facilitated by the breakdown of the anti-terror cooperation between the P.A. and Israel), and build up its rocket arsenal to enhance its ability to strike Israeli targets. The possibility of a simultaneous escalation of violence by Hamas in both the West Bank and Gaza remains real (besacenter.org).

At the end of the day, the Israeli government would have to design and implement a minimal version of its plans to annex parts of the West Bank, so that they could be hardly reversed by any future U.S. president, while they would not create a massive resurgence of Palestinian and other Islamic jihad violence in the region to interfere with the ongoing U.S. presidential electoral campaign. The possible farther expansion of this minimal version of annexation may largely depend on who will be sitting in the White House from the end of January 2021: D. Trump, the Godfather of the "Deal of the Century", or J. Biden, the defender of the multilateralist "two-states solution" of the Arab-Israeli conflict.



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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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