



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

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Key points:

- 1) Presidents' Biden and Putin summit might move U.S.-Russia confrontation into the next stage.
 - 2) Is the U.S.-Germany deal on Ukraine, European energy security, and climate the "happy end" of Nord Stream 2's geopolitical saga?
 - 3) The Afghan "geopolitical vacuum" is driving Central Asians into finding new geopolitical bearings.
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1) Presidents' Biden and Putin summit might move U.S.-Russia ongoing confrontation into the next stage.

The first bilateral summit of President Joe Biden with President Vladimir Putin of Russia took place on June 16th, 2021, in Geneva (Switzerland). Although the former called it “positive”, and the latter deemed it “constructive”, most international commentators concluded that it has been short of delivering any strategic breakthrough in relations. Neither have been there any higher expectations from this summit. For example, an article published by “Foreign Affairs” on June 9th, 2021, outlined the common view within the political-diplomatic, academic, and media circles: *“expectations for the Putin-Biden summit are low. The stakes, however, are high.[...] Domestic politics in both countries rewards toughness. Each side is convinced that the other is in decline, making compromise much less desirable”* apparently since the collapse of the other side was deemed simply a matter of time. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com>)

However, this pre-summit common view has not been entirely validated. In the wake of the two leaders' separate press conferences after the summit, experts have concluded that: a *“pragmatic approach was visible in Geneva. Biden's mission was not to lecture Putin or tell him off for 'misbehaving'. Instead, he intended to lay ground rules and create “guardrails” for a more stable and predictable relationship to avoid dangerous escalations.”* (<https://www.epc.eu>)

Prevailing pragmatism in the U.S.-Russia contentious relations would have been predictable if one had thought that both presidents, although for very different reasons and despite a rather poor mutual personal chemistry, did have a very high interest in changing the current pattern in their country's relations. *“The bottom line is I told President Putin that we need to have some basic rules of the road that we can all abide by”* President

Biden told reporters after the summit. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com>). Conversely, it has been common knowledge for many years that for President Putin *“relations with Russia must be officially built not on potential affinity with the West, nor on the basis of Western assessments of the state of affairs in Russia, but purely on common interests, against mutual enemies, and for the sake of avoiding clashes where they might occur.”* (<https://www.carnegie.ru>).

Eventually, the Biden-Putin summit resulted in a few, apparently modest, outcomes. The presidents succeeded to thrash out: a) an agreement to resume normal diplomatic relations, with the return of ambassadors to posts, and to begin negotiations on restoring normal staffing of embassies and consulates in both countries; b) an agreement to start technical discussions on cybersecurity, building upon a list of 16 critical infrastructure sectors, which should not be targeted by cyberattacks; c) an agreement to launch *“an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue [...] to lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures.”* (<https://www.epc.eu>)

Regional issues, such as the conflicts in Ukraine, Afghanistan, or in the Middle East might have also been briefly addressed, but no specific agreements leaked to the media. Several points regarding the separation of domestic politics from foreign and security affairs in both the U.S. and Russia might have also been exchanged, but the positions were probably divergent enough to prevent any concrete agreement. The huge ideological gap existing between the two leaders could be hardly bridged in a few hours of official talks.

It appeared that, overall, the two presidents were on different strategic pages in their visions on the future of U.S.-Russia relations. From Washington D.C., short-term common strategic interests for more stable and predictable relations with Russia might be conflicting with the long-term perspective

on the global distribution of power (which should rather contain than accommodate the geopolitical expansions of Beijing, Moscow, Teheran, and other authoritarian regimes). President Biden might have eventually decided to favor policies supporting U.S. short-term interests to the temporary detriment of his longer-term vision on the “Alliance of Democracies”. On the other hand, as seen from Moscow, *“a renewed format of Cold War–era relations, when the two sides operated in full recognition of their obvious differences, contained each other’s expansion, and together wrote the rules needed to avoid a fatal collision”* would be highly desirable. (<https://carnegie.ru>) However, for America the return to a “Cold-War era” pattern of relations, even if it was strategically attractive and short term economically most viable, a redrawn bipolar system might be highly counterproductive against its long-term political, technological, ideological, trade, and military interests. The inherent additional difficulties in fighting the new set of global security threats, such as climate change, pandemics, illegal immigration, cyber security, dis- and mis- information, as well as the older scourges of international terrorism, organized crime, and WMD proliferation, could make even less attractive the prospects of a new “Cold War”-like global order for Washington.

Nevertheless, the spirit of the latest Biden-Putin summit seems to remain alive, and so is apparently their willingness to move forward towards a new, more pragmatic, thus more stable, and predictable, stage of their relations. The magic disappearance from the cyber space of the allegedly Russia-based “REvil” ransom hacking group in the wake of a Biden-Putin phone call (<https://www.nytimes.com>); the apparent resolution (with German involvement) of the Nord Stream 2 dispute, and the lack of American support for Ukrainian aspirations to revise the Minsk 2 agreements (<https://jamestown.org>); the start of high level talks on climate change (U.S. special envoy John Kerry

July visit to Moscow); the launch in Geneva of the agreed Strategic Stability Dialogue (<https://www.themoscowtimes.com>); the media reports, confirmed from confidential sources, that President Putin would have offered to let the U.S. utilize Russian bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, albeit for limited, intelligence-gathering purposes to help contain Taliban’s warfare capabilities, in the wake of the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan (<https://responsiblestatecraft.org>) are some of the steps that have been (or are about to be) made to that end.

However, it is probably too early to say now whether the June 16th Biden-Putin summit in Geneva has been a cornerstone of the currently bottom rock U.S.-Russia relations. What it is apparent though is that, for now, restoring the predictability and stability in relations seems to be aimed at by both parties. And that leading officials in each of the respective foreign affairs and security establishments are keen to pursue a highly contested path to take them away from the edge of the multi-faceted abyss they had dug in-between themselves over the last decade or so.

2) Is the U.S.- Germany deal on Ukraine, European energy security and climate the “happy end” of Nord Stream 2’s geopolitical saga?

On July 21st, a Joint Statement by the Governments of the U.S. and Germany on their support for Ukraine, European energy security, and climate goals was released. It has hardly taken geopolitical and energy experts by surprise, although prior to its release its details were unknown to the public. This Joint Statement was the expression of a deal, which was most likely sealed during the visit to the White House of Chancellor Angela Merkel on July 15th, and it was meant to solve one of the most troubling issues of U.S.- German relations, i.e. the imminent completion of the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which is bypassing Ukraine and other Eastern European states. Since its launch in

September 2015, the Nord Stream 2 project has been mired with geopolitical concerns in Ukraine, Central Eastern Europe, and in several Western countries, most notably in the U.S. In [Issue 2, summer/autumn 2015](#) of this publication we highlighted the geopolitical relevance of the Nord Stream expansion project, while concluding that its completion “*had many hurdles to overcome while evolving from a pipedream to a pipeline*”. And we have been proved right, not the least by a two-years delay of the end of its construction, mainly caused by geopolitically motivated legal, and environmental issues, as well as by economic sanctions.



The off-shore routes of the Nord Stream gas pipelines (Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock)

Since then, the project has been criticized for it “*made it easier for Russian President Vladimir Putin to wield gas as “a geopolitical weapon” against Eastern European countries, expand Kremlin influence in Germany, deprive Ukraine of billions of dollars in gas-transit fees, and even for “giving Putin more flexibility in conducting his war in Ukraine’s east as he no longer needed to worry about destroying the pipeline carrying his gas to Europe.”* (J. Herbst on <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org>)

The latest U.S.- Germany Joint Statement was actually meant to effectively respond most of the legitimate concerns of the critics, and in particular

those from Ukraine- the greatest loser because of its geopolitical and economic consequences: “*Should Russia attempt to use energy as a weapon or commit further aggressive acts against Ukraine, Germany will take action at the national level and press for effective measures at the European level, including sanctions, to limit Russian export capabilities to Europe in the energy sector*”. (<https://state.gov>) In addition, Germany agreed to provide Ukraine with \$1bn to support its transition to cleaner energy by setting up and managing a Green Fund for Ukraine, and to appoint a special envoy to help Ukraine negotiate by 2024 an extension with up to 10 years of its current transit contract with Russia. The U.S. will support this initiative with technical assistance and policy support. (<https://washingtonpost.com> and <https://www.intellinews.com>)

In the wake of the June 16th Biden-Putin summit, what might have disappointed the Ukrainian president V. Zelensky and his supporters the most might have been the waning illusion that, under President J. Biden, Kyiv could use the U.S. as geopolitical counterweight to Russia in order to reshape the implementation of the 2015 Minsk 2 agreements. In its introduction, the Joint Statement specified that “*The United States pledges to support Germany’s and France’s efforts to bring peace to Eastern Ukraine via the Normandy Format. Germany will intensify its efforts within the Normandy Format to facilitate the implementation of the Minsk agreements.*” (<https://state.gov>)

On that basis, the critics of the Nord Stream 2 deal have been quick in denouncing it as “A Victory for Russia”, and “a generational geopolitical mistake that decades from now future Russian dictators will be reaping billions of dollars of benefits annually from” (Senator Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) quoted by “The Washington Post”). They have also argued that “*Russia is weaponizing gas supplies and using its dominant position on the European Union gas market to send a political message that Europe*

would face gas shortages if the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is not completed.”(<https://www.kyivpost.com>) And they doubted that “Berlin would take such drastic measures against Moscow, particularly ones that would affect German commercial interests.” (<https://www.jamestown.org>), and that “U.S. and German investments in the transformation, efficiency and security of Ukraine’s energy sector are unlikely to be enough to prevent the Nord Stream 2 pipeline from reducing Ukraine’s crucial transit revenues in the coming years.” (<https://www.stratfor.com>)

In fact, President Biden’s decision to make a deal with the German Chancellor A. Merkel allowing the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline in exchange for a string of German political, diplomatic, energy and financial commitments against Ukraine has been a skilful way to conceal the loss of the battle against this energy project, initiated and fought for almost five and a half years by his predecessors, B. Obama and D. Trump. In the first months of 2021, after he entered the White House, he might have realized that “the project was 90 percent complete, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel was set on getting it done before she left office next fall. So, the Biden administration judged that killing it with US-imposed sanctions would fail and inflame relations with Germany, giving Putin a win”. (Daniel Fried on <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org>)

Moreover, this deal might have been driven by a strategic calculation that within the global powers’ competition, it would be more helpful for U.S. interests to avoid antagonizing Germany over playing out in favour of key, but merely regional players Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states. As Jeremy Shapiro of the European Council on Foreign Relations has put it: “The Biden administration by contrast recognizes that the United States has more important foreign policy problems than a faraway pipeline, not the least of which is the geopolitical competition with China. [...] Those problems require

a strong alliance with partners like Germany.” (<https://washingtonpost.com>) In essence, Henry Kissinger’s triangular approach to U.S. relations with China and the former Soviet Union, successfully applied by president R. Nixon in the early 1970’s, might have prevailed this time over U.S. Eastern European and Wider Black Sea geopolitical interests. That global geopolitics might sometimes trump regional geopolitics is a blatant risk which must be considered in the future by all those affected/unhappy with the outcomes of this deal.

Is this a “happy end” of Nord Stream 2’s geopolitical saga? Probably not. The prospect that the U.S. Congress could still impose on the Biden administration to issue sanctions aiming to prevent the certification and insurance of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline remained. The geopolitical and strategic choices Kyiv might make following the adoption of this inconvenient great powers’ deal is also unclear. Much will depend on the extent president Biden would succeed in persuading president Zelensky during their end of August scheduled summit that the U.S. remained nevertheless committed to support Ukraine’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and European integration path. That would also send strong geopolitical signals to other interested actors from Eastern Europe and the Wider Black Sea on the direction of, and risks emerging from, Washington’s European policy. In addition, questions still remained on how Nord Stream 2 would succeed in abiding to the key principles enshrined in the EU’s Third Energy Package on diversity and security of supply. Last, but not least, a number of questions remained to be answered in the near future, including by the new German chancellor to be elected next fall: “Will the threat of punitive actions against Russia and Gazprom, including new transit agreement sanctions, keep Russia and Gazprom from breaching their transit agreement with Ukraine? Does Germany have the leverage to successfully

negotiate an extension of the transit agreement beyond 2024? Will the US and Germany agree on what constitutes malign behaviour [by Russia] and what actions are justified? (Richard Morningstar on <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org>)

This is why we would conclude that the Nord Stream 2 geopolitical saga has not ended, but it has merely taken another turn. The U.S. and Germany appeared to have joined forces to keep up the Western flags against the ongoing global and regional transitions towards a post-Western international system. How far and where would this recycled post-Cold War geopolitical trend go in this era of competition of global powers still remains to be seen.

3) The Afghan “geopolitical vacuum” is driving Central Asians into finding new geopolitical bearings.

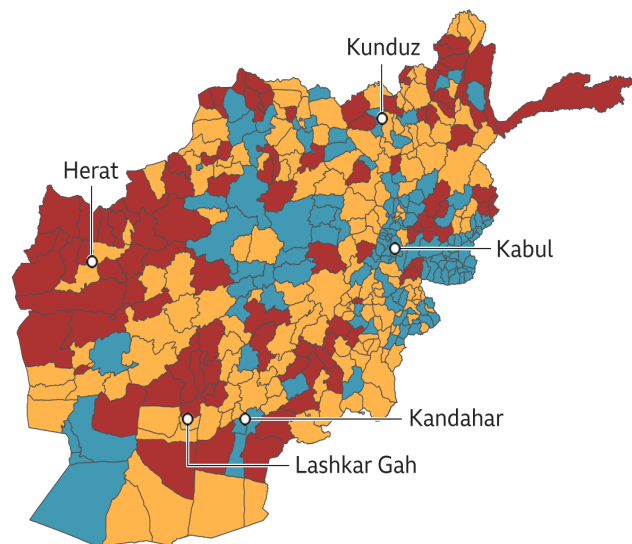
The most widely discussed Eurasia-related topic on the political, security, media, and scientific agendas throughout the months of June and July was the ongoing civil war in Afghanistan waged by the Taliban against the current Afghan government. In our [previous issue](#) we had explained the emergence of a “geopolitical vacuum” at the “heart of Asia” following the US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, and we discussed some geopolitical implications. This EGF Geopolitical Trends item is aimed at outlining how the Central Asian states have been affected by, and how did they respond, those implications.

As we had expected, over the last two months the Afghan civil war has escalated further. Apparently, the Taliban now control more than half of Afghanistan’s districts, along with various strategic border locations, including many along the Afghan Northern border with Central Asians (Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). In recent weeks, the militant group has also launched offensives against provincial capitals in Southern and Western

Afghanistan, and a suicide-bomb attack in a highly protected area of Kabul. (<https://www.stratfor.com>)

Who's in control in Afghanistan?

■ Taliban control ■ Government control ■ Contested*



*Contested is where fighting is ongoing or strong Taliban presence

Districts according to 2005 Afghanistan government boundaries

Source: BBC Afghan service 3 August 2021

BBC

Although their main goal to establish an Islamic Emirate remained in place, the Taliban’s tactics and strategy did dramatically change over the last 20 years. *“Today, the Taliban embrace social media and media attention. They also engage with the international community to a much greater extent than they had in the past. In fact, they are very eager to keep international engagement in Afghanistan on the table after the US withdraws.”* (<https://cabar.asia>)

Nevertheless, while the Taliban swept through Northern Afghanistan, the neighboring Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have taken up the heat. Insecurity in Northern Afghanistan has created a window for various groups of Central Asian fighters to engage in the region, causing legitimate concerns among the Central Asian republics. The danger of inflaming inter-ethnic relations is growing (as seen from the recent Tajik-Kyrgyz border incidents), while the threat of terrorism spilling over from Afghanistan to Central

Asian states' territories is very high, and it might be thriving rather soon. *"Even the voices in these countries discounting the possibility that the Taliban will move north, into former Soviet territory, say that the Islamist success in Afghanistan is driving others from that country to move to Central Asian states as far afield as Kazakhstan as well as to Russia and China, where there is the danger that they will destabilize the situation just by their presence or by linking up with home-grown radicals."* (<https://jamestown.org>)



In response, the Central Asian republics have taken measures converging towards similar objectives: raising the readiness of their military forces and beefing up the protection of their borders with Afghanistan; strengthening security and military cooperation with Russia; engaging in political-diplomatic dialogue with both the Taliban and the other fellow Central Asians, as well as with China. International media reported that *"Tajikistan, the weakest of the three frontline countries, has already accepted many refugees and tried to play down its earlier anti-Taliban position in the hopes that the Afghan group will not exploit the situation. It has negotiated with Taliban representatives, and its*

media outlets have played down the sometimes-violent clashes on the Afghan-Tajikistani border that have already occurred. [...] Turkmenistan has moved up its army to the Afghan border in the hopes of blocking any refugee flows or advance by the Taliban. But its military is small and unreliable. Thus, Ashgabat has also sought to negotiate with the Taliban in the hopes of preventing a disaster.[...] Uzbekistan appears more confident that it can counter any threat. Still, it too has been beefing up its security forces on the border and considering expanding security cooperation with Russia." (<https://jamestown.org>)

While the U.S. and NATO have almost completely withdrawn their forces from Afghanistan (leaving behind a small Turkish contingent with the limited task to guard the Kabul airport), Russia and China have stepped up their regional security and military cooperation efforts to shore up the Central Asian states' borders against the advents of instability, drug trade, extremism, and terrorism from neighboring Afghanistan. That was because Central Asia is seen in Moscow as an essential part of its Southern buffer zone. In addition, Moscow started to negotiate directly with the Taliban, in part to get reassurances that their activities will be limited to Afghan territory and in part to raise its own profile as a mediator. *"Taliban representatives met with Russia's special envoy for Afghanistan in Moscow on July 8. The group had previously promised during talks in Tehran not to allow its territory to be used to stage attacks on Russia."* (<https://geopoliticalfutures.com>)

On the other hand, Beijing is worried less that Taliban might cross into China than that Islamist fighters may step into Central Asia: *"Beijing worries that the victory of the Taliban will simultaneously interfere with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and link up with alleged Islamists in Xinjiang, among whom it counts the Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities."* (<https://jamestown.org>) This is why,

“On May 12, 2021, China’s foreign minister Wang Yi hosted the second China + Central Asia Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in the city of Xi’an. At the top of the agenda was Afghanistan, as China is worried about possible spillover into Central Asia and its eastern provinces.” (<https://www.besacenter.org>)

The Russian and Chinese efforts to isolate rather than fill in the “geopolitical vacuum” emerging in Afghanistan have created appropriate conditions for establishing the first China-Russia regional power-sharing arrangement in Central Asia as a pillar of the post-Western Eurasian order. *“Unable to forestall the growth of Chinese influence, Russia wants instead to take maximum advantage of Beijing’s emergence in Central Asia. [...] Beijing and Moscow will be more inclined to divide their influence in Central Asia. Russia will be less vocal about Chinese economic advances while playing the major security role.”* (<https://www.besacenter.org>)

Similarities with the South Caucasus and Syria, where Russia pursued power-sharing strategies involving Turkey, and Iran are also blatant. Meanwhile, Iran, Turkey, India, and Pakistan are struggling to join in (and balance) the Russia-China emerging regional power-sharing arrangement in Central Asia (mostly via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization-SCO, but also through bilateral or other multilateral frameworks), while the West has mostly left Afghanistan, and is about to limit its future engagement with Central Asia too. This situation might possibly favor Uzbekistan, which appeared to become the most attractive Western partner in Central Asia over the last few years since president Shavkat Mirziyoyev has stepped up wide-ranging political and macro-economic reforms, while maintaining a non-aligned status for his country. (<https://geopoliticalfutures.com>)

In our [previous issue](#) we concluded that the outcome of the 20 year war against terrorism in Afghanistan would suggest that Afghans could be hardly subdued by foreign powers, whatever their

agendas. Indeed, the last two months have reinforced those conclusions: *“The U.S., Turkey, Russia and others seem to have accepted their limitations and the fact that the future of Afghanistan will be determined by the Afghans themselves.”* (<https://geopoliticalfutures.com>)

Afghanistan would benefit from the help of its Central Asian and other neighbors to turn itself into a stable geopolitical actor, that would leverage its geo-economic potential as a bridge between Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East rather than letting the current “geopolitical vacuum” turn into a “geopolitical blackhole” brewing regional instability, international terrorism, extremism, drugs trafficking, and other transnational security threats. Building upon such a constructive, forward-looking perspective, Uzbekistan understood better than any other Central Asian republic *“that now is an ideal moment to capitalize on its competitive advantages, so it is already proposing a number of initiatives for Central and South Asia, including a multilateral agreement on economic cooperation between the countries of the region, accelerating the construction of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul- Peshawar railway, cooperating in the development of digitalization, tourism, the fight against drugs and terrorism, and so on.”* (<https://geopoliticalfutures.com>)

However, it is unclear yet whether Afghanistan itself would have anytime soon an inclusive, stable, outward-looking government willing to work with its Central Asian partners to implement such beneficial regional projects. The future will show whether Afghan leaders, including the Taliban, would be able to reach agreement among themselves, and persuade their people, that foreign blood and treasure have not been wasted just to return once again to a dreadful past after 20 years of war, anger, and death.



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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