



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

By George Vlad NICULESCU, PhD, Head of Research, European Geopolitical Forum

Key points:

- 1) What Room Would Be There for a Diplomatic Way Out from the current US/NATO- Russia Stand-Off over Ukraine?
 - 2) Geopolitical Implications of Ramping Up the Donbas Conflict at the Top of the European Security Agenda.
 - 3) After the COP 26, Geopolitical Prospects of Climate Change: Unifying or Dividing the World?
-

1) What Room Would Be There for a Diplomatic Way Out from the Current U.S./NATO-Russia Stand-Off over Ukraine?

In our previous issue [No 16/August-October 2021](#) we had elaborated on how geopolitical miscalculations and the European gas price crisis have left Kyiv in limbo over the Minsk 2 Agreements. We concluded that brief analysis by suggesting three scenarios for what president V. Zelensky might do next. The “ultranationalist scenario” assumed he might escalate the Donbas conflict in the hope to outmanoeuvre Moscow into a larger Eastern European conflict, potentially also involving EU and NATO. This is exactly where we are being today. However, as he lost control of the developments, it has appeared that the Ukrainian president would like to close the “Pandora box” he had opened, in spite of “creating privately expressed frustration among American and British officials for him and his inner circles downplaying the Russian threat”. And the need to avoid a war with Russia and pursue a diplomatic solution has brought Kyiv back to square one, facing the same limbo over the implementation of Minsk 2 Agreements. In theory, the difference should be made by Ukrainian, Russian, French, and German leaders and diplomats trying once again to lubricate and push through the Minsk 2 Agreements.

However, it would be unfair to blame the current U.S./NATO-Russia stand-off over Ukraine exclusively on president Zelensky and his foreign and security policy team. Apparently, both the Biden administration’s information war against Russia and the Russian practice of European diplomacy at the point of the guns have turned the Ukrainian limbo into a full-fledged European security crisis.

In the second half of October, the U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin visited the Black Sea region “to promote partnerships needed to mount a credible defence against Russia along the most volatile territorial frontier between Moscow and the

West.” In the few months prior to Secretary Austin’s trip to the Black Sea, the Biden administration had stepped up security assistance to Ukraine and Georgia by providing them with patrol boats, approving sales and transfers of Javelin missiles, and expanding bilateral and multilateral military exercises. All those moves went against president Biden’s promise around his June 2021 Geneva summit with president Putin to pursue stable and predictable relations with Russia. Certainly, secretary Austin’s trip to the Black Sea region unnerved president Putin who told reporters that “Ukraine’s military development poses a threat to Russia,” and that “its accession to the alliance would be a red line”. Those comments followed Austin’s declaration in Kyiv that “no third country has a veto over NATO’s membership decisions.”, and similarly unambiguous remarks while in Tbilisi, condemning “Russia’s ongoing occupation of Georgia.” (<https://washingtonpost.com>). To the Kremlin, those statements might have sounded inconsistent with previous high level State Department officials who came to Moscow with much more conciliatory messages, days before secretary Austin’s tough statements against Russia (see item #3 from EGF GT [No 16/August-October 2021](#)).

Soon thereafter, Russia resumed building up its military forces next to the Ukrainian borders, temporarily interrupted since May 2021 (in the run-up to the Geneva summit). Consequently, few days before mid-November, Ukraine’s Defence Ministry claimed that “about 90,000 Russian troops were stationed close to its border and in rebel-controlled areas in Ukraine’s east”. Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on November 13 doubled down on comments made a day earlier over the Russian forces build-up: “We’re very concerned about some of the irregular movements of forces that we see on Ukraine’s borders,” Blinken said. To playdown Ukrainian and Western concerns Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said: “The movement of

troops on our territory shouldn't be a cause for anyone's concern." (<https://dw.com>)

The following level of escalation of the Ukrainian crisis was signed off by president V. Putin. On November 17, at a meeting with high ranking Russian diplomats he said: "Our recent warnings have had a certain effect: tensions have arisen there anyway. It is important for them to remain in this state for as long as possible, so that it does not occur to them to stage some kind of conflict... we do not need a new conflict". That statement offered a reasonable argument to experts who had suggested that: "Indeed, Russian sabre-rattling on Ukrainian borders shouldn't be dismissed in either Kyiv or West as Russian aggression. Neither should it be exaggerated as sign of an imminent invasion. It's rather Moscow expecting Kyiv move to Donbas conflict settlement." (@EGF Brussels Tweet on [November 16](#)). V. Putin further called the Western countries "unreliable" for only "superficially acknowledging Moscow's red lines and warnings". Therefore, he called on foreign minister S. Lavrov to provide Russia with "serious long-term guarantees" in the Euro-Atlantic region. (<https://carnegiemoscow.org>).

By mid-December, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published two drafts handed over for consideration to the U.S. administration: an "United States of America- Russian Federation Treaty on security guarantees" and an "Agreement on measures to ensure security of Russian Federation and NATO". Both drafts proposed "non-starter" concessions from the West: to indiscriminately write off future NATO enlargements and to withdraw foreign forces and military installations from the territories of the new NATO members. Given that NATO leaders stated repeatedly that such concessions were unacceptable many thought that the two drafts were in fact a Russian bluff and a mere pretext for justifying a military invasion of Ukraine. A couple of phone calls between presidents Biden and Putin in December seemed

not to have helped in overcoming this political-diplomatic deadlock. Indeed, on January 26, the United States has given Moscow a written response aimed at deterring the Russian invasion of Ukraine. "The document we've delivered includes concerns of the United States and our allies and partners about Russia's actions that undermine security, a principled and pragmatic evaluation of the concerns that Russia has raised, and our own proposals for areas where we may be able to find common ground," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said. (<https://edition.cnn.com>)

On February 1, president Putin publicly blamed the U.S. for the current crisis. He claimed it was Washington that was fanning the flames of war, seeking to goad the Kremlin into action and create a pretext for enacting harsh new sanctions. "Their most important task is to contain Russia's development," Mr. Putin said of the U.S. "Ukraine is just an instrument of achieving this goal. It can be done in different ways, such as pulling us into some armed conflict and then forcing their allies in Europe to enact those harsh sanctions against us". Regarding the U.S. response to Russian draft agreements, he said that it was clear "that the principal Russian concerns turned out to be ignored." (<https://nytimes.com>)

Meanwhile, president Zelensky offered his own grim appraisal after weeks of playing down American and British assessments of the severity of the Russian threat. "This is not going to be a war of Ukraine and Russia," should diplomatic efforts fail, he said. "This is going to be a European war, a full-fledged war." (<https://nytimes.com>) Apparently, this statement showed that president Zelensky was unaware of the U.S.-led information war aiming to deter a new Russian attack against his own country. Sadly, he seemed falling victim himself to Russian media counter-attack, while discrediting Ukraine's bid for NATO membership, particularly in front of most European countries for whom Ukraine was not worth a fight against Russia.

After all, there are no good reasons for Russia to invade Ukraine in the near future. Actually, president Putin and Russian officials have repeatedly denied any intentions to conduct an invasion on the back of their military build-up around the Ukrainian borders. That would be both illegal and very costly not only because of Western sanctions, but also for a majority of Ukrainians were not willing to give up to Moscow their country's sovereignty. Most likely, Russian concentration of troops around Ukraine was aimed at deterring a potential Ukrainian massive attack against Russian-backed forces in Donbas (i.e. the "worst case/ultranationalist scenario" of president Zelensky). Current Russian forces deployed around Ukrainian borders (latest estimates from the Ukrainian ministry of defence placed them on February 9, 2022 at about 140,000-<https://washingtonpost.com>) were insufficient to ensure a successful large-scale invasion, but might be large enough to deter a Ukrainian brazen incursion in Donbas or Crimea. The risk of sanctions is rather high in case Russians moved their military against Ukrainian territory while targeting a wider occupation.

On the other hand, while president Putin kept US/NATO guessing about Russia's next moves against Ukraine, he was hardly willing to pick up an indiscriminate fight against NATO allies. His likeliest course of action would therefore favour targeting Kyiv with hybrid warfare under massive geopolitical pressure. Putin's aim would be to make the Ukrainian government either to implement Minsk 2 agreements or to make mistakes that would prove the inability of a "NATO-centric" security system to adequately respond major international crises in Eastern Europe. A change of leadership in Kyiv would also suit him well. To that end, maintaining highest geopolitical pressure and launching hybrid attacks might be his only ways not to lose face. The chances for a successful Russian hybrid attack against Kyiv being equated in Washington with an

infringement against Ukraine's sovereignty and independence are rather high, and might trigger massive economic sanctions against Moscow. Whether all of the European allies would follow the U.S. lead or not it is rather unclear at this time.

Most of the recent "threat" of a Russian invasion of Ukraine has been driven by a Western media hype (read information war) initiated and sustained as a soft deterrent by vested geopolitical interests. Russia has responded this information war while trying to leverage its military build-up around Ukrainian borders on imposing its style of Donbas conflict resolution, and, eventually, on negotiating with the West a revision of the European security system. De-escalation is possible and desirable if all parties involved would choose returning to the negotiations table instead of trying to solve the Donbas conflict by military means.

Nevertheless, the risk for an inadvertent/artificially provoked outbreak of a military confrontation remains quite high, particularly in the context of massive military deployments and exercising on both sides of the Ukrainian borders with Russia and Belarus, and the ongoing information war claiming that a massive Russian military intervention on Ukrainian territory was imminent.

In conclusion, the room for a diplomatic way out from the current standoff over Ukraine is narrow and it is fraught with quite high geopolitical, economic, security and, ultimately, military risks. On their way out, Ukraine, Russia, and the other stakeholders from the OSCE area should find ways to: 1) revitalize the Normandy format and find viable and mutually acceptable solutions to implement the Minsk 2 Agreements; 2) somehow compensate Ukraine with appropriate political, economic and security incentives for living with the territorial loss of Crimea; 3) move away from the "theory" of NATO enlargement towards a pragmatic review of the dysfunctional OSCE legal framework on arms control and confidence building; 4) assess

the relative security benefits of Ukraine and Georgia as potentially neutral countries (just like Azerbaijan and the Republic of Moldova) against the security risks ensuing from a *sine die* status of “NATO aspirant” that could possibly face an existential war against Russia. In a recent article, Stephen Walt suggested: “Ukraine should take the initiative and announce it intends to operate as a neutral country that will not join any military alliance.[...] For Ukrainians, this is hardly an ideal situation. But it is the best outcome Ukraine can realistically expect.” (<https://foreignpolicy.com>)

Those requirements for effective diplomacy might be easier said than done, and would definitely not concur with the maximalist agendas of all parties. However, they might have already become conditions for avoiding regional war in Eastern Europe at times of great powers rivalries.

2) Geopolitical Implications of Ramping Up the Donbas Conflict at the Top of the European Security Agenda.

In the previous item we outlined how the Donbas conflict has escalated over the last three-four months to the largest threat against European security since the end of the Cold War. Faced with a large threat of war in their Eastern neighbourhood, Allies have beefed up their defences on the Eastern borders of member states Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states. However, those military moves were not meant to change the balance of forces against the Russian and Belarusian troops massed around Ukrainian borders, but were mostly symbolic deployments meant to show the unity of the Alliance and to deter against the perceived Russian military threats.

This item will briefly address how the escalation of the Donbas conflict could change the dysfunctional post-Cold War European security system. It would also be complemented with few comments on the influence of the current West-Russia standoff on the prospects for the operationalization of Nord

Stream 2 gas pipeline, and the key role of Turkey in keeping the balance of power in the Black Sea area. On his way to Moscow (February 7, 2022), French president E. Macron stated for the Journal du Dimanche newspaper: “*The geopolitical objective of Russia today is clearly not Ukraine, but to clarify the rules of cohabitation with NATO and the E.U.*” (<https://intellinews.com>). This statement is consistent with the [EGF Tweet of December 2](#) reading: “*There is lots of talk on Russia's possible (but unlikely) invasion of Ukraine versus NATO is getting closer to Russian borders. In fact, this is all about the imminent crash of the European security.*” Obviously, such a crash would be a direct consequence of a possible escalation of the Donbas conflict into a wider Eastern European war.

To prevent such a sudden crash, international experts have come up with concrete proposals on how to adapt the European security system to the new geopolitical realities. For example, in a Brookings publication of January 11, 2022, Michael O’Hanlon thought that: “*we need to develop new concepts for future European security. Ukraine and Georgia should not be in NATO — even if Moscow should not be able to make that decision for them [...] Security alliances should not be used by Washington and Brussels as democracy promotion tools or instruments to advance the “European project.”*”, while “*The new security architecture must require that Russia withdraw its troops from Ukraine and Georgia (and Moldova, most likely) in a verifiable manner. The Crimea issue would have to be finessed, since Moscow almost certainly will not give that strategic peninsula on the Black Sea back to Ukraine.*” Angela Stent has written in the same Brookings publication: “*Putin’s goal is a wholesale relitigating of the post-Cold War settlement in Europe. Where do we go from here? Best case: revived negotiations on the now-defunct Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty. Worst case? Another military incursion into Ukraine*

followed by punitive sanctions on Russia which will also adversely affect Western economies" (<https://brookings.edu>).

Michael Kimmage has done a similar plea in an article published in Foreign Affairs on January 17, 2022 on: "Time for NATO to Close Its Door- The Alliance Is Too Big—and Too Provocative—for Its Own Good": "The alliance should make clear that its long phase of expansion is over. Ending the open-door policy, tricky as it would be to execute, and rethinking the security architecture of central and eastern Europe would not be a concession to Putin." (<https://foreignaffairs.com>)

Furthermore, in a "Foreign Policy" article on "Liberal Illusions Caused the Ukraine Crisis" Stephen Walt thought: "If Russia has obvious reasons to worry about NATO enlargement, its neighbours have ample reason to worry about Russia as well. [...] Unpleasant as it may be, the United States and its allies need to recognize that Ukraine's geopolitical alignment is a vital interest for Russia—one it is willing to use force to defend" (<https://foreignpolicy.com/>). Therefore, new pan-European arrangements should be agreed to align Russian vital interests with those of its neighbours Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, whose territorial integrity has been directly affected by Russian military operations over the last thirty years. NATO enlargement has not been, and it will hardly be, a panacea for conflict resolution in the Euro-Atlantic area, as some in Kyiv, and in Tbilisi might have wrongly imagined. Instead, new European security mechanisms need to be developed to cope with conflicts in Abkhazia, Donbas, South Ossetia, and Transnistria which are hopelessly dragging on for decades.

Russian experts have also come up with ideas for refurbishing the European security system. For example, Andrey Kortunov, writing for Carnegie Moscow Centre, on January 25, 2022 suggested: "Any confidence-building measures, however modest would help to stabilize the volatile situation

on the ground. [...] Specific issues of NATO's geographical expansion could be negotiated within the framework of a new Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE 2). [...] Moscow should focus on finding alternative security mechanisms for those countries (Ukraine and Georgia) to reduce their interest in coveted NATO membership."

The post-Cold War European order is in tatters, while a new European order is yet to be born, and there seems to be little appetite to imagine and negotiate it. Nevertheless, at least over the medium and longer term, this is the only alternative to regional war in Eastern Europe.

Apparently, on February 7, 2022, president Macron, during his meeting with president Putin, displayed some readiness to put the new European security framework on the table of negotiations with a view to devising a new Euro-Atlantic deal with Russia. So far, President Biden has been more restrained, while offering to discuss with Moscow nothing more than a few arms control and confidence building measures agreements. Given the current mutual lack of trust between the Western leaders and president Putin, the latter would be a good starting point though.

At this time, it is unclear how would president Putin decide to move forward with the resolution of the Donbas conflict, or whether or not would he be prepared to start negotiations with the West over new Eastern Europe security arrangements. However, according to the latest Western reports on his phone calls with presidents Biden and Macron (on February 12), a breakthrough is still unlikely on both issues. On the other hand, reports about some Western countries withdrawing their OSCE monitors from their mission to supervise the Donbas cease fire are worrying. Meanwhile, Russian hybrid warfare and political manoeuvres in Ukrainian domestic politics might keep the cauldron boiling up.

Nord Stream 2

Our [issue No 15/June-July 2021](#) discussed whether or not the “Joint Statement by the Governments of the U.S. and Germany on their support for Ukraine, European energy security, and climate goals” was the end of the geopolitical saga of Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. We concluded that it was not. Meanwhile, the current course of events where the operationalization of Nord Stream 2 looks highly dependent on the outcome of the current standoff between Russia and the West over Ukraine proved us quite right. At this time, we could add to that analysis, two additional points:

1) Germany’s energy security has always been vulnerable due to its gas dependence on Russia. Ironically, the expansion, and ramping up at the top of the European security agenda of the Donbas war would create new dilemmas for Berlin by displaying the critical role of Nord Stream 2 in securing its gas supply, while increasing its geopolitical vulnerabilities. Germany might have to decide what is more important for its security: maintaining the unity of NATO on imposing drastic economic sanctions against potential Russian military moves in Ukraine or its own energy security. This would be a tough choice to be made, which most likely featured high on the recent agenda of the meeting of president Biden and chancellor Scholz in Washington. The unity seems to have prevailed, but at what costs for Germany it is still unclear.

2) Recent statements by the French minister of finance Bruno Le Maire in favour of using the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline as leverage over Russia to de-escalate the Ukrainian crisis seems also relevant to the ongoing geopolitical debate over Nord Stream 2: “We will not allow ourselves to be led by America on a question which cannot be anything other than European. We have different interests to them in this Ukrainian crisis,” said Le Maire, referring to Biden’s threat of scrapping Nord Stream 2 if Russia invaded (<https://intellinews.com>). On the other hand, the current security limbo of Ukraine is *de*

facto making the Russian point stressing that Ukraine is rather a liability to European energy security, while the true asset would be the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, whose quick operationalization could have helped moderating the current spike of energy prices on the European markets, and could prevent a possible shortage of gas in Europe, in the near future.

Turkey, Ukraine, and the Black Sea

In our [Issue No 6/April 2020](#) it appeared we underestimated Ankara’s openings to Kyiv and Tbilisi as “*tactical moves to get leverage over Russian policy in the MENA (Syria, Libya) by pursuing active defence cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia, Russian local adversaries in the Wider Black Sea*”. In fact, as the current stand-off between Russia and the West over Ukraine is showing they might be much more than that. D. Kuleba, the Ukrainian foreign minister, has made this point in a recent op-ed: “*Turkey and Ukraine have much more in common than burgeoning trade, growing cooperation in the military and technical spheres, and a shared commitment to ending the Russian occupation of Crimea*”. (<https://atlanticcouncil.org>) In fact, Ukraine and Georgia are strategic pieces in the very delicate Russo-Turkish regional balance of power in the Wider Black Sea. If Moscow significantly attempted to alter their strategic direction, the whole regional balance of power might be in danger to being broken, and Turkey’s siding with NATO would be unavoidable. Indeed, on January 26, president Erdogan came into the NATO-Russia stand-off over Ukraine: “*I hope that Russia will not make an armed attack or occupy Ukraine. Such a step will not be a wise act for Russia or the region,*” he said (<https://www.reuters.com>). He also warned that, in such a case, Turkey would do what is necessary as a NATO member. He further offered to mediate between presidents Putin and Zelensky, but so far his offer has not been accepted by the Kremlin.

At the time of deepest NATO-Russia crisis, when president Putin was expected to respond Western proposals to his request for legally binding security guarantees, president Erdogan threw the heavy Black Sea geopolitical weight of Turkey on the side of NATO and Ukraine. This might ultimately prove a game changer. If Putin ignored Erdogan's warnings he could break down a Russo-Turkish balance of power crafted with efforts over the last two decades not only in the Black Sea, but also in the South Caucasus, in Central Asia, and in the Middle East & Northern Africa. From Moscow's perspective that would be a most serious strategic setback, which would make it think twice before launching an unprovoked military attack against Kyiv.

3) After the COP 26, Geopolitical Prospects of Climate Change: Unifying or Dividing the World?

The global agenda in the first half of November 2021 was topped by the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties, widely known as COP 26, held in Glasgow (UK). That was the case not only for the topic was both crucial for the future of the world and controversial in terms of measures to be taken and responsibilities, but also for it was opened by a summit preceded by a G20 summit in Rome (Italy), where climate change stood also at the top of the agenda. This was a huge global effort aiming to move forward the implementation of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, agreed in December 2015, largely stalled *inter alia* by the infamous U.S. withdrawal in 2017 by president Trump, and resumed by president Biden's re-joining in the first day of his mandate.

Reflecting on a theoretically unifying approach, HRH Charles, prince of Wales, deemed the COP 26 as "the last chance saloon" for the planet. However, for a host of reasons, most world leaders might not be persuaded by the apocalyptic prospects for the future stemming from too little and slow progress in the battle against climate change. In an article published by "Geopolitical Futures", George

Friedman outlined several credible reasons for why many of the world's leaders might be in fact rather divided and sceptical about some of the environmentalists' arguments: "*the leaders don't actually believe in the dangers of climate change but are publicly demonstrating that they do to pander to those who fear the apocalypse*" (<https://geopoliticalfutures.com>).

Such carefully disguised high level doubts about an universally catastrophic outcome of climate change opened room for turning the COP 26 into a new global public diplomacy scene largely displaying the growing geopolitical, socio-economic, ideological rifts feeding the ongoing great powers' rivalries.

No wonder that president Biden used the COP 26 summit, on the one hand, to show global leadership on climate change, a controversial topic in U.S. domestic politics, and, on the other hand, to rebuke the leaders of China and Russia for not having travelled to Glasgow at the COP26 summit. "*I think it's been a big mistake for China not to show up at the conference*" he said. "*They've lost their ability to influence people around the world, and people here at COP.*" Mr. Biden said of the Chinese leadership. "*How do you do that and claim to have any leadership mantle?*" Mr. Biden had similarly sharp words for President Vladimir Putin of Russia. "*Literally, his tundra is burning. He has serious climate problems. And he has been mum on his willingness to do anything.*" (<https://nytimes.com>).

In reality, both presidents Xi and Putin have announced via online calls their plans on addressing the consequences of climate change, even if they were more modest than expected in the West. Moreover, Biden's tough talk on the Chinese global leadership at the summit has received an almost immediate geopolitical response from China. One week later, the U.S. and China pledged to work together to slow global warming during the third decade of this century, and ensure that the Glasgow talks would result in meaningful progress. The world's two biggest greenhouse gas emitters said in

a joint statement they would take *“enhanced climate actions to meet the central goals of the 2015 Paris climate accord — limiting warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius beyond preindustrial levels, and if possible, not to exceed 1.5° Celsius.”* (<https://www.washingtonpost.com>).

However, there was a key difference between the Berlin COP1, in 1995, and the Glasgow COP26 in 2021. In many countries, there has been ever since a shift in the domestic politics of climate change. Green parties have won over larger shares of the electorate. Green ideas have also gone mainstream, with candidates from across the political spectrum portraying themselves as friends of the climate. And citizens have begun to vote with climate on their minds. *“No one is questioning the science, no one is questioning that the crisis is happening,”* said Annika Hedberg, from the European Policy Center. *“The debate is around what can be done and at what speed. This is a positive thing — we’re not questioning the science but the measures.”* (<https://www.washingtonpost.com>).

One apparently shared global political goal has also generated divisive approaches on responsibilities and modalities for achieving it. And, of course, on who should pay for it, as well. This is why *“Long-running fault lines in the global debate over who should be the most responsible for cutting emissions emerged in the opening speeches of the assembled heads of state [at COP 26]. So did barbs aimed at two major greenhouse gas emitters, China and Russia, whose leaders did not attend. And so did the tensions between the globe’s rich and poor, as less-developed countries demanded more aid and swifter action from wealthier ones.”* (<https://nytimes.com>).

The science is clear on what needs to be done to slow down global warming and keep up with the cap of “1.5° Celsius” above the pre-industrial times level of commitment by 2100, enshrined in the Paris Agreement. Emissions of carbon dioxide, methane and other greenhouse gases (GHG) driving up global

temperatures needed to be cut by nearly half by 2030. This would require to drastically cut or even stop the burning of coal, oil and gas. However, many world leaders and corporate executives are not yet prepared to do exactly that. The hydrocarbons energy industry currently amounts for hundreds of billions USD, in cash revenues, and tens of millions of jobs worldwide every year. Who would be ready to scrape them off against vague promises for new technologies still to be developed and related infrastructures still to be built? Serious questions remain about whether a net-zero emissions target will be feasible by 2050 to 2070 without significant technological breakthroughs and “back up” clean energy solutions (such as nuclear). The geopolitical implications of the clean energy transition are huge. In a most recent article published by Foreign Affairs (January/February 2022) Jason Bordoff and Meghan O’Sullivan claim that *“The transition [to clean energy] will reconfigure many elements of international politics that have shaped the global system since at least World War II, significantly affecting the sources of national power, the process of globalization, relations among the great powers, and the ongoing economic convergence of developed countries and developing ones.”* (<https://foreignaffairs.com>). This would add to an already structurally changing international system due to the limits and downsides of globalization and the shifting great powers relations at the global and regional levels. Bordoff and O’Sullivan further argued that innovation and cheap capital would enable clean energy superpowers to yield geopolitical influence by means of: a) the power to set standards on clean energy; b) maintaining control of the supply chain for minerals such as cobalt, copper, lithium, nickel, and rare earths, which are critical to various clean energy technologies (*“China’s control over the inputs for many clean energy technologies includes not only mining but an even more dominant role in the processing and refining of critical minerals.”*);

c) enhancing the ability to cheaply manufacture components for new technologies; d) sustain the production and export of low-carbon fuels (in particular hydrogen and ammonia) who would be critical to the transition to net-zero GHG emissions, given their potential role in decarbonizing hard-to-electrify sectors and in balancing grids supplied primarily by renewable sources of energy that can experience intermittent disruptions. *"The IEA's "net zero by 2050" scenario anticipates that trade in hydrogen and ammonia will rise from almost nothing today to more than one-third of all energy-related transactions."* Neither of those clean energy superpowers resources are exclusively held in the West, but they are more widely distributed across the globe.

Eventually, the COP 26 ended with a hard-fought agreement that called on participants to return next year with stronger emissions-reduction targets and promises to double the money available to help countries cope with the effects of global warming, and to achieve the most ambitious goal of the 2015 Paris accord — to limit the global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. It has also named (but probably not shamed) the main cause of climate change: the fossil fuels. *"We must end fossil fuel subsidies, phase out coal, put a price on carbon, protect vulnerable communities from the impacts of climate change and make good on the \$100 billion climate finance commitment to support developing countries"* U.N. Secretary General António Guterres said in a video at the close of the conference. *"We did not achieve these goals at this conference, but we have some building blocks for progress."* (<https://www.washingtonpost.com>).

In conclusion, clean energy transition might shift the geopolitics of energy in hardly predictable ways. As usually, there will be winners and losers. And clean energy driven conflicts cannot be excluded. Therefore, efforts to mitigate ensuing geopolitical risks are crucial to preventing national security

concerns hinder or stop the move to a net-zero global economy. As shown in the previous item, Germany is a case in point concerning Nord Stream 2, since national security concerns over Ukraine conflicted with Germany's own clean energy security needs and led into hard to break political dilemmas, while creating serious geopolitical vulnerabilities.

The ongoing global energy crisis has made the point that climate change policies have major geopolitical consequences. From this perspective, the green energy transition should be driven, *inter alia*, by the changing balance of power of fossil fuels' suppliers/users and clean energy stakeholders, including environmental activists. The ensuing geopolitical trend is that as the predominance of green energy and the net-zero emissions societies are still far away from ensuring the energy sufficiency of global economy, some sort of market sharing agreement with the other energy suppliers would be inevitable. Otherwise, hydrocarbon producers would manoeuvre their supply to the global markets so that they keep the energy prices very high and thereby try to slow down and make more expensive the clean energy transition.



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.

About the Author

Dr George Vlad Niculescu is originally from Bucharest, Romania, and is currently the Head of Research of the European Geopolitical Forum. He is also a 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 and received his PhD degree in June 2021. 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). Dr 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](#).

Disclaimer

The information presented in this report is believed to be correct at the time of publication. Please note that the contents of the report are based on materials gathered in good faith from both primary and secondary sources, the accuracy of which we are not always in a position to guarantee. EGF does not accept any liability for subsequent actions taken by third parties based on any of the information provided in our reports, if such information may subsequently be proven to be inaccurate.