



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

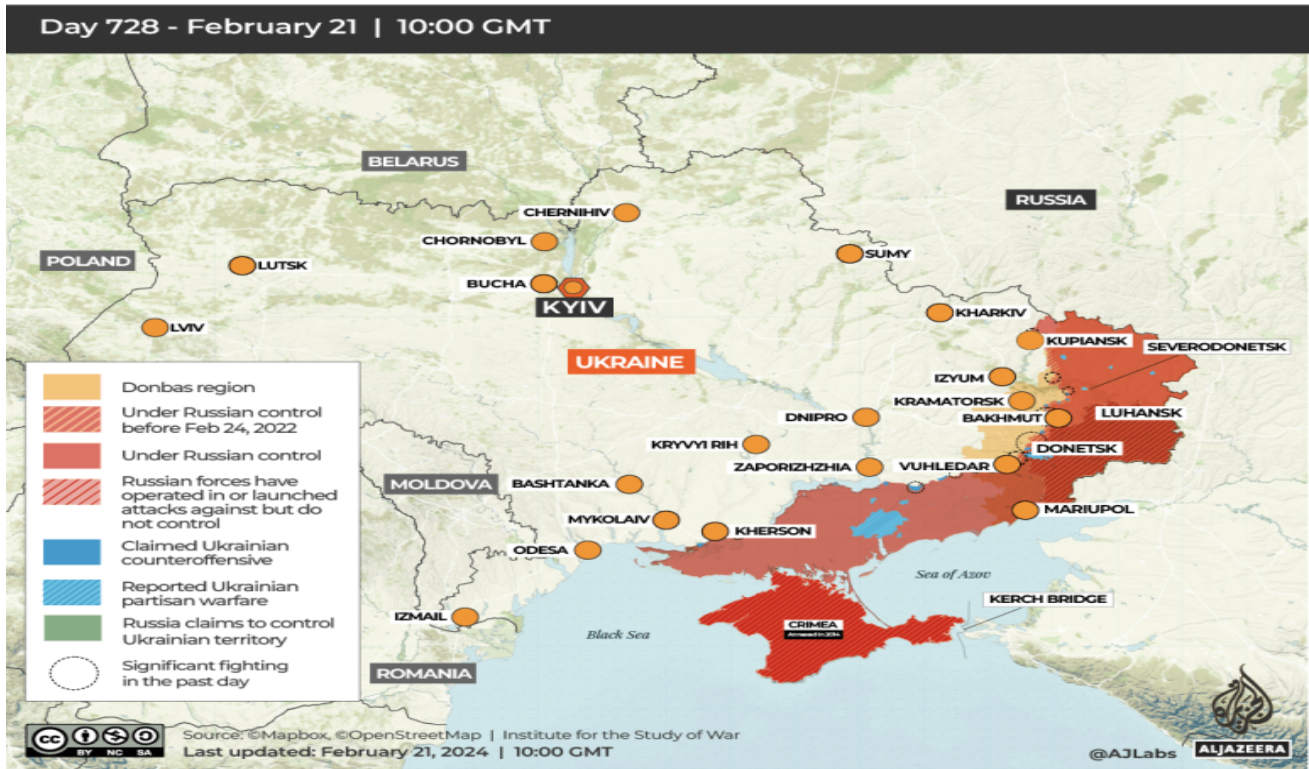
By George Vlad NICULESCU, PhD, Head of Research, European Geopolitical Forum

Key points:

- 1) Is a crisis in European security affairs at the horizon?
 - 2) Is the Middle East on the brink of regional war?
 - 3) How to deal best with the Global South at times of great power competition.
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RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Who controls what in Ukraine?



1) Is a crisis in European security affairs at the horizon?

Four months ago, we noted in our previous [issue](#) that the sluggish Ukrainian counter-offensive, the growing war fatigue in the US and in much of Western Europe, and the danger of having the Israel-Hamas war evolving into a regional conflict in the Middle East would make the armistice/protracted conflict scenario in the war in Ukraine likelier over this winter. Although by the time of this writing no ceasefire negotiations have been reported by the international media, a number of more recent factors and evolutions ensuing from the above trends are hinting that, unless an armistice or a ceasefire was agreed soon, a fresh European security crisis might be in the making instead.

A) **Shifting initiative on the frontline.** In early November 2023, the political and military logics within Ukrainian leadership clashed. At the time, president V. Zelensky engaged in a public dispute with the commander of Ukraine's armed forces, Gen.

V. Zaluzhny, over whether or not this war reached a World War I-style "stalemate" - as Zaluzhny had asserted in an interview with "The Economist". On that occasion, he talked of the need for Ukrainian armed forces to go on the defensive, arguing that the chances of turning the tide against the Russian aggressors were practically zero. Zelensky rebuffed the remarks of his most senior military commander at a news conference with European Commission President U. von der Leyen: *"Everyone is tired and there are different opinions,"* he said about Zaluzhny's "stalemate" remark. He also told NBC News that he did *"not think that this was a stalemate."* (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/>) When political and military logics clashed, they could be either unified via compromise or split in internal conflict. For Ukraine the former would be painful, while the latter might predicate national disaster. In wartime though, how the leaders are dealing with such a clash might make the difference between state-survival and defeat.

General Zaluzhny's views were subsequently supported by many Western scholars, including G. Friedman, R. Haas, Ch. Kupchan, and A. Lieven. For example, in an article published in Foreign Affairs in November 2023, Haas and Kupchan thought that: *"Despite Ukraine's much-heralded counteroffensive, Russia has actually gained more territory over the course of 2023 than Ukraine has. Overall, neither side has made significant advances. Ukrainian and Russian forces have fought to an effective standstill: a stalemate has set in"*. They went further by suggesting that: *"Ukraine should focus on holding and rebuilding the territory that it now controls, reversing the offense-defence equation and putting Russia in the position of having to bear the exorbitant costs of conducting offensive operations."* The aim would be to balance Ukrainian ends with the available means. ("Redefining Success in Ukraine", <https://foreignaffairs.com>) Of course, for president Zelensky this might have hardly sounded as an attractive outcome, as it would fall short of his stated strategic goals: a return to Ukraine's borders as they were in 1991, at the collapse of the Soviet Union: i.e. including Crimea, as well as reparations from, and justice against Russian aggressors. However, the president has had the backing of a majority of the public opinion which wasn't ready for compromise with the aggressors. (<https://carnegieendowment.org/>) In February 2024, general Zaluzhny, who seemed to be very popular not only within the armed forces but with the wider Ukrainian population, was removed from his top military position by president Zelensky. A. Lieven thought this was a colossal political gamble for Zelensky indicating an increasing mood of desperation in Kyiv. The political background of this move, most probably, has been the failure of last year's Ukrainian offensive, and the attempts both to shift blame and to draw up a new strategy that could promise victory for Ukraine in the future. (<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/>) In fact, one of the first decisions made by Zaluzhny's successor, general O. Syrsky, has been a chaotic

withdrawal from the small town of Avdiivka, around mid-February 2024, which seemed to have been followed by a larger Russian winter offensive in several key points along the front line. Although this latest Russian move might not have been triggered by the perceived Ukrainian military weakness induced by the replacement of the top commander, it remains to be seen whether general Syrsky would succeed in maintaining the frontline while facing the same shortages in soldiers and ammunition as his predecessor.

B) ***A growing disbalance of Ukrainian political goals and military capabilities, partly due to Western wavering support.*** To rebalance strategic goals with the available means, in 2024, Ukraine switched to an active defence strategy. It was expected that this strategic shift would play to Ukraine's current strengths while buying valuable time to regroup and rearm ahead of what might hopefully be more advantageous circumstances in 2025. In parallel, Ukraine should continue degrading Russia's ability to wage war by conducting an escalating campaign of air strikes on targets far behind the front lines throughout its occupied territories, and inside Russia itself. In order to defeat Russia and end the threat posed by Moscow's resurgent imperialism, it was envisaged that both Ukraine and its international supporters should switch from thinking in terms of offensive-defensive sequences towards a longer-term approach. However, the effectiveness of any Ukrainian defensive strategy would rely heavily on the level of support provided by the Western partners of Ukraine. (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>) Meanwhile, the West's ability to support Ukraine for "as long as it takes" has become increasingly problematic. For the last more than five months, the U.S. Congress has stalled a resolution authorizing continued funding of the military aid to Ukraine. The House of Representatives didn't budge even after, in January 2024, the White House representative of the National Security Council, John Kirby, said that the

Administration had run out of money completely for Ukraine. Top aides of president J. Biden insisted repeatedly that if Congress failed to authorise additional military aid for Ukraine, Russia could win the war *"in a matter of weeks - months at best"*. (<https://www.intellinews.com>) Former president, and Republican candidate in the next presidential elections, D. Trump's congressional allies have opposed sending further military assistance to Kyiv. Mr. Trump had repeatedly declared that, if elected, he would settle this war *"in 24 hours"*. (<https://nytimes.com>) For D. Trump's congressional supporters spending over 60 billion USD on arming Ukraine in 2024 would be a waste, as long as their favourite president would make a deal with Russia over the future of Ukraine shortly thereafter. Moreover, critics had complained that the Biden Administration has only given Ukraine the minimum resources necessary not to lose the war, but not enough to win it. Underpinning that strategy would have been the Western fears that if Ukraine were actually close to defeating Russia, then president Putin would massively escalate against the West, including by using nuclear weapons.

On the other hand, the European partners of Ukraine are having difficulty in stepping up their military production capabilities to make a difference on the battlefield. (<https://www.brookings.com>) For example, the European Union has already acknowledged that it would miss its target of providing one million rounds of ammunition to Ukraine by March 1. Mr. Macron noted on February 26, 2024, that it had probably been an unwise commitment given that Europe didn't have sufficient stocks or production capacity to meet that target. (<https://nytimes.com>)

However, at the end of January 2024, international media reported that the Biden administration and its European allies would be working on a longer-term, multilateral plan aimed at warding against a potential return at the White House of D. Trump, and future-proofing support for Ukraine. That would

include pledges of economic and security assistance that stretched into the next decade and paving the way for Ukraine to get integrated into the European Union and NATO. Jack Watling, a senior British research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute think tank has recently warned that: *"The West in fact faces a crucial choice right now: support Ukraine so that its leaders can defend their territory and prepare for a 2025 offensive or cede an irrecoverable advantage to Russia"*. (<https://washingtonpost.com>)

C) A dangerous Western distrust of Russian intentions after the Ukraine war

At his end-of-year event on December 14, 2023, president V. Putin has made clear that Russia was expecting the West to reconsider its policy and start looking for opportunities for an inclusive dialogue. From a Russian perspective, the confrontation with the West would have reached a turning point: the Ukrainian 2023 counteroffensive failed, cracks in Western solidarity were spreading so that Russia felt more confident than ever. Putin also said that Russia didn't change its political goals in Ukraine, including the capitulation of the armed forces, and the installation of a pro-Russian regime. In addition, Crimea and southeastern Ukraine should remain Russian. (www.carnegieendowment.org)

On the other hand, Western policy on Ukraine has been so far built upon a sequence of catchphrases, including: *"Putin cannot be allowed to win"*; *"This war must end soon"*; *"The war ends when Ukraine wins"*; *"By Ukraine's side for as long as it takes"*. (<https://www.intellinews.com>) In addition, a growing fear that if Ukraine fell then Russia would in the next few years march into NATO territory, combined with tough statements from the top Republican presidential candidate, D. Trump, against European allies' commitments, and his plans to reconsider US engagement with NATO have apparently revived European support for Ukraine in 2024, and triggered an European arms race to catch up with Russia (and the US).

According to G. Friedman, this highly unpredictable strategic context *"would make a compromise necessary, but it could be equally hard, as long as all sides had reasonable fears, and no side could quit the fight"*. Until one side achieved an overwhelming advantage and imposed a new reality, the war must go on even if the losses were difficult to endure. ("Remember Ukraine?", <https://geopoliticalfutures.com>)

Apparently, Europe is facing a crucial security dilemma ensuing from its higher military dependence on the US, distrust of Russia, and reluctance to negotiate on building a new European security architecture: it should either escalate the war with Russia or lose (at least much of) Ukraine at its own peril. Such evolutions could portend a fresh crisis in European affairs.

In conclusion, given that the war in Ukraine has been triggered by the collapse of the post-Cold War European order, peace in Europe is dependent on building a new order. The current discussion about winning and losing the war in Ukraine is very dangerous and largely superfluous. In fact, everyone has lost this war with Ukrainians, Russians, and Europeans at the top of the stack. The recent loss of Avdiivka by the Ukrainians has been the latest reminder that the Western policy on Ukraine is failing for it lacked realism in addressing the current imbalance in human, financial, material, morale resources of the belligerents in what has become a genuine war of attrition between Ukraine and Russia. Europeans aren't entirely to blame for their ensuing insecurity against Russian threats. Like Ukraine, they have been surprised by US wavering military support to Kyiv and shocked by the prospects of a Trumpian US-less NATO. Is a crisis in European security affairs at the horizon?

2) Is the Middle East on the brink of regional war?

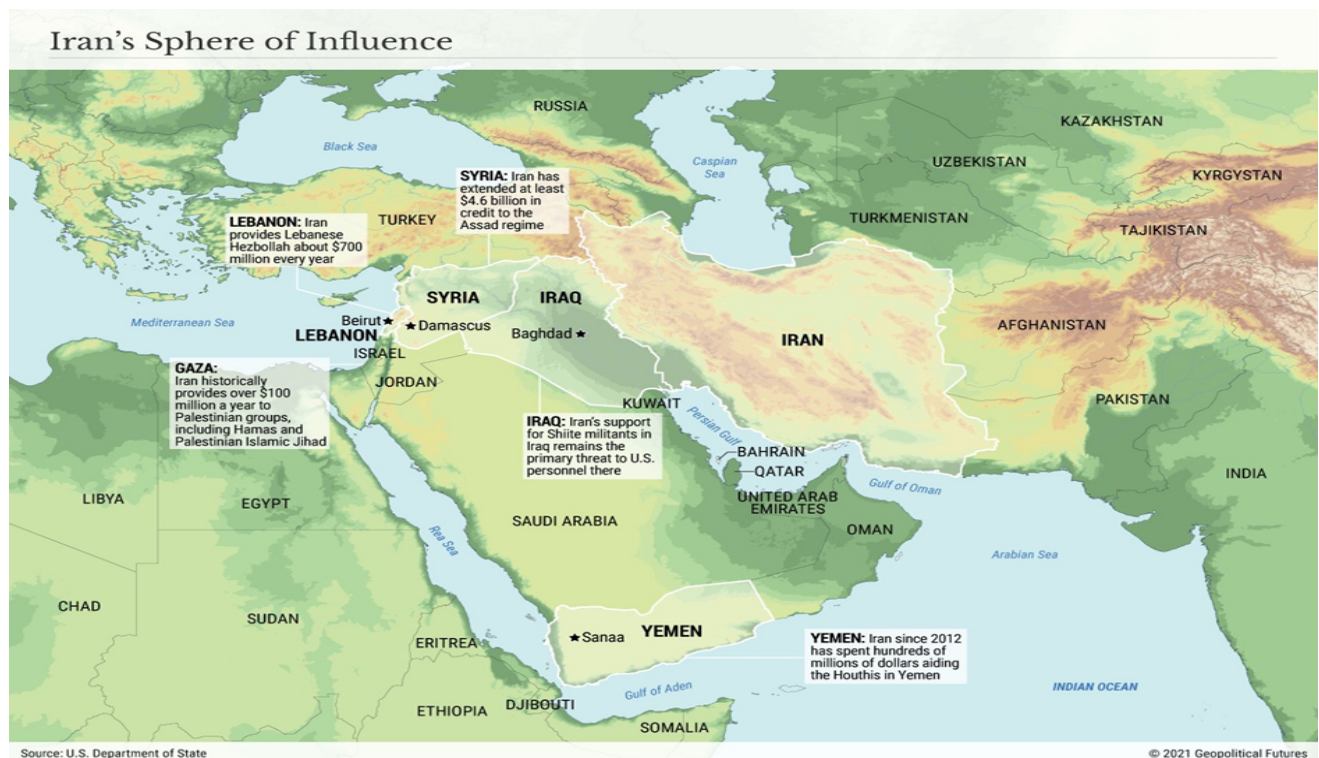
In 2023, two geopolitical game-changers have shaped the evolving regional balance of power in the Middle East:

1) On March 10, Saudi Arabia and Iran signed an agreement, brokered by the PR of China (PRC), to restore ties and re-open embassies after a seven-year hiatus. A trilateral statement, signed by high level representatives, noted that Riyadh and Tehran had agreed to respect the state sovereignty and not to interfere in each other's internal affairs, as well as to re-activate a security cooperation agreement signed in 2001. Moreover, the deal called for enhanced economic and diplomatic ties between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and for Iran and its Arab partners to begin discussions on building a new regional security framework, while granting a key role to Beijing in overseeing the further development of those relationships.

2) The Hamas surprise attack against Israel on October 7, and the ensuing Israel-Hamas war in Gaza which have upended the geopolitics of the Middle East, as outlined in [Issue 23/ July-October 2023](#).

Against the backdrop of the consequences of those geopolitical game-changers, is the Middle East on the brink of a wider regional war, potentially featuring Israel, and the US, on the one hand, and Iran and its "axis of resistance", on the other?

In a March 2023 interview with Washington Post, H. Kissinger, the former leader of US diplomacy, contended regarding the China-brokered Saudi Arabia- Iran deal: *"I see it as a substantial change in the strategic situation in the Middle East,"*. He further thought that *"over the longer run, Beijing's emergence as a "peacemaker" changes the terms of reference in international diplomacy, [while] the United States is no longer the indispensable power in the region - the only country strong or supple enough*



to broker peace deals. China has claimed a share of that convening power.” (<https://washingtonpost.com>)

As noted by M. Fantappie and V. Nasr in a March 2023 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Tehran welcomed China's deeper involvement in the Middle East since it would have weakened US regional influence and undermined the US-led sanctions regime against Iran. To that end, Tehran's thinking went on, better ties with GCC countries would lessen the threat posed by the US-brokered Abraham Accords concluded or negotiated by Israel with US Arab allies from the Persian Gulf (currently frozen/stalled due to the Israel- Hamas war).

On the other hand, for Saudi Arabia this agreement with Iran has been a balancing act playing off the US against China. The deep Arab dissatisfaction with US policies in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and, most of all, against Iran has been well known for years. Saudi Arabia seems to believe that by assembling a broad network of partners, including China and Russia, and by improving relations with former adversaries such as Iran, Syria, and Turkey, it could secure its long-term security, while effectively complementing a most demanding dependence on US security assistance. (<https://foreignaffairs.com>)

As for the US, despite China's new-found geopolitical role in the Middle East, the Iranian-Saudi agreement wasn't all bad news. “We support any effort to de-escalate tensions there,” White House spokesman J. Kirby said of the agreement. In fact, the latter achieved priorities that Washington had long sought for, such as mitigating tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia which have threatened the stability of the region from Syria to Yemen, but that it could not meet by itself due to its awkward relationship with Tehran. (<https://washingtonpost.com>) However, over the medium and longer term, this China-brokered agreement might have also enshrined a geopolitical warning for Washington: losing focus on the Middle East could undermine US regional and global interests.

Over the last months, the war in Gaza has turned into a humanitarian disaster for the local population. More than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed by the Israeli defence forces, who are basically controlling the Gaza strip, while large scale infrastructure destruction, massive population displacements, decaying governance, and a growing threat of widespread famine and contagious

diseases have brought the life of Gazans next to impossible. Hamas forces have held out against extensive Israeli assaults thanks to the solid defence infrastructure prepared before the war, while international efforts to set up a longer ceasefire in return for Hamas liberating all Israeli hostages kidnapped on 07/10 have failed so far. As efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to the Gazans have also largely failed. Iran's regional proxies – Hezbollah in Lebanon, militias in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen stroke with missiles and drones the Israeli and US forces, and international commercial ships. There are no doubts that those strikes would not have been possible without Iranian support, and strategic guidance. However, they have shown a certain restraint so far, reportedly upon Tehran's request. (<https://washingtonpost.com>)

In fact, since October 2023, the Israel-Hamas war has spread much beyond the Gaza strip, but apparently both the US and Iran have struggled to put a lid on it. For example, in January 2024, in the wake of the US retaliation in Yemen against the Houthi missile attacks on civilian ships in the Red Sea the White House spokesman, J. Kirby, stated: *"We're not interested in a war with Yemen. We're not interested in a conflict of any kind. [...] In fact, everything the president has been doing has been trying to prevent any escalation of conflict"*. Meanwhile, Iran's foreign minister, H.A. Abdollahian, said in an interview in November 2023: *"I want to reiterate that we are not pursuing the spreading of this war [...] The region is at a boiling point and any moment it may explode, and this may be unavoidable. If this happens, all sides will lose control."* Western intelligence sources explained that the ruling elite in Tehran would favour avoiding a broader war against Israel and the US both for domestic politics reasons, as well as the best way to protect its nuclear facilities for enriching uranium against possible US/Israeli strikes. (<https://nytimes.com>)

In the wake of the 07/10 Hamas attack against Israel, the significant deployment by the Biden administration of additional forces (two carrier strike groups-naval forces, a nuclear capable submarine, advanced fighter and close-air- support aircraft) in the region, and its deliveries of air defence systems to regional allies, might have deterred a direct Iranian involvement in the Israel-Hamas war. However, they might have also displayed that former president B. Obama's strategy of retrenchment from the Middle East, known as "pivot to East Asia", had apparently suffered a serious setback. As J. Kavanagh and F. Wehrey noted in an article in November 2023: *"by expanding its military presence in the Middle East, Washington may aggravate regional tensions and raise the risk and costs of miscalculation-and thus inadvertently provoke the very conflict it is desperate to avoid"*, while also pointing at *"risks that the Biden administration must acknowledge and address: escalation, backlash, and overstretch"*: the risk of escalation by either Israel or Iran and its proxies, which remains likely as the situation in the field evolved; the risk of backlash for the US regional strategy from regional allies and partners who might turn to US global competitors, China and Russia, for they found cooperation with Washington too demanding and potentially troublesome; and the risk of overstretch that might leave the US unable to meet its commitments and deter adversaries elsewhere- especially in the Indo-Pacific, where it faced an increasingly assertive China. (<https://foreignaffairs.com>). Those risks remain high for the foreseeable future, and they might have a decisive role in the potential outbreak of a regional war in the Middle East.

For example, in early February 2024, in an op-ed for Geopolitical Futures, K. Bokhari recalled that Iran's aggressive actions through its proxies followed by calls for diplomacy would align with Tehran's *modus operandi* to continuously advance its sphere of influence at the expense of US interests and at little cost to itself. He warned that *"A wider war would*

exacerbate regional conditions, likely to the benefit of Tehran. At the same time, Washington's explicit desire to steer clear of a direct confrontation has emboldened the Islamic republic to engage in even more belligerence. This situation is untenable. Any further escalation will likely be impossible to contain, bringing the U.S. and Iran into direct conflict." (<https://geopoliticalfutures.com>)

An additional risk in the equation of a regional war in the Middle East is the burgeoning Iran-Russia partnership, based upon defending common interests, such as fighting back against Western sanctions and international isolation, building a multipolar world order, and more favourable balances of power in the Middle East and Eurasia. The war in Ukraine, and the ensuing Russia-West confrontation, have pushed Moscow towards more Asian and Middle Eastern trade, investment, and military cooperation partners. In the military field, Iran supplied Russia with drones that had been widely used against Ukraine, and apparently more recently with ballistic missiles. In exchange, Iran would be about to receive Russian SU-35 fighter jets and MI-28 attack helicopters. The expanding bilateral military cooperation seems being part of a broader geopolitical alignment between Iran and Russia. In December 2023, Tehran finalized a free trade agreement with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), while the two countries announced a prospective inter-state comprehensive agreement, likely a 20-year deal aiming to expand military, economic, and political ties. (<https://jamestownfoundation.com>)

Russia's closer partnership with Iran and the geopolitical fallout from the Gaza war have strained its bilateral relations with Israel, while opening new opportunities for Russian mediation among Palestinian factions. This way, Moscow is seeking to carve a wider niche for itself in the evolving geopolitical structure of the Middle East, beyond its

staunch support for Al-Assad regime in Syria, and energy cooperation with OPEC+. Although, for the moment, neither Russia nor Iran seemed interested in escalating the war in Gaza, their fractured relations with the US and the West, more broadly, are creating additional risks for regional war while expanding the geopolitical links between Eurasia and the Middle East.

In conclusion, the Middle East might be on the brink of regional war, but that isn't imminent, at least not in 2024. None of the key players (US, Iran, Saudi Arabia) seemed interested or capable (China, Russia) to fill the existing *power vacuum*¹ which, for now, is likely to endure. The only exception might be the Israeli prime minister B. Netanyahu, seconded by his far-right supporters. He might see regional war as a personal escape door from a possible criminal conviction, and a potential solution for saving his embattled political career. However, under president J. Biden, he is unlikely to succeed steering the wheel to regional war in the Middle East. On the other hand, if Netanyahu somehow hung on in Israeli politics until D. Trump would re-enter the White House, then he might raise an additional risk of regional war in the Middle East, given D. Trump's outright support for Netanyahu's policies, his proved aversion for the "two-state solution" to the Palestinian question, and his apparent foreign policy priority for sustaining US commitments in the Middle East (and the Indo-Pacific), at the expense of Europe.

Nevertheless, irrespective of who would be at the White House, as of January 2025, a potential regional war in the Middle East would be bad news for US allies across the globe. It would likely draw China, Russia, and Iran closer together, while emboldening them to forcefully pursue their own regional agendas in East Asia, Eurasia, and the MENA region (plus Africa).

¹ See G. Carlstrom, "The Power Vacuum in the Middle East", Foreign Affairs, March 6, 2024, <https://foreignaffairs.com>

3) How to deal best with the Global South at times of great power competition.

In past issues² we looked at how the US and China have engaged in great power competition, that is a giant economic, technological, and military race for global primacy garnered with coalitions building, and sometimes with shows of military force. At the time, we noted an emerging geopolitical trend suggesting that the current global, and regional alignments in the world would be following the US- China global power dyad. Indeed, over the last year, the polarization of this contest for global hegemony has continued to grow at full throttle. Meanwhile, fears are rising that this growing polarization might become a harbinger for World War III or a new Cold War. Within this widespread global and regional turmoil, a vaguely defined, and rather heterogeneous grouping -generally known as the Global South³- has become the geopolitically contested arena where China and Russia are increasingly challenging US (and Western) hegemony. Why has become the Global South relevant, and how could the West deal best with it, at times of great power competition?

Probably, the most striking way the Global South has collided with US/Western interests so far has been by refusing to condemn, and apply sanctions against, Russia's war in Ukraine. The expectations that most countries from the Global South would follow Western policies to strongly condemn, isolate and fight back against Russian violations of international and humanitarian laws in Ukraine have been illusory. While many voted for UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia, more than 40 countries regularly opposed or abstained on them. These included many African, Asian, and Latin American states of the Global South. One most striking example has been India. While New Delhi is

developing a close bilateral relationship with the US and other Western countries, it stopped short of publicly condemning Russian war in Ukraine or providing concrete support to Kyiv. Neither did New Delhi observe the Western imposed sanctions against Russia. On the contrary, it has taken advantage of Russian need to replace its exports to the West, and it has dramatically increased its trade with Russia, including on energy. Indian policy makers contended that respecting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine was crucial, but so was Russian claim that security was indivisible, including the liability not to strengthen one's security at the expense of the security of other countries (with an implicit reference to Ukraine's bid to join NATO).

Baroness Ashton explained in a February 2024 article on "Stop Taking the Global South for Granted" that for many in the Global South relying on their colonial past based on taking up Western aid and trade in exchange for foreign policy support and easy economic access to scarce natural resources was insufficient to meet their current development needs. Their growth would depend on diversifying or replacing their post-colonial relationships with Western countries with new ones, which seemed more advantageous for themselves. *"Relations with Russia and China grow stronger as engagement with Europe and the US gets scaled back. Many countries of the Global South have established strong economic links with Russia. [...] China has increased its engagement, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative which includes around 150 countries, 44 of which are in Sub-Saharan Africa and 22 in Latin America and the Caribbean."* Consequently, the US-China great power competition has incentivized many countries from the Global South to hedge

² Issue 13/February- March 2021, Issue 21/ November 2022- February 2023.

³ According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Global South broadly comprises

Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, excluding Israel, Japan, and South Korea, and Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand (<https://en.wikipedia.org>).

against both sides rather than align their positions with one or another, while avoiding jeopardizing their economic and political interests. Against the background of those shifting geopolitical realities, Baroness Ashton perceived the fundamental need for the West to build new long-term relationships with the countries from the Global South on a range of issues long before there was an expectation of getting any concrete support from them. In addition, treating the Global South countries as distinct nations, and strengthening diplomatic efforts to talk about issues of concern for them would be both vital and urgent. (<https://www.chathamhouse.org>)

The decision made by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa at their Summit, held in August 2023 in Johannesburg (South Africa), to invite Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to join the BRICS, with effect from 1 January 2024, could be seen as an attempt to enrol them in support of their endeavours to balance the global power of the Western Group of Seven (G7). According to the “Bulletin de la Banque de France”, enlargement would give the BRICS greater economic and demographic weight. The ensuing Johannesburg Declaration stated that BRICS+’s goal was to amplify the voice of the Global South. The authors of the Bulletin thought that: *“The inclusion of new members has given BRICS+ greater legitimacy and could also increase its standing within the G20, despite the limited economic integration between its members, their divergent economic interests and lack of geopolitical unity.”* (<https://publications.banque-france.fr>)

Lord Jim O’Neill (who coined the BRIC acronym more than 20 years ago) contended that with this enlargement BRICS+’s symbolic power would grow, as it succeeded to tap into the broader Global South’s suspicion that the post-WWII global-governance organizations were too Western although, over the last decades, the structure of the global economy has shifted. Clearly, China has been

the winner of those economic transformations, as it has firmly taken up the second place in the world economy by its GDP size. *“In nominal terms, its GDP is more than three times larger than Japan and Germany, and around 75 per cent the size of the US.”* And India would seek to become the third-largest economy by 2030. However, China and India (the largest economic powers in BRICS) are geopolitical competitors and engaged in border disputes, so that they could hardly form together the hard-core of a largely heterogenous, and sometimes divisive Global South. (<https://www.chathamhouse.org>)

Also given the geopolitical differences and the ongoing regional competition for power among the new members (in particular, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) larger BRICS+ wouldn’t necessarily make it a stronger global actor. The contrary might be actually true: larger could be in fact weaker. However, BRICS+ states are being brought together by shared aspirations to mirror the Western G7, empower the Global South, strengthen their position in the G20, and ultimately to build up a new, multipolar world order.

As to how to best deal with the Global South at times of great power competition, bold, insightful, and pragmatic proposals were made by A. De Hoop Scheffer in her May 2023 article on “Fluid Alliances in a Multi-polarizing World: Rethinking US and European Strategies Toward Global Swing States”. The core of those proposals consisted of having the Transatlantic partners and the global swing states building an alternative to the emerging binary US vs. China, blocs-based, global order. By “global swing states” De Hoop Scheffer refers six mid-sized, pivotal countries of the Global South: Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Turkey, which would seek to increase their influence in global affairs by cooperating with the US, China, Europe, and Russia, without giving any of them an exclusive commitment. Given that the world order has become more fragmented, increasingly split

between Washington- and Beijing-led blocs, regionalization has become more consequential than globalization, with more than half of international trade, investment, and the movement of money, information, and people now occurring within regions. According to De Hoop Scheffer, the ongoing global geopolitical shifts would have morphed the Cold War-nonalignment into efforts of the global swing states (and others) for multi-alignment. Consequently, *“the United States and Europe should broaden and diversify their relationships with these [N/A global swing] states to address a wider range of topics of mutual interest. At the same time, the transatlantic partners must accept a compartmentalization of those relationships: A lack of cooperation in some areas should not prohibit collaboration in others.”* Furthermore, she recommended developing constructive and pragmatic dialogues, in bilateral and multilateral (such as the G20) formats with regional powers on global challenges, including climate change, health, agriculture, and energy security. The Transatlantic partners should consider the growing North-South divide, engage in confidence-building measures, and rely less on coercive diplomacy.

A corollary of that would suggest that structuring contemporary geopolitics around the ideological competition between autocracy and democracy was counterproductive, as the Cold War *“us-versus-them”* paradigm wouldn’t apply to the emerging global order. (<https://gmfus.org>) Which is what we have also argued for on the EGF website, in various contexts and formats, all along the past 10 years.

In conclusion, the great power competition leading into the fragmentation of the world into opposing blocs is dangerous and risks throwing us all into a *de facto* WWII. The West needs to dramatically shift its current foreign policy approach to the states of the Global South from prioritizing regime change, spreading democratic values, and coercive

diplomacy against so-called “autocracies” towards embracing pragmatic bilateral and multilateral dialogue and cooperation, tailored upon mutually shared interests, with a special priority for the global swing states. While the structure and management of the new multipolar world order would become more complex, the risk of stumbling into WWII and an ensuing nuclear war would be significantly mitigated.

More concretely (and related to items 1) and 2) of this Issue), given that the US is still playing a central role in global and regional affairs, we would recommend a holistic approach of the geopolitical transformation of the current world order with a clear understanding of possible competing priorities for deploying US military capabilities and assets on three main global strategic theatres: Europe, Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific. From this perspective, the outcome of the November 2024 presidential elections in the US might be highly consequential on the global arena. The US security policy priorities have become topics for debate in the presidential campaign, where candidate D. Trump seems eager to replace the current Ukraine/Europe priority of president J. Biden with his own priorities for the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific. This is how we might understand the former's puzzling approach to NATO, European security, and Russia, and the latter's uneasiness with prime-minister B. Netanyahu's inflexible pursuit of the Gaza War. In this vein, a possible turn from the current values-based decision-making to a purely mercurial approach of the delivery of US military support might be in the balance in that election. While non-Americans might have little, if any influence on the outcome of those elections, they should open their eyes to look at how the US foreign policy is changing, and with it how their current strategies to ensure national and regional security could become obsolete and would also need to shift accordingly.



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

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