



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

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**Key points:**

- 1) *President Joe Biden's foreign policy might end up squeezed between unrealistic external expectations and existing domestic limitations.*
  - 2) *How to move past the current "precarious peace" in Nagorno-Karabakh?*
  - 3) *Elected Moldovan president set to unite society against oligarchic corruption rather than playing divisive geopolitical games.*
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**1) President Joe Biden's foreign policy might end up squeezed between unrealistic external expectations and existing domestic limitations.**

In his article in Foreign Affairs of March/April 2020, J. Biden thought that the next U.S. president “*will have to salvage our [U.S.] reputation, rebuild confidence in our leadership, and mobilize our country and our allies to rapidly meet new challenges.*” (<https://foreignaffairs.com>).

This would obviously be easier said than done. According to the same source, his core priorities as future president would aim at: renewing U.S. democracy and alliances; protecting the United States' economic future; and mobilizing the world towards collective action against global threats. As a critical element of this core agenda, president Biden would strive to put strengthening democracy back on the global agenda by focusing on fighting corruption, defending against authoritarianism, and advancing human rights in the world. On the economic security front, he might need to focus on: shaping a trade policy that would strengthen the middle class; leading the charge in technological innovation; removing trade barriers that penalize Americans and resisting the global slide toward protectionism.

In his vision, renewing US leadership in tackling global threats (such as terrorism, proliferation of WMD, cybertheft, disinformation, weaponized corruption) would require restoring diplomacy as the primary tool of foreign policy, while the use of force was merely left as a last resort. That might entail: bringing back more troops from Afghanistan and the Middle East, while more narrowly targeting Al-Qaeda and ISIS; restoring the role of democratic values in defining U.S. commitments to its alliances and partnerships in Europe and in Asia; maintaining an “ironclad commitment to Israel's security”; renewed commitment to arms control, including conditionally re-joining the nuclear deal with Iran,

and the extension of New START, as bases for further developing new arms control agreements.

Biden's nominee for his state secretary, A. Blinken has reinforced the above mentioned tenets of the new U.S foreign policy. In a recent Zoom call, Blinken made the case that with the United States in “*full retreat*”, under President Trump, the world “*does not organize itself*” and the vacuum gets filled by either bad actors or “*chaos.*” ([www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com))

As widely acknowledged, president D. Trump's international practices had been built upon the so-called “Trumpism”, which have had a direct disruptive impact on the post-WWII liberal world order. Against that backdrop, J. Biden's victory in the latest presidential elections (held on November 3, 2020) created unrealistic external expectations that Trumpism is going to be completely reversed or largely altered. However, there are many distinguished experts who have been warning that the Biden administration would neither be able to do away with all of the unwanted fall-out from president Trump's external performance, nor would it be able to resume the tenets of former Barack Obama's foreign and security policy from where it was left in January 2017.

For example, George Friedman has recently conceded: “*The goal of the incoming Biden administration will be to focus on the issues that destroyed Trump: COVID-19 and the economy. To do that, it is necessary to limit or avoid foreign policy initiatives that might weaken Biden's position in Congress and the country.*” (<https://geopoliticalfutures.com>) And Rosa Balfour cautioned against his prospective foreign policy agenda for Europe as being fraught with “*high expectations and wishful thinking that EU-U.S. cooperation can be picked up where it left in 2016, when Donald Trump was elected U.S. president.*” (<https://carnegieeurope.eu>)

There might be at least three main reasons which could spoil president Biden's European foreign policy: 1) America's own political and social divides<sup>1</sup>; 2) Biden's stated priority for tackling unfair economic and technological competition from China; 3) changing geopolitical realities in an emerging multipolar system where Europe would prioritize carving its individual place over simply trailing the U.S. lead.

The latter argument could also play out within the complex network of relations of the U.S.-E.U.-Russia-Turkey rectangle, in particular around an increasing number of European geopolitical hotspots and controversies. For example, take the old issue of "Trans-Atlanticism vs Europeanism", whereby "lazy Trans-Atlanticism" has undermined for decades the development of EU's military capabilities, which should have facilitated larger European responsibilities in its neighbourhoods, while clashing with misplaced fears that a stronger Europe would necessarily mean a weaker NATO, and vice-versa. Meanwhile, Russia and Turkey have favoured and sometimes sustained Trans-Atlantic disagreements for having vested interests in maintaining a weak Europe and a distracted NATO (and U.S.).

In conclusion, while the new U.S. foreign policy might bring a new momentum to reforming rather than replacing the liberal world order, it might be also fraught with serious disappointments in case it didn't take into account the current U.S. economic, social, and technological interests to rebuild the middle-class, the existing deep political and societal divides in America, and the geopolitical consequences of the Corona virus pandemics.

## 2) How to move past the current "precarious peace" In Nagorno-Karabakh?

In the previous [issue](#) of this publication we concluded that "at least for now, peace in Karabakh is rather hanging on the broader balance of power between Russia and Turkey than on the ineffective multilateralism practiced for so many years by the OSCE Minsk Group." Indeed, after six weeks of war, and three failed cease-fire calls from Russia, France and the United States (the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group), presidents V. Putin of Russia and R.T. Erdogan of Turkey have finally called off the warfighting. They had agreed on the nine points of a [Statement](#) eventually signed on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020 by the Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian leaders. This trilateral Statement called for a ceasefire and a set of guidelines making up for a politically binding peace arrangement including the:

- deployment of Russian peacekeepers
- return to Azerbaijan of the last three Armenian-controlled districts neighboring to Nagorno-Karabakh
- establishment of a (Russian-Turkish) Peacemaking Centre
- return of displaced persons to their homes
- exchange of prisoners of war, hostages, and dead bodies
- unblocking of all economic and transport links
- establishing of two secure transit corridors: Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh, and Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan (and farther to Turkey).

Since then, the cease fire has largely held, while the Russian peacekeepers have been deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh. In practical terms, "The core of the Lavrov Plan<sup>2</sup> is now being implemented—but on much more favourable terms for Baku than before.

<sup>1</sup>George Friedman- "Biden's Dilemma" from <https://geopoliticalfutures.com> and Richard Haass-

"Repairing the World- The Imperative and Limits of a Post-Trump Foreign Policy" from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>

<sup>2</sup> A Russian unofficial version of the OSCE Basic Principles.

A new line of contact is being established that runs through Karabakh itself.”<sup>3</sup> See picture below:



However, on the medium to longer term, the trilateral Statement is hardly a substitute for a legally binding peace agreement. Given its urgent, top-down development, the Statement has inherently left key issues open, such as: the (interim and final) status of Nagorno-Karabakh; what happened to the status if the initial five-years mandate of the peacekeepers wasn't prolonged; the future role of the OSCE Minsk Group and of other international organizations and actors (other than Russia and the UNHCR) in its implementation; the conditions for the return of the displaced persons to Karabakh; how existing mistrust and animosities between the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities would be overcome. All open issues might sooner or later become bones of contention to the signatories or might be disputed with third parties.

In addition, the signature of the Statement by prime-minister N. Pashinyan has triggered serious

social unrest and growing political instability in Armenia. “A Precarious Peace for Karabakh”<sup>4</sup> and an uncertain future not only for the population of Nagorno-Karabakh itself, but also for the wider South Caucasus region are looming.

Within the current tense regional context, how could the conflicting parties, the peace-enablers (Russia and Turkey), and other local, regional and external actors move past the current “precarious peace” towards a stable, and long lasting peace?

a) The main responsibility for drawing the peace process forward and for resuming Track 1 and Track 2 diplomacy will rest with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia. Turkey, after having played a “game changer” role in the war, might also step up its contribution to setting in a stable, long lasting peace, and undertake “the role of an honest broker in the conflict”. (<https://www.brookings.edu>)

b) A deal that Armenians viewed as a capitulation would hardly be a reliable foundation for stable and long-lasting peace. On the contrary, it might fuel more inter-ethnic mistrust, tensions, and eventually lead to another war. A large responsibility would rest with both Azerbaijan and Turkey, who need to avoid imposing a “maximalist peace” on Armenia and the Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. “An imposed peace that leaves a generation of Armenians resentful is no recipe for peace; in a way, it would be a mere mirror image of the reality with which Azerbaijanis have lived for the last three decades.” (<https://www.crisisgroup.org>) In that context, the way the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh, and Turkey-Armenia relations were handled would be instrumental to restoring a stable, long lasting peace. Russia might also have to pull its weight into the negotiations to cool down Azerbaijani maximalist aspirations and to prevent Armenian dismay with an uncertain future of their co-nationals from Karabakh.

<sup>3</sup> Th. de Waal- “A Precarious Peace for Karabakh” - from <https://carnegie.ru>

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

c) The stakeholders of the current peace process might sooner rather than later turn towards the international community (UN and/or OSCE) to ensure the international legality, and legitimacy of any future peace deal, which should be negotiated to cement and clarify the provisions of the trilateral Statement. *“Without an exit strategy, any peacekeeping deployment soon starts to look like an occupying force. Exit strategies depend on robust agreements and commitments to new kinds of politics. That is missing from the Armenian-Azerbaijani context.”*<sup>5</sup> They might also need to ask for international humanitarian help, as well as for assistance on reconstruction, demining, facilitating the resettlement of displaced persons, protection of cultural heritage. Sectorial/governmental, business, youth and other forms of economic, social, and cultural inter-community dialogue and interaction might also help overcome existing mistrust and animosities.

d) The OSCE, the EU, the US, the relevant UN agencies, as well as other international actors could, upon request, help the key stakeholders to build up an effective mechanism for conflict resolution and a strong, comprehensive foundation for ensuring a lasting peace. *“But that engagement also requires great humility. The Western powers should acknowledge that they basically allowed themselves to be bystanders to the great-power deal that halted the new war over Nagorno- Karabakh.”*<sup>6</sup> Claiming post-conflict geopolitical benefits might seriously undermine the whole peace process.

If one or more of those principles for a long lasting peace were ignored or fudged, the largest geopolitical risk stemming from the new pattern of “balance of power” conflict management applied to Nagorno-Karabakh is that it might end up entangled with the ongoing Russia-West unmanaged geopolitical confrontation. As long as NATO-member Turkey would individually play as a “middle

power” the prospects for conflict management spilling over into a proxy-conflict would grow higher.

### **3) Elected Moldovan president set to unite society against oligarchic corruption rather than playing divisive geopolitical games.**

Maia Sandu, the elected president of the Republic of Moldova, might set a new standard for *political modernism* in the post-Soviet area: a united society against oligarchic corruption, regardless of geopolitical penchants. This political innovation, which might help overcome the usual European versus Eurasian integration dilemma, could validate a leap forward in Eastern European mainstream politics. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine might also consider implementing similar political strategies in the foreseeable future.

In the latest electoral contest (held on November 1<sup>st</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup>), M. Sandu overtook the incumbent president, I. Dodon, by running on an anti-corruption rather than a geopolitical (Russia vs. EU) bid. In doing so she and her staff have been building upon lessons learned from past elections that had pleaded for a geopolitical-free political discourse. Furthermore, in her first post-election briefing, Ms. Sandu announced a policy of “authentic balance” through dialogues with Europe, the United States, Russia, as well as the neighbors Romania and Ukraine, proceeding from the interests of “Moldova’s citizens”. Her political innovation was awarded by president V. Putin, who had practically abandoned incumbent President Dodon ahead of the elections and became one of the first international leaders to congratulate Ms. Sandu on her victory.

In the first day after the elections, she met with the ambassadors of the EU, US, Romania and Russia to

<sup>5</sup> Laurence Broers- “Russia’s Pace Imposed on Armenia-Azerbaijan Bloodshed” on <https://www.chathamhouse.org>.

<sup>6</sup> Th. de Waal- “What Role for Europe in the New Post-War Caucasus” on <https://www.carnegieeurope.eu>.

highlight Moldova's needs for internal development rather than proclaim her presidency's aspirations to move "away from Russia", "abandon neutrality", "join NATO", or at least "stand up to Russia" in the ongoing conflict in Transnistria. That was because, unlike in Georgia and Ukraine, in Moldova these geopolitical themes have been confined to a political minority. Consequently, her presidential campaign avoided "geopolitical" and "national-identity" themes in exchange for focusing on combatting corruption, cleaning up the justice and law enforcement systems, and promises to bring Western funding for reforms of the education and medical systems (<https://www.jamestown.org>).

Signals on a "geopolitical consensus" regarding the future of Moldova emerged among Moscow, Brussels, and Washington during a previous change of regime, in June 2019. At that time, Ms. Sandu's "NOW Platform" (consisting of Justice and Truth- DA party and her own Party for Action and Solidarity-PAS) and Dodon's Socialist party briefly joined forces to make her prime-minister of Moldova, and oust politician and businessman V. Plahotniuc, who had managed to capture most of Moldova's key institutions. (<https://www.intellinews.com>)

Nevertheless, her alliance with the Socialists did not last for long. In November 2019, a political stalemate on justice reform led to the fall of Ms. Sandu's government since the Socialists' pace of reform was deemed too slow and unconvincing for deserving continued EU support and assistance. (<https://www.ipn.md>) Moldova has been for many years an Eastern neighbor of the EU where justice reform has been dragging on in spite of tremendous acts of blatant corruption affecting the economic health of the country, and the wellbeing of its population.

Since its launch in 2009, the Eastern Partnership has been perceived by Russia as a geopolitical process competing with the Eurasian integration. Meanwhile, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has been widely suspected in the West as disguised "re-Sovietizing" of large parts of the former Soviet Union. Moreover, an apparent technical incompatibility between the two economic integration processes placed third parties in the uncomfortable position of having to choose between setting up free trade with the EU and joining the EAEU.

This *dilemma of European versus Eurasian integration* forced Armenia, back in 2013, to swap a long time negotiated Association Agreement (AA) and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU for EAEU membership. Eventually, the EU and Armenia jointly found a realistic way to continue to nurture Armenia's European aspirations, while accommodating them with the needs of its Eurasian integration<sup>7</sup>.

Conversely, Ms. Sandu's electoral success in garnering a majority of the Moldovan society behind her socio-economic and justice reform-oriented agenda might set in place a new standard to Eastern European states' "multi-vector" foreign policies: granting priority to building stronger and effective state institutions over restoring a Soviet-inherited illusory territorial integrity. However, Ms. Sandu's eventual success in implementing an effective anti-corruption and domestic reforms agenda will largely depend on her ability to set up and put at work a new supporting parliamentary majority, most likely following early elections to be held next spring. It would be only at that point that her innovative standard for political modernism would receive an unchallenged validation from the electorate.

<sup>7</sup> G. Niculescu- "Perspectives of Co-Existence of European and Eurasian Integration. Is Armenia a Case Study for Belarus and Moldova?", in "Perspectives of Co-Existence of EU and EAEU

Integration Processes: The Case of Armenia", Political Science Association of Armenia, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, pp. 93-121, Yerevan, 2018.



### About EGF

The European Geopolitical Forum (EGF) was established in early 2010 by several independently minded practitioners of European geopolitics, who saw a certain vacuum in the information flow leading into the European geopolitical discussion. EGF is dedicated, therefore, towards the promotion of an objective, Pan-European geopolitical debate incorporating the views of Wider-European opinion shapers rather than simply those from the mainstream European Union (EU) member states. EGF seeks to elaborate upon European decision makers' and other relevant stakeholders' appreciation of European geopolitics by encouraging and effectively expanding the information flow from east to west, from south to north. In order to achieve these objectives, the European Geopolitical Forum was established as an independent internet-based resource, a web-portal which aims to serve as a knowledge hub on Pan-European geopolitics. EGF's strength is in its unique ability to gather a wide range of affiliated experts, the majority of whom originate from the countries in the EU's external neighbourhood, to examine and debate core issues in the Wider-European geopolitical context. Exchange of positions and interactivity between east and west, south and north, is at the heart of the EGF project. Please visit our website for further information at [www.gpf-europe.com](http://www.gpf-europe.com).

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Mr. George Vlad Niculescu is originally from Bucharest, Romania, and is currently acting as the Head of Research of the European Geopolitical Forum. He is also currently acting as co-Chair of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group of the [PfP Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes \(PfPC\)](#). In October 2019, he has successfully defended his PhD thesis on "[SECURITY SCENARIOS PLANNING IN THE GEOPOLITICAL AREA FROM THE BALTIC SEA TO THE WIDER BLACK SEA \(INTER-MARIUM\)](#)" at the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration (NSPSPA) Bucharest. He has also academic experience as a member of several other PfPC working groups, as well as assistant professor and/or visiting lecturer at the NSPSPA, "Dimitrie Cantemir" University, NATO Studies Centre, and the PfP Training Centre from Bucharest (1997-2004). Mr. Niculescu has been involved in several international research projects sponsored by the German Marshall Fund of the United States (Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation), the European Commission (HiQSTEP Project), and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. His full CV and list of publications could be found [here](#).

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