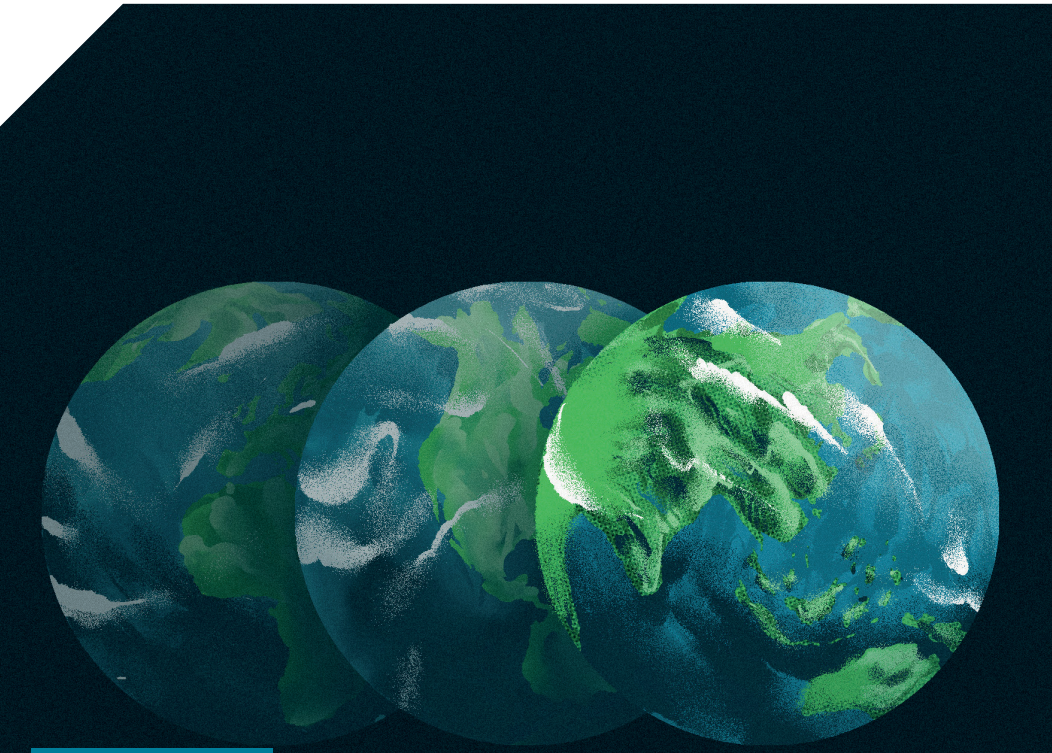
ISPI REPORT 2022

THE GREAT TRANSITION

edited by **Alessandro Colombo** and **Paolo Magri**
conclusion by **Giampiero Massolo**



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Introduction

The past year has seen states and international organisations continue their fight against the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. But behind the rush and rhetoric of the "state of emergency", there have been growing signs of a more comprehensive transition, which is likely to call into question not only global and intra-regional balances of power, but also the fabric of principles, rules and decision-making procedures that govern the political, economic and environmental dimensions of international relations. This transition comprises multiple layers that inter-relate in changing and unpredictable patterns. In the meantime, we are seeing a massive shift in the hierarchy of international power and prestige. On the surface, this manifests itself in the growing rivalry between the United States and China, but deeper down it points to the much more historically significant fact that pivotal importance is ebbing away from Europe and the West. In conjunction with the former, the global structures of the international economy are undergoing such profound change as to call into question the balance between state and market. In essence, there is a crisis of democracy at the heart of what has been the liberal world for the past 30 years. In some cases, this can be seen in the involution of democratic institutions; in others, in a full-blown descent towards authoritarianism. And against the background of all this, massive changes are taking place – simultaneously and in complex conjunction with one another – in the environmental and technological arenas, and in the less linear but more

contested arena of the principles, rules and conventions of international coexistence.

At the most superficial level, the collapse of the existing architecture of international coexistence is exerting its biggest effects on the United States – which has topped the hierarchy of power and prestige for several decades – but it is also dragging with it what is left of the centrality of the West as a whole. Chapter One focuses on the possible transition towards a post-Western world. Again in 2021, various events fuelled this expectation. Within the first week of the year, the assault on Capitol Hill provided a symbol of the profound crisis of legitimacy of American democracy and, more generally, the difficulties that have been faced by all democracies for some years now, including the most established ones in Europe and the United States. A few months later, the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan graphically illustrated the other side of the West's crisis – the loss of its ability to "shape the international environment" that had been its pride and illusion for the first 15 years after the end of the Cold War. But, above all, it swept away the illusion that the US might once again be willing to lead the international community, in the wake of the handover of power from Donald Trump to Joe Biden. Because the fundamental dilemma facing US foreign policy has not changed and is unlikely to change: one the one hand, the US cannot maintain its positions without being more selective about its commitments and thus focusing them on the most important region (the Indo-Pacific) at the expense of other regions; while on the other hand, it cannot do this without sending out a signal of weakness to its adversaries and lack of credibility to its allies.

The transition to a post-Western world would be a literally epoch-making challenge. But even in the current context, the apparent decline of the West is already opening the door to an increasingly overt dispute over legitimacy. The first victim of this is the Western countries' traditional claim to speak on behalf of the entire international community, thereby setting

the threshold for full membership of it, and setting the political, economic and cultural standards that apply to everyone. This is the same dispute that we have already seen, in the past 15 years, over "constitutional" issues, such as the relationship between sovereignty and non-interference, and the relationship between formal equality between states and actual discrimination in favour of democracies. And it is the same dispute that, even over the past year, first manifested itself in the collective management of the pandemic, and later, with even more symbolic significance, in the International Conference on the Environment in Glasgow.

On the economic front, the change in relations between the West and the rest of the world is accompanied by the possible opening of a new phase of capitalism, marked by the return of state intervention in the economy. This is the focus of Chapter Two, by Franco Bruni and Edoardo Campanella. As far as the economic climate is concerned, 2021 saw an international trend of rising inflation, which had remained below the 2% annual target for over a decade, despite the immense amount of liquidity generated by monetary stimulus. At the end of the year, inflation reached 5% in the euro area and almost 7% in the US. It also picked up pace in China, Russia and Japan, while hyperinflation intensified in certain emerging and developing countries. Meanwhile, the pandemic played a central role in the world economy again last year, but against a background in which multiple "transitions" of various types are emerging. These include an end to the state of liquidity that has driven the world economy for so long; a gradual phase-out of fiscal stimulus; and the need to act on a wide variety of forms of inequality, such as inequality of power, opportunity and dignity, and inequality between people, businesses, institutions, countries, regions, cultures, genders, ethnic groups, information, income and wealth.

In this context, it is not surprising to see signs of growing state activism in the economy. Rather than a mere collateral effect of the pandemic, this is a long-term trend stemming from

the crisis in the capitalist system that started in 2007, with the collapse of Lehman Brothers, and became more acute in the years that followed, with the rise of populism in the West. Covid-19 has created the right conditions to justify a higher degree of state activism and address three decades of market excesses, which have led to environmental degradation, rising inequality and disruptive technologies.

New balances between state and market will require new rules and a new system of global governance to enable different types of capitalism to peacefully coexist. The old global governance of the XX century will start to look increasingly obsolete, and new sets of common rules will have to accommodate widely diverging – and in some cases contradictory – economic-policy choices, and this will fuel tensions between liberal Western capitalism and its authoritarian Chinese counterpart. All the more so since 2021 also saw China move further away from the market system – another transition that looks more like an involution than an evolution.

And if that wasn't enough, cracks are also beginning to show in the third pillar of the world order of the last 30 years: liberal democracy. This topic is covered in the chapter by Andrea Cassani. After the last big "wave of democratisation" that followed the end of the Cold War and the transition of the 1990s, fears of an authoritarian resurgence started spreading in the early 2000s. The still vague "worrying signs" noted by Freedom House, a research centre, in 2005 – including the rapid re-establishment of authoritarianism in Russia and other former Soviet republics, and events taking place in Venezuela under Hugo Chavez – soon turned into more explicit alarm bells over the "retreat of democracy". In the years since then, we have witnessed the return of military rule to countries like Thailand, the resurgence of leadership models based on cults of personality in several sub-Saharan states, the swift end of the Arab Spring and the deterioration of democracy in certain Eastern European countries. This authoritarian resurgence seems to be concentrated in the last regions reached by the

third wave of democratisation in the 1990s. This means that the majority of the transitions toward autocracy in the past decade have taken place in relatively young, unconsolidated democracies.

The latest transitions toward autocracy, however, have tended to be less disruptive than their historic counterparts. Coups accompanied by the sudden collapse of the affected country's democratic institutions are less common these days. What we tend to see instead is the gradual erosion of democratic norms by the expansion of government powers, the weakening of controls on government and the manipulation of elections, which nonetheless remain – at least formally – the means by which modern autocrats seek to legitimise their power. The fact that today's lurches towards authoritarianism rarely lead to the abrogation of elections is, in itself, a source of hope. The "survival" of elections as the tool by which most modern autocrats seek to legitimise their power, notwithstanding their attempts at electoral manipulation, can in fact reopen a window of opportunity for the forces of democracy in their countries.

Against the backdrop of these political and economic changes, other even more profound transitions are impacting the environmental and technological arenas. The former – covered in the chapter by Marzio Galeotti – relates to the fight against climate change, for which last year was the most significant since 2015, when the Paris agreement was signed. 2021 was the year of Italy's presidency of the G20, which marked an important staging post on the road to COP26 in Glasgow. Above all, 2021 was the year of Europe. In June, the Council adopted its position, at first reading, on the European climate law, thus setting into legislation the objective of a climate-neutral EU by 2050. The goal of climate neutrality became the mantra of 2021 and, under the impetus of the EU, prompted many other countries to announce similar resolutions before and during the Glasgow conference.

The "new" energy transition stands out for its scale and difficulty. Decarbonisation requires a much broader and faster

transition than before, given that 80% more fossil energy sources will have to be replaced with renewable or alternative sources, and that energy will have to be supplied to a growing population and to the poor populations that do not currently have access to it. The fight against climate change, which is starting to have serious adverse effects in various parts of the world, will therefore lead to a profound change that is set to revolutionise economic activities, international trade and relations, and social interaction.

In particular, the global energy transition driven by renewable energy will have major geopolitical implications. Relations between countries will change significantly, and the world that emerges from the transition will be very different from the one built on fossil fuels. Power is expected to become more decentralised and widely spread. The influence of some countries, such as China, which have invested more in renewable technologies, will increase, while countries that depend more heavily on fossil-fuel exports, such as Saudi Arabia, will lose influence. Most importantly, supplying energy will no longer be the job of a limited number of countries, because most nations have the potential to achieve energy independence, thereby enhancing their development and security.

For these reasons, the transition could yield considerable benefits and opportunities, by boosting the energy security and energy independence of most countries, and promoting prosperity and job creation. At the same time, it will pose a threat to crucial countries, such as India and Indonesia, which are still a long way from the turning point at which growth enters the self-perpetuating stage, where – thanks to advanced technologies, energy efficiency and reformed lifestyles underpinned by new public awareness – the pursuit of material well-being and the containment of environmental impact become mutually compatible goals. Not to mention the major countries that generate high levels of pollution and are reluctant to quickly and decisively follow the path opened up by Europe: these include a disparate range of players, from Saudi Arabia to

Australia, that fall into a common category on the grounds that they derive a significant share of their wealth from fossil energy.

The impact of the digital transition, covered in the chapter by Michele Sorice, is likely to be equally significant. The Covid-19 pandemic has merely accelerated a process that had been going on for years already, resulting in the emergence of new and pending matters (such as forced recourse to digital platforms and working from home) and the acceleration of multiple aspects of technological modernisation (such as fibre optic backbones and robotics for Industry 5.0). In fact, the very term *digital transition* (often combined with technological transition) is not entirely free from ambiguity. *Digital transition* denotes a systemic transformation of the social organisation, in which digital technology applications replace or implement existing tools, techniques and practices. At the same time, new digital technologies should also help improve quality of life, within a framework of shared rules and enhanced democracy. As well as increasing data traffic and internet usage, this is such an era-defining transition that it is comparable – in terms of social impact, although not in numerical terms – to the advent of electricity, and is set to affect not only individual countries, but every dimension of international relations, from the environment to geopolitics.

The key statistic in this respect is that China and the US control three-quarters of the world's cloud computing market and have the same percentage of control over blockchain patents. In terms of capitalisation, these two countries alone account for 90% of the global platform market, have the world's highest rate of 5G uptake and, in the period 2016-21 (so even during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic) provided 94% of all AI start-up funding on the planet. Such massively disproportionate control encourages what is known as "data colonialism", which poses a threat to national sovereignty to the benefit of a few countries and a small circle of global companies. It is no coincidence that the world's largest platforms have more economic weight (and sometimes political weight too)

than many countries. The conflict between state sovereignty and the growing weight of global digital enterprises is another important aspect of the geopolitical balances of the digital and technological transition.

Lastly, on the geopolitical chessboard, the high degree of inequality in decision-making power between the global north and the global south is another critical factor that should not be underestimated. Indeed, the digital society now taking shape is tailored to the economic, political, regulatory and standardisation needs of rich countries (which, not by chance, are seeking to avoid multilateral approaches to issues connected with the digital transition), to the detriment of the needs and potential of the poorest countries. This brings with it the threat of instability and the potential outbreak of conflict over digital power.

All these immense tangible transitions are accompanied by a much more gradual and controversial regulatory transition, symbolised by the disappointing 20th anniversary of the doctrine of *Responsibility to Protect*. This topic is covered in the chapter by Luca Scuccimarra. The aim of the original version of the *Responsibility to Protect* doctrine was to bring stability and clarity of vision to the "humanitarian turn" that international politics had taken in the 1990s as a key component of the "new order" of globalisation, while at the same time decoupling it from the extrinsic – and often destabilising – decision-making dynamics that characterise the traditional "international society of States". And the proposed route to achieving this purpose was to build an open, layered system of shared responsibilities, centred on an eminently functional redefinition of the traditional concept of "sovereignty" that underpins the so-called "Westphalia System".

Over the past few years, the force of attraction of this regulatory transition has diminished dramatically, for reasons that go beyond changes in the geography of global power. Driven by the complex constellation of crises triggered by the 2008 "global financial crash," even Western countries with a

proven liberal-democratic tradition have been hit, in recent years, by a resurgence of forms of identitarian nationalism – some more, some less muscular – which mainly find expression in the language of the new "sovereigntist populism". And the political and cultural cost of this has mainly been borne by that constellation of ideas and values of cosmopolitan origin in the broadest sense, which in previous decades had prepared and supported the advent of *Responsibility to Protect* as a new guiding concept of international politics, at least within the confines of elite political, diplomatic and intellectual circles.

Here again, however, the handover from Trump to Biden does not seem to have been enough to effect a change of course. Despite the promises of a break from the past that were made around the time of his inauguration, and despite all the declarations of principle, the new President still identifies the pursuit of the "vital national interests" of the United States and its "people" as the ultimate deciding factor of the ends and means of American foreign policy. And this is exacerbated by the fact that the state of human rights around the world one year after the Biden administration took office may now look even worse than it did the previous year, if we accept that Afghanistan – now firmly back in the hands of the Taliban – should be added to the list of countries facing various degrees of *atrocity crimes* or *ethnic cleansing*, alongside Syria, Myanmar, China, Yemen, Ethiopia and Congo.

This epidemic of political and humanitarian crises is linked with the spatial dimension of the transition. In addition to the international system as a whole, it also affects individual regions, with different forms and degrees of intensity on each occasion. Over the past year, the region surrounding Afghanistan has been the one most directly affected by the change, owing to the Taliban's conquest of the country and the ruinous withdrawal of Western forces. The chapter by Elisa Giunchi covers the impact of this trauma on the regional picture. Predictably, Western observers have focused on the opportunities for Russia and China to fill the void. While statements from Russia have shown

a certain caution, China – ever since the first high-level bilateral meeting on 25 October – has made clear, in no uncertain terms, that it will respect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Afghanistan, and has, on several occasions, called on the West to lift the sanctions imposed on the Taliban.

Although both countries share the same concerns about the possible destabilisation of the region, this does not mean that their interests are aligned: while Beijing wants to stem the influence of New Delhi and exclude it from the negotiating tables on the Afghan crisis, Moscow would like to include India in efforts to stabilise Afghanistan, as illustrated by Russia's request to invite New Delhi (and Tehran) to the Troika Plus forum (which currently includes Russia, Pakistan, China and the United States). Pakistan and India have the greatest interest in Afghanistan's development. The return of the emirate brings clear benefits for Islamabad: firstly, the border dispute, which has been poisoning bilateral relations for about a century, could be resolved or at least defused; secondly, Islamabad can hope that Kabul will stop supporting the Baloch nationalists, who are currently endangering CPEC-related infrastructure projects; and lastly, Pakistan gains the strategic depth it has long desired, while at the same time reducing Indian influence on its doorstep, which had increased dramatically since 2001.

From India's point of view, by contrast, the re-establishment of the emirate compromises both its investments in Afghanistan and its extra-regional projection of power, to the benefit, moreover, of its regional rivals, China and Pakistan. But this does not mean that India will be inclined to support a hypothetical anti-Taliban opposition, as it did in the 1990s: in fact, representatives of the Modi government met with key figures from the emirate's leadership in September, in the knowledge that the new Afghan government has every interest in reopening the doors to bilateral trade and Indian investment, and diversifying its alliances. Above all, stability in Afghanistan is in the interests of all the regional actors, including those, such as Iran and India, which have good reason to feel threatened by the emirate.

The same interweaving of competitive dynamics and efforts to restore regional stability can be seen in the Greater Middle East, which is covered in the chapter by Armando Sanguini. A varied range of dynamics pervaded the MENA region in 2021: from overt conflict in Yemen, to a precarious balance in Lebanon, a hazardous stalemate in Libya and uncertainty, with differing characteristics, in Iraq and Syria. The common denominator of these countries is that they are all subject to the intertwining policies of influence of regional and international powers. One of the most prominent of these is Iran, which is in negotiations with and under surveillance by the United States in connection with its nuclear ambitions, while Israel has announced it will oppose any agreement it considers unsatisfactory. The Gulf monarchies keep a lower profile but remain significant, and are gradually opening up to the world on all fronts, while hoping to ease tensions with Tehran and form an innovative Coordinating Council with Egypt. Russia and Turkey, meanwhile, share a changeable relationship of political and military competition, from Syria to Libya, against a backdrop of pervasive and almost silent expansion of China's presence in the region.

All of the above is set against the now long-standing rivalry between Saudi Arabia's Sunni monarchy and Iran's Shia theocracy, and their respective allies and companions, for geopolitical primacy in the area. This has also been accompanied for some time by the intra-Sunni conflict waged by Turkey under the banner of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is interwoven with the repercussions of the Abraham Accords, even beyond the perimeter of the first signatories (Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Morocco and Sudan). This conflict is bound to be affected by the outcome of the negotiations, which resumed at the end of the year, between Washington and Tehran on Iran's nuclear programme (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with China, Russia, UK, France and Germany), in a climate of considerable uncertainty, mainly caused by the harsh preconditions – "restoration of the rights of the Iranian nation and lifting of all sanctions" – imposed by the new leadership elected in June.

However, the illusory geopolitical centrality that the Greater Middle East acquired within the framework of the "Global War on Terror" continued to diminish in 2021. In its place, the political and economic transition of the XXI century seems increasingly to be shifting the world's geopolitical centre from the Atlantic axis – in which the United States and Europe were the key players – to the Pacific axis, characterised by the rivalry between Washington and Beijing. This shift is covered in the chapter by Filippo Fasulo. The events of 2021 appear to indicate that this process has gained momentum, so much so that all the main actors have formalised their strategy for the region that has been known for some years now as the Indo-Pacific. Although the forms of engagement of regional and external actors are not yet fully defined, they are already sufficient to make the Indo-Pacific the new frontier of international engagement in terms of military presence, trade and the formation of alliances within the framework of great-power rivalry.

The idea of an Indo-Pacific area has gradually gained currency, from a Japanese plan to involve India in the dynamics of containing China. Once the notion of the area was conceived, it led to the establishment of political and diplomatic tools that use the Indo-Pacific as a platform for economic, scientific and health cooperation, as well as military cooperation. The foremost of these is the *Quadrilateral Security Dialogue* (Quad) between the US, Japan, India and Australia, which was established in 2007 as a specifically military instrument, but later extended to all the key dimensions of international relations, and expanded thanks to the participation of other countries, such as South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand (*Quad Plus*). However, they also include the unprecedented AUKUS pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, which was established last year. More generally, the invention of the Indo-Pacific attracts the presence in the Asia-Pacific region of actors (including the European Union itself) who were previously perceived as being external, thus fostering opportunities for cooperation and turning the costs

and benefits of local issues into global ones. In this respect, the development of the concept of the Indo-Pacific poses a challenge for China, because it significantly increases the presence and attention of the world's major powers in China's immediate periphery.

The competitive dynamics between the United States and China were again accompanied by competitive dynamics between Russia and the West in 2021, fuelled by conflicts first in Belarus and later, with much wider implications, in Ukraine. This is discussed in the chapter by Aldo Ferrari and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti. In Europe, Russian foreign policy is observed through its changing relationships with all the main players involved: the United States, first and foremost, which has been involved in a whirlwind of summit meetings and subsequent ruptures; NATO, with which relations, in 2021, reached one of their lowest points since the Cold War; and the European Union, of course, whose critical stance towards Moscow has not been substantially reduced by the departure of the UK.

While moving ever further from the West, Moscow continued to collaborate intensively with many Asian countries in 2021, primarily China. Since the 2014 Ukraine crisis in particular, Moscow and Beijing have stepped up their political, economic and security ties considerably, although not to the extent of forming a fully fledged alliance. This cooperation moved beyond the economic sphere in 2021 and spread into the political sphere. The fact that Moscow sees Taiwan as a domestic matter for China is particularly important, and is reflected in Beijing's approach to Crimea, whose annexation it neither recognises nor condemns. Furthermore, the two countries have carried out large-scale joint military manoeuvres in western China and the Sea of Japan, and have jointly organised air patrol missions with strategic bombers in North-East Asia.

Increasingly, this political and strategic triangle between the United States, China and Russia encompasses other regional contexts, such as the African continent covered in the chapter

by Giovanni Carbone. Increasingly, foreign countries with a presence in Africa can be classified into different groups – almost different "generations" – according to when they arrived in or returned to the continent. These include the traditional powers (which, since the end of the Cold War, basically means the major Western countries, such as France, the United States and Great Britain), the wave of emerging powers (China, of course, but also India, Japan, Brazil and Russia), and lastly, a second-generation group of emerging economies (Turkey, South Korea, Indonesia, the Gulf States and others). But an alternative classification could be based on the distinction between major global powers, or powers with global aspirations (the US and China, followed by Russia), and the African projection of regional powers whose range of action is necessarily more limited (not only the Gulf States and Turkey, but also to some extent France, which has always seen West and Central Africa as part of its sphere of influence).

This emphasis on foreign presence, however, should not be allowed to overshadow the role of the continent's own member states. Although clearly none of these can match the power of external actors – and boast varying degrees of power themselves – they are never entirely passive parties. First of all, there no longer any countries that are fully aligned with one foreign power or another, to the exclusion of the rest. Generally speaking, African countries maintain political and economic relations with major external players who are rivals of each other, while favouring (or being dominated by) some more than others, depending in part on the scope of action that this affords them.

Against this backdrop of general transition, the European Union needs to overcome its internal difficulties and rediscover an international geopolitical identity. This topic is covered in the chapter by Sonia Lucarelli. The most important news of 2021 was the launch of the implementation phase of Europe's large-scale economic and social recovery plan known as Next Generation EU. The approval of national recovery and

resilience plans and the green light for 22 countries to use funds for investment and reform have made a major contribution to the European economy, but have also provided the means to launch a comprehensive programme of structural reforms with an impact that goes well beyond post-pandemic recovery. The aim is not only to respond to internal challenges, support Europe's recovery and take the wind out of euro-sceptic sails, but also to support the EU's capacity to play a prominent *international* role, which President von der Leyen herself has defined as "geopolitical".

This has driven progress in the area of defence policy. Further steps were taken in 2021 towards consolidating Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), while the European Defence Fund also came became operational. Over the course of last year, furthermore, Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, worked on the "Strategic Compass", which he describes as "a political proposal to prevent the major risk the EU is facing: that of 'strategic shrinkage', or the risk of being always principled but seldom relevant".

Nonetheless, uncertainty and concern still hang over the future of Europe and the international role of the EU. 2021 saw persistent internal divisions over democracy and the rule of law in Eastern Europe, vaccine nationalism, differing policy positions towards the over-assertiveness of neighbouring Russia, difficulties in achieving the planned strategic parity and even in merely demonstrating relevance on the world stage, all of which have undermined the EU's credibility as an international actor. The EU's lack of decisive involvement in events in Belarus, Ukraine, Afghanistan and Kazakhstan in 2021 merely reinforced the image of Europe as a weak and divided old continent.

This is aggravated by the likelihood that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan presages a more general reduction in US commitment to the MENA region and the strategic area of the Sahel, just as activism by other powers (primarily Russia and China) is on the rise, instability is increasing and democratisation

is coming to a halt (as in Tunisia). The leading role in this region has historically been played by France, more than any other European country, but the EU itself also plays a key role, on the basis of the close relations it has established for the purposes of countering illegal immigration and combating terrorism. The complex framework of the Middle East and North Africa macro-region will continue to weigh ever more heavily on the EU's political agenda, by challenging the EU's ability to become a politically effective actor (e.g. by halting illegal immigration and defeating terrorism), without jeopardising its core values (in terms of human rights and safeguarding democracy).

Needless to say, the opportunities and difficulties facing the European Union are intertwined with those relating more specifically to Italy. These are covered in the conclusive chapter by Giampiero Massolo.

Alessandro Colombo
Paolo Magri

SECTION I

THE DIMENSIONS OF THE GREAT TRANSITION

1. Towards a Post-Western World?

Alessandro Colombo

As the third decade of the XXI century gets into gear, the Euro-American Western world finds itself – and, to the same degree, feels – in a rather ambiguous, almost paradoxical position. On the one hand, fresh from the final and seemingly decisive victory in the XX century, Europe and America have not yet renounced their claim to be examples for the world, as can be seen in their secular religion of markets and democracy and as is found in practice through their universal programmes for exporting rights, institutions and efficiency. On the other hand, under the combined pressure of their own internal crises and the rise of non-Western powers, such as China and India, the West is developing a growing sense of vulnerability, as evidenced in the siege rhetoric and the tendency to adopt a panoply of defensive, counter-offensive and (as preventative measures) offensive responses.

This syndrome of decline was fuelled by various events in 2021. In the opening days of the year, the attack on Capitol Hill was symbolic of the deep crisis of legitimacy in American democracy and, more generally, the troubles faced by all democracies in recent years, including the most established ones in Europe and the United States. The disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan a few months later literally "foregrounded" the other side of the crisis in the West, as its capacity to "shape the international sphere" - the pride and illusion that dominated the first decade and a half after the Cold War - has run dry. Throughout the year, both the United States and Europe were

the hardest hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, with the predictable reputational effects in the growing competition with China.

From Trump to Biden. The Illusory Return of American Hegemony

It is no accident the decline in the West's centrality has its epicentre in the very country that is leading the Western world, the United States. The shift from Donald Trump's troubled four years to the new presidency of Joe Biden was predictably welcomed as a "return to the normality" of American hegemony, understood in the etymological sense of the word, as the United States' willingness to lead the international community and especially its allies. "America is Back," was Joe Biden's promise in the period between the presidential campaign and his opening days in the White House. America is Back was also the chorus sung in European papers in the weeks that followed - an almost grotesque revival of the "We're all American" that bounced from one language to the next in the wake of the September 11th attacks in 2001.

Plus, the new Administration wasted no time in sending what seemed to be promising signs of an about turn: rejoining the Paris climate accords and the World Health Organization, returning to negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme, promoting a global agreement against tax havens, increasing US contributions to global policy to combat Covid-19, and renewing cooperation with European allies at the NATO summit in July. In a succinct summary of all this, the Biden Administration has stated its intention of reviving the liberal idea of American hegemony and multilateralism and, in more general terms, to "put diplomacy back at the centre" of American foreign policy. In a clear step away from the previous Administration, this announcement has been accompanied by relaunching multilateralism with a grand return to the rhetoric of defending and expanding democracy that culminated in December in organising the first "global summit for democracy" with 111 countries invited (including

nations with somewhat dubious credentials, such as Pakistan, Iraq and the Philippines, while the invitations for allies Turkey and Hungary never arrived).

Yet, it only took a few months for all this enthusiasm to cool somewhat.[1] Various initiatives undertaken by the new Administration seemed to stall, starting with the negotiations with Iran. And for others, such as managing the pandemic, Joe Biden's approach hardly seems far from the infamous "America First" touted by Donald Trump. In more general terms, despite commitments to relaunch democracy, relations with adversaries (China above all) seem to be showing signs of deterioration, partly because of how the clash for legitimacy has been overloaded by the new crusade for democracy and the peculiar multilateralism associated with it that seeks more to mobilise allies than involve opponents. To make matters worse, relations with allies have suffered because of the lack or, at least, sparsity of any consultation on the Afghan withdrawal and, right after that, the enormously clumsy manner in which the United States announced the new Aukus agreement with the United Kingdom and Australia.

The proximity of these events, especially in temporal terms, provided clear confirmation of how the new Administration has struggled to distance itself from the targets and problems that permeated the two previous Administrations. The fundamental dilemma of American foreign policy has not changed, and in all likelihood, it will not change. The United States cannot maintain its positions without selecting its commitments more carefully, focusing on the most important region (India-Pacific) and reducing its commitments in other regions. However, it cannot do this without sending a message of weakness to its opponents and of a lack of credibility to its allies. Above all, the more general goal of its foreign policy has not changed

[1] One year on from taking office, this view is held almost unanimously by commentators and intellectuals. For example, see S. Walt, "Is Biden's Foreign Policy Failing?", *Foreign Policy*, September 2021; D. Strieff, *Biden's Foreign Policy: Fine words, little action*, Chatham House online, 3 December 2021.

because, for the last 15 years, it has not be about some form of reviving its hegemony, but about the prudent management of its potential decline.

Great Stories and the Reality of Western Decline

The powerful cultural and political image of the West's decline has been around for over a hundred years now. As early as the start of the XX century, it was found in the "yellow peril" rhetoric that came with the largely colonial effort to repress the Boxer Rebellion in China. In the aftermath of World War One, it found a monumental synthesis in Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*,[2] which celebrated its centenary three years ago. In this world, Western civilisation is already declining, with the petrification of "civilisation" (*Zivilisation*), and like all civilisations at such a stage in their existence, the "future of the West is not a limitless tending upwards and onwards for all time towards our present ideals, but a single phenomenon of history, strictly limited and defined as to form and duration".[3] Yet, to return to the ambivalence that marked the start of this piece, it is even more meaningful that this image could return right at the time of the greatest triumph of the Euro-American West, in the early 90s, in Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations,* a work that was so successful it can be considered as emblematic.[4] Although readers (and especially critics) focused on the prognosis of the clash, the prognosis itself was based on a diagnosis of decline. Once the Cold War had ended, which was also the final act in the century of "Western civil wars," as Huntington wrote, "international politics moves out of its western phase, and its centrepiece becomes the interaction

[2] O. Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, München 1918; trad. it. *Il tramonto dell'Occidente*, Milan 1981.

[3] Ivi, p. 69.

[4] S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations?*, "Foreign Affairs", Summer 1993, pp. 22-49.

between the West and the non-Western civilizations and among non-Western civilizations. In the politics of civilizations, the peoples and governments of non-Western civilizations no longer remain the objects of history as targets of Western colonialism but join the West as movers and shapers of history".[5]

This topos of the decline of the West reflects an objective historical process and, at least through the paradigm of international politics and economic relations, it is the most significant - and, in this is perspective, emblematic - phenomenon in the history of the last century. Merely comparing the current world with that of a hundred years ago shall suffice to show this. At the start of the XX century, the world had about 30 independent states, nearly all of which were located (with only three or four exceptions) in Europe and on the American continent. Among all these states, all of the major powers were still European, with the addition of the United States and the sole and first great non-Western power, Japan. Yet, even the latter was unable to operate outside of its our region; therefore, for nearly the entire XX century, the West had a monopoly on globalism. By contrast, at the start of the XXI century, there were two hundred states and the potential rising powers were all non-Western. In terms of the western nations, only the United States had maintained its capacity to effectively project its power globally, while the other non-Western states (China undoubtedly, Russia and India at least to some degree) were rushing to achieve this.

This same rise and fall has also, obviously, been seen on the economic front. In 1900, world manufacturing was almost entirely located in Europe and North America. The United States accounted for 23.6%, the United Kingdom, 18.5% and Germany, 13%, while China only reached 6%, Japan, 2.5% and India/Pakistan, 1.7%.[6] One hundred years down the line, none of the three major economic powers based on GDP were

[5] Ivi, p. 23.

[6] P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Random House, 1987, trad. it. *Ascesa e declino delle grandi potenze*, Garzanti, Milano 1989, p. 223.

European, although the United States was still on top followed by China and Japan (and soon, based on the forecasts, India). Above all, this redistribution happened extremely quickly. Fifty years ago, in 1970, Europe accounted for 40% of global GDP and North America, 36%. Today, America's percentage has dropped slightly under the 30% mark, while Europe's has slumped to 25% as Asia's has grown from 15% to nearly 40%.

This slide is even more evident in demographic terms, especially if one foregrounds the European part of the West. At the start of the XX century, nearly a quarter of the world's population (24.7%) lived in Europe. One hundred years later and this percentage had tumbled to under 10%. Taking Europe and North America together, the West currently accounts for 15% of the global population, while nearly 60% of humans live in Asia and almost 20% in Africa.

Of course, to be properly understood, it is important not to exaggerate the extent of this decline. As is always the case when speaking about power in social terms and, especially, in the anarchic, competitive world of international politics, the decline must not be seen in absolute terms, but rather in relative ones. In other words, the real problem is not (or, at least, not necessarily) that Americans and Europeans are growing far less than in the past, but that the others are growing much more. This results in the fading or even complete disappearance of the supremacy that Europeans and Americans have enjoyed for the last two centuries.

Even within such limits, it is important to remember that the decline in question merely relates to an exceptional, late and, from a long-term perspective, limited event in history - the expansion of Europe began on the American continent and the coasts of Africa and Asia in the early XVI century, extended progressively to almost all of Asia and Oceania between the mid-XVIII century and the end of the XIX century, and culminated between then and the beginning of the XX century with the last great appropriation of Africa and the imposition of a semi-colonial system in China and the Ottoman Empire. Outside

of this historical parenthesis, the West never occupied a central position in international political and economic relations. This is not merely because it makes no sense to speak about global international relations before the XX century, but also because, prior to the XVI century, other areas of civilization had always surpassed or equalled it (although often at a distance, as in the long coexistence between the Roman and Chinese Empires) militarily and economically.

This is precisely where the challenge for the next century begins. To paraphrase what has already been written about Europe,[7] in the current international environment, the West finds itself historically in a new and unique position. The West neither dominates nor is dominated; it is not isolated, nor is it able to control the world. For the first time in the West's history, it is but one of the regions in the international global system. In the past, when it was previously one region among many others (prior to the age of European expansion), the world was less interdependent. Today, there is but one globe and the West is less and less the centre.

Alternatives to the Western World

So, what might a post-western world – or a post-American world, as some like to call it – look like?[8] The most unlikely scenario would seem to be a transition in hegemony from the United States to China based on contemporary hegemonic readings of a phantasmagoria of cycles that is drawn from a traditional pattern read into the succession of empires. The automatic repetition of such a cycle comes up against at least two factors. The first of this is about desire and relates to the willingness to turn growth in power into a desire for hegemony.

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[7] O. Waever, "Modelli e scenari futuri", *Politica Internazionale*, no. 1, January-March 1993, pp. 5-27.

[8] F. Zakarias, *The post-American World. And the Rise of the Rest*, London, Penguin Books, 2011.

China might well not express such a desire,[9] as has been seen at other critical moments in its past. The second factor relates to the distribution of power and concerns the divergence (also temporal) between the hierarchy of economic power, where China is already an equal competitor to the United States, and the hierarchy of military power, a sphere in which the United States maintains a clear advantage over China.

A second possibility for a post-Western world looks just as ambiguous and problematic as the option just explored: the multipolarity favoured by all the leading players, especially Europe. In truth, to speak in general terms, one can conceives of very different kinds of multipolarism. One the one hand, a kind of multilateralism may arise that is based on institutional cooperation between the leading global players and a constellation of mid-size regional powers. However, a quite different outcome would, naturally, be the multipolarism found in Europe in the past, with growing competitive dynamics and, importantly, by the potentially revolutionary conflict between satisfied and "revisionist" powers.

Yet, a major stumbling block to a hypothetical transition to multipolarism lies in the fact that all the possible candidates for the role of "pole" are not in good health at all and, in any case, have critical political and economic weaknesses. This clearly applies to those non-Western countries still in an unstable ascendancy, such as Brazil, South Africa and even India, but other more solid nations – Japan, Russia, the European Union, of course, but also the United States and China – are not without their own vulnerabilities.

Above all, such a multipolar scenario assumes that the international context maintains the same global dimensions as the world has had over the last century (but never had at any other stage before then). This might well become the key junction in international relations, should the rebalancing of

[9] On this topic see A.I. Johnston, "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations", *International Security*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2019, pp. 9-60.

power between the United States and China proceed or the latter even overtake the former. As a counterpoint to the global hegemony of the United States, the regional growth already taking place (India in south Asia, Brazil in Latin America, South Africa in sub-Saharan Africa, China in East Asia, Russia in part of the post-Soviet sphere, the European Union in Europe) might not actually prefigure the new "poles" of a global spatial order, but instead sustain an alternative spatial order based on the organisational capacity of individual regions[10] and on the (progressive) exclusion of all external interference in the dynamics of war and peace. This could be seen as a sort of proliferation of "Monroe doctrines"[11] and, it is hardly a coincidence, this was the same scenario that was found with rising powers at the time of the decline of British hegemony.

One final, more disturbing scenario remains of no overall polar system in which power would be shared among an increasing number of players, including some that are not states.[12] In such a case, the post-Western world would be, at least temporarily, a completely disorderly world that would crack if not completely break the global structure of international relations.

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[10] For different versions of this thesis, see B. Buzan and O. Waever, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2003; A. Colombo, *La disunità del mondo. Dopo il secolo globale*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2010; D.A. Lake and P.M. Morgan (eds.), *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*, University Park, Pennsylvania State UP, 1997; P. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions. Asia and Europe in the American Imperium*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 2005. On the implications for the foreign politics of the United States, see R.A. Manning, "US Strategy in a Post-Western World", *Survival*, vol. 55, no. 5, October-November 2013, pp. 115-132.

[11] J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2001; trad. it. *La logica di potenza. L'America, le guerre, il controllo del mondo*, Milan, UBE, 2003, p. 364.

[12] R.N. Haass, "The Age of Nonpolarity. What Will Follow U.S. Dominance", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 3, May-June 2008, pp. 44-56.

Tensions in Transition

In all likelihood, the transition over the coming decade will reflect some combination of the scenarios explored above. In the meantime, though, the major transformation already underway will produce significant political, cultural and institutional changes. The first and most obvious consequence is a return to the other great XX century story of the "revolt against the West", as English historians and international relations thinkers have labelled it (from their privileged viewpoint of a declining former hegemonic power).[13] To draw on Hedley Bull's effective summary,[14] this revolt has occurred in five phases so far, each of which actually overlapped with the following phase: a struggle for equal sovereignty by states that were formally independent (such as China, Turkey and even Japan), but in reality only enjoyed subordinate or inferior status (through the imposition of "unequal treaties", "capitulations" and so on); the anti-colonial revolution and the struggle for independence, which began in the wake of World War One and reached its height following World War Two; the struggle for racial equality, which ran largely in parallel with the first two, and the battle against white supremacy; the fight for economic justice, which is the fourth phase and came after independence, symbolised by the formation of the Group of 77 in 1964; and finally a more radical final phase for cultural liberation conducted, unlike the other four, not in the name of ideas or using languages that are themselves Western, but using those countries' own symbolic heritages and in the name of their own identities.

In today's world, this long revolt is now resulting in a growing clash of legitimacy, particularly upon the traditional pretext that Western countries can speak for the entire international community, determine the entrance thresholds

[13] See, in particular, H. Bull and A. Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1984; trad. it. *L'espansione della società internazionale. L'Europa e il mondo dalla fine del Medioevo ai tempi nostri*, Milan, Jaka Book, 1994

[14] H. Bull, *La rivolta contro l'Occidente*, Ivi, pp. 227-238.

for full belonging and universal criteria for political, economic and cultural normality (those ideas that, in the second half of the XIX century, were called the "standards of civilisation"). Over the last decade and a half, this battle has been evident in "constitutional" matters such as the relationship between sovereignty and non-interference or between formal equality among states and discrimination favouring democracies.[15] This selfsame struggle has been visible over the last year in, firstly, the collective management of the pandemic and, after this and with greater symbolic importance, at the international environmental conference in Glasgow.

The second manifestation, and this is destined to become entwined with the first, is the struggle for recognition. As always happens in the historical phase of transition in power,[16] the great, non-Western emerging powers are already working to gain or regain suitable status in the hierarchy of international prestige.[17] This happens both through competition to be allowed into the top international organisations (take, for example, the G20), through a redistribution of roles within such organisations and through diplomatic or military activism, which are the most traditional means for such struggle. This has been seen in very recent years in the military exploits of the Russian Federation in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria, and in China's multilateral dynamism, which is symbolised by, but not limited to, the Belt-and-Road Initiative.

The final manifestation is the defensive reaction from Europe and the United States. From Oswald Spengler to Samuel Huntington, this is seen as the most powerful political

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[15] A. Colombo, *Una democrazia senza eguaglianza. I paradossi di un nuovo ordine internazionale democratico*, in "Quaderni di Relazioni Internazionali", ISPI, no. 2, September 2006, pp. 18-33.

[16] On the theory of the transition of power, see A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics,* Alfred A. Knopf, New York,1968; A.F.K. Organski and J, Kugler, *The War Ledger,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980.

[17] D.W. Larson and A. Shevchenko, "Status Seekers. Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy", *International Security*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2010, pp. 63-95.

understatement for decline. In other words, the call to "close ranks" is juxtaposed, in Spengler's morphology of history, to the "political Hellenism" that followed the decline of the *poleis*,[18] and simplified in Huntington's rereading as the dichotomous image of the "West against the Rest".[19] Within states, this call is expressed in the stigmatisation of internal divisions that is shared, albeit using opposing content and language, by populist parties and technocratic governments. In international relations, the call to "close ranks" underscores the new attempt to relaunch institutionalised cooperation between Europe and America under the banner of the traditional motif of the mobilisation of democracies. But in this case, so to speak, things have been turned upside down because it is no longer about driving progressive "enlargement", which was how it was presented in the aftermath of the Cold War, but about an ebbing West reclaiming its identity.

[18] O. Spengler, "Tavola delle epoche politiche sincroniche", in Idem (1981), p. 89.
[19] S.P. Huntington (1993).

2. The Great Economic Transition

Franco Bruni, Edoardo Campanella

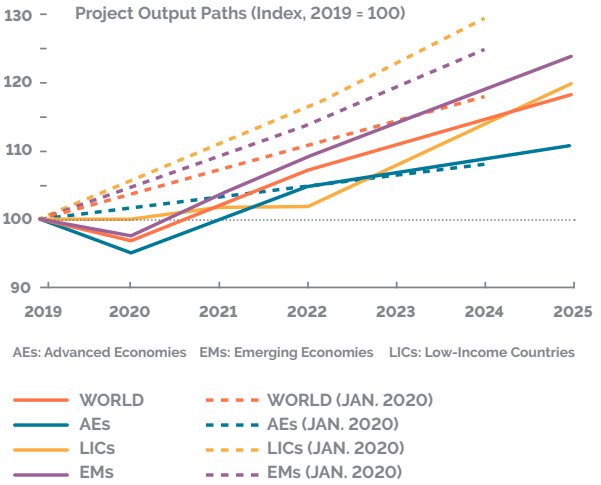
The Growth Rebound

The pandemic remained central to the international economic climate in 2021. After peaking early in the year, however, its severity diminished, although not without alarming fluctuations and a rise in recent months. Growth rates have bounced back: taking 2019 GDP as 100, worldwide GDP rose from 97 in 2020 to 103 in 2021, advanced-economy GDP from 97 to 102, and emerging- and developing-market GDP from 98 to 104. But the US is almost alone in having got back to where it would have been without Covid.[1] The advanced economies as a whole have climbed back to their pre-pandemic trend, but the rest of the world, despite growing back faster, has lost over 4% of its GDP "for ever". As FIG.1 shows, the group of the most underdeveloped economies lost over 10% of GDP, a loss that is expected to be lasting. The headline for the OECD's Economic Outlook for December 2021 reads: "The global recovery is strong but imbalanced".[2]

[1] See interactive tables in GDP and spending - Real GDP forecast - OECD Data

[2] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *A Balancing Act. OECD Economic Outlook*, December 2021.

FIG. 2.1 – GDP GROWTH FORECASTS



Source: International Monetary Fund (IMF), "Chapter 1 DATA", *World Economic Outlook*, October 2021.

The rebound was driven by vaccination, but vaccination rates were uneven, with over half of countries worldwide failing to reach a vaccination target of 40% of the population by the end of year, while rich countries are aiming at 90% and higher. Higher percentages of unvaccinated people increase the probability of virus mutations that could build resistance to vaccines. Contagion between different parts of the world makes it difficult to improve health and economic conditions permanently without doing so on a global scale. The realisation of this is one of the first important effects of the pandemic.

A second effect is the attitude towards the economic cycle. The 2021 recovery could turn out to be nothing more than a rebound. If economies return to pre-pandemic growth patterns after the pandemic, it would be advisable to use the trauma of Covid as a stimulus for reflection on the adequacy and sustainability of that growth, and put in place strategies to improve its adequacy and sustainability, by looking beyond

the cycle, to the long-term trend, which needs to accelerate and improve in quality. Profound structural reforms and the awareness of interdependencies are imperative: the growth rates of different countries impact on each other and the pandemic provides an opportunity to tackle the many challenges that humanity now faces. The economic aspect is a common denominator to all of these.

Interdependencies and "Transitions"

The fact that we have become aware of the interdependencies between countries and problems does not mean that we have done so promptly. In 2021, important lessons were learned from the crisis, but have not yet given rise to adequate action. The extent to which "lessons" have been learned is one of the aspects that distinguishes the health crisis from the financial crisis of 2007-09. In the latter, despite the fact that the G20 coordinated substantial measures, recognition of the world's structural problems was less widespread and almost forgotten as soon the economy picked up again. Many of those problems are the same ones that we are now seeing again, almost entirely unchanged.[3] Closer worldwide political and economic cooperation is needed.

From this point of view, the 2021 G20, chaired by Italy, was significant. Although it did not generate much in the way of decisions, it did succeed in listing the problems and their interconnections. It led to the first decisions on tax competition between countries. It examined the problem of the solvency of the poorest and most indebted countries, and, with the help of the IMF, created new international liquidity to deal with it. It set an agenda of multiple "transitions" of various kinds that need to be addressed. These were formally classified into categories that are now common to everyone's agenda.

[3] *Fault lines* by R. Rajan: "Fault Lines: How Hidden Fractures Still Threaten the World Economy", Wikipedia.

The ecological and technological-digital transitions stand out in particular. But there is also the demographic transition, with its macro-financial consequences, and the closely linked migratory transition. And there is the more comprehensive economic-political transition, which requires a reduction in a wide variety of forms of inequality, for example inequality of power, opportunity and dignity, and inequality between people, businesses, institutions, countries, regions, cultures, genders, ethnic groups, information, income and wealth. The agenda should also facilitate the pursuit of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the United Nations Agenda 2030 has been targeting since 2015.[4] Taken as a whole, what is at stake seems to be a full-blown transition of "capitalism", in the sense of the economic model in use worldwide, albeit in different forms.[5]

These transitions need to be tackled on an internationally coordinated basis. Otherwise, non-uniformities can arise that reduce economic integration, competition and global progress. Furthermore, since they carry high economic and political costs, if these transitions are not tackled in unison, they are held back in every country. Shutting down polluting activities or interconnecting an entire country become insurmountable challenges if tackled without international cooperation.

The fields subject to transition really are inextricably linked. The G20 was firm in its assertion that human health is inseparable from the health of animals, plants and the environment (*One Health Approach*[6]). Its works set out ideas on how to closely interlink all the transitions. If we confine ourselves to health, ecology, digital technology and reducing

[4] United Nation Development Program (UNDP), *The SDGS in Action. What are the Sustainable Development Goals?*

[5] "Production organized for profit using legally free wage labor and mostly privately-owned capital, with decentralized coordination", see B. Milanovic, *Capitalism Alone*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2019, p. 2.

[6] OIE World Organisation for Animal Health, *G20 Ministers of Health reaffirm the urgent need to address global health under a One health approach*, 17 September 2021.

inequality, it is easy to find examples of how progress on each of these fronts benefits each of the others, in both directions. Table 2.1 below shows several examples. Note that the rebounds of the two-directional effects between all of the fronts mean that progress (or regression) on any one front triggers a process of multiplication that leads to considerably larger improvements (or deteriorations) of the system as a whole. The examples in the Table also show how a general transition of the economic system underlies the other, more specific transitions.

TAB. 2.1 - IMPROVEMENTS (DETERIORATIONS) IN VERTICAL ASPECTS LEAD TO IMPROVEMENTS (DETERIORATIONS) IN HORIZONTAL ASPECTS

	HEALTHCARE	ECOLOGY	DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY	INEQUALITY REDUCTION
HEALTHCARE	×	"One health", the health of humans, animals and plants is the basis for an healthy environment	Effect of covid precautions on the development of digital skills	Health is an essential part of welfare systems, which benefit the less fortunate/ underprivileged
ECOLOGY	Reducing pollution improves health	×	Energy saving goals promote digital research	Ecological damages are more severe in poorer and weaker regions/countries
DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY	Intensively digital management of the pandemic	Digital measurements are essential to the monitoring of climate and environment	×	Technological empowerment: decreasing the digital divide
INEQUALITY REDUCTION	More education, wealth, access to vaccines, of less developed countries increase healthcare and curb the spread of pandemics in the world	Less poor regions can take care of the environment	Reducing poverty in one region/ country allows and promotes the digital development of its population	×

Monetary Policies and Inflation as Transition-Induced Friction

Central banks have made a major contribution to supporting the economy during the pandemic by providing liquidity to businesses, banks and governments, so as to prevent the snowballing of interruptions in production due to their effects on payment chains and the increase in unsustainable debts. However, the monetary policies of the world's major countries had already been expansionary for many years before the pandemic.

A few figures paint a clear picture of the exceptional extent of this expansion. With loans to banks and the purchase of securities from governments, central banks' balance sheets have ballooned: in the US, they rose from 6% of GDP in 2007 prior to the financial crisis, to about 20% in 2019 prior to the pandemic, before rising above 40% at the end of 2021. The same three ratios for the euro zone are 12%, 40% and 65% respectively. This enormous injection of liquidity corresponds to sharp reductions in interbank rates. In the US, interbank rates fell from over 5% before the 2008 crisis, to less than 0.1% in December 2021. In the euro area, they fell from just under 4.5% to -0.6% in the same period. At the same time, there has been a fall in yields on 10-year government bonds: in the US, yields fell from just under 4% to less than 1.5%; in the euro area, they fell from +4.2% to 0.15%, and as low as -0.35% for the bonds of countries with AAA ratings. In November 2021, a highly indebted country like Italy had an average cost of 0.1% on the issue of government bonds.

Expansionary monetary policies tend to impact on price levels and the speed at which they rise. 2021 saw an international trend of rising inflation, which had remained below the 2% annual target for over a decade, despite the immense amount of liquidity generated by monetary stimulus. By the end of the year, inflation had reached 5% in the euro area and almost 7% in the US. It was also picking up pace in China, Russia and

Japan, while hyperinflation was intensifying in certain emerging and developing countries. The danger is that inflation becomes self-propagating, by getting priced into the expectations of operators involved in setting prices and into wage bargaining.

There has been much discussion of whether central banks should respond to rising inflation by tightening monetary policy.[7] According to central banks and international organisations, the increase in inflation is temporary and will return to normal in 2022, without any need for significant monetary tightening. But the US Federal reserve has started to rein in asset purchases and is planning to start raising rates in 2022. If price acceleration is temporary, it is possible to avoid sharp tightenings that could put a halt to the recovery and cause asset prices to fall, at the risk of provoking a financial crisis.

The idea is that prices are rising because, while aggregate post-pandemic demand has taken off vigorously, due to subsidies, macroeconomic stimulus and optimism that the pandemic is subsiding, supply is coming up against persistent friction, which is leading to shortages of products on the market. Manufacturer specialisation, technological evolution and globalisation have broken production into long "value chains" that often have production stages in different countries: all it takes is a bottleneck at one of these stages to scupper final production and raise prices. This is happening in a wide range of sectors, from semiconductors to used cars, agri-food, sea-freight charters and building materials. The imbalance between the sharp upturn in demand for energy products and the delay in adjustment of supply, which has complex features and causes,[8] has raised energy prices considerably.

The forecast is that, as the post-pandemic recovery consolidates, supply will adjust and the inflationary friction between demand

[7] See F. Bruni, *Cercasi regia comune anti-inflazione,* Commentary, ISPI, 10 December 2021.

[8] For further details of interest, see Box 1.2 in *OECD Economic Outlook*, vol. 21, no. 2, December 2021.

and production will pass. The OECD[9] forecasts that, in the majority of advanced and emerging economies, inflation will peak in the first quarter of 2022 before gradually falling.

Part of the transitory nature of the inflationary friction may underlie more lasting phenomena linked with the full combination of transformations underway in the world economy. The first of these are the energy and ecological transitions, which are bringing about considerable displacements in demand and production. The second is the labour market, because of the mismatches between the new types of workers that businesses need and the characteristics of the workers available. There may also be a consolidation of those post-pandemic attitudes that make people more demanding in respect of their participation in the labour market, and less ready to enter it on a precarious basis and low wages.[10] In the long term, the considerable ageing of many populations is also a structurally inflationary force.

Inflationary dynamics also depend on the degree of competition and international openness of markets, which attenuate price increases. This is another mechanism by which globalisation has helped keep inflation low over the past 4-5 years. A process of de-globalisation that reduced arbitrage in the allocation of production and the purchasing of goods, would have the opposite effect: enforced protectionism and relocations, sovereigntist closures and reinforcement of national and regional monopolies would reduce competition, putting an end to the global price competition that moderates prices.

Furthermore, although a slowdown in the technical progress that has been the hallmark of the past few decades would afford respite from the continuous effort of innovation, it would also hinder productivity gains and production cost reductions.

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[9] OECD, *A Balancing Act*..., cit.

[10] Increasing numbers of studies are being made and papers written on the structural transformations taking place in labour markets. For example: J. Bradford Delong, "The Great Labor Market Shakeup", *Project Syndicate*, 6 December 2021.

Even in the medium term, the bubbles that have inflated the values of securities and other assets, including real estate, in the years of over-abundant liquidity, could unfreeze. The unfrozen purchasing power would then put pressure on goods prices, provoking immediate and expected increases. This calls to mind the role of monetary policies in controlling inflation. It will be vital for central banks to keep their independence both from governments, which invariably have a short-sighted desire to finance themselves when liquidity is cheap and plentiful, and from financial-market traders, who benefit from the short-term impact of monetary expansion on asset prices.

Inflation therefore cuts across many of the most important aspects of the transitions that international capitalism is going through in the organisation of production and trade, and their technical and political governance.

Public Finance and the Role of Governments

Global problems can manifest themselves in the search for and defence of "global public goods" such as health, climate, the environment, peace, the containment of inequalities, and the spread and use of technical progress. Public goods, by definition, require intervention by governments in production and regulation: in fact, decisions by private individuals and markets do not take account of the advantages that those goods bring to people who do not take part in their direct use. The role of governments must therefore be stepped up or, at least, transformed, so as to achieve a closer focus on the actions that are most needed to obtain public goods. "Transitions" take place as a result of the spontaneous interaction of citizens, businesses and markets, but if they are to enhance public well-being, they cannot do without public initiatives and finances. The latter are being sought, as happened in the course of efforts to tackle the pandemic.

The most obvious aspect of the augmented role of the public sector is the substantial increase in government deficits and debts in 2020-21. Vast expansionary fiscal measures have

helped the financial situation of businesses and households, thus containing the immediate cost of the pandemic. But fiscal expansion has not been uniform: the richest countries have been able to use it more intensively. In 2020, the primary deficit of advanced economies as a percentage of GDP almost tripled compared with the previous year: after cyclical adjustment, it was almost 7%. In 2021, it fell by just half a point and is expected to reach 5% in 2022. On average for emerging and developing countries, by contrast, the same three percentages are just above and then below 1%. This has increased the world's public-debt-to-GDP ratio to 99%, from 84% before the pandemic. The 15-point increase, however, is the average of over 20 of advanced countries, fewer than 10 of emerging and developing countries, and fewer than 5 of the poorest countries. So, while the level of debt seems to require difficult future balance-sheet adjustments, the different countries involved clearly have different capacities to react to crises through fiscal policies: this is another inequality that should be borne in mind when coordinating international cooperation.

Furthermore, different governments took different approaches to fiscal expansion, depending on how convinced they were that it was desirable. The US, for example, raised its government deficit to 15% of GDP in 2020 and 11% in 2021, whereas the euro zone average lies between 7% and 8%, with Germany between 4% and 7%, and France and Italy between 8% and 10%. These differences were generally consistent with past public-finance customs, and thus aggravated the divergence between debt levels. Italy is one of the countries with the highest levels of public debt (over 150% of GDP), which will be difficult to service if interest rates rise and exceed GDP growth rates in the next few years. Debt sustainability therefore creates a link between fiscal and monetary policies. To "avoid withdrawing fiscal support too early, and yet signal to the public that their debt levels are sustainable in the long run" many countries could "commit to future deficit reduction", undertake "structural fiscal reforms (such as pension reform

or subsidies reform), pre-legislate change to taxes or spending, commit to fiscal rules that lead to deficit reduction in the future".[11] Credibility, combined with growth opportunities and monetary policies, will therefore be key to the sustainability of public debts.

The state's growing role in the economy and in the lives of its citizens, however, goes well beyond aggregate measures of public finance. Public regulatory intervention is crucial. The pandemic made this immediately clear when governments chose to combat it with lock-downs: essential freedoms were suddenly limited. 2021 saw the emergence of the debate on vaccination, or more specifically on making it mandatory, explicitly or otherwise, for individuals to have a vaccine injected into their bodies. Regardless of the relevance of their arguments, the anti-vaxxers can be seen as a symbol of the many issues that global society may face when it becomes more aware of the influence, on its well-being, of individual or national behaviour, production or regulation, to which there is clearly also a private, national and individual aspect that warrants the attention of protectors of "freedom". This is a freedom, however, that advocates of public intervention see as illusory because it is violated by the impact of the interactions provoked by individual and national actions.

One of the first conclusions to be drawn from the pandemic is that measures should be taken to improve health. It is significant, in this respect, that the G20 emphasised that global health decisions should be taken on the basis of institutional collaboration between health authorities and financial authorities, so as to expedite and strengthen their implementation. A joint task force of national authorities has been set up, which will propose organisational, regulatory and financial initiatives in 2022.[12]

Dealing with the major transitions requires huge investments in infrastructure and appropriate industrial policies, designed to

[11] International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Fiscal Monitor*, October 2021, Chap. 2.

[12] See *G20 Rome Leaders' Declaration*, para. 6.

accelerate the transformation of production models with public investment, thus complementing the incentives for private individuals to undertake them, and thereby overcoming the dichotomy between state and market with new approaches.[13] Most countries plan to increase public investment in the period 2021-23. But the OECD estimates that, almost everywhere, the pace of such investment will fall short of the level needed to raise production capacity by 2% in 2030.[14] Considerable economies of scale and purpose are available, and it is unthinkable to do without public policies. The transitions need to be facilitated by large-scale investments in research: this is particularly important for the energy transition because achieving it in time to save the global environment requires technologies that are not yet available. There are transitions that require new rules if they are to be beneficial, such as artificial intelligence, which could potentially cause humanity to lose control of its creations. To facilitate and improve transitions, aid designed to facilitate the survival of businesses in difficulty can be made more selective.

On the other side of the argument, there are fears that industrial policies could be "captured" by special interests, and government intervention might not steer the transitions towards the true public interest. Furthermore, since these transitions tread a global pathway, the public policies designed to facilitate them require international coordination in order to stop them becoming vehicles for nationalist competition and protectionism. Although necessary, public intervention is delicate, difficult and can have distorting effects.

The European Union took the opportunity of the pandemic to establish an EU strategy of public policies to direct the flows of solidarity-driven aid made available under the Next

[13] L. Zingales, "Burying the Laissez-Faire Zombie", *Project Syndicate*, 15 December 2021.

[14] *OECD Economic Outlook*… cit., General assessment of the macroeconomic situation, Figure 1.39 - Projected public investment increases are welcome but often too modest, Version 1.

Generation EU (NGEU) project.[15] 2021 saw the launch of the national NGEU plans, their examination and approval by the Commission, the first transfers of funds to governments, and the first issues of EU public debt to finance them. It is too early to feel reassured by the success of the European initiative, but it is worth noting that it is designed along the lines of the transitions that should characterise the global economy, with a special commitment to the digital and ecological transitions, and a surprising new "solidarity-based" focus on the Member States that were worst affected by the pandemic and are in the weakest condition. The US has also put together immense packages of public intervention, which, if they succeed and if the resulting debts prove to be sustainable and do not displace private enterprise, will facilitate the renovation and improvement of the US economy, as expressed by Joe Biden's commitment to "build back better".

The Capitalist Transition

The state's return to the economy seems to mark the beginning of a new phase for capitalism. Rather than a mere collateral effect of the pandemic, this is a long-term trend stemming from the crisis in the capitalist system that started in 2007, with the collapse of Lehman Brothers, and became more acute in the years that followed, with the rise of populism in the West. Covid-19 has created the right conditions to justify a higher degree of state activism and address three decades of market excesses, which have led to environmental degradation, rising inequality and disruptive technologies.

This is not the first time there has been a radical change in the relationship between state and market in modern economies. The balance between them is unstable and constantly evolving,

[15] See F. Bruni, "Economia e Recovery: la reazione dell'Europa alla crisi pandemica", in A. Colombo and P. Magri (Eds.), *Il mondo al tempo del Covid. L'ora dell'Europa?*, ISPI Report 2021, Milano, Ledizioni-ISPI, 2021.

and tends to swing like a pendulum, in time with long cycles. The swinging motion often becomes forceful and abrupt, in response to systemic crises that compel the main economic players to reinvent their roles radically and continuously. Too much market, to too much state, and back again, because the excesses of one trigger an ideological change that ushers in the excesses of the other.

The history of modern capitalism can be divided into three stages, which can be identified on the basis of how intrusive or otherwise the state's role in them was. The triumphalist expansion of the market in the late XIX century came to a halt immediately after the First World War, forcing Western governments to become more active in the way they managed their economies in order to overcome the Great Depression, defeat Nazism, accelerate post-war reconstruction and stem the communist threat. When state hegemony became too stifling, resulting in the instability of the 1970s, the market reacted by throwing open the doors to an era of deregulation, liberalisation and globalisation. The dawn of a fourth age of capitalism coincides with the gradual emergence of a new consensus on issues such as the taxation of capital, regulating Big Tech, industrial policy, fair trade and public investment.

The transition to sustainable capitalism, however, will not be uniform. While the market is the key feature of capitalism, the state dictates its many guises, from the liberal Anglo-Saxon model, to the social democratic European model and the authoritarian Asian model. Some capitalist systems will adapt more easily; others will struggle; some will fall behind. In some cases, adaptation will be purely economic; in others, it will be partly or purely political. Each system will find a new internal equilibrium, which will change the way economies interact internationally. Convergence between systems will facilitate international cooperation, while divergence will intensify competition and conflict.

On inequality, for example, Joe Biden's America is gradually converging towards a more European-style safety net than it

has had in the past, which will go hand-in-hand with a more active role for government in managing the economy and its excesses. China is also taking a radical approach to inequality, by setting itself the task of revitalising the middle class, rather than merely combating extreme poverty. But the spirit and method by which America and China are tackling similar levels of inequality are incompatible.

On climate change, all the major countries are committed to reducing CO2 emissions through strict limitations on economic activities, but their strategies, targets and policies will not be equally ambitious. Although both the European Union and the United States are aiming to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, the European strategy seems more credible – to date – in view of the difficulties the Biden administration is having in passing the Build Back Better plan. Differences in commitments to combat climate change will lead to serious geopolitical tensions. Countries or blocks of countries that do more, such as the European Union, will be under pressure to safeguard the competitiveness of their industries with protectionist measures, such as carbon tariffs. Climate protectionism could be a key feature of the new world we are about to enter.

And on the digital front, the gap in user data management and the regulation of tech giants already varies considerably, not only between democratic and authoritarian capitalist systems, but also within them. Regulatory inconsistencies between different jurisdictions, in the digital arena, could give rise to significant distortions in data flows across geographical borders, thus putting up major barriers to what the trade of the future should be.

China's Transition

New balances between state and market will require new rules and a new system of global governance to enable disparate types of capitalism to peacefully coexist. The old global governance of the XX century will start to look increasingly obsolete, and

new sets of common rules will have to accommodate widely diverging – and in some cases contradictory – economic-policy choices, and this will fuel tensions between liberal Western capitalism and its authoritarian Chinese counterpart.

2021 also saw China move further away from the market system – another transition that looks more like an involution than an evolution. It was 2013 when President Xi Jinping stated that: "The market must become the decisive force in the allocation of resources". Over the past two years, however, and with a sudden spurt last summer, the socialist component of the Chinese market system has been regaining ground. Last January, Xi Jinping argued that "China has entered a new phase of development," the aim of which is to turn the country into a "modern socialist power" and rein in "the disorderly expansion of capital".

By the Party's XIX Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping had already declared that the "main contradiction" that the party was facing had changed. In Marxist-Leninist jargon, a "contradiction" is the interaction between progressive forces pushing towards socialism and the resistance to that change. Identifying it and resolving it enables society to develop peacefully, and determines the political direction of the country. If left unresolved, however, contradiction can lead to chaos and ultimately revolution. In 1982, Deng Xiaoping redefined the party's main contradiction, and moved away from the Maoist class struggle towards unbridled economic development. Thirty-five years later, Xi Jinping declared that the new contradiction is between "unbalanced and inadequate development and people's ever-growing need for a better life".

The implications of this are substantial. As became clear last summer, the state is authorised to resolve problems of capitalist excess through radical forms of intervention. The tightening of the screw on a variety of sectors, from technology to education and entertainment, and the promotion of the ideal of common prosperity that has led President Xi Jinping to take a hard line with Chinese millionaires, are clear signals of a shift in Beijing's

attitude to the market. According to the Wall Street Journal, regulatory tightening has generated over 100 regulatory actions, government directives and policy changes since the end of last year, including measures designed to break the market dominance of companies like e-commerce giant Alibaba, the conglomerate Tencent and the ride-sharing company Didi.

Xi Jinping's decision to rein in the market is driven by several factors, ranging from his personal ambition to win a third term as President, to pressure from the Communist Party of China to establish more control over key economic sectors, and the structural slowdown of the Chinese economy, which makes it necessary to introduce new guidelines for the redistribution of wealth. But external factors have probably just accelerated a transformation that was already under way. Ever since Donald Trump's arrival in the White House, first the US and then Europe have taken an increasingly antagonistic stance towards Beijing, prompting it to adopt a more isolationist strategy, as illustrated by its "dual circulation strategy", intended to promote domestic demand and limit dependence on Western technologies.

To date, Joe Biden has done little to reassure his Chinese counterpart. On the contrary, his administration has been quite explicit in its view that the economic engagement policies of the past three decades have run their course. In general, his approach has been even more aggressive than that of Trump, who attacked allies and enemies alike, without distinction. Biden, by contrast, is mobilising all America's allies to put up a united front against China.

Colliding Transitions

In some respects, Western and Chinese capitalism are evolving in a similar way. In both cases, the state is taking back a leading role in the economy at the expense of the market. The structural challenges are similar: inequality, green transition and digital revolution. What is different is the spirit and method with which

they are being tackled. China's transition is very ideological, replete with socialist rhetoric that translates words into deeds with increasing frequency. It is important not to forget that, according to the Maoist-style development theories embraced by Xi Jinping, state capitalism is an intermediate phase en route to achieving the socialist ideal. At the same time, issues such as rising inequality and the market power of certain companies are resolved abruptly, opaquely and often also brutally. In the West, by contrast, democratic decision-making processes inevitably involve long reaction times, which can often lead to sub-optimal outcomes.

The biggest mistake we can make is to let the two capitalist models evolve independently of each other, with each one solving similar challenges in diametrically opposed ways, and returning the world to the Cold War era, when two incompatible systems faced off against each other, without any form of integration. Preserving dialogue between the two worlds, by recognising and accepting the specific characteristics of each, is the key to ensuring that the benefits of capitalism's transformation towards a more sustainable model are not compromised by the emergence of unbridgeable gaps between the two, often directly opposing, versions of modern capitalism.

3. The Crisis of Democracy and the Risk of an Authoritarian Tide

Andrea Cassani

The Spectre of an Authoritarian Tide

The Great Transition that the international system has been undergoing in recent years has been fuelled in part by processes of political and institutional change taking place within states and concerning the nature – whether democratic or authoritarian – of their governance.

The last quarter of the XX century saw the unleashing of what Samuel Huntington called a "wave of democratisation".[1] More specifically, Huntington saw this as the third wave of democratic reforms in history, following up on the first wave, which developed as the XIX century gave way to the 20th, and the second wave on the heels of World War II. The third wave began in southern Europe in the mid-1970s, with the democratic transitions in Spain, Portugal, and Greece, and subsequently extended to Latin America and several Asian countries, and finally numerous post-Communist and sub-Saharan countries after the end of the Cold War.

The global scope of the third wave led to widespread optimism about the future of democracy. Starting in the first years of the

[1] S. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

XXI century, however, the fear arose that the democratic wave could be followed by an authoritarian tide, and that some of the new democracies could backslide to repressive and despotic forms of government. This is a legitimate fear, since all previous democratisation waves have been followed by an authoritarian backslide, both between the two world wars and in the period between the late 1950s and the early 1970s.

But are we really experiencing an authoritarian tide? To answer this question, this chapter will try to provide empirical evidence in support of this hypothesis and will discuss how and why regime transitions from democracy to autocracy take place, with a particular focus on the possible consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Democracy, Autocracy, and Regime Transitions in the Last Decade

Fears of a new authoritarian tide began to arise in the early 2000s. The still-vague "worrying signals" noted by the Freedom House think tank back in 2005 – including the rapid reconsolidation of authoritarianism in Russia and other former Soviet republics, combined with the events in Hugo Chavez's Venezuela – quickly turned into more explicit alarms concerning the "retreat of democracy".[2] Indeed, in the years that followed we witnessed the return of military rule in countries such as Thailand, the re-emergence of strongmen in a number of sub-Saharan states, the rapid unravelling of the so-called Arab Spring, and the deterioration of democracy in several Eastern European countries.

A look at empirical evidence can help us better understand the true breadth of this phenomenon. Based on data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) research institute drawn

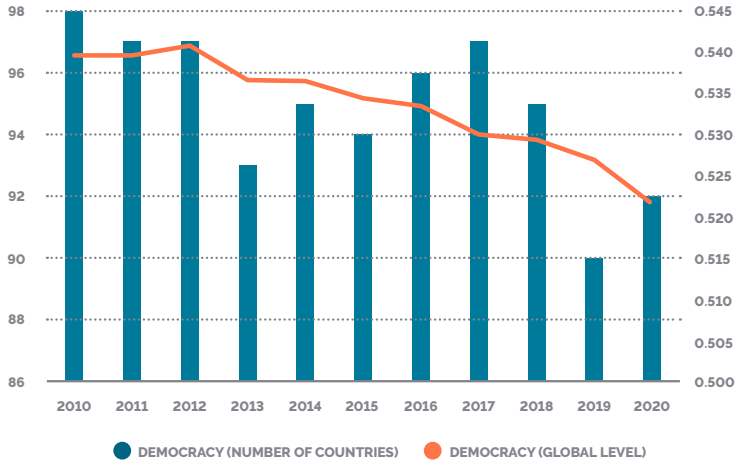
[2] A. Puddington e A. Piano, "Worrisome Signs, Modest Shifts", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2005, pp. 103-08; A. Puddington, "The Erosion Accelerates", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2010, pp.136-50.

from a sample of 174 countries (all internationally-recognised sovereign states, with the exception of micro-states), Figure 3.1 provides an overview of the state of democracy worldwide over the last decade, from 2010 to 2020 (the last year for which data is available). The V-Dem institute measures democracy using an index that ranges from 0 to 1, and takes into account five key characteristics: electability of public officials, extension of the right to vote, fairness of elections, freedom of assembly, and freedom of speech and free press. Countries with an index higher than 0.5 and whose elections are deemed "free and fair" are considered democracies.

Figure 3.1 shows an evident negative trend that has accelerated in the last five years. Over the course of ten years, the global level of democracy (continuous line, right-hand axis) decreased by 3.7%. At the same time, the number of democratic countries (vertical bars, left-hand axis) dropped from 98 in 2010 (56% of the countries considered) to 92 in 2020 (53%), while non-democratic or autocratic countries increased from 76 to 82.

In other words, the world we live in today is less democratic and more authoritarian than it was ten years ago. But what do today's autocracies look like? Broadly speaking, they are developing countries with large populations. The V-Dem institute estimates that at the end of 2020 about 68% of the world's population lived in authoritarian countries. China, Russia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and starting in 2019 India as well, account for the lion's share. Additionally, about 64% of autocracies are medium-low or low-income countries.

FIG. 3.1 - DEMOCRACY AROUND THE WORLD, 2010-2020



Source: Varieties of Democracy, The V-Dem Dataset. Data re-elaborated by the author

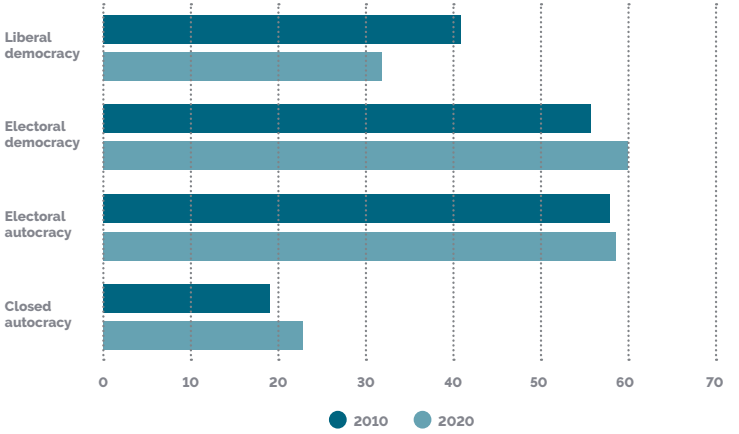
Referring once again to the 2010-20 period, Figure 3.2 looks at certain specific types of political regime. It identifies two varieties each of democracy and autocracy, and measures their diffusion in 2010 and 2020. Among democracies, *liberal* democracies are different from *electoral* democracies since in addition to ensuring free and fair elections, they also ensure a greater degree of protection of citizens' rights and place constraints on government power. *Electoral* autocracies, on the other hand, differ from *closed* autocracies in allowing opposition parties to participate in elections, whose outcomes, however, are manipulated.

According to Figure 3.2, in 2010 about one-quarter (24%) of states worldwide – 41 countries – met the standards of a liberal democracy. This is one of the highest totals ever, but it also represents the peak after which a rather radical turnaround took place. Ten years later, in 2020, there were only 32 liberal democracies (18% of all countries). In the meantime, electoral democracies grew from 57 to 60. Comparing these results with

those in Figure 1, we can see that not only did the number of democracies worldwide decrease between 2010 and 2020, but the "quality" of these democracies also deteriorated: in 2010, 42% of all democratic countries met the standards of a liberal democracy, but in 2020 only 35% did.

More worries emerge if we shift our attention to the two varieties of autocracy detailed in Figure 3.2. Not only has the total number of autocracies increased (mirroring the decrease in democracies shown in Figure 1), but this increase has mostly concerned closed autocracies, which have increased from 19 to 23 in the space of ten years (from 11% to 13% of all countries), while the number of electoral autocracies has remained essentially the same. This means that between 2010 and 2020 non-democratic regimes have become more repressive.

FIG. 3.2 - VARIETIES OF DEMOCRACY AND AUTOCRACY, 2010-2020



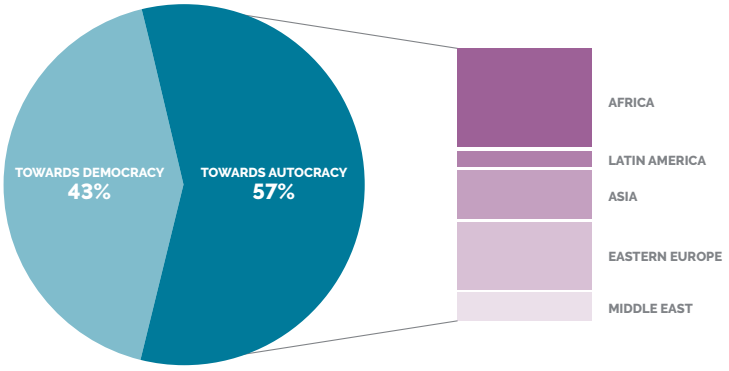
Source: Varieties of Democracy, The V-Dem Dataset. Data re-elaborated by the author

Figure 3.3 sheds light on another specific aspect of this issue, namely regime transitions from autocracy to democracy or vice-versa. Out of a total of 46 regime changes between 2010 and 2020, the majority (57%, or 26 of them) were transitions

to autocracy. This is perhaps the most evident sign of the authoritarian tide we are currently experiencing. Huntington defined a wave of democratisation as a period during which transitions to democracy outnumbered transitions to autocracy: during the last decade, however, transitions to autocracy have been the majority.

With reference to transitions to autocracy, the bar graph on the right hand of Figure 3.3 shows that the current authoritarian tide has mostly affected two regions, sub-Saharan Africa with 9 transitions to autocracy, and Eastern Europe (including the Balkans) with 7. In this regard, it is worth noting that the two regions most affected by the current authoritarian tide are also the last to have been reached by the third wave of democratisation in the 1990s. We can thus conclude that most transitions to autocracy in the last decade took place in relatively young and unconsolidated democracies.

FIG. 3.3 - DEMOCRATIC AND AUTOCRATIC TRANSITIONS, 2010-2020



Source: Varieties of Democracy, The V-Dem Dataset. Data re-elaborated by the author

The Origins of the Authoritarian Tide: Recession and Disaffection

While the data confirms that the world is currently experiencing an authoritarian tide, the causes of recent transitions to autocracy and the manner in which they have taken place remain to be fully understood. With regards to these two issues, there are both similarities and differences compared to authoritarian backslides in the XX century.

When discussing their causes, it must be kept in mind that democracy, autocracy, and the processes that lead to one or the other are complex phenomena that cannot be boiled down to one or a few factors, especially when trying to explain multiple events that took place in a variety of disparate contexts. Without trying to be exhaustive, we can still identify the economy as a factor that has historically influenced the destiny of democracy, for better or worse. For example, the Great Depression of the 1930s has commonly been identified as one of the causes of the authoritarian tide in the period between the two world wars, while the oil shocks of the 1970s contributed to the fall of many dictatorships during the third wave of democratisation.

By the same token, we can identify the Great Recession that began around 2007 as a key factor to explain the events we are examining here. First of all, the Great Recession's impact in terms of job losses, impoverishment, and increasing inequalities created significant discontent among the citizens of many countries. Additionally, the recession hit democracies harder than it did autocracies, or at least this is the general perception, shaped in part by the ability of autocratic regimes to conceal domestic turmoil from the eyes of the world, and by the enviable economic performance of a few of these countries, including China.

This has engendered a feeling of "democratic disaffection" in many democracies, especially newer ones that have not yet found solid footing. A growing number of their citizens has begun to see democracy – and with it, political pluralism, the protection of the rights of all, and checks on government power

– as hindering the solution of problems that would instead require a concentration of power, rapid decision making, and choices on which categories of citizens should be prioritised in terms of addressing their needs. All of this adds up to more authoritarianism. This growing perception of the inadequacy of democracy has in turn facilitated the rise to power of political parties and leaders that promise exactly this, from Viktor Orban in Hungary to El Salvador's Nayib Bukele, and from the outgoing President of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte to Narendra Modi in India, just to name a few.

In fact, the emergence in the political arena of these "new autocrats" or aspiring autocrats, and the strategies they have adopted, also betrays a key difference between the current authoritarian tide and those of the XX century. As highlighted by Nancy Bermeo,[3] the newest authoritarian transitions tend to be less blatant than those of the past: instead of seeing the sudden collapse of democratic institutions in the wake of a coup, we are increasingly witnessing their gradual deterioration as the powers of the head of government are expanded, checks and balances are weakened, and elections are manipulated, while remaining, at least formally, the means through which modern autocrats attempt to legitimise their power.

An Authoritarian Pandemic?

Our discussion of the authoritarian tide that affects the early XXI century must leave room for the role being played by the Covid-19 pandemic that began in early 2020 and is still ongoing. What are the effects of the pandemic, now and in the future, on the stability of contemporary democratic regimes? Will it give further impetus to the current authoritarian tide, or will it instead prove to be a turning point that re-launches democracy worldwide?

[3] N. Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2016, pp. 5-19.

For starters, it is clear that in the short term, the pandemic – and the lockdowns that countries as disparate as Italy and China imposed to contain its spread – have led to significant constraints on the individual and political liberties that citizens of democratic countries normally take for granted, such as freedom of movement and of assembly. Many parliaments have also seen their roles reduced as governments needed to take urgent decisions. In light of the "state of emergency" created by the pandemic, these and other exceptions to the normal functioning of democracy are justified (or justifiable) only to the extent to which they are proportionate, necessary, and non-discriminatory. Nevertheless, declaring a state of emergency provides governments with an opportunity to take advantage of their greater authority and reduced checks and balances to consolidate their power and repress dissent and political opposition.

The risk that the Covid-19 pandemic could have such consequences is a source for concern for some of the main organizations monitoring the state of democracy worldwide, such as the above-mentioned Freedom House and Varieties of Democracy.[4] Their timely assessments have shown that some of these fears were founded, and highlighted two main problems. The first concerns limitations of freedom of expression, and particularly on a free press, under the pretext of preventing the dissemination of fake news on the pandemic and its management. Additionally, containment measures in some countries were applied through an excessive recourse to violence and in a manner that discriminated against certain social categories.

At the same time, while the pandemic contributed to a further decline in global democracy and liberty, the studies carried out by Freedom House and Varieties of Democracy also seem to suggest that democracies and autocracies managed the

[4] S. Repucci e A. Slipowitz, *Democracy under siege*, Freedom House, 2021; Varieties of Democracy, *Autocratization turns viral*, Democracy Report 2021, marzo 2021.

pandemic using rather different methods. In particular, abuses of powers mostly took place in countries that were undemocratic even before the pandemic. In most cases then, those who exploited the pandemic and the state of emergency to heighten repression of their opponents were either dictatorships (such as Belarus, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia) or regimes that aspire more or less openly to that dubious distinction (including Sri Lanka, El Salvador, and Serbia). On the other hands, governments in countries where democracy has solid roots – from Canada to Taiwan, from New Zealand to Botswana – have managed (or tried to manage) the pandemic with measures that were adopted in accordance with the rule of law, and any limitations on civil liberties were minor and non-systematic.

Conclusion: Good News and Bad

Must we resign ourselves to living in a world that is less democratic than it was in the past? How far will the authoritarian tide of the last decade extend in space (i.e. in how many countries) and time (i.e. for how long)? The analysis presented in this chapter paints a mixed picture, with several positive developments among the many worrying signals, and a number of question marks.

On the one hand, we must conclude that we are indeed transitioning towards a world in which the number of undemocratic regimes is higher than in the recent past. Also worrying is the fact that autocracies outnumber democracies among the world's most populous countries. This fact, coupled with the gap in socio-economic development in favour of democracies, may also have major consequences on global migration flows, putting additional pressure on democratic governments.

On the other hand, it must be kept in mind that although the world is less democratic than it was ten years ago, democratic countries continue to outnumber autocratic ones. Additionally, we have seen that the most advanced and consolidated democracies seem to be largely immune from this authoritarian

tide, which has most affected countries in which democratic institutions were already fragile or at least rather new.

These last cases should be evaluated in light of the fact that the consolidation of democracy is a fraught and drawn-out process. Indeed, some of the most stable democracies in the current era – including Germany, Spain, and Portugal – underwent a democratisation process in the XX century that often stalled and was rife with hiccups and changes in course. In other words, what may initially look like the restoration of authoritarianism in certain young democracies may, in the long run, merely prove to be a transitory phase in a democratisation process.

In this regard, the fact that the current authoritarian tide has only rarely resulted in the cancellation of elections is an additional cause for hope. The "survival" of elections as a tool through which most modern autocrats attempt to legitimise their power – the electoral manipulations they attempt notwithstanding – will periodically open a window of opportunity for democratic forces in their countries.

Finally, having already discussed the short-term consequences of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, we must still consider the challenges and uncertainties in the mid and long run that will be engendered by the management of the economic and social problems created by the pandemic in democratic and authoritarian countries worldwide. The ability to meet these challenges effectively will influence the legitimacy of both governments and the political institutions they represent. While a successful management of the pandemic and the post-pandemic phase may have positive repercussions on the stability of both democracies and autocracies, a failure in this regard would fuel discontent. In countries where the erosion of democracy is already underway, this could be the final nail in the coffin, but in authoritarian countries it might revive pro-democracy movements.

4. Climate and Energy Transition

Marzio Galeotti

In the fight against climate change, last year was the most significant since 2015, when the Paris agreement was signed. 2021 was the year of Italy's presidency of the G20, which put the planet at the heart of its agenda and marked an important staging post on the road to COP26 in Glasgow. The run-up to the annual United Nations Climate Change Conference held in November generated high expectations, and while the verdicts on the conference's outcome were not unanimous, the glass was more half full than half empty. A few months earlier, on 9 August, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published the first part of its Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) on the physical science basis of climate. The IPCC raised a new alarm, by confirming that many of the changes observed are unprecedented: not only have they not been seen in the past few thousand years, they have not been seen in the past few hundred thousand years.

Above all, 2021 was the year of Europe. In June, the Council adopted its position, at first reading, on the European climate law, thus setting into legislation the objective of a climate-neutral EU by 2050. This is one of the first and perhaps most significant acts of the European Green deal – the overarching strategy of the European Commission under the presidency of Ursula von der Leyen – aimed at turning the EU into a "modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy, ensuring no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050, economic growth decoupled from resource use, and no person and no place left behind." Within

this framework, the European Commission then adopted the "Fit for 55" climate package in July, which contains legislative proposals designed to cut emissions by 55% compared with their 1990 levels, by 2030.

The goal of climate neutrality became the mantra of 2021 and, under the impetus of the EU, prompted many other countries to announce similar resolutions before and during the Glasgow conference. In May, the International Energy Agency (IEA) presented its "Net Zero by 2050"[1] report, providing a roadmap for the global energy sector. The term "Net Zero Emissions" (NZE) has escaped the confines of the world of IPCC experts and scientists, and entered the vocabulary of politicians, observers and other stakeholders. Even more importantly, the terms "energy transition", "green transition" and "ecological transition" are now heard in the media, debates and even public opinion. It looks crystal clear to everyone that the fight against climate change, which is starting to have serious adverse effects in various parts of the world, will lead to a profound change that is set to revolutionise economic activities, international trade and relations, and social interaction. The root cause of climate change, namely the burning of fossil energy sources, whose emissions fuel the phenomenon, remains the starting point. It is imperative to gradually cut our use of fossil energy sources and replace them with other sources capable of performing the same crucial function, i.e. supplying the fuel for the economic system on whose operation and growth our well-being depends.

To do this, we need to embark on a pathway of radical change, which is now commonly known as the energy transition. As is often the case when technical terms enter everyday language, their precise meaning can be lost. It is therefore worth starting with an explanation of what is meant by energy transition, to give us a clearer idea of the scale of the challenge facing humanity today.

[1] *Net Zero by 2050. A Roadmap for the Global Energy Sector*, International Energy Agency (IEA), October 2021.

What Does "Energy Transition" Mean?

When we talk about transition, we mean a progressive, supposedly radical, change from one system to a new and different one. Since the goal is decarbonisation, it falls to the energy system and, by extension, the production system to undertake this profound change. Energy prices, new technologies, the effects of climate-related environmental policies, flows of credit and finance, and business risk and performance are all affected by the energy transition.

Energy is the object of the energy transition, because the industrial use of energy makes it possible to transform raw materials into finished products or goods and to supply services to society and humankind directly. As such, energy is the driver of development and plays a key role in improving the welfare and living standards of human beings.

A whistle-stop tour of the history of energy reminds us that it always used to come from renewable sources: fire, the power of humans and animals, the power of wind and water, and biomass like wood, which was burnt to heat homes and cook food in the ancient and medieval world.

The use of fossil energy sources is a recent chapter in human history. The age of coal, which has been known and used as a fuel since 1200, began in the mid-1600s, while oil was first distilled in 1650 to obtain a product for degreasing cart wheels and fuelling the first oil lamps. But the real energy revolution began with the invention of the Papin steam digester in 1680 and the Watt steam engine in 1765. Society became increasingly dependent on the energy-generating raw materials it needed to power production machinery. Technological progress accelerated in the XIX century with the invention of the first electric motor by Joseph Henry in 1831, and the first steam turbines and power stations in 1882. The first hydroelectric power stations were developed at the foot of waterfalls at around this time, and the commercial production of cars started in the early XX century, thus driving further consumption of oil for the production of petrol and other fuels.

This brief historical excursion illustrates an important fact. Human well-being is heavily dependent on energy services, such as heating, lighting, transport, cooking and communication. Schematically speaking, these services are the result of a combination of energy sources and technologies capable of transforming them. For example, solar radiation is converted into electricity by the cells of photovoltaic panels; electricity is transmitted via the grid to homes, which it illuminates with the light generated by light-bulbs; crude oil is extracted from underground oil fields and sent by ship or overland pipeline to refineries, where it is turned into fuel for motor vehicles. It is then transported by tanker to service stations, where it is pumped into the fuel tanks of vehicles, before being burned in their internal combustion engines and transformed into the kinetic energy that powers them.

The complex chain in which these transformations take place is the energy system that the energy transition is intended to change. The energy transition therefore involves gradually reducing the use of fossil energy sources in favour of emission-free sources, and the development and spread of processing technologies that make efficient, economical use of alternative sources, as well as technologies that remove or eliminate the emissions generated by traditional sources.

One, Many or No Energy Transitions

Humans have lived through many energy transitions: they have learned to produce and control fire, they have domesticated animals such as oxen, horses and camels, they have harnessed the wind to sail and grind, and they have channelled rivers through canals and mills, and harnessed the power of their currents and waterfalls. It was the combination of fossil energy sources and machines that changed everything. According to the energy historian Vaclav Smil, global energy consumption increased about 15-fold between 1850 and 2000. This expansion was neither uniform nor gradual, because the mix of

fossil energy sources during this process changed significantly, giving rise to an energy transition each time. Coal did not overtake traditional biomass in energy consumption until the 1900s, and it was not until 1950 – a century after the first commercial oil well was drilled – that oil's share of primary energy consumption rose to 25%. From this point of view, the global growth of new renewable energy sources, solar and wind, has not been outstandingly quick. Their share has almost doubled in 25 years, at an average annual growth rate of about 3%, compared with 5% for coal between 1850 and 1870, 8% for oil between 1880 and 1900, and 6% for natural gas between 1920 and 1940. While the last century witnessed multiple transitions to and from various fuels and technologies, however, today's challenge is one of scale, given the levels of global energy consumption, which are 10 times higher than in 1919, and growing steadily. What's more, the world's energy mix has not changed substantially: fossil fuels still accounted for 81% of the total in 2019, just as they did in 1990, while renewables have gained only one percentage point since then, rising from 13% to 14%. As a result, the carbon intensity of 2.32 tonnes of CO_2 (TCO_2) per tonne of oil equivalent (TOE) recorded in 1990 only dropped to 2.13 tonnes in 2019.

The "new" energy transition, which humanity is now called upon to make, therefore stands out for its scale and difficulty. Decarbonisation requires a much broader and faster transition than before, given that 80% more fossil energy sources will have to be replaced with renewable or alternative sources, and that energy will have to be supplied to a growing population and to the poor populations that do not currently have access to it.

Today's energy transition is different from past transitions. At the risk of oversimplifying, past changes were mainly caused by demand for new services that only a specific source could supply, such as automotive fuels. The growth in renewable sources that we are seeing today is not due to different electrons from the ones obtained by burning coal. Today's change is driven by government policies, which in turn are driven by the growing

climate crisis. Climate change is therefore the underlying driver of the major change in the global energy system that we now need to make. This is the essential new feature of the current era.

The Need for Decarbonisation

The facts are now all too familiar. With a world energy mix made up of 80.2% fossil sources and 11.2% solar and wind power in 2019, 120 million TOE are consumed annually by the current industrial economies, which in turn translates into 36.7 billion TCO_2 "shot" into the atmosphere. Subtracting the portion non-degraded or removed by ocean and forest sinks, the earth's "digestive system" absorbs just over 53% of man-made emissions, leaving the rest in the atmosphere, which heat it and alter the climate system.

A quick inventory of these changes includes, first and foremost, global warming, but also rising sea levels, ocean acidification, melting polar ice, reduced snow coverage in mountain areas, changes in the frequency and intensity of rainfall, increased drought and desertification, extreme events such as heat waves, and changes in the power and frequency of tropical cyclones (hurricanes and typhoons). All these phenomena have serious repercussions on human beings and their economic and social activities. These repercussions are numerous and affect every area of life, including health, food security – due to their adverse effects on agricultural yields – and the quality and quantity of water and water resources. They also impact on human settlements, especially in coastal areas and around the deltas of major rivers, while reducing the protection of marine, freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems, and altering traditional production practices in multiple sectors, including energy, industry, financial and insurance services, healthcare and even national security, due to the risk of conflict over vital resources that could break out between intra-national communities, between neighbouring countries or even on an international scale.

Climate change is a global phenomenon insofar as it affects the entire planet, but its consequences are not geographically uniform. The difference in the type and intensity of impact is one of the factors that increases the difficulty of taking decisive action, coordinated between all countries. The other main problem is that the effects build up gradually over the long and very long term, with the result that what we are seeing now is just the tip of the iceberg, and the most devastating consequences will be borne by future generations. The second major obstacle to decisive collective action is generational egoism – action needs to be taken today to secure benefits tomorrow and beyond – compounded by the inevitable uncertainty associated with the evaluation of future effects. Furthermore, we cannot rule out the possibility – nor do we know how remote that possibility might be – that "tipping points" with catastrophic consequences could be reached. These include the melting of terrestrial ice from the western Antarctic to Greenland, the meridional overturning circulation in the Atlantic Ocean, the thawing of permafrost, the destabilisation of methane hydrates, coral bleaching and the destruction of the Amazon rainforest. All these possibilities make it more urgent to take far-reaching action.

Climate economists are faced with the arduous task of making a monetary valuation of the benefits of decisive policy action to combat climate change and the costs of inaction or inadequate action. There is now a substantial literature on the subject, including the famous Stern Review, for example, whose main conclusion in 2008 was that 2% of world GDP needs to be invested annually if we are to avoid the worst consequences of climate change, which, in the absence of intervention, could cut world GDP by 20%. The recipe is therefore clear: decisive action needs to be taken without delay.

The ultimate goal is to limit the average global temperature increase, which as recently as 2014 was still being quantified as +2°C compared with pre-industrial levels. According to the IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report from that same year, this would

require a 40-70% cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 and "Net Zero" by 2100. Awareness of the need to respond to climate change and counter its effects, however, has increased and become clearer over the years, as a result of progress in scientific knowledge. By the time the IPCC published its Special Report entitled "Global Warming of 1.5°C" in 2018, the targets had become more stringent, and involved limiting the temperature rise to +1.5°C and therefore achieving net zero emissions (NZE), in other words carbon neutrality, by 2050.

This turbocharged the political decision-making process at both national and international level, partly in view of manifestations of the first – although not yet the most devastating – effects of climate change. The inventory of climate-related events that have occurred over the past few years includes 50 million hectares of land in flames in Australia, record summer temperatures in the northern hemisphere, record fire outbreaks in California, the foreseeable opening of the North-West passage due to the retreat of Arctic ice, so many hurricanes that the US has run out of names for them all, record summer flooding in China, the worst drought in Thailand in 40 years, heat waves thawing out Siberia, and the devastation of cyclone Amphan in India. All these events, which have already taken a heavy toll in human lives lost and financial costs, make mitigation imperative, without ruling out adaptive measures.

Towards Net Zero Emissions

Following the "running-in" period of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the second and so far most important international agreement on combating climate change has now been reached, in the form of the 2015 Paris Agreement. Reiterating the minimum target of limiting the average global temperature rise to "well below 2 degrees centigrade" compared with pre-industrial levels by the end of the century, COP21 in France also asked the parties to do everything possible "to avoid exceeding 1.5 degrees". This formed the basis for the process that will lead – and to

some extent is already leading – to a radical transformation of energy systems, by gradually weaning the world off fossil energy sources.

The EU once again stood out in this process of momentous change, having already set a target of cutting emissions by 80-95% compared with 1990 levels by 2050 in its 2011 "Roadmap for moving to a competitive low-carbon economy in 2050". The EU will also be the first to translate the Paris commitments into the precise and more stringent target of achieving climate neutrality by 2050. To serve this purpose, it has revised the strategy it launched in 2007-09, consisting of quantitative targets for emissions, renewable energy sources and energy efficiency for each Member State, by formulating a package of proposals in July 2021 under the name "Fit for 55". In the wake of this, in the run-up to and during COP26 in Glasgow, many other countries, including the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases, announced their own NZE intentions and targets. In November 2021, the United Nations reported that over 130 countries had adopted or were considering adopting an NZE target for 2050.

The energy transition therefore now has a clear target in terms of when (2050) and how much (net zero). This is an extremely important factor as far as international climate policy is concerned, although there are of course many different paths to achieving the target, and the debate on the costs, as well as the benefits of the transition, remains ongoing. This was the issue that experts and politicians grappled with this year, especially in the run-up to the Glasgow conference. On the strength of its prestige and dependability, the IEA report published in May triggered intense international debate on a range of matters, including certain implications that sent shock-waves through the energy industry and the governments of energy-rich countries. Space does not permit an in-depth analysis of the report here, but the basis of it is this: the energy system is currently the source of about three-quarters of all greenhouse-gas emissions, so it is clearly the energy system that

holds the key to avoiding the worst effects of climate change. This requires nothing less than a complete transformation of how we currently produce, transport and consume energy.

The road to NZE is narrow: to remain on it, we need to adopt all the available clean and efficient energy technologies immediately and at scale. The IEA estimates that the world economy in 2030 will be about 40% bigger than it is now, but will consume 7% less energy. This will require a huge global effort to increase energy efficiency at three times the average rate of the past two decades.

The falling cost of renewable energy technologies gives electricity an advantage in the race to NZE, which it could achieve as early as 2040. Electricity will therefore play a key role in all sectors, from transport to construction and industry. By 2050, it is estimated that electricity will account for 50% of total final energy consumption, as against 21% in 2018. By that date, 90% of the total electricity requirement will be met from renewable sources, followed by 6% from natural gas and the rest from nuclear power. A further 8% of final energy will be indirect electricity, in the form of synthetic fuels and hydrogen. Between now and the end of 2030, solar and wind power are set to increase at four times the record rate set in 2020. In transport, the share of electric vehicles will rise from around 5% of global sales to over 60% by 2030, while on the fossil-fuel front, net zero means huge cuts in the use of coal, oil and gas, and calling off the search for new oil fields. The world's daily oil consumption, which is currently over 95 million barrels, will have to fall to around 22 million barrels by 2050. This will require changes such as stopping the sale of new internal combustion engine cars by 2035 and phasing out all coal-fired and oil-fired power stations by 2040. Achieving the NZE target therefore requires a huge financial effort. Taking account of all public and private actors and all forms of finance, the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA)[2] estimates

[2] *World Energy Transitions Outlook: 1.5°C Pathway*, International Renewable Energy

that investments in renewable sources, energy efficiency and electrification, which amounted to US$2,000 billion per year in 2019, will have to reach 5,700 billion per year in the decade 2021-30 and 3,700 billion per year between 2031 and 2050. In fact, investors and the financial markets are already anticipating the energy transition, and have started reallocating capital to applications unconnected with fossil energy sources and to transition technologies, such as those based on renewable sources.

The transition to NZE is also expected to yield benefits. It will create millions of new jobs, with IRENA estimating that the "new" energy system alone will generate 122 million jobs by 2050. It will also boost global economic growth, to the tune of +2.4% over the next decade and an average of +1.2% throughout the transition to 2050. New low-emission industries will flourish, on the basis of technologies that are not yet fully available on today's market. But in 2050, almost half of the cut in emissions will have to come from technologies that are currently under demonstration or at the prototype stage. Major innovative efforts will have to be made over the course of this decade to bring these new technologies to market in time.

The Difficulties of the Transition

Achieving this cleaner, healthier future will require a unique degree of focus and unprecedented determination from all governments, in close conjunction with businesses, investors and citizens. It will also require closer international cooperation between countries, aimed particularly at ensuring that developing economies have the funding and technologies they need to reach net zero in time.

The global energy transition driven by renewable energy will have major geopolitical implications. Relations between countries will change significantly, and the world that emerges

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Agency (IRENA), Abu Dhabi, 2021.

from the transition will be very different from the one built on fossil fuels. According to a recent IRENA report,[3] power will become more decentralised and widely spread: the influence of some countries, such as China, will increase, because they have invested heavily in renewable technologies and have developed their ability to reap the opportunities they create, whereas countries that are heavily dependent on fossil-fuel exports, such as Saudi Arabia, will face risks and lose influence unless they adapt to the energy transition. Supplying energy will no longer be the job of a limited number of countries, because most nations have the potential to achieve energy independence, thereby enhancing their development and security. Although the precise scale and pace of energy transition cannot be predicted, its impact on countries, communities and companies will be profound. However, the transition will yield considerable benefits and opportunities, by boosting the energy security and energy independence of most countries and promoting prosperity and job creation.

Convincing crucial countries, such as India and Indonesia, for example, that these benefits are attainable, is a very difficult task. These countries are still a long way from the turning point at which growth enters the self-perpetuating stage, where – thanks to advanced technologies, energy efficiency and reformed lifestyles underpinned by new public awareness – the pursuit of material well-being and the containment of environmental impact become mutually compatible goals. These criteria apply to Europe, which cut its emissions by 23% between 1990 and 2019, while its GDP grew by 61%. This is the real point that makes major countries that generate high levels of pollution reluctant to quickly and decisively follow the path opened up by Europe. Countries that derive a significant share of their wealth from fossil energy – which include a disparate range of players, from Saudi Arabia to Australia – fear for their future

[3] *A New World: The Geopolitics of the Energy Transformation*, International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), January 2019.

and therefore wish to defer the moment at which they have to make even more difficult choices than cutting emissions.

If these are the underlying knots, untying them will be extremely difficult. We must hope that politics and society will make the energy transition quickly enough to outpace the dramatic changes that the climate has in store. But no-one has a crystal ball to see what will happen. We can only find out by living.

5. Back to the Future? The Ghost of R2P and the Dilemmas of the Global Order

Luca Scuccimarra

The disputes and difficulties of 2021 overshadowed a long list of anniversaries, one of which was undoubtedly the 20th anniversary of *Responsibility to Protect*, which started life in late 2001 as an internationalist doctrine developed by the independent experts of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), and went on to become part of the official regulatory and institutional framework of the United Nations. Indeed, public discourse over the past few months has paid precious little attention to the controversial events associated with this ambitious invention of international politics and the significance that it is now due, exactly 20 years since its first appearance. None of this, furthermore, seems to have carved out any space for itself in the wider public debate on international issues, as evidenced by the essential absence of any reference to the subject in the already lean internationalist agenda of the mediatised western democracies. This silence is disappointing, in view of the knot of complex, unresolved systemic issues – of a "legal, moral, operational and political"[1] nature – that the model in question is still capable of illuminating for anyone who has the patience – and courage – to get to grips with its deepest, albeit still unresolved, regulatory and design content.

[1] G. Evans and M. Sahnoun, *Foreword*, in ICISS, *The Responsibility To Protect. Report of the International Commission on State Sovereignty and Intervention*, Ottawa, International Development Research Center, 2001, p. vii.

The Origins of R2P

To gain a full understanding of how far this approach still raises questions about the present day, we must go back to the specific circumstances in which it was drawn up, in a pre-9/11 world still dominated by the face-off between the expansionary power of a broadly liberal-democratic *cosmopolitan rights regime* and the *sovereigntism ante-litteram* that the controversial outcomes of the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo had triggered in many non-Western actors – first and foremost Russia and China. The aim of the original version of the *Responsibility to Protect* doctrine, developed by the members of ICISS, was to bring stability and clarity of vision to the "humanitarian turn" that international politics had taken in the 1990s as a key component of the "new order" of globalisation, while at the same time decoupling it from the extrinsic – and often destabilising – decision-making dynamics that characterise the traditional "international society of states". And the proposed route to achieving this purpose was to build an open, layered system of *shared responsibilities*, centred on an eminently *functional* redefinition of the traditional concept of "sovereignty" that underpins the so-called "Westphalia System", but also characterised by the establishment of a far-reaching form of *international responsibility to protect* designed to come into play specifically when states fail to fulfil the duties of protection that bind them to their own citizens. The ICISS Report sums up this system effectively in the principle of "*sovereignty as responsibility*", which the Commission's members presented as a "necessary re-characterisation" of the concept that in some way reflected the major political and legal changes that had arisen in the international order since the end of the Second World War.[2]

But the stated objectives of the 2001 report also included the goal of going beyond a public discourse centred obsessively "on the act of intervention", to consider a much broader set

[2] Ivi, pp. 17 s.

of humanitarian protection measures, which, if properly implemented, could reduce the frequency of recourse to the military option. For its purposes, therefore, "responsibility to protect" does not simply mean "responsibility to react" to high-profile humanitarian crises, but also "responsibility to prevent" and "responsibility to rebuild", in line with a multi-faceted functional sequence designed to draw the attention of the agents of international politics to the "costs and results of action versus no action", by providing the necessary "conceptual, normative and operational linkages between assistance, intervention and reconstruction". With this approach, the members of ICISS definitively distanced themselves from the polarised field of tensions previously generated by the aggressive and, at least partly, ideological language of the "right of intervention" that typified the "military humanitarianism" of the 1990s.

Protect or Dominate?

To reconstruct the political and legal legacy of this model, we inevitably need to take account of the fluid and multi-faceted ideological context – characterised in particular by the emergence of new "repressive" and "punitive" paradigms of absolute legitimisation of the use of force – triggered by 9/11 and the nascent dynamics of the *global war on terror*. From this point of view, to avoid undue conflation, we need to draw a clear dividing line between the theoretical and institutional path of "Responsibility to Protect" in the early years of the new century, and the paths of the extrinsic, and entirely instrumental "humanitarian rhetoric", which, with effect from the invasion of Iraq at least, gradually established itself as a stable component of the propaganda arsenal of the US Administration and others. Rather than playing out in the arena of mediatised global politics, however, the history of R2P unfolded mainly in the interstices of the "UN system", through a series of complex procedural steps aimed at laying the groundwork for the formal adoption

of this doctrine by the "international community".[3] This process reached completion at the United Nations World Summit in September 2005, whose final paper explicitly mentions – albeit in a decidedly "watered down" form according to some analysts[4] – the key regulatory priorities set down a few years earlier in the ICISS report, namely the recognition that "all states have a responsibility to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity"; that the international community, through the United Nations, has a duty to assist individual states in fulfilling these responsibilities, using all the "diplomatic and humanitarian instruments" established in Chapters VI and VIII of the UN Charter; and that, where a state manifestly fails to assume its responsibilities towards its citizens, the international community has a duty to intervene "decisively and promptly", including through the use of military force, to protect the populations in question against extreme forms of mass violence.[5]

The sequel to this story revolves around the effort – by Ban Ki-moon, Kofi Annan's successor as Secretary-General – to "operationalise" the model by gradually reinstating, at the UN, the modular scheme of shared responsibility originally devised by ICISS. Above all, however, it revolves around NATO's reckless attempt at regime-change in Libya in 2011, under the cover of the UN doctrine of *responsibility to protect*. There now seems to be little doubt that:

the intensity of the Nato led intervention, which swept away all governmental structures existing in Libya, placed an enormous responsibility on the intervening forces for the rebuilding of the country – a responsibility, the intervening States had probably not anticipated and were in any case not

[3] Cfr. L. Scuccimarra, *Proteggere l'umanità. Sovranità e diritti umani nell'epoca globale*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2016, pp. 119 ss.

[4] A.J. Bellamy, "Whither the Responsibility to Protect? Humanitarian Intervention and the 2005 World Summit", *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2006, p. 144.

[5] *2005 World Summit Outcome*, para. 138-139.

willing to assume. The consequences are known: after a first stabilization as an immediate result of intervention the security situation began to deteriorate steadily, finally ending up in a chaotic situation that left the country in the hands of armed gangs, contracted militias and Islamist militias.[6]

In addition to the countless people killed in an endless conflict, the innocent victims of operation *Unified Protector* undoubtedly also include the hundreds of thousands of displaced people driven towards the contentious Mediterranean migration routes, often with fatal consequences, and the hundreds of thousands of people killed and displaced by the Syrian crisis, in view of the close link between the events in Libya and the lethal inaction of the international community in Syria, on the basis of the traditional swing of the "humanitarian pendulum". It is no coincidence, from this point of view, that many analysts have identified operation *Unified Protector* as a tipping point in the brief legal and political history of R2P.

The Great Regression

But the incipient crisis facing this model calls into question not only the intractable operational contradictions generated by a system of international relations that – at least from the point of view of UN procedures – remains firmly nailed to the balances of power that prevailed in the post-World War II period, but also the deeper political and ideological dynamics that in some ways reflect the polarised field of tensions that characterise the unresolved present-day scenario. While a famous article written in 2009 by the jurist Anne Peters was still able to present the United Nations General Assembly's "endorsement" of *R2P* as a decisive advance in the realisation of that "humanised" and "individual-centric" system of international law, whose

[6] P. Hilpold, "Jus Post Bellum and the Responsibility to Rebuild", *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2/105, 29 May 2014, pp. 284-305, cit., p. 300.

foundations were laid "with the codification of international human rights after the Holocaust and World War II"[7] by the time Jennifer M. Welsh was speaking on the same subject a few months later, she felt it advisable to emphasise the changed cultural, more than political, climate now prevailing in the system of international relations, as a result of the rise of new regional powers – mainly but not only the BRICS – which had little interest, even in principle, in promoting standards of global legitimacy centred on the protection of human rights. When venturing a prediction on the uncertain future of that doctrine, Welsh thus had little choice but to take a much more valedictory tone:

> Arguably, RtoP was born in an era when assertive liberalism was at its height, and sovereign equality looked and smelled reactionary. But as the liberal moment recedes, and the distribution of power shifts globally, the principle of sovereign equality may enjoy a comeback. If so, it could very well dampen the new climate of expectations around the responsibility to protect.[8]

I hardly need point out which of the two views, with hindsight, was closer to the mark, although it would be wrong to read the steady decline in the force of attraction of this concept as a mere effect of changes in the geography of global power brought about by the so-called "rise of the rest".[9] Driven by the complex constellation of crises triggered by the 2008 "global financial crash", even Western countries with a proven liberal-democratic tradition have been hit, in recent years, by a resurgence of forms of identitarian nationalism – some more, some less muscular – which mainly find expression in the language of the new

[7] A. Peters, "Humanity as the A and Ω of Sovereignty", *The European Journal of International Law*, vol. 20, n. 3, 2009, p. 514.

[8] J.M. Welsh, "Implementing the Responsibility to Protect: Where Expectations Meet Reality", *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2010.

[9] C. Duncombe and T. Dunne, "After liberal world order", *International Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 1, 2018, pp. 25-42.

"sovereigntist populism". And the political and cultural cost of this has mainly been borne by that constellation of ideas and values of cosmopolitan origin in the broadest sense, which in previous decades had prepared and supported the advent of *Responsibility to Protect* as a new guiding concept of international politics, at least within the confines of elite political, diplomatic and intellectual circles.

As the experience of Trumpism in the United States demonstrates, in recent years populist intolerance of the culture of limits and guarantees has also found expression in a violent offensive against supranational institutions, global human rights policy and even international law, insofar as it is seen as a source of para-constitutional legislation that is unconditionally binding even for sovereign territorial states as "masters of the treaties". This is because, in the mental universe of the new populist leaders, there is no room for anything that might lay claim to reining in the full and free deployment of the "popular will," as the only source of legitimacy of politics and its organisational forms; and there is no room for the idea of *global governance*, as a forum for promoting common values and interests based on a shared interpretation of "solidarity among strangers". Instead, the world is going back to how it was in the darkest moments of Europe's recent history: a rigidly segmented space of closed, self-centred communities, capable of interacting only in the traditional ways so dear to political realism: negotiation and conflict.

In the four years of his presidency, Donald Trump successfully brought about the "great regression"[10] in the way international relations are viewed (and practised), by means of a series of U-turns of considerable symbolic impact, such as the brash withdrawal of the United States from the United Nations Human Rights Council and the attack, including a legal attack, on the International Criminal Court and its staff. But he was also able to give voice, with highly effective rhetoric, to the obsolete

[10] H. Geiselberger (Ed.), *The Great Regression*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2017.

form of "international political morality" that underpins these choices, by bringing his aggressive anti-globalist credo into the enemy's camp, i.e. the United Nations General Assembly, as demonstrated by the cutting presidential speech delivered there on 25 September 2019:

> Looking around and all over this large, magnificent planet, the truth is plain to see: If you want freedom, take pride in your country. If you want democracy, hold on to your sovereignty. And if you want peace, love your nation. Wise leaders always put the good of their own people and their own country first. The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots. The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations who protect their citizens, respect their neighbors, and honor the differences that make each country special and unique.[11]

Fired by an angry and confused anti-globalist tension, the new identitarian populism has thus managed to turn the rejection of any binding form of international responsibility for human protection into one of its key ideological and rhetorical features, even to the point of calling into question the honouring of international commitments that arose directly from the trauma of the Second World War, such as the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The only *responsibility to protect* that the protagonists of the populist turn in world politics are willing to recognise is the one that binds them to the demands of their own "people", who have too long been oppressed by the power of "mammoth multinational trade deals", "unaccountable international tribunals", and "powerful global bureaucracies".[12] But the declared enemies of the "people" of the populists include anyone who, from the outside, in the name of misunderstood universal rights, tries to undermine their solid identitarian compactness, and anyone who, from

[11] *Remarks by President Trump to the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly,* New York, UN, 25 September 2019.

[12] H. Kriege, *Populist Government and International Law*, KFG Working Paper Series, no. 29, 2019.

within, in the name of a misunderstood humanitarian morality, expects to facilitate the entry or secure the existence of these *strangers*. The three watchwords of post-1989 legal globalism – *rule of law*, *democracy* and *human rights* – have thus been replaced by the trio of *sovereignty*, *security* and *prosperity*, in which the traditional border logic that characterises the Westphalia System once again imposes its differential grip on issues that clearly concern the minimum level of respect for the universal prerogatives of humankind.

Is America Back?

In my view, some of the controversial signals that we have received in recent months from the crucial "American test-bed" must be viewed against the backdrop of these tumultuous events. As has been pointed out in many quarters, Joe Biden's difficult 2020 presidential election campaign was partly built on a return to the ambitious *politics of human rights* that had been one of the key features of the *liberal* vision of international relations in the preceding decades. Many people chose to see this same message in the "America is back" slogan that Joe Biden repeated almost daily over the first 100 days of his presidency, as demonstrated by the expectant attention with which human rights activists and experts in international law, both in and outside the US, followed his first steps in government, while often seeking to contribute directly to the formulation of the US government's new agenda on rights policy and the prevention of *atrocity crimes* worldwide.

As we all know, the Biden administration chose to respond to these expectations in its early months, mainly by restoring the model of *global governance* that the Trump doctrine had literally wiped off the horizon of American foreign policy: a clear example of this was the United States' high-profile return to the forefront of the countries most engaged in the fight against climate change, marked, both symbolically and practically, by its formal participation in the 26th UN Climate

Conference in Glasgow (COP26). In his first presidential speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021, however, Joe Biden was keen to place an even stronger emphasis on the change of course with respect to his predecessor's line, by replacing the nationalistic and sovereigntist narrative of Trumpian populism with a cooperative, solidarity-based vision of international relations, openly inspired by the *moral vision of common humanity* that underpinned the peak years of liberal-democratic internationalism.[13] The "plain truth" of self-centred patriotism expounded by Trump in his UN speech in 2019 is therefore set against the much more complex truth of a world that is both fragmented and interconnected at the same time, and thus needs – more than ever – to strike the right balance between interests and values, and particular viewpoints and universal principles. In the international community's shared commitment to fully achieve the goals on which the creation of the United Nations was based – peace, human dignity, the protection of all human beings against poverty and violence – this perspective is now being tested again, in an age of tumultuous historical changes:

> There's a fundamental truth of the 21st century within each of our own countries and as a global community that our own success is bound up with others succeeding as well. To deliver for our own people, we must also engage deeply with the rest of the world. To ensure that our own future, we must work together with other partners – our partners – toward a shared future. Our security, our prosperity, and our very freedoms are interconnected, in my view, as never before. And so, I believe we must work together as never before.[14]

Everything about this "great narrative" on the future of the international order appears to advocate the recognition of an unconditional duty to act to stem the most extreme situations

[13] *Remarks by President Biden Before the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly*, New York, UN, 21 September 2021.
[14] Ibid.

of humanitarian crisis wherever they arise in the world, with particular reference to the forms of "horrific violence" and "human rights violations against civilians" that are the routine outcome of the new wars of the global age. A closer look at Biden's reasoning, however, reveals once again the full extent of the limitations and contradictions of a vision of the international order, which, despite all the declarations of principle, still identifies the pursuit of the "vital national interests" of the United States and its "people" as the ultimate deciding factor of the ends and means of American foreign policy. These nuanced but essentially unequivocal words inevitably bring to mind the much clearer words that the US President used a few weeks earlier to justify the contentious US withdrawal from Afghanistan, if it is true that the universalist semantics of "liberal internationalism" in them make way completely for a securitarian argument entirely within the dynamics of US "vital interests":

> (…) I want to remind everyone how we got here and what America's interests are in Afghanistan. We went to Afghanistan almost 20 years ago with clear goals: get those who attacked us on September 11th, 2001, and make sure al Qaeda could not use Afghanistan as a base from which to attack us again. We did that. We severely degraded al Qaeda in Afghanistan. We never gave up the hunt for Osama bin Laden, and we got him. That was a decade ago. Our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to have been nation building. It was never supposed to be creating a unified, centralized democracy. Our only vital national interest in Afghanistan remains today what it has always been: preventing a terrorist attack on American homeland.[15]

It is one of the great paradoxes of our times, in my view, that the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the *Responsibility to Protect* doctrine ended up coinciding with the most flagrant *collective abdication of responsibility* that the post-1989 international system has so far spawned. And in this

[15] The White House, *Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan*, 16 August 2021.

respect, it is no coincidence that some analysts chose to see the chaotic, syncopated and deeply traumatic way in which that withdrawal took place as definitive proof of the international community's inability to set itself rules that come anywhere near the standards enshrined in the modular, layered model of humanitarian protection set out by the cornerstone of cosmopolitanism of rights when the principle was at its peak. Seen from the targeted – and highly selective – viewpoint of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, the world situation one year after the Biden administration took office might therefore look even worse than it did the previous year, if we accept that Afghanistan – now firmly back in the hands of the Taliban – should be added to the list of countries facing various degrees of *atrocity crimes* or *ethnic cleansing*, alongside Syria, Myanmar, China, Yemen, Ethiopia and Congo.

Should we finally lay to rest the great hopes raised, perhaps rashly, by the formative years of liberal internationalism? Some of the main participants in the latest debate on the matter would be advised not to draw definitive conclusions about the future of the world order on the basis of the worrying dynamics that have pervaded recent years. Despite all other considerations, it is a fact that, since 2005, the year that it was formally transposed into the United Nations framework of principles, *R2P* has gradually established itself in the practical dynamics of international relations as "the central framework for considering responses to mass atrocities", thus helping guide the international community's response to a significant number of cases of mass violence.[16] Far from writing it off as a pipe-dream from a now bygone age, we should therefore see it for what it really is: a moment of "transcendence of the system from within" that has the potential, if duly valued, to push international politics and its ideological basis beyond the "great regression" caused by the crisis of the "liberal order". In

[16] J. Pattison, "The International Responsibility to Protect in a Post-Liberal Order", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 65, 2021, pp. 891-904.

the words of Michael Ignatieff, who was a member of ICISS 20 years ago and therefore one of the founding fathers of this model, "good ideas do not always die just because the times in which they were first articulated turn out to be too barren for them to sprout. They remain on the ground, seeds awaiting a time to germinate".[17] Perhaps this is the wisest view to take of the apparently insoluble dilemmas of our time.

[17] M. Ignatieff, "The Responsibility to Protect in a Changing World Order: Twenty Years since Its Inception", *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2021, pp. 175-180, cit. p. 179.

6. The Technological-Digital Transition

Michele Sorice

The launch of the digital transition predates the Covid-19 pandemic: plans to digitise the public administration, the creation of European networks for digital security, the debate over 5G, the discussions on digital capitalism and platform society processes ("platformisation"),[1] the focus on the potential of artificial intelligence (including for health care), and future scenarios revolving around the Internet of Things (IoT[2]) have provided fodder for scholars, professionals, and policy makers over the entire decade of the 2010s. The pandemic has accelerated this discussion and highlighted how dramatically topical it is,

[1] The concept of a "platform society" forcefully made its way into the scientific debate (and eventually the media debate) in connection with the development of digital capitalism. See: N. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge, Polity, 2017; J. Van Dijck, M. de Waal, and T. Poell, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

[2] The *Internet of Things* refers to the web of relations between the Internet and everyday objects. In other words, the Internet helps create a network within the "real" world which it can then manage through specific technologies. A pot of yogurt (or the refrigerator it is in) that tells us – through a smartphone app, for instance – that it is about to expire and must thus be consumed shortly is a mundane yet meaningful example of the Internet of Things. In addition to aspects related to domotics ("smart" lamps, music speakers with integrated information, etc.), many other features may lie on the horizon (traffic lights with traffic sensors, farming machinery that can measure changes in the weather or analyse soils, smart automobiles that can assess traffic flows, equipment to monitor one's physical conditions, and more). The development of the Internet of Things is closely intertwined with that of artificial intelligence.

but it only occasionally proved to be the main impetus for it. We might say that the events related to the pandemic impacted the technological-digital transition in two main ways: a) on the one hand, the pandemic brought to the surface several issues that were either new or had been lying dormant: the forced recourse to digital platforms and remote work brought about a reappraisal of these tools; in particular, remote work, which has evolved significantly from the teleworking of the 1990s, has re-entered the public debate, both in terms of its implications for worker rights, and with regards to the need to reconsider the organisation itself of systems of production and of the public administration – in such a framework, the debate over the need for cloud computing in the public administration has found a renewed impetus; b) on the other, the crisis engendered by the pandemic has forced the acceleration of numerous aspects related to technological modernisation that were already on the public policy agenda but were not considered high priorities: from fibre optic Internet backbones to robotics for Industry 5.0 and the use of Artificial Intelligence (IA) to accompany industrial development towards a sorely needed "ecological transition". In this scenario, the technological-digital transition appears unavoidable, and indeed it is a core asset of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP).

The Growth of the Web and the Digital Transition

The explosion of digital communications is not merely a journalistic narrative, but an established fact, as highlighted by increasingly precise data. The following two examples clearly get the point across: while in 2007 there were about 5,000 tweets a day, now there are about 600,000 every minute, and almost six million Google searches are initiated in those same sixty seconds. Domo – the company that publishes the *Data Never Sleeps* report – calculated that 5.17 billion people – or two-thirds of the world population – used the web in 2021, versus 3.4 billion just five years earlier. The data is even more

astonishing if one looks at the enormous amount of messages, videos, images, and other shared content exchanged through the web every day. The International Data Corporation (IDC)[3] calculated that the data circulating on the web amounted to 64 Zettabytes[4] in 2020 and around 80 Zettabytes in 2021. The data at our disposal – which keep changing rapidly – trace a startling scenario that is forcing us to rethink certain key social concepts, such as the *public sphere* and the *collective imaginary*. This is an epoch-defining change, which can be likened in terms of its social impact to the advent of electricity.

The growth of the web and of data traffic is but one aspect of the digital transition. Indeed, the very expression *digital transition* (often combined with the technological transition) is not without ambiguity. The digital transition, in fact, refers to a systemic transformation of social organisation, in which digital technological applications replace or implement pre-existing instruments, techniques, and practices. At the same time, these new digital technologies are expected to help improve quality of life within a framework of shared rules and with an eye towards improving the quality of democracy.

One of the fields of application for the digital transition is the public administration, where a digitalisation process has been ongoing for a number of years, albeit on a timescale than changes from one country to another. In fact, the digital transition is not limited to digitalisation or to making administrative procedures paperless (although these are two important aspects of the process as a whole). It is reflected in the necessary strengthening of digital infrastructure. In Italy, this means a commitment to creating a national digital platform, developing cloud computing in the public administration, applying data interoperability processes, implementing existing

[3] See: https://www.idc.com/

[4] A zettabyte (ZB) is a unit of measurement for digital data. It is very widely used (including in media narratives) but it is criticised by some experts, who consider it ambiguous. A zettabyte is a multiple of the byte and is equivalent to 1021 (or a sextillion) bytes.

instruments (from digital identity to digital public services), and a more decisive recourse to cybersecurity solutions without jeopardising individual rights. The importance of the digital transition in the public administration is also evident in the legislative initiatives that have taken place both in Italy and Europe.

Nevertheless, the digital transition extends well beyond the transformation of the public administration. While digital transition processes have been most evident in the logistics sector (sometimes accompanied by a substantial reduction of workers' rights), other industrial sectors also require a change in their productive architecture in a way that takes into account both people and their expectations. Indeed, the Industry 5.0 concept proposed by the European Commission is moving in a more human-centric direction.[5] The Industry 4.0 development process revolved, and still revolves, around the digitalisation of productive activities, with an increasing focus on products designed for digital ecosystems, with the "smart factory" as the new industrial model. The digital-technological transition, however, is fully fleshed out in the Industry 5.0 concept, which centres the digitalisation of productive processes and the use of artificial intelligence around the role of workers as key agents in the transformation towards a sustainable development model.[6] In this perspective, sustainability, a human-centric approach, and resilience (including the ability to respond to the challenges and risks posed by the Covid-19 pandemic) are the key pillars for a full digital transition in the industrial sector. In such a scenario, the European Commission identified six key categories for the development of Industry 5.0: a)

[5] M. Breque, L. De Nul, and A. Petridis, "Industry 5.0: towards a sustainable, human-centric and resilient European industry", European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Publications Office, 2021.

[6] The concept of sustainability is used here in its most widespread meaning. We acknowledge the problematic nature of this concept and the fact that it is often used as an umbrella definition, including in questionable greenwashing processes.

"human-centric" interactions between people and machines; b) the growth of bio-inspired technologies; c) the development of digital twins platforms and, more broadly, of the Internet of Things (IoT); d) the implementation of data transmission and analysis technologies; e) the growth of artificial intelligence; f) the development of technologies for energy efficiency within a highly sustainable framework.

Environmental Impact

The technological-digital transition is thus a system transformation process. For this reason, it cannot be uncoupled from the ecological transition. Then again, in recent years systems have emerged to measure (or more often, project) the environmental impact of digital technologies, which can potentially cause significant pollution. The Internet, and digital technologies in general, cause pollution, although this is not always evident. According to some projections that calculate the impact of electricity use (often from non-renewables) over the entire communication process, sending twenty e-mails a day for a year produces the same amount of emissions as a driving an automobile for 1,000 km. This is a staggering amount considering that several billion e-mails are sent worldwide every hour.[7] Artificial intelligence itself – which could theoretically facilitate the more intelligent use of energy in digital devices – is a double-edged sword, since if used on a massive scale it could contribute heavily to an increase in harmful emissions.

Numerous initiatives have arisen to reduce the Internet's carbon footprint, with the aim of lowering emissions and making the digital transaction compatible with the ecological one. This is the impetus behind projects such as *Code Carbon*,[8]

[7] Numerous initiatives have arisen to promote a greener use of digital technologies. An example in Italy is the initiative promoted by ReteClima® called CO2Web® and described here: https://co2web.it/

[8] For more information, see: https://www.codecarbon.io/index.html

which produces a free, open-source software packet that can trace emissions on the basis of energy consumption and the location of the server. The aim of these initiatives – which are mostly launched by non-profit organisations – is to encourage business to search for more sustainable ways to disseminate information through the web. Indeed, while a full digital transition requires more and more online subjects and devices, it must not undermine the ecological transition.

Geopolitical Impact

The extraordinary economic scope of the digital sphere (technologies and platforms) becomes an element of power (and conflict) at the geopolitical level. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD),[9] China and the United States control three-quarters of the entire global market for cloud computing, and the same percentage of blockchain patents. In capitalisation terms, these two countries alone account for 90% of the global digital platform market. Europe only controls 4%, while Africa and Latin America combined account for a mere 1%. Additionally, China and the United States have the highest 5G adoption rates in the world, and in 2016-21 (including the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic) they guaranteed 94% of all funding for AI start-ups worldwide. Regarding the Internet of Things, UNCTAD projects that in 2021-25 Africa and South America combined will account for just over 10% of revenues, versus 22% for Europe and 66% for the United States and Asia combined.

This scenario highlights both the existence of a digital power gap and the Global South's lack of options in creating autonomous spaces. Indeed, the European Union itself also strongly depends on the two global digital giants. The conflict over control of the digital sphere is a typical geopolitical issue:

[9] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Digital Economy Report 2021*, 2021.

the tensions between the United States and China in this field are clear evidence of this. Nevertheless, this is not just a trade war, since the conflict also spills over into different visions of digital power, from market organisation to the role of governments, and from the role of platforms to data control approaches. Europe plays a glaringly marginal role in this, in spite of the fact that the European Union has played – and continues to play – a major political role in the definition of global standards such as those regarding the protection of personal data. In this scenario, emerging countries such as Russia or India are playing a secondary role, at least for the time being, while Latin America and Africa have essentially been cut off. This situation has favoured the emergence of a phenomenon known as "data colonialism", which undermines national sovereignty to the advantage of a handful of states and multinational corporations. It is no coincidence that the major global platforms have an economic (and sometimes political) importance that outweighs that of many countries. The conflict between national sovereignty and the increasing importance of global digital companies is another important aspect of the geopolitical balancing act connected to the technological and digital transition.

Finally, a significant problem on the geopolitical chessboard concerns the strong imbalance in decision-making power between the Global North and the Global South. The emerging digital society is strongly tailored to the needs (economic, political, and related to standards and regulations) of wealthy countries – which countries, unsurprisingly, try to eschew multilateral approaches to issues related to the digital transition – to the detriment of the needs and potential of poorer countries. This introduces a dangerous element of instability that could trigger the explosion of conflicts over digital power.

The impact of the digital and technological transition on the geo-political balance must not be overlooked, since the transition itself is structurally geopolitical in nature.

Social Impact

Obviously, the technological-digital transition also has a major social impact, since in its final stages it includes not only advanced forms of digitalisation but also an extensive overhaul of our social lives. The adoption of AI in education and training, for instance, requires a change in perspective that brings back those who teach to the centre of the social innovation project. The idea of entrusting robots with teaching in a dystopian future does not belong to the technological-digital transition paradigm, which makes sense only to the extent that it is strongly human-centric. Of course, governments and local administrations will have to ensure that the human-centric dimension of the technological-digital transition is not merely a statement of intent, or worse yet, that it ends up advantaging the few to the detriment of a truly egalitarian democracy.

Another aspect that requires monitoring is the relationship between the digital transition and platforms. The massive recourse to digital technologies and architecture will only increase the centrality of platforms.[10] The platform era will not right the imbalance of power between users and owners, or the one between countries. While it is true that the exporting of goods for the manufacturing of technological hardware has resulted in more balanced relations between different states, power relations with regards to platforms remain unchanged, since many economic variables are still held by a select few (from IP addresses to business models, and from shared values to content distribution modalities). These elements aren't quite as tangible as rare earth minerals, for example, but they are no less significant from an economic standpoint. An additional issue is that of data, and their importance in the power mechanisms

[10] The term "platform" actually refers to a very disparate set of things, from websites offering digital services (including social media) to e-commerce websites, participatory spaces for digital democracy, services provided by the public administration, and spaces for collaboration in the artificial intelligence realm.

that take shape in the platform mechanisms. The emergence of "platformisation" processes in society links up with another significant aspect, which concerns the power shift from the ideological oligarchies of traditional politics to the technocratic elites that know how the machinery of politics works, and which are legitimised in the public media sphere. Furthermore, these same elites play a crucial role in the dynamics leading to the commercialisation of citizenship and to neoliberal approaches to society.

Another important aspect concerns the digital divide, which remains a major problem in any attempt at a digital transition. Together with the global digital divide (between more and less technologically-advanced countries), there are social divides (within individual countries) and a democracy divide (concerning the degree of political participation that takes place via digital technologies).[11] According to the 2021 DESI,[12] the analytical tool that measures the digital situation in Europe and its individual states, Italy is in 20th place (out of 27 Member States) in terms of the digitalisation of its economy and society. The situation is even worse when it comes to connectivity. In this regard, Italy is ranked 23rd: only 61% of Italian households have broadband access (compared to a European average of 77%) while only 42% of individuals have basic digital skills (compared to 56% Europe-wide). Italy falls even further with regards to human capital: it is ranked 25th out of 27. This evidences the following: a) the existence of a large infrastructural digital gap that requires a strong commitment to strengthening the Internet backbone; b) the existence of a very large digital cultural gap that mandates a massive commitment to digital training. Regarding the relationship between citizens and the public administration, only 36% of individuals use open government tools (versus a European average of 64%),

[11] Indeed, the Human Rights Council of the United Nations (Resolution A/HCR/20/L.13) treats Internet access as a fundamental human right.

[12] Digital Economy and Society Index. European Commission, Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2021, Report Study, 12 November 2021.

highlighting the shortcomings of the Italian system that were already identified by other authoritative comparative studies.[13]

It is no coincidence that the NRRP dedicates just over 25% of its total value to the digital transition, with a focus on the private sector, the public administration, the judiciary system, and quality improvements in the health care system, with a major increase in the training offer for digital skills in the citizenry at large. The operational plan of the National Strategy for Digital Skills[14] has set some important goals in this regard: ensuring 70% of the population has basic digital skills by 2025, reducing the digital gender divide, increasing the number of university graduates in information science and technology (currently Italy is in last place in Europe), and achieving a significant increase (+50%) in the number of small and medium enterprises employing digital technology specialists. A significant commitment is expected to be made on the human capital front: augmenting the tools for digital inclusion (with a particular focus on disabled persons), focusing on the education system, and investing in strengthening the "digital civil service" and doctorates in new technologies.

The technological-digital transition is not just a new way to frame the digitalisation processes and projects that were launched as early as the late 1990s. It is instead meant to be a push towards a systemic transformation of society, as part of a human-centric paradigm. This last-named aspect is an important challenge to be met, so that the technological-digital transition can be something more than merely a shiny label.

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[13] See E. De Blasio, *Il governo online. Nuove frontiere della politica.* Roma, Carocci, 2018.

[14] The plan is developed along four axes and 111 specific actions. It is accompanied by over 60 indicators to monitor expected results, which are based on the Desi indicators and the Digital Maturity Index (DMI) developed by the Digital Agenda Observatory.

SECTION II

REGIONAL TRANSITION

7. The European Union in 2022: Continuity or Transformation?

Sonia Lucarelli

Covid-19, pandemic, SARS-CoV-2, variants, vaccines, No Vax, community transmission, herd immunity… all these terms were largely unknown to the public at large until the spring of 2020. Today, they are central to public debate in Europe and elsewhere. 2021 was the second year in which the Covid-19 pandemic conditioned public discourse, political agendas and the priorities of Europe and the rest of the world. It is now clear that the virus has impacted not only the public health scenario but the lives of individuals and institutions in general. While the response to the pandemic was initially hesitant and slow, 2021 saw a dramatic change of gear, in the hope of transforming the crisis into an opportunity for renewal and innovation.

Nevertheless, at the close of 2021, we found ourselves still facing not only the pandemic and the prospects it afforded for a reboot, but a great deal of uncertainty and tension in intra-European and international relations too. The pandemic effectively slowed or even halted many processes while advancing others. In a new year that is likely to be associated with new Covid-19 variants, it is difficult to imagine how the political situation will develop in Europe, let alone globally. We can, however, take it for granted that there will be no shortage of challenges. This short essay attempts to identify the legacy of 2021 and some of the main threats facing us in 2022. Whether these will lead to continuity (should we read stagnation) or

transformation will depend on the capacity of the European Union and its Member States to respond.

The Legacy of 2021

In 2021, much of the political agenda in Europe was dedicated to the implementation of processes begun in 2020 or earlier. Business was therefore not limited to dealing with the consequences of the pandemic.

For a start, 1 January 2021 marked the end of the transition period in the divorce between the European Union and the United Kingdom. On 1 May, with the ratification of the last sections of the post-Brexit agreement on trade and data security, the settlement reached by the parties in December 2020 was fully implemented. Brexit seems to have created little drama for the EU; if anything, prospects for further integration have improved. Its eventual impact on the parties, of course, remains to be evaluated.

Secondly, 2021 saw the launch of Next Generation EU, the Union's ambitious plan for economic and social regeneration. The approval of national recovery and resilience plans and the go-ahead for 22 countries to receive funds for investments and reforms provided a major boost to the European economy and also permitted the launch of a vast programme of wide-ranging structural reforms, the impact of which will be felt well beyond any immediate post-pandemic recovery. On the public health front, the extraordinary campaign to vaccinate the majority of European citizen, support for global vaccination, the adoption of the EU Digital Covid Certificate to maintain intra-European mobility, and the expansion of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control all proved valuable responses and effective investments in EU resilience. The Commission's adoption of the European Climate Law in June 2021 (officially setting the objective of EU climate neutrality by 2050 and a reduction in CO_2 emissions of at least 55 % by 2030) and its European Digital Decade proposal both went in the same

direction. In the field of internal policy, 2021 was characterised by an effort by European Community institutions to monitor the state of democracy in Member States.

Developments in 2021 therefore provide the key to identifying priorities for 2022.[1] Sustainable development, digitalisation and democracy were the words with which European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen opened the academic year of the Catholic University of Milan on 19 December 2021.[2] 2021 also saw the start of the Conference on the Future of Europe,[3] a courageous – and perhaps excessively bold – undertaking by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission to revitalise the process of integration by involving the citizens of Europe, despite the serious obstacles presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The ambitious European Recovery and Resilience Plan put in place last year was designed not only to respond to internal challenges, support recovery and counter the propaganda of Eurosceptics, but also to boost the EU's ability to play a leading international role, or "geopolitical" role as President von der Leyen defines it. With this in mind, and to overcome the problems that have previously prevented the EU from using its economic resources for political ends, i.e. differences of opinion between Member States and the power of veto, on 8 December 2021 the European Commission presented a series of measures designed to give it a more decisive role in EU internal (and intergovernment) policy, using its own competences in the area of trade. The proposed "Anti-Coercion Instrument"[4] would give

[1] European Council, Joint Declaration of the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission, *EU Legislative Priorities for 2022*.

[2] "Podcast: La Presidente alla Cattolica di Milano", *Affarinternazionali*, 19 December 2021.

[3] The Conference's website is https://futureu.europa.eu/?locale=en

[4] European Commission, COM(2021) 775 final 2021/0406 (COD), Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council, "Protection of the Union and its Member States from economic coercion by third countries", Brussels, 8 December 2021.

the Commission the autonomy it needs to intervene in the area of international trade if a third country is guilty of misconduct towards the EU or any single Member State, and to introduce import duties, suspend scientific collaboration, and limit access to the single market, etc, with immediate effect. Whether this proposal will become law will only be seen in 2022, but the new French presidency of the Council has already pronounced in its favour. If the measure passes, it would greatly increase the power of the Commission in foreign policy.

On the theme of defence, further steps were taken in 2021 to establish Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). The European Defence Fund also became operational. Over the year, the High Representative of the European Union, Joseph Borrell, worked on the so-called "Strategic Compass", "a political proposal to prevent the major risk the EU is facing: that of 'strategic shrinkage', or the risk of being always principled but seldom relevant".[5] In an increasingly complex and geopolitically competitive world characterised by growing threats, rapid technological development, climate change and global instability, the Strategic Compass serves as an instrument for improving internal cohesion on questions of security and defence, strengthening the EU's role and international incisiveness, developing partnerships and stimulating innovation. Its supporters see it as an essential step towards a "European Defence Union".[6]

Despite this, the destiny of Europe and the EU's future international role are still threatened by uncertainty and disturbing developments. 2021 saw persistent internal divisions on questions of democracy and the rule of law in eastern Member

[5] EEAS, *A Strategic Compass to make Europe a Security Provider*, Foreword by HR/VP Josep Borrell, Why do we need a Strategic Compass?, 2021.

[6] European Commission, "State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen", Strasbourg, 15 September 2021.

States.[7] Vaccine nationalism,[8] differences of opinion regarding how to deal with the EU's awkward Russian neighbour, and an inability to achieve strategic parity or even appear relevant on the international stage undermined Europe's credibility as an international actor. The EU's limited contribution to the crises in Belarus, Ukraine, Afghanistan and Kazakhstan during the course of 2021 reinforced the image of an ageing, weak and fractious continent. China's and Russia's effective use of vaccine diplomacy[9] also overshadowed the efforts of "Team Europe" (the EU and individual Member States) in the campaign to vaccinate poorer nations.[10]

On the subject of immigration, the respite afforded by the pandemic waned towards the end of the year, both in the Mediterranean and along the EU's eastern borders. Above all, it became patently clear that third countries (Turkey and Belarus in particular) were able to use immigration as a tool to apply political pressure, divide European nations and fracture the EU's already weak immigration and political asylum system.[11]

2022 has therefore inherited both positive trends (economic recovery and an improved response to the pandemic) and negative if not disastrous ones (obstacles to the relaunch of the EU, consequent fallout on internal social and political policies,

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[7] IDEA (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance), *The State of Democracy in Europe 2021. Overcoming the Impact of the Pandemic*, 2021; J. Rankin, "Brussels vows swift response to Poland's ruling against EU law", *The Guardian*, 8 October 2021.

[8] "The many guises of vaccine nationalism", *The Economist*, 13 March 2021.

[9] D. Cenusa, *China, Russia and Covid-19: Vaccine Diplomacy at Different Capacity*, Commentary, ISPI, 7 July 2021.

[10] Late in 2021, Team Europe contributed around €3 billion to COVAX, the tool established in 2020 to promote equal access to Covid vaccines e cures. This commitment has been complemented by many other global solidarity initiatives. For an overview, see the relevant web page of the European Council: "Global solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic", European Council.

[11] Cf. E. Fassi, S. Lucarelli, and M. Ceccorulli, *The EU Migration System of Governance. Justice on the move*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. For an up-to-date debate on this subject, see "L'Italia, l'Europa e il dibattito sulla nuova politica migratoria", CeSPI.

and imminent international crises). How Europe moves forward will depend largely on Member States' ability to use the resources provided under the Recovery and Resilience Plan to effectively initiate a virtuous circle; it will also hinge on the ability of "Team Europe" (to borrow a term from anti-Covid policy) to respond to challenges. In the remainder of this brief analysis we shall examine the main internal and international challenges facing the EU.[12]

Internal Challenges: Populism and the Rule of Law

The pandemic gave Europe a degree of respite from populist rhetoric. The rising tide of populism, a source of much concern in the years prior to the pandemic, and closely identified with sovereigntist figures like Donald Trump, Matteo Salvini, Marie Le Pen and Viktor Orban, was overshadowed by the public health emergency in the last two year. Many observers have pointed out that the electoral defeat of Donald Trump was more a victory for SARS-CoV-2 than for the democratic candidate.[13] Nevertheless, two points deserve closer attention: (i) right wing populism has not disappeared; (ii) the pandemic has also led to states of emergency that certain countries have exploited to weaken democracy and reduce personal freedoms, accelerating a decline in the rule of law.

Recent elections in Europe have not recorded any great advance in populism, even in the countries most at risk. Support for the right has grown in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic but has fallen dramatically in Germany. In the Netherlands, the Partij voor de Vrijheid has remained in third

[12] This chapter does not deal with challenges related to the implementation of the recovery and resilience plan, which are discussed in chapter XX of this volume.
[13] A. Neundorf and S. Pardos-Prado, *The Impact of COVID-19 on Trump's Electoral Demise: The Role of Economic and Democratic Accountability. Perspectives on Politics*, Cambridge University Press 2021, pp. 1-17, doi:10.1017/S1537592721001961; A. Brodeur, L. Baccini, and S. Weymouth, "How COVID-19 led to Donald Trump's defeat", *The Conversation*, 7 December 2020.

place, losing less than 3% compared to the 2017 elections. In France, polls in the run-up to the 2022 presidential elections have failed to return any clear forecast but have revealed the enduring strength of the populist right, with the more radical candidate, Eric Zemmour, challenging the supremacy of Marie Le Pen.[14] Emmanuel Macron is unlikely to lose in the second round, but the strength of support for the two radical right-wing candidates, Le Pen and Zemmour, is significant. In Spain, Vox till holds 17% of popular support. In Italia, the League and Brothers of Italy claim 36% between them. In Hungary, Fidesz is on 48%[15] (through the opposition is far more united than in the past). While, in most cases, right-wing populist parties are unlikely to be elected to government, this level of popularity clearly demonstrates that support for them is showing no sign of diminishing.

The crowds that No Vax, No Green Pass and other such protests have attracted throughout Europe indicate that populism still has plenty of potential for growth. It would, of course, be wrong to equate criticism of the anti-Covid vaccination movement with populist political beliefs, but opposition in the form of support for conspiracy and anti-scientific theories has created a new vaccine populism that has much in common with its political counterpart, starting with distrust of elites and experts.

A survey published in the *European Journal of Public Health*[16] confirms that there is a clear link between the percentage of people that vote for populist parties and the percentage of those who insist that vaccines are not important or ineffective. In support of this hypothesis, communications issued by populist parties in Europe concerning Covid-19 and vaccines have often been ambiguous (M5S and the League in Italy, National Rally in France, Syriza in Greece).

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[14] "Poll of Polls. Polling from across Europe. Updated Daily", *Politico*.

[15] Ibid.

[16] J. Kennedy, "Populist politics and vaccine hesitancy in Western Europe: An analysis of national-level data", *European Journal of Public Health*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2019, pp. 512-16.

New forms of populism could also appear, especially if green policies start to have a severe impact or the energy crisis gets worse. The Eastern European economies that still rely heavily on coal could even reject Brussels' request to invest in the Green New Deal under such circumstances. No-green populism is nothing new, of course (just think of climate change denialism), but it has now been transformed into a political movement, largely by supporters of Donald Trump, and the adoption of no-green policies by parties like the Swiss People's Party.[17] In the European Union, the countries most affected by this phenomenon are those of Eastern Europe, like Poland, that are still heavily dependent on coal, but the anti-green movement could easily spread to the rest of the EU and merge with other streams of populism.[18]

Paradoxically, the present crisis in the rule of law is also facilitating the return and spread of populism. The states of emergency imposed in response to the pandemic not only imposed necessary limitations on the freedom of the individual but also demanded more frequent use of extraordinary decisional-making measures (like decree-laws in Italy). This has reduced the role of parliaments (a trend found worrying by many leading legal experts), and even permitted real abuses of power, weaking the rule of law even further. Poland and Hungary are the nations that immediately spring to mind but, according to the *State of Democracy in Europe* report for 2021,[19] various other European countries, especially those with already weak democratic institutions, have imposed restrictions on freedom of speech and freedom of association. Though this phenomenon has so far been contained in extent, a deep divide has formed within the European Union on the need to protect the rule of law, and the pandemic has exacerbated it. It will be

[17] A. Audikana e V. Kaufmann, "Towards Green Populism? Right-wing Populism and Metropolization in Switzerland", International Journal of Urban and Regional Research (IJURR), 14 July 2021.

[18] M. Burleigh, "A Dangerous New Variant of Populism", *Project Syndacate*, 10 August 2021.

[19] IDEA (2021).

essential to EU credibility for the Commission and Member States to denounce and sanction the authoritarian drift of certain countries, continuing the policy first applied vigorously in 2021. Last year, in fact, the European People's Party (EPP) expelled Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, and the European Court of Justice repeatedly found against laws introduced by Poland and Hungary. More importantly, in December 2021 the European Commission suspended the Recovery Plan funds destined for Poland €5 billion) and Hungary (1 billion) until both nations adopt agreed reforms (concerning the independence of the judiciary in Poland and anticorruption, transparency and rule of law measures in Hungary). The Commission also began legal proceedings against violations of LGBTIQ rights and referred Hungary to the Court of Justice for infringing European immigration and asylum law. This war of attrition between the EU and Hungary/Poland is not destined to end any time soon and new, even more bitter battles are likely to be fought.

Sanctions against incumbent governments alone, however, will not succeed in bolstering democracy or countering the growth of populism; adequate economic and social instruments must be introduced to support the economies, societies and individuals worst affected by the pandemic, and to reduce growing inequalities.[20]

International Challenges: Relevance and Consistency

2022 began with the winds of war blowing to the east of the European Union. The threat of Russia intervening militarily in Ukraine has become more imminent and the prospects for a

[20] A. Fiske et al., "The second pandemic: Examining structural inequality through reverberations of COVID-19 in Europe", *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 292, no. 114634, January 2022; M. Dauderstädt, *Covid 19 and Europewide Income Disparities. The Pandemic Stopped the Previous Decline of Inequality*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), 2021.

rapid and painless solution are fading by the day. Despite the geographic vicinity of the potential conflict, however, Europe is playing a very limited role. The game is mainly between Moscow and Washington. Brussel's sole function seems to be as home to the headquarters of NATO. The EU has shown a united front in maintaining the sanctions imposed in 2014, but divisions between Member States have come to the fore and have often led to inaction or meaningless political declarations.

The EU's relations with Russia are indirectly in the balance on another front too: the humanitarian crisis on the border between Poland and Belarus, where the government of Lukashenko has instrumentally amassed thousands of EU-bound migrants with the aim of convincing Brussels to withdraw the sanctions imposed on his regime in June 2021. The European Union is conspicuous by its absence here too, sanctions on Belarus apart. Poland has even denied Doctors Without Borders access to the border area, forcing the organisation to abandon its mission there. Polish border police regularly push migrants back, denying them access to asylum under international law. Europe is therefore not only losing the game with Belarus (and Russia) but is backsliding on human rights, which are now regularly violated in the name of the relentless fight against irregular migration. Indeed, migration has played a major role in moulding EU foreign policy at least since 2015, especially with regard to the EU's southern neighbours (Turkey and MENA) and the Sahel.[21]

The EU has long recognised the strategic relevance of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), but 2022 brings new challenges: the US withdrawal from Afghanistan evidently confirms America's pivot towards the Indo-Pacific, and gives competing powers (primarily Russia and China) an opportunity to play a far greater role in MENA and in the strategic Sahel

[21] M. Ceccorulli and E. Fassi (Eds.), *The EU's External Governance of Migration. Perspectives of Justice*, London, Routledge, 2022; M. Bøås, "EU migration management in the Sahel: unintended consequences on the ground in Niger?", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 52-67, Doi:10.1080/01436597.2020.1784002.

region at a time of growing instability and decline in democratic processes (as in Tunisia). France has historically played the leading role in this part of the world, but the EU as such has also forged links with the region in the fields of migration prevention and counter-terrorism. The complex situation in (north) Africa and the Middle East already weighs on European policy and will do so increasingly in future. The EU will therefore have to become a more active political force and more effective in preventing irregular migration and fighting terrorism, for example, while simultaneously respecting its founding values of human rights and democracy.

2022 also looks like being a critical year for transatlantic relations. Joe Biden's election to the presidency rekindled hopes of bridging the gulf in transatlantic relations that opened years ago and was exacerbated under the Trump administration. Though hesitantly at first (as exemplified by the AUKUS defence agreement between Australia, the UK and the US, and a withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan in September 2021 that was simply not coordinated with Europe), the United States has gradually returned to multilateral fora and confirmed its commitment to the liberal world order and democracy. Biden's electoral campaign promise of closer foreign policy coordination with America's allies was kept in his administration's first year, with foreign visits and meetings with transatlantic partners. Uncertainly nevertheless remains as a result of internal US factors (the midterm elections could well see the Democrats losing control of the House of Representatives) and international developments. Europe and the US may also drift apart over China, as the Americans demand an increasingly firm approach. In recent years, Brussels has attempted to maintain a close economic partnership with China without alienating the United States, who are increasingly preoccupied with the Chinese threat. The pressure on Europe to clarify its position in the Sino-American dispute is now becoming inescapable.[22]

[22] European nations are far from united in their approach to China. Not only

China could therefore drive a wedge between the allies by fanning the flames of an intensifying competition in the Indo-Pacific region that is of special interest to the Americans. The EU has recently announced a new strategy for the region, and certain Member States (France, Germany and the Netherlands) have particularly close ties with it.[23] The future of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline between Russia and Germany could also add to transatlantic tensions: Washington views it with diffidence while EU countries see it as of strategic importance. Finally, another potential area of disagreement could be the EU's attempt to achieve "strategic autonomy". The Americans take this expression to mean competitive independence from NATO, though Brussels intends it only as greater economic, energy and defence resilience. In the end, how the EU manages to communicate its actions to the Americans will count more than the actions themselves.

In addition to the above challenges in its relations with individual international actors, the EU will also face a far greater challenge as a global player. It will need to adjust to an international system in which power bases are shifting and technology, connectivity, relations and the ability to adapt are becoming increasingly important. Rapid developments in technology imply a rapidly changing international scenario, with evolving threats and actorness (understood as the ability of countries to play a relevant role). Radical transformation and accelerated change present major challenges to all actors in the international system, of course, but even more so to a collective actor like the EU which suffers from slow decision making and contrasting sovereign prerogatives.

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was China's invitation to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative received very differently but Europe has proved divided on the most politically sensitive issue for China: Tawan. Lithuania recently recognised Taiwan as a sovereign state, infuriating the Chinese government and forcing the European Commission to re-state the EU's *One China* policy.

[23] R. Borges de Castro, *Europe in the world in 2022: The transatlantic comeback?*, Outlook Paper, European Policy Centre (EPC), 21 January 2022.

Quo Vadis, Europe?

2021 came to an end with the introduction of a plan to relaunch the EU that was both ambitious and unexpectedly forward-looking on the economic and social levels. 2022, however, began with major uncertainties, looming threats and an unchanged institutional structure afflicted by all the limitations of hybrid governance. Whether future circumstances will actually result in the transformation of the EU into a closer and internationally more incisive union will depend on how it responds to internal challenges (like the solidity of democracy and the rising wave of populism) and international developments. While progress made on the economic level in 2021 gives good reason for optimism, the EU's historic inter-governmental structure in key areas of policy, disagreement between Member States, and the seriousness of external threats all force us to be cautious in our expectations.

8. The MENA Region in Transition: Old Challenges and New Opportunities

Armando Sanguini

In 2021, the MENA region was clearly a place of political and politico-military transition, but also a place of ecological and environmental transition. And there was Covid-19, which affected countries in patches, in a manner inversely proportional to their wealth. This all took place against the backdrop of the now perennial clash for geopolitical supremacy in the area between the Sunni monarchy in Saudi Arabia and the Shiite theocracy in Iran, along with their various allies and associates. For a while now, one also has to factor in the internal Sunni conflict driven by Turkey under the banner of the Muslim Brotherhood, a conflict that cannot be disentangled from the repercussions of the Abraham Accords for the original signatories (Bahrain, Emirates, Morocco and Sudan) and beyond. Indeed, these nations are also going to feel the impact of the outcome of the nuclear talks that resumed in late 2021 between Washington and Tehran ("Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" with China, Russia, England, France and Germany) in a climate of enormous uncertainty, particularly because the new Iranian leadership elected in June has put some very demanding conditions in place ("restoration of the rights of the Iranian nation and lifting of all sanctions"). At the end of the year, the predominant feeling among the European signatories to the agreement was one of scepticism.

In the background, there was also the pervasive, almost silent spread of China's presence in the region.

The Peace Process has not made any strides forward with the formation of the new Naftali Bennet government in Israel that brought to an end 12 years of Netanyahu's premiership, a moment marked by the umpteenth Hamas attack and the usual legacy of death and destruction, especially on a Palestinian side that is still waiting for elections, partly because of Abu Mazen. Bennet announced he did not want to annex territories or create a Palestinian state and he took some key social steps in the Gaza Strip. He also rejected the reopening of the US consulate in Jerusalem, an idea tabled by Trump and accepted by Biden, while the Palestinians rejected Israel's counteroffer of Ramallah. The new Executive does deserve some credit for the steps forward in relations with Egypt and Russia, and with the Emirates and the other countries that signed the Abraham Accords. 2021 also ended with the announcement of the 4th dose of the Covid-19 vaccine.

Electoral Transition in Iraq, Algeria and Morocco

In **Iraq,** the scourge of the Covid-19 pandemic caused waves of protest and a boycott of the October parliamentary elections, which posted the lowest ever voter turnout (41%, below even the disappointing 44.5% in 2018) despite a new provision reserving 25% of the 329 seats for women and 9 seats for minorities (Christians and Yazidis).

The Fatah Alliance linked to a pro-Iran paramilitary force called Hashd al-Shaabi lost, winning only 17 seats compared to the 48 the Alliance took in 2018. Moreover, this loss was not offset by the seats taken by the pro-Iranian Nouri al Maliki, a former Prime Minister and later Vice-President. The political groupings aligned with the West also struggled, such as the one led by ex-Premier Abadi.

A political block under the leadership of controversial Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr won 37 seats and spoke about "[n]

either Eastern nor Western, a national majority government", while calling for all armed factions to be disbanded. Time will tell whether and how it is possible to govern without the support of pro-Iranian forces after so many years of "consensus governments" (since 2003). Such a challenge is especially complex because in 2022 the US military mission in the country (with 2,500 troops) will be limited to training and advising. At the same time, the anti-ISIS barrier between Iraq and Syria was completed in this land in which Islamic extremism remains a real threat.

In **Algeria** President Tebboune, Prime Minister during the Bouteflika presidency, saw a boycott of the elections he had brought forward to meet the demands of the Hirak protest movement, which had in turn criticised the elections as a delaying and self-serving tactic. The result was 30% turnout (35% in 2017, 42.9% in 2012), a government reshuffle and a pardon for numerous activists that was sought by Tebboune, who did manage to divide the protest movement into a faction that is willing to negotiate and a more radical, intransigent faction.

Internationally, Hirak has received some sympathy, but Algeria's main partners have indicated a preference for continuity in government rather than uncertainty. This tendency has undoubted economic reasons, but it also has political and security motives (migration and extremism), especially in a Mediterranean region where the geopolitical balance has shifted because of Russia, Turkey, the Gulf Countries and China, which has been generous in fighting Covid-19 and has a clear interest in the El-Hamdania port as part of its Silk Road. Relations with the United States are also positive because of the efforts to fight terrorism and the support for North African stability.

This was the situation in Algeria when Italian President Sergio Mattarella headed to the country to celebrate the "happy relationship" between the countries and, as part of this, the unveiling of a white marble plaque dedicated to Enrico Mattei, founder of ENI.

Morocco was another country that held elections, with the Justice and Development Party (PJD) only taking home 12 seats compared to its previous tally of 125 because of patent shortcomings in governance that were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The elections were won by the National Rally of Independents (RNI), headed by magnate Aziz Akhannouch, who has close ties to the King. His ruling coalition is made up of his 97 MPs and 82 MPs from the Authenticity and Modernity Party, with him heading this centre-right government with "an innovative development strategy". The real winner is arguably King Mohammed VI whose signing of the Abraham Accords with Israel was rewarded by Trump with recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. The latter is such a sensitive issue that Rabat opened the border with Ceuta to thousands of migrants in retaliation for Spain admitting the Secretary General of the Polisario Front, Brahim Ghali, to a hospital there for treatment. Nonetheless, Rabat did accept the UN's call to Rabat and Algiers to return to the negotiating table in a mutual process of "self-determination".

For its part, the European Union defended its partnership with Morocco by appealing against the European Court of Justice's annulment of the fisheries and farming agreement due to a lack of consultation with the Sahrawi people. It also launched a "Green Partnership"[1] to support energy and environmental transition in the country, which has been on the front-lines (COP22 in Marrakesh in 2016) of these issues in the region for a while.

Mohammed VI continued his policy of an active presence in Africa and "openness to the world". Such openness is first and foremost to the US, but it is also to China. With the latter, on the back of a 2016 Memorandum of Understanding, it signed three conventions in July that will give the country the industrial and biotechnological capacity to make vaccines, including a Covid-19 vaccine.

[1] European Commission, "The EU and Morocco form a Green Partnership on energy, climate and the environment ahead of COP 26", 28 June 2021.

Has the Democratic Interruption in Tunisia Following the Dignity Revolution Ended?

The disruptive measures adopted in July by President Kais Saied to "protect the State against imminent danger" (Parliament frozen, Government dismissed, imprisonment of people accused of corruption and so on) certainly arose fears of as much. Even appointing a woman premier with 8 female ministers out of a total of 24 did little to help calm such fears. Public opinion was initially on his side, based on the widespread belief that the major social and economic problems the country was grappling with – and that were made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic – were the result of a corrupt and incapable political system. But, with time, this feeling has changed. The General Labour Union (UGTT) was robust in its criticism of the government's silence about the previously announced reforms and called for early elections, as did Rached Ghannouchi, leader of the first Ennahda Party (Muslim Brotherhood) and President of the Parliament. Saied's response was to announce, on 13 December, that a series of online public consultations would take place in 2022 focusing on the constitutional reforms to put to a referendum on 25 July, with parliamentary elections at the end of the year. Turkey, with its clear support for the Muslim Brotherhood, was quick to criticise the Tunisian President and its autocratic ruler Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke of "suspension of the democratic process". The United States and European Union favoured a more "wait-and-see" approach, reiterating the view that the processes underway to help the country's economic and social recovery (indicators) should continue, even though these have been heavily weighed down by the impact of Covid-19 and the weight of expectations for democracy and the rule of law. Slight apprehension underlies this approach as it seems President Saied might respond to any excessive criticism by turning to the Gulf Monarchies for help in getting his country out of the serious crisis in which it finds itself. This would effectively repeat what happened previously in Egypt in 2013, when Abdel

Fattah al-Sisi was supported to overturn President Mohamed Morsi (Muslim Brotherhood). It was against this backdrop that Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio headed to Tunisia at the back-end of the year. Finally, the International Monetary Fund was positive in its response to Tunisia's request for €3.3 billion in financial support.

Egypt Becomes a Leading Regional Player Again

In the wake of the troubled years following the Arab Spring, Egypt has returned to its traditional position of being internationally recognised as a leading regional player, obscuring its democratic shortcomings and the human rights violations of al-Sisi's regime – the memory of Giulio Regeni's torture and death, and the unknown state of Patrick Zaki's trial after almost two years in prison. This return to the top was definitely facilitated by its meditation during the Israeli-Palestinian crisis (the Gaza Strip) and its helping to mend the tear that had developed between Qatar and the other Gulf Monarchies. But it is probably most linked to the country's role in energy affairs (Zohr field), which must be connected to the formal signing of the charter for the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, an intergovernmental organisation involving Cyprus, Egypt, France, Jordan, Greece, Israel, Italy and Palestine, with the European Union and the US as permanent observers. Its security partnership with Israel is notable as is its more recent renewed agreement on such matters with Jordan and Iraq. Of similar significance is its agreement with Washington on the importance of the Libyan presidential elections on 24 December and the need for all foreign armed militias to leave the country "without exception" – an evident reference to Turkey's military forces. al-Sisi's ambitions even extended to the future of Bashar al Assad's Syria, advocating for the return of this nation to the Arab League and offering to help rebuild the country, along with the tripartite cooperation with Iraq and Jordan commenced in 2019. Not everything was agreement though, with discord persisting with Ethiopia on the

dam on the Blue Nile and growing worse following the filling of the second reservoir in July, which Egypt and Sudan see as a threat to their national and water security.

In 2021, Egypt's economy provided some timid signs of recovery, aided by the renewed loan for US$5.2 billion agreed with the International Monetary Fund, although the continuing subdued nature of the tourist industry remains a worry as it is a major source of income for the country (about 12% of GDP and 10% of employment).

Role of the Gulf in the Process of Regional Transition

The Gulf Monarchies continued to provide much of the world's energy demand and offer significant domestic investment opportunities. They also continued to show increased openness to the world on a diverse array of fronts, such as architecture, sport, tourism and music. They did take some small steps towards female emancipation, creating a dynamic that should be encouraged by the West by finding a pragmatic balance between proclaimed values and pursued interests.

As the Gulf Cooperation Council found renewed unit after the 2017 rift with Qatar was mended, the monarchies – with Saudi Arabia and the UAE at the forefront – are committed to the transition to renewable sources based on an approach that balances energy security, support for economic diversification and saving water. The scarcity of water in the region is a key challenge and, should the targets be achieved, it would mean an estimated overall reduction of 17% and 12% in water withdrawal and consumption.

On the eve of COP26, Riyadh launched the Saudi Green Initiative (SGI) that sets out carbon neutrality by 2060 and investment of about US$190 billion, it joined a Global Methane Pledge to reduce methane emissions by 30% by 2030, and it launched phase one of a reforestation initiative that has seen it plant over 450 million trees.

Make no mistake, this positive transition within the Vision 2030 programme launched by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman cannot erase the shadow cast by the horrendous killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the repressive hand of the Saudi monarchy. However, it perhaps does show the notable abatement of Biden's initial desire to "recalibrate" his relations with Riyadh in light of the checks conducted on some Middle Eastern dossiers. It is also worth keeping an eye on the increase in contact with Israeli intelligence to fight the main, common enemy: Iran and its associates. (For now) this does not suggest Riyadh formally signing the Abraham Accords – as done by Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco and Sudan – but it does subsume the substantive meaning of such Accords, including for military cooperation. At the end of the year, it was significant that the Gulf Cooperation Council made public it was not opposed to finalising the nuclear negotiations, but to their incompleteness as they did not cover Tehran's political and military efforts to destabilise the region.

Looking at the Gulf Monarchies, the role played (and still being played) by Qatar in mediating the (disastrous) withdrawal by America and its allies from Afghanistan is significant, a clear indication of how Qatar can maintain good relations with Tehran, with which it shares the South Pars/North Dome gas field, with Erdogan's Turkey, with the US, for which it hosts a major military base and with which it has entered the fourth phase of strategic dialogue, and with the European Union as well.

Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, and Libya: The Darkness of Seemingly Endless Crises

Yemen

No end is in sight here. In truth, things might get worse because the critical M'arib remains under threat from the Houthis. Matters are made even worse by the various failed UN driven negotiation attempts, most recently sending UN special envoy Hans Grundberg to Tehran, and the mediation attempted by Oman. In this, the Yemeni government and Riyadh rejected the Houthi precondition that Sana'a airport and Hodeidah harbour on the Red Sea be opened out of fear such moves would be exploited militarily by Tehran. Biden's approval in November of an arms sale to Saudi Arabia worth US$650 million and an explicit guarantee to supply what is needed for its defence is important, especially since the Administration had suspended arms sales to the country specifically over the Yemen conflict. Of course, this does not even take into account the humanitarian catastrophe of this war – seen by many as a proxy war between Tehran and Riyah – that, according to the United Nations, has left 13 thousand civilians dead and 112 thousand injured, along with over 4 million people homeless. Plus, nearly two thirds of the population (about 20 million) survive on humanitarian aid and about 5 million go hungry.

Lebanon

Following a nerve-racking period lasting over a year in which no government could be formed, Najib Mikati, a seasoned man of power, former Minister of Transport and Public Works and now in his third term, has managed to form a new Executive. His government is faced with the gigantic challenges posed by the social, financial and economic abyss into which the country has fallen and by the generalised spread of acute discontent that has been made worse by escalating intra-sectarian clashes in which the latest move was Hezbollah's attempt to use military

power to stop the trial of those allegedly responsible for the devastating explosion at Beirut's port.

Mikati immediately formed a commission to deal with the International Monetary Fund and to raise awareness among Libya's friends, especially France under Macron, which has strongly backed the new premier. Interestingly, the Gulf Monarchies were missing from this "list" of nations, with Saudi Arabia the most notable absence following the sudden stigmatisation of the Saudi war in Yemen by Georges Qordahi, the current Minister of Information, when he was not yet in government and still close to Hezbollah. In truth, this was a cause/pretext to emphasise the hostility towards the power enjoyed by Hezbollah (and so Iran) in the country. It was only in the wake of Qordahi's resignation and subsequent pressure from Mikati and the Arab League that an opportunity arose for Riyadh to reconsider its position. Yet, this is definitely no certainty as Saudi Arabia feels the Lebanese political class is responsible for Hezbollah's growing role. Saudi Arabia of course blames Hezbollah for many things, including smuggling millions of Captagon pills, the "drug of the fundamentalists" at Jeddah port, due to which key fruit and vegetable exports from Beirut have been blocked.

Syria

"… Syria does not meet the minimum conditions needed to guarantee a process capable of ending the conflict, establishing credible and inclusive governance and paving the way for free and fair elections; conditions explicitly stated to be hostile to European involvement in the reconstruction of the country…".[2] Such words were used in the Final Statement at the Brussels V conference on the Syrian crisis in late March chaired by the UN and the European Union, which is, along with the Member States, the main donor (€24.9 billion) for

[2] EEAS10, "Supporting the future of Syria and the region", Brussels V Conference – 29-30 March 2021, Video.

humanitarian assistance, stabilisation and resilience including efforts to combat the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since then, the situation has not changed, not even in the key zones in the north-east and the north-west where Damascus, Moscow and Ankara face off. Moscow and Damascus are allies, but Ankara continues to support the militias (even extremists) that oppose Assad in the north-west and, in the north-east it is fighting the Syrian Kurds in the YPG ("People's Defence Units") – seen by the Turkish government as "terrorists" as they are linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – that falls under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) backed by the US, partly because of its efforts to fight IS in this desert portion of the country.

Yet Bashar al Assad was re-elected to the presidency with 95% of the vote. Despite the doubts as to the legitimacy of this, it does show the widespread belief (or sense of resignation) that he will not be toppled purely using military means and that he might regain control of the entire territory (currently at 70%). So, it is now more convenient for the Arab world to get Syria back, including for the Arab League, which expelled it way back in 2011. This would also help to reduce its dependence on Iran. The US has shown it has no interest, for now, in normalising relations with the regime, but Damascus is definitely in favour of the Arab opening, partly because it would like access to the resources of the Gulf Monarchies to reconstruct the country, a task that could well cost around US$400 billion.

Interestingly, the quietening of relations with Tehran and Iran's reduced military and political presence in the country is welcomed not only by Israel, but also by Moscow, which actually is allied with Iran in supporting Damascus. A further sign of this new dynamic can be found in the departure of General Javad Ghaffari, commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria, and the UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs visiting Syria. This needs to be monitored, especially to see if there is any weakening of the "Axis of Resistance".

Libya

> In Libya, we must continue with our commitment to the country's full stabilisation, following the path mapped out by the United Nations. This must remain a Libyan-led process, with the international community supporting and accompanying the country along this path ... it is important that free, credible and inclusive elections are held as soon as possible, able to unite the country and lead to long-lasting peace. Stabilisation in Libya is also crucial in order to control migratory flows. Over the past months, we have managed to once again bring this issue to the heart of the European agenda. The European Union must now implement a shared, humane and secure management – that lives up to our values.

These were the words used by Prime Minister Mario Draghi when speaking about the postponement of the 24 December elections, which was widely expected after weeks of mounting uncertainty, internal hostilities and underhand external interference. Only 2022 will tell whether the capital of convergence that was slowly forged during 2021, with both local and international support, will suffice to prevent the country slipping back into a spiral of conflict. Some comfort comes from the fact that neither Russia nor Turkey, which have been, through their allies and associates, at the forefront of increasing the major tribal, political, military and clan divisions, seems interested in fuelling such a conflict.

Still, many problems remain to be overcome, from the election law to creating a constitutional framework, from the commitment of candidates – yet to be really tested – to accepting the results of any vote, and much more.

The year ended shrouded in a shadow of internal turmoil that has created a major challenge for international and local players. They have to stand up and face the burden of being the "facilitators" in creating a new road map that is as Libyan-centric as possible and which can provide the basis for renewing the pathway to stabilisation begun in 2020 with the ceasefire

signed on 23 October in Geneva sponsored by the 5+5 Libyan Joint Military Commission, and continued with the Paris Conference on 12 November and its follow-ups.

Conclusion

In 2021, MENA experienced differing dynamics. In Yemen, this dynamic remained clearly conflictual in nature, in Lebanon it was perilous for the country, in Libya it was a risky stalemate, while in Syria and Iraq the dynamic was uncertain, although with distinct specific features. Yet, all these countries were also united by the intersecting politics of influence enacted by the regional and global powers. In such a framework, Iran stands out. It is, of course, engaging with the US and carefully watched by the latter as negotiations to renew the nuclear agreement proceed. Israel has indicated its intention to fight any agreement that is "not good" – like the rest of the Gulf Council – as it furthers its goal of broadening its relations in the Gulf beyond the Abraham Accords. The Gulf Monarchies played a less evident but nonetheless important role as they leaned towards progressively opening up to the world in general and to trying to be active partners for global challenges, as well as proving eager for an easing in tensions with Tehran and for an innovative Coordinating Council with Egypt. Finally, one cannot ignore the role played by Russia and Turkey, two powers untied in an indefinite relationship of political and military competition from Syria to Libya.

America's recalibration or disengagement remains hazy, accompanied by the EU's rather indecisive diplomatic and humanitarian role.

Numerous unknowns exist, and Islamic extremism is definitely a major one, its multi-faceted nature impacting the entire region, especially in the wake of the recent dreadful, horrifying Afghan trauma.

9. The Return of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan and its Repercussions for the Region

Elisa Giunchi

In the summer of 2021, as international contingents completed their withdrawal from the country, the Afghan army collapsed, allowing the Taleban to occupy all the main passes and rural areas and finally to enter Kabul on 15 August, almost without firing a shot.[1] Over the next two weeks, all remaining international personnel left the country, along with thousands of Afghans who had worked for foreign embassies, development agencies and government offices. By the autumn, the already precarious living conditions of the population began to deteriorate rapidly. The causes of the humanitarian crisis that is now unfolding in Afghanistan include a second consecutive year of drought that has increased the price of wheat and other staples, the Taleban's need to use already scarce resources to consolidate their control over the country and to recompense their rank and file, the freezing of funds deposited in western banks, and the international development community's interruption of development aid that, until 15 August, had covered three quarters of Afghan public expenditure. If we exclude earnings derived from the opium trade, taxes on now strangled domestic trade, and humanitarian aid, the reborn Islamic Emirate can

[1] For a long-term view of events leading to the re-establishment of the Emirate, see E. Giunchi, *Afghanistan. Da una confederazione tribale alle crisi contemporanee*, Rome, Carocci, 2021.

only count on imports from certain countries in the region, and even these are restricted by the Taleban's limited liquidity and by the distrust that many nations display towards the reborn Islamic Emirate. It is to this regional context – complex and typified by multiple antagonisms – that the following pages are dedicated.

China and Russia

No sooner had the Taleban reached Kabul than the western press began warning that Russia and China could extend their influence in the region to fill the vacuum left by the international contingents. Indeed, both countries immediately demonstrated their willingness to deal with the new Taleban government. Though the Russians expressed a certain caution, the Chinese clearly announced their intention to respect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Afghanistan in the very first top-level bilateral meeting, held on 25 October, and have frequently urged the West to revoke the sanctions imposed on the Taleban.

There can be no doubt that China benefits from the restoration of the Emirate: first of all, the departure of US troops leaves Beijing free to re-vitalise and consolidate investments made in Afghanistan over the last twenty years, especially in the mining sector. According to TOLOnews, the television and internet channel the Taleban now use to communicate with the rest of the world, copper mining operations have already recommenced in Mes Aynak, where Chinese companies obtained exclusive extraction rights 13 years ago.[2] In addition to ample, as of yet unexploited reserves of copper, gold, bauxite, lithium, chromium, lead, zinc, iron minerals and talc, Afghanistan is also rich in rare earths – the chemical elements needed to produce various high-performance materials essential to the arms and aerospace industries and to the green

[2] "Mining at Mes Aynak has resumed: officials", *TOLOnews*, 13 December 2021.

transition. The country also has important reserves of oil and natural gas, regarding which meetings with potential Russian investorsare already ongoing.[3] Such resources could also be exported to China one day along the Wakhan corridor. Second, if the Taleban succeed in stabilising the country, Beijing could consolidate its BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) land corridors, in particular the CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) that is probably its most important trade artery, and perhaps even expand the BRI with additional corridors towards Afghanistan. Third, on a more strictly geopolitical level, China is now free to strengthen its position in the region with respect to India, whose ascent in recent decades has been favourably viewed and supported by Washington, and with whom China still has unresolved borders disputes concerning the eastern and western sectors of the McMahon line.

The return of the Islamic Emirate, however, is not without its risks from the Chinese point of view: the Taleban could once again offer refuge to militant factions of the Uyghur TIP (Turkestan Islamic Party) and similar jihadi outfits with the effect of destabilising Xinjiang and compromising the success of the New Silk Road. While the Taleban have generally avoided criticising Beijing's policies of sinification in Xinjiang and Uyghur repression, it is difficult to believe that all the factions in the fragmented movement will renounce links with the TIP. Chinese fears were confirmed in September by the formation of the interim government, one third of which is made up of figures affiliated with the Haqqani network, which maintains ties – though how strong we do not know – with al-Qaeda and other organisations of the global jihad.

This same fear of jihadist connections is shared by Moscow and the Central Asian Republics. The victory of the Taleban could easily have the knock-on effect of re-invigorating jihadist movements in ex-Soviet territories even if the new Emirate

[3] "Taliban say Russian investors willing to establish oil & gas refineries in Afghanistan", *republicworld.com*, 4 January 2021.

decides not to offer them refuge. As the attacks carried out in Afghanistan in recent months by ISK (Islamic State in the Khorasan) have demonstrated, the Taleban seem unable to control the jihadist grouping that most worries regional actors. Unlike al-Qaeda, which is a mere shadow of what it was twenty years ago, though it still maintains a presence in many Afghan provinces, ISK is constantly attracting militants to its bases in Nangarhar. The fear of jihadist contagion induced Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to hold joint military exercises near the Afghan border in early August, Tajikistan and Iran to establish a joint committee aimed at promoting bilateral collaboration in security and counter-terrorism at the end of summer, and Russia and China to sign an agreement on terrorism and narcotrafficking in September, complementing the 2+2 talks held in April.

Convergence between Russia and China on regional security themes does not, however, mean that their interests coincide: while Beijing is striving to contain the influence of New Delhi and keep India out of talks on the Afghan crisis, Moscow would prefer to involve its Indian allies – who happen to be key customers for Russian arms and military equipment – in attempts to stabilise Afghanistan. This can be seen from the Russian request to invite New Delhi (and Teheran) to the Troika plus forum (currently limited to Russia, Pakistan, China and the United States).[4]

The Gulf States

Little attention has been paid to the impact of recent events in Afghanistan on Saudi Arabia, yet Riyadh financed the Taleban movement in the nineties and was one of only three countries, along with Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, to recognise the first Emirate diplomatically. Like the support provided to

[4] "Every reason to believe India will join extended Troika of US-China-Russia-Pak on Afghanistan: Lavrov", *The Tribune*, 3 January 2022.

the Afghan anti-Soviet resistance in the previous decade, this strategy was part of Saudi Arabia's effort, pursued vigorously ever since the seventies, to influence global Islam against Iran. It proved a dangerous game for Riyadh, however, as was seen when its *protégés* and their affiliates began to question the religious legitimacy of the House of Saud in the nineties, accusing them of not being sufficiently Islamic and of colluding with the United States and Israel.

The limited attention paid to Saudi Arabia by the media following the Taleban's return to Kabul reflects the conviction among many analysts that Riyadh stopped supporting the "students" some time ago. The Saudis have certainly been striving to project a more moderate image abroad, in the hope of repairing the damage done to their reputation by involvement in the attacks of 11 September and more recently by the Kashoggi affair. Aside from certain reforms introduced in recent years by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, however, there is no proof that Saudi support for jihadist and anti-Shiite movements outside the country has actually been withdrawn, or that the aim of Wahhabising global Islam has been abandoned. The same can be said of the United Arab Emirates who, in recent years, have initiated a policy of cautious progress in human rights as part of a competition for religious soft power with the other Gulf countries. Qatar is probably the Gulf state that has been most advantaged by the rebirth of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Taleban were allowed to open a political office in Doha back in 2013. The city was also the location of the negotiations between Trump's envoy and Mullah Baradar that led to the agreement of February 2020. Last August Qatar helped evacuate foreigners and Afghans from Kabul. This tiny State could thus consolidate its Islamic credentials while, at the same time, strengthening its links with the United States. Not a bad achievement for a nation that, until only a year previously, had been subject to a strict embargo by its powerful Saudi neighbours and their allies.

Though they have repeatedly invited the West to engage the Islamic Emirate in the cause of regional stability, the Gulf states have not yet recognised the new regime in Kabul themselves. Being associated with the Taleban, who certainly do not enjoy good press in the West, may significantly damage a nation's reputation, at least until the Islamic Emirate assumes a far more "moderate" face. With this in mind, the declarations made by the political leaders of the Gulf states are enlightening. Last October the Qatari Foreign Minister emphasised the differences between his government's tolerant social policy, and the repressive policies towards women carried out by new Afghan Emirate, and urged the Taleban to moderate their ways. Also Saudi Arabia has tried to convince the Emirate to soften its positions on the theme of human rights, in an attempt to consolidate the image the Saud family wishes to project, of a reformed Taleban movement that has long abandoned the excesses of the nineties and is therefore "worthy" of Western recognition. Until the Taleban comply more closely with its requests, is the Saudi government is trying to distance itself from them formally. Prince Turki al-Faisal, the ex-head of Saudi intelligence, has thus pointed to the difference between Wahhabism, the kingdom's official ideology, and the Deobandi beliefs that inspire the Taleban, conveniently forgetting the role his country played in supporting them and the policy of Wahhabising Deobandi Pakistani madrassas pursued by the Saudi ruling family since the nineteen seventies.[5]

Iran

The removal of the Taleban regime in 2001 and that of Saddam Hussein in Iraq two years later allowed Iran to extend its influence beyond its eastern and western borders. In Afghanistan, the state-building initiated by the Bonn conference made it

[5] J.M. Dorsey, "Afghanistan highlights link between religious soft power and Gulf security", *The Times of Israel*, 1 October 2021.

possible for Hazaras and Tajiks, traditionally favourable to Iran, to enter State institutions. Teheran also began to play a role in reconstructing the Afghan nation through investment and aid, in the hope of reducing its own isolation and alleviating the impact of sanctions. Many Iranian investments in Afghanistan were intended to improve connections between the two countries and, through them, access to Afghan markets.

In the last two decades, Arab, Israeli and US media frequently accused Iran's leaders of playing a duplicitous game: Teheran, they asserted, was simultaneously supporting the Taleban in the hope of avoiding the long-term presence of American troops near Iran's borders. There is no real proof that this was the case, but we cannot exclude the possibility that, at a certain point, the Iranian government decided to open channels of communication with factions of the Taleban in preparation for a possible withdrawal of foreign troops from the country – a possibility that became reality when Obama announced in 2009 that the US military would begin to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2011.

The main fear of the Iranian government today is that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will once again fall under the influence of Saudi Arabia, which already supports armed Sunni groups in Sistan and Baluchestan. This risk is viewed as particularly serious now that rivalry between the GCC nations has been attenuated by the desire to renew unity in the face of Iran and to rebuild links with the Americans, who appear far less eager to guarantee the protection of the Arabian Peninsula today. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan, of course, has clearly shown that America's priorities lie elsewhere, in the Indo-Pacific region, and has almost certainly contributed to convincing the Gulf states to overcome their differences.

There is also the fear that the Taleban might resume their anti-Shiite policies of the nineties. The determination and capacity to defend Shiite minorities outside the borders of Iran, it must be remembered, is an important legitimising factor for the Iranian leadership. Finally, it is feared that the

new Emirate might exclude Persian-speaking Afghans from any future political set-up, especially the Tajiks, who have always maintained close ties with Teheran. The Taleban's formation of an interim government confirms these fears: only three of its members come from ethnic minorities and no Shiites have been included. In November, against the backdrop of the third Regional Security Dialogue, the secretary of the Iranian National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, remarked on the need to include all the main ethnic groups in the new Afghan government. So far, there has been no response.

The return of the Taleban nevertheless presents Teheran with opportunities too: if Russia succeeds in convincing other regional players to include Iran in talks on Afghanistan and to admit Iran as a full member of the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), in which it currently only has observer status, the country's diplomatic isolation would be greatly diminished. While deciding how to move forward, Teheran, brought almost to its knees by sanctions, is continuing to export oil and other products to Afghanistan. Continuous stability in Afghanistan is also in Iran's interest for other reasons: it would avoid rendering worthless all the investments made over the last twenty years; it would prevent the arrival of new waves of refugees in the west of the country, where around 20,000 Afghans fled in the first half of 2021;[6] and it would help control the opium imports that are causing high rates of drug dependency and widespread corruption.

Pakistan and India

In the seventies, when Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was Prime Minister, Pakistan began backing Islamist Afghan dissidents with the goal of convincing Kabul to recognise the Durand Line and stop supporting the Balochi guerrillas whose insurgency against

[6] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Flash External Update: Afghanistan Situation, #6, 20 September 2021.

Islamabad began after the secession of the eastern wing in 1971. In the following decade, the military regime of Zia ul-Haq supported ultraconservative Sunni and Islamist factions of the Afghan resistance with the intent of resolving the border question in Pakistan's own favour and achieving strategic depth in the event of a new conflict with India. In the early nineties, Benazir Bhutto transferred allegiance to a new Afghan ally: the Taleban movement. This decision was confirmed first by Nawaz Sharif and then, after the 1999 coup, by General Pervaiz Musharraf: Islamabad's Afghan policy therefore remained unchanged irrespective of the political system and ideological orientation of the political class.

Following the attacks of 11 September, Musharraf found himself forced to disown the Taleban on the diplomatic level and to support the forces engaged in the Global War on Terror in the hope of improving relations with the United States, which remained frosty following Pakistan's 1998 nuclear tests and the 1999 coup d'état, and of obtaining bilateral and multilateral economic benefits. Musharraf's hopes were soon realised.[7] However, both he and the elected governments that followed the democratic transition of 2008 have apparently adopted an ambivalent policy: Taleban leaders continued to find refuge in north-west Pakistan and were able to plan offensives and recruit fighters there, counting on the solidarity and support of the local Pashtun population, Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and – as many researchers and analysts maintain – the Pakistani secret services. This inevitably led to a deterioration in relations between Islamabad and the government in Kabul, and between Islamabad and the United States, at least until Pakistan became key to the Trump administration's policy of negotiating directly with the Taleban.

The revival of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan offers a number of advantages to Islamabad. First of all, the border question, which has poisoned relations for almost a century,

[7] See E. Giunchi, *Pakistan: islam, potere e democratizzazione*, Roma, Carocci, 2009.

could finally be resolved or at least glossed over in the name of Islamic brotherhood: the Taleban – especially the Ghilzai to whom the Haqqani network belongs and not by chance the Taleban faction that has received most support from Islamabad – have so far not raised the border issue. Secondly, Islamabad might hope that Kabul will no longer support the Baloch nationalists who currently threaten the infrastructure projects associated with the CPEC. Finally, Pakistan could achieve its much sought-after strategic depth while simultaneously reducing India's influence over Afghanistan, which has increased dramatically since 2001.

Following the defeat of the first Taleban regime, the Indian government established cordial relations with the Karzai government, not so much in the context of antagonism with Pakistan as in an attempt to extend its influence outside the South Asia region. India opened four consulates in Afghanistan, became the country's main regional donor, with projects of great symbolic impact, and invested around US$3.5 billion in healthcare, education and infrastructure. Among the most important projects were the construction of a road linking Afghanistan to Central Asia and to Chabahar, the key Iranian port through which Indian goods destined for Afghanistan had to transit. In the eyes of New Delhi, Chabahar represented a counterweight to Gwadar, the Pakistani port developed by Chinese funding. In the military field, in 2011 India concluded a strategic partnership with the Afghan government under which New Delhi agreed to supply light arms and training to Kabul.

With the return of the Emirate, the Indian government sees its investments in Afghanistan under threat, along with its extra-regional power projection, to the advantage of its regional rivals China and Pakistan. India also fears that the Emirate will once again start offering refuge to jihadist groups like LeT (Lashkar-e Taiba) and JeM (Jaish-e-Mohammed), which have previously been behind attacks against Indian targets in Afghanistan, Kashmir and in India itself. It does not, however,

look as if India has any intention of aiding a hypothetical anti-Taleban opposition as it did in the nineties: in September, representatives of the Modi government even met with leading figures of the new Emirate in the awareness that Kabul has every interest in restoring bilateral trade and Indian investments, and in diversifying its alliances.

In short, Pakistani calculations may well prove incorrect, as India may yet succeed in preserving its interests in Afghanistan. The renewal of the Taleban Emirate could also re-invigorate the TTP and similar groups that consider the Islamabad government insufficiently Islamic, and convince them to emulate their Afghan brothers. If this were to happen, sectarian tensions within Pakistan would inevitably come to a head. The long-standing intra-Sunni violence, with the Deobandi Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam on one side and the Barelvi Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan on the other, may also be exacerbated. Some even fear that the Islamist objectives of the TTP may come to coincide with those of the Pashtun nationalist movement that hopes to unite the populations on either side of the Durand Line. If this happens, the reference to Islam that has unified the Pakistani nation since 1947 would no longer provide the necessary glue, opening the door to what Jinnah used to call the poison of provincialism.

Imran Khan has every interest in seeing the Emirate recognised by regional governments and the wider international community, as this would simultaneously help Pakistan consolidate its influence over the Emirate and avert the risk that the countries that feel most threatened by the new Afghan regime might begin supporting Afghan proxies or exacerbating fractures within the Taleban. Further destabilisation of Afghanistan would, among other things, create new movements of refugees into Pakistan (over 10,000 arrived in the first half of this year)[8] and fuel drug-trafficking through the porous Durand Line.

[8] Ibidem.

To have the Emirate recognised, integrate it into the region, ward off the risk of civil war, and also to clean up its own image as a country that sponsors reactionary forces, Pakistan is struggling to steer the Taleban in a more moderate direction. But it is objectively difficult to influence a polycentric movement in which the chain of command is opaque and fluid. Even more so because the faction least inclined to moderation is the same Haqqani network that according to many analysts Pakistan's secret services have been supporting for decades.

Islamabad also has every interest in preventing India from assuming a negotiating role that would compromise its influence over the new Afghan political system. Indeed, India was not invited to the "Troika plus" forum held on 11 November in Islamabad and neither Pakistan nor China chose to take part in the Regional Security Dialogue held in New Delhi the previous day, which India, Russia and the Central Asian Republics all attended.

Islamabad calls India a spoiler that cannot act as peacemaker, while India accuses Pakistan of considering Afghanistan as its own protectorate. As for China, Pakistan's all-weather ally, Beijing mistrusts the intentions of the Indian government, which is seen as an important pillar of US policy in the Indo-Pacific region. This point is clearly illustrated by the pro-government *Global Times*: "If India is to play a role in Afghanistan, it is unlikely to play a positive one. India is likely to use its intelligence agencies and some forces cultivated in Afghanistan and its surrounding areas in the past … to undermine and disrupt the stability of Afghanistan".[9]

[9] L. Zongyi, "Why is it essential for China, Pakistan to enhance coordination against terrorists, safeguard regional stability", *Global Times*, 2 October 2021.

Conclusion

The stability of Afghanistan is in the interests of all regional actors, including Iran, India and other countries that feel threatened by the new Afghan regime. Entering a dialogue with the Taleban and integrating them into the region may be a practical way of gaining access to Afghan markets and resources, and preventing new, uncontrolled movements of refugees into neighbouring countries.

The degree of acceptance shown to the Emirate nevertheless depends on the Taleban's willingness to form a more inclusive government, to combat drug-trafficking and to refrain from supporting jihadist movements that threaten other countries. On the other hand, the call for women's rights reiterated by many regional actors presumably stems from soft power considerations – a desire not to be identified as "reactionary" and, in the case of the Arab nations of the Gulf, an attempt to present themselves as bastions of a "moderate" Islam that can act as a bridge between the United States and the Islamic world.

How the region's attitude towards the Emirate develops will depend largely on two factors: the outcome of power struggles within the Taleban, who are divided between a pragmatic wing under the leadership of Mullah Baradar and an "extremist" wing – the Haqqani network – contrary to any dilution of the movement's strict ideology, and geostrategic rivalries between India and Pakistan, China and India, the Gulf states and Iran.

10. Indo-Pacific: The Rise of a New Geopolitical Space

Filippo Fasulo

The end of the Cold War, with its consequent reduction in the value of Europe as a physical border with the Soviet enemy, combined with the rise in economic weight of the Asian economies, has generated broad debate over the past three decades about the imminent shift of the world's geopolitical centre from the Atlantic axis – in which the United States and Europe are the key players – to the Pacific axis, characterised by the rivalry between Washington and Beijing. The events of 2021 finally seem to demonstrate that this shift has taken place, to the extent that all the main actors have formalised their strategy for the region, even though the forms of engagement of regional and external actors are still to be fully defined. What we are talking about is the Indo-Pacific, a concept that was still obscure a few years ago, but which now represents the new frontier of international engagement in terms of military presence, trade and the formation of alliances within the framework of great-power rivalry. The Indo-Pacific is therefore a relatively new concept, promoted by Asians, with a military dimension, a commercial dimension and a strong emphasis on curbing China's expansionist ambitions.

The Genesis of the Term and the Main Issues in Play

The first step in understanding the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific is to explore the genesis of its name. The term was coined in Germany, in the inter-war years, by Karl Haushofer, a geographer and political scientist. Haushofer, who focused considerable attention on the idea of *Lebensraum* over the course of his career, had imagined the Indo-Pacific as a space in contraposition to the Atlantic Ocean dominated by the Anglo-Americans and the European colonial powers.[1] Once formulated, the concept remained in the background until it was evoked again in 2007 by the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, during a visit to India, on which he spoke of the "confluence of two oceans", albeit without explicitly mentioning the Indo-Pacific.[2] Under the Obama administration, the term gained currency within the broader context of the "Pivot to Asia",[3] but without finding its way into any official US strategy papers. By the mid-2010s, however, several regional actors[4] had started using the term in their foreign-policy guidelines and speeches by national leaders, such as Australia (2013), Japan (2013), and Indonesia (2013). After the United States, under Donald Trump, officially used the term in 2017 in its *National Security Strategy*,[5] which referenced the *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* based on the model of Japan's 2016 strategy[6] of the same name,

[1] "The 'Indo-Pacific': Intellectual Origins and International Visions in GlobalContexts", *Modern Intellectual History*, Cambridge University Press, vol. 16, no. 1, 2019.

[2] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Confluence of the Two Seas". Speech by H.E.Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, 22 August 2007.

[3] H. Clinton, "America's Pacific Century", *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011.

[4] W. Haruko, *The "Indo-Pacific" Concept: Geographical Adjustments and their Implications*, WP 326, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), 16 March 2020.

[5] The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017.

[6] T. Watanabe, *Japan's Rationale for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy*, The

other countries formalised their position on the Indo-Pacific, including India (2018), France (2018), the United Kingdom (2018), Germany (2020) and the Netherlands (2020).[7] The joint initiative by France, Germany and the Netherlands then generated the debate that led to the *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*[8] in 2021.

The emergence of the concept between about 2005 and 2010 is attributable to three dynamics: the growing interest in the region elicited by the rise of China, the realisation that the concept of Asia-Pacific in vogue at the time was too limited,[9] and the need to include India in the formulations of the region's security architecture. The task of identifying the exact borders of the Indo-Pacific area, however, is still ongoing. In its most extensive version, the area runs from the coast of East Africa to the American shores of the Pacific, while other versions are confined to "the eastern half of the Indian Ocean to the west and the western half of the Pacific Ocean to the east".[10] The minimum form, however, involves the inclusion of India in a conceptualisation of the region that was previously confined essentially to the Pacific countries or the eastern end of Asia. This also gives a central position to Australia, especially as an ally of the United States in the region, and France, which, with the inclusion of the Pacific Islands, becomes a local power.

Having briefly defined the main players, we can now turn our attention to the various trade initiatives developed in recent years. The first was the *Trans-Pacific Partnership* (TPP). Designed as the "economic leg" of the Obama administration's Pivot

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Sasakawa Peace Foundation.

[7] F. Heiduk and G. Wacker, *From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific. Significance, Implementation and Challenges*, SWP Research Paper 2020/RP 09, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 1 July 2020, doi:10.18449/2020RP09.

[8] European Commission, Join(2021) 24 final, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, "The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" Brussels, 16 September 2021.

[9] F. Heiduk e G. Wacker (2020).

[10] Ibid; A. Berkofsky and S. Miracola, *Geopolitics by Other Means: The Indo-Pacific Reality*, ISPI Report, Milan, Ledizioni, 2019.

to Asia, it was mothballed after Donald Trump's withdrawal, although by then even the Democrats no longer took a favourable view of the US presence in the deal. Paradoxically, the TPP gained a new lease of life in the form of the *Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership* (CPTPP) without US involvement, while its China-backed counterpart (the *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership - RCEP)* took effect on 1 January 2022 and is currently the world's biggest trade agreement.

From a military point of view, the 2012 clash between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands[11] and its subsequent escalation in the South China Sea, which spawned a number of artificial islands built by Beijing to strengthen its territorial claims, reinforced the sense of urgency among the other actors to step up their military presence in the area. Not only has the United States started taking disruptive action designed to call into question the exclusive territorial areas associated with the new islands, but even geographically distant countries, such as Germany, have launched patrol missions to safeguard freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.[12]

The gradual adoption of a term designed to draw India into the regional block actively resisting Chinese expansion, in response to mainly Japanese concerns, went onto create a space that drew in new actors too (Australia and France), which have filled that space with both a physical presence and a new focus. This mechanism culminated in the establishment of a central role for the *Quadrilateral Security Dialogue* (QUAD) between the US, Japan, India and Australia; the launch of a new initiative between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States; and the formulation of the European Strategy. The centre of international cooperation and conflict between global and regional powers has therefore shifted to a space that

[11] European Parliament, *Sino-Japanese controversy over the Senkaku/Diaoyu/Diaoyutai Islands. An imminent flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific?*, 2021.

[12] https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3143567/german-warship-heads-south-china-sea-it-deploys-six-month

was only recently conceptualised, under the term Indo-Pacific, and has yet to be fully defined.

The US and the Indo-Pacific

Although in Haushofer's original vision, the creation of the Indo-Pacific space was supposed to present an opportunity to release the eastern portion of the globe from the dominion of the Atlantic powers, it now represents a global field of contest and an opportunity for the United States and the European Union to be present as regional actors in East Asia. For the US, it is also about responding to calls from Japan, India and Australia, which feel intimidated by China's growing assertiveness, to take part in the local security dynamics.

The military component of the US presence in the Indo-Pacific has a direct impact on the redefinition of the military structure's organisation. In May 2018, in fact, the *US Pacific Command* (USPACOM) was renamed the *US Indo-Pacific Command* (USINDOPACOM). Much as this change might look like an administrative detail, in fact it signals a commitment to a lasting and structural change of perspective. A look at the genesis of the QUAD, which for about a decade only really existed in the form of joint military exercises, also shows that security appears to have been the first motivation and the first opportunity to step up the US presence in the area. Aukus is a similar example of how strategic motives are the driving force behind the creation of new alliances. However, two additional factors warrant consideration: firstly that, once regional powers meet around the same table, they can then reach agreements on aspects that are not strictly strategic, and secondly, that economic considerations are entirely complementary to military effort.

These concepts have been frequently reprised in the not yet fully defined formulations of US strategy towards the Indo-Pacific, which, in the words of President Biden,[13] must be

[13] https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/27/

an "open, connected, prosperous, resilient and secure" space. Putting these principles into practice on the economic front has led to the development of an "*Indo-Pacific economic framework*" intended to establish shared goals on facilitating trade, setting standards for the digital economy and technology, the resilience of supply chains, decarbonisation and a range of other issues. This is a very important step for the US presence in the region, insofar as the nature of the agreement, due to move into the negotiation phase in early 2022, has been described by US Trade Secretary, Gina Raimondo, as "inclusive, flexible and not structured as a typical free trade agreement".[14]

More broadly, US strategy towards the Indo-Pacific was identified by the US Secretary of State, Anthony J. Blinken, in a speech he made at the Universitas Indonesia in Jakarta on 14 December 2021.[15] The key concept is "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," meaning the ability of individuals and States to act freely, on the one hand, and the need to uphold a rules-based order, on the other. This is a direct and explicit reference to the 2016 ruling of a United Nations court certifying China's violation of the UNCLOS Treaty concerning the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea. On this basis, the US intends to strengthen its network of alliances and partnerships with regional actors, such as the QUAD members, South Korea, Australia, Thailand and the Philippines, with which agreements already exist, while also forging new ones with Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. The US also regards the European Union as a partner with which to cooperate, due to its interests in the area. One of the central planks of the strategy to achieve these goals is the pursuit of broad-based prosperity, which will inevitably revolve around

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readout-of-president-bidens-participation-in-the-east-asia-summit/

[14] R. Latiff and L. Lee, "U.S. says new Indo-Pacific economic framework not typical trade deal", *Reuters*, 19 November 2021.

[15] U.S. Department of State, "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific", Speech Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia, 14 December 2021.

the "*Indo-Pacific economic framework*" that is under discussion, with the addition of infrastructure development efforts. This move is a direct response to China's *Belt and Road Initiative* and will be based on the *Build Back Better World* plan and similar initiatives taken within the framework of QUAD. It is also worth noting the emphasis placed on democracy and the *Summit for Democracy*, thus implicitly marking a dividing line with respect to China.

The formation of AUKUS, which triggered a diplomatic incident with France and the European Union, was a clear sign of the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific in the US's projection of power abroad. In the rush to reassure Australia of its security support in relation to big-power rivalry and China's growing assertiveness towards Australia, the announcement of Aukus overshadowed the presentation of Europe's Strategy towards the Indo-Pacific and, at a more practical level, inflicted considerable economic damage on France, which lost a contract for the supply of military submarines. Regardless of whether the timing and content of the agreement were deliberately intended as an act of competition with the European Union and the interests of its Member States, or whether they were simply the result of a diplomatic oversight, the result clearly indicates that the minds of decision-makers in Washington are increasingly focused on the Pacific axis.

From QUAD to QUAD Plus

The strategic agreement that best represents the new centrality of the Indo-Pacific and the change of gear in the system of regional alliances is undoubtedly the QUAD (Quadrilateral Dialogue) between the US, India, Japan and Australia. Established at the initiative of Japan in 2007 – at a time when the concept of the Indo-Pacific was beginning to take shape – and intended mainly as a vehicle for joint military operations, it was hobbled almost from the outset by the withdrawal of Australia, under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who saw the initiative as unduly

anti-Chinese. Having survived on the strength of the *Malabar Exercise* – joint military operations first between the US and India, and then with Japan, which became a permanent member in 2014[16] – the QUAD was revived under the presidency of Donald Trump, who was incorporating the concept of the Indo-Pacific into his national strategy at the same time.

Joe Biden has not only maintained the arrangement, but has raised the diplomatic level of the meetings between the four countries' representatives, from ministerial summits to heads of government summits. The first virtual summit of leaders was held on 12 March 2021 and the first face-to-face edition on 24 September 2021. By this time, not only had Australia fully rejoined the group, but the QUAD's goals had also evolved, to encompass fields beyond just military cooperation. In the joint communiqué issued on the fringe of the March[17] and September[18] meetings, priority is given to more general issues. This is not an entirely new development, insofar as goals relating to development finance and the promotion of quality infrastructure[19] had already been set out at a number of consultations in 2019, alongside military initiatives and the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Albeit within the framework of this concept, the meetings held in 2021 focused on addressing "some of the world's most pressing challenges", such as the pandemic, climate change, and critical and emerging technologies. These goals will be pursued through specific task forces for each, known as the *Quad Vaccine Partnership* – which will endeavour to extend the distribution of vaccines to countries that are still without them, within the framework COVAX,

[16] K. Kaushik, "Explained: The Malabar Exercise of Quad nations, and why it matters to India", *The Indian Express*, 31 August 2021.

[17] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Quad Summit Fact Sheet, "The Quad Vaccine Partnership", 12 March 2021.

[18] The White House, Joint Statement from Quad Leaders, Statements and Releases, 24 September 2021.

[19] U.S. Department of State, U.S.-Australia-India-Japan Consultations ("The Quad"), Media note, Office of the Spokesperson, 4 November 2019.

under the supervision of a *Quad Vaccine Experts Group* and in addition to investments in local vaccine production capacity and Research & Development – *the Quad Climate Working Group* and *the Quad Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group*.

Originating as a military exercise, the QUAD has thus expanded its scope to almost all of the key fields of international politics, under the umbrella of what has been called the "Spirit of the Quad",[20] involving the shared vision of QUAD members for a region that is "free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion." Adherence to these principles enables other players to take part in QUAD initiatives, within the framework of the *Quad Plus*, which have already seen the participation of South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand.[21] These countries could be involved in policy proposals spawned on the fringes of the QUAD, such as the *Supply Chain Resilience Initiative*, adopted on 27 April 2021[22] by the Trade Ministers of Japan, India and Australia, for the purpose of sharing best practices and organising events for businesses, aimed at fostering the diversification of supply chains.

Europe as an Indo-Pacific Nation

2021 was the year in which the European Union formalised its intent to be a regional actor in the Indo-Pacific. This is mainly due to the territorial possessions of one of its Member States, namely France, which span almost the entire region, from the islands of Mayotte and Reunion near Madagascar, to French

[20] The White House, Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: "The Spirit of the Quad", Statements and Releases, 12 marzo 2021.

[21] J. Panda, "Making 'Quad Plus' a Reality", *The Diplomat*, 13 January 2021.

[22] Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan, Joint Statement on the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative by Australian, Indian and Japanese Trade Ministers, 27 April 2021

Polynesia in the heart of the Pacific Ocean, for a total population of about 1.5 million people. This is why France, together with Germany and the Netherlands, has been the driving force behind the European Union's policy action in relation to the area. The latter two countries, however, had to justify their interest in the area on the grounds of their traditional trading policy and the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific,[23] rather than as local actors. Unlike in US documents, furthermore, there is less emphasis on the containment of China, and more on the desirability of extending cooperation with ASEAN countries, albeit in a context involving a close focus on freedom of navigation. The *EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*[24] is essentially based on this approach and gives priority to strengthening supply chains, bilateral trade agreements and cooperation agreements with local actors, but without denying the need to protect communication lines and freedom of navigation, including through patrols by Member States. It is therefore acknowledged that geopolitical tensions exist, partly as a result of China's growing militarisation, which could raise doubts about trade goals, above all. In any event, the most important signal at this stage is the European Union's recognition of the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific and the role the EU might play, both by leveraging the French presence, and on the basis of economic engagement in the area, given that the EU and Indo-Pacific combined account for over 70% of global trade in goods and services and over 60% of foreign direct investment.

The presentation of the document on 16 September 2021, however, was overshadowed by the almost simultaneous announcement of the establishment of AUKUS. Having already mentioned US interests and Australian security concerns, it is

[23] G. Wacker, *The Indo-Pacific concepts of France, Germany and the Netherlands in comparison: Implications and Challenges for the EU*, Policy Brief, n. 2021/19, EUI Global Governance Programme, Robert Schuman Centre, May2021.

[24] European Commission, "The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific…, cit

worth looking at the position of the United Kingdom, whose own strategy paper (*Global Britain in a competitive age*[25]) dwells at length on the Indo-Pacific and the opportunities it presents for trade cooperation. This stance is thought to derive from the UK's desire to find an alternative market to Europe in the wake of Brexit, although doubts remain as to how much more growth the country can actually achieve in the region, having already signed major trade agreements in recent years.[26]

Looking ahead, it is foreseeable that that the European Union and the United Kingdom might wish to step up their presence in the area in the years to come, although much will depend on how relations between China and the United States develop in terms of great-power rivalry. The real ability of European nations to influence this factor is still uncertain.

China: The "Dragon" in the Room

China is simultaneously one of the authors of the Indo-Pacific region's success, the reason why the concept of the Indo-Pacific has come to the fore again, and the focus of the regional alliances and partnerships that have been created in recent years. China's perception and awareness of the intention to contain it seems clear.[27] Its reaction was to openly denounce the anti-Chinese nature of the QUAD and AUKUS, perhaps recalling that Australia had withdrawn from the QUAD specifically to prevent its relations with Beijing from deteriorating. China did not set itself up in direct opposition to the European Union, however, despite the latter's adoption of the term Indo-Pacific, with all its implicit original connotations of containment. There

[25] HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister by Command of Her Majesty, March 2021.

[26] J. Shapiro and N. Witney, *Beyond Global Britain: A realistic foreign policy for the UK*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 15 December 2021.

[27] F. Heiduk and G. Wacker (2020); S. Miracola, *The Indo-Pacific "Encirclement": How Is China Reacting?*, Commentary, ISPI, 4 June 2018.

is reason to believe that the activism in the Strait of Taiwan in the weeks following the Aukus announcement might have been a show of military might in response to the announcement. It is worth noting, however, that the direct consequence of the announcement of the pact between the United States, United Kingdom and Australia was a request to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). China's intention, therefore, appears to be to avoid economic isolation and attenuate the anti-Chinese interpretation of the main regional trade agreements.

Conclusion

The concept of the Indo-Pacific did not originate in 2021, but this was the year in which global attention turned decisively towards the region in a structured manner. The three key steps were the elevation of the QUAD into a meeting of leaders with a range of goals that are no longer just military, the establishment of Aukus and the publication of the European strategy. The idea of an area known as the Indo-Pacific has gradually gained currency, from a Japanese plan to involve India in the dynamics of containing China, to the creation of a new space that has been progressively occupied by all the major global players. Once the notion of the area was conceived, it led to the establishment of formal arrangements that use the Indo-Pacific as a platform for economic, scientific and health cooperation, as well as military cooperation. The concept of the Indo-Pacific justifies a local presence in the Asia-Pacific region of actors who were previously perceived as being external, thus fostering opportunities for cooperation and turning the costs and benefits of local issues into global ones. Freedom of navigation and the security of communication routes are examples of this. There is no doubt that the development of the concept of the Indo-Pacific poses a challenge for China, because it significantly increases the presence and attention of the world's major powers in China's immediate periphery.

11. Russia 2021. A Good Year?[1]

Aldo Ferrari, Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti

The election of Joe Biden, a long-standing critic of Moscow, as US President, along with looming economic and public health crises, seemed to indicate that 2021 would be a bad year for Putin's Russia. In reality, however, things have not gone entirely this way. The two meetings between the American and Russian presidents over the course of the year were, on the whole, positive. They showed that Washington continues to attach great importance to Moscow despite regular criticism, especially in the context of the Ukraine crisis, which has led to intense US-Russia diplomatic negotiations since the beginning of 2022. Then, in September's parliamentary elections, the governing United Russia party achieved an excellent result, though with serious accusations of fraud and, for the first time, without OSCE observers present. The party even achieved a constitutional majority of two thirds of the seats in the Duma, confirming the opposition's inability to re-organise following the arrest of Alexei Navalny, though this is also due to objective political obstacles placed in its way and limited access to key media outlets. Moscow even managed to prevent the fall of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus and, in exchange, obtained recognition – though belated – of its annexation of Crimea.

The pandemic presented significant economic and demographic challenges in 2021, exacerbating the fact that

[1] The first and the second paragraph are by Aldo Ferrari, the third and the fourth are by Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, while the introduction was written jointly.

Russia has, for some time, been facing a population decline that many – Putin first and foremost – consider worrying. Nevertheless, the rise in the price of oil to 80 dollars a barrel provided a boost to the Russian economy and made possible major investments in welfare as well as armaments.[2] Still on the subject of energy, despite the delay in opening the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, the ongoing energy crisis and the associated increase in gas prices is reminding Brussels just how unadvisable it would be to clash head on with Russia, the EU's main supplier of oil and gas. Finally, the so-called "green transition" announced in 2021 represents an excellent opportunity to diversify the Russian economy, though major obstacles to implementing the Kremlin's carbon neutrality strategy remain.

Russia and the West

Under these circumstances, Moscow has been able to face down various foreign policy challenges from a fairly solid base. It has certainly succeeded in defying increasingly tense relations with the West.

During the course of 2021, disagreements between Russia and the West continued along well-established lines, with the by now ritual renewal of sanctions. The applies to the United State, despite two meetings between Putin and Biden, and to the European Union, whose critical approach to Moscow has not been substantially tempered by Brexit. Relations with Nato have broken down completely, and the Kremlin has responded to the expulsion of staff from its mission to Brussels by suspending all forms of cooperation.

The areas of contrast between Russia and the West include Moscow's support for the repressive Lukashenko regime in Belarus and, in 2021, the gas price crisis, much of the blame for

[2] E. Rumer and A.S. Weiss, *Ukraine: Putin's Unfinished Business*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 November 2021.

which was laid at Moscow's door, perhaps a bit simplistically.[3]

The main sticking point between Russia and the West, however, concerns Ukraine, which has recently passed a law denying Russians the status of an indigenous population.[4] Moscow is particularly angered by what it sees as Ukraine's failure to implement the Minsk agreements, and fears that Kiev is planning to retake the Donbass region by force, emulating Azerbaijan's military intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh. Behind all this, of course is Ukraine's application to join Nato, whose ships are ramping up manoeuvres in the increasingly militarised Black Sea. Moscow therefore explains the massive deployment of troops nears the Ukrainian border as a necessary "defensive" action. There can be no doubt, however, that in the eyes of Russia, and of Putin especially, the Ukrainian question is assuming an extreme importance that certain experts are attributing to the age of Putin.[5] In July, the Russian President even published a long historical article substantially claiming that the Russians and Ukrainians are a single people and have only been divided by anti-Russian forces.[6] While denying any hostile intentions towards Kiev, Moscow is demanding explicit guarantees on the national security front, and in particular that Ukraine will never be allowed to become a member of NATO. This request was essentially refused in late January 2022. Tensions are high as a result, and are likely to remain so, given the importance of the stakes.

Russia and NATO have, in effect, come to a crossroads: they can either use this crisis to resolve the major differences between them or trigger another period of potentially dangerous

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[3] Cfr. A. Hernandez, "The EU's impotent rage at Putin's gas games", *Politico*, 22 October 2021.

[4] D. Trenin, *Russian Foreign Policy: Shifting Gears*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 19 November 2021.

[5] E. Rumer, A. S. Weiss (2021); D. Trenin, *How Russia could recalibrate its relationship with Ukraine*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 10 September 2021.

[6] V. Putin, *Ob istoričeskom edinstve russkich i ukraincev* (On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians), President of Russia, 12 July 2021.

confrontation. The problem lies in the fact that while the West is defending its principles in Ukraine, Russia believes it is fighting for its security and is therefore ready to assume a far tougher position. Moscow's stance has also been encouraged by the clear backing it has received from Beijing in its face-off with the West – a support never available during the Cold War.[7] The crisis between Russia and the West could therefore have serious consequences in 2022, given the geopolitical and cultural context and the fact that Ukraine, though a crucial element, is only one of the players in a far greater and more significant international process.

The distance between Russia and the West is also expanding because of the increasingly polarised views endorsed by President Biden in the run-up to the recent Summit for Democracy, from which Russia and China were both absent and largely considered among the accused.[8] The initiative was severely criticised by the Russians; Moscow's ambassador to Washington, Anatolij Antonov, for example, stated that " … the US initiative is an evident product of Cold War mentality, it will stoke up ideological confrontation and create new dividing lines".[9]

On this subject it must be remembered that Moscow has been insisting for years on the uniqueness of Russian culture, and claiming to act as a champion of conservative values in contrast to a culturally degenerate West.[10] Putin strongly emphasised this position in his talk to the annual meeting of the Valdai Club in October 2021, at which he frequently referred to a "healthy", "optimistic" and "reasonable" conservatism.[11]

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[7] A. Baunov, *The West Has responded to Russia's Ultimatum. It is Enough?*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 1 February 2022.

[8] On this subject, see the article by M. Del Pero and G. Di Tommaso, *Il summit per la democrazia di Joe Biden*, Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale a cura di ISPI, Senato della Repubblica, Camera dei Deputati, Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internzionale, 8 July 2021

[9] A. Antonov, *Red Lines' on Ukraine, Ties With China and More*, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), 20 December 2021.

[10] A. Ferrari, *Russia. A Conservative Society?*, in A. Ferrari and E. Tafuro Ambrosetti (ed.), *Russia 2018. Predictable Elections, uncertain future*, ISPI-Ledizioni, Milan 2018, pp. 33-53.

[11] Cfr. T. McDonougue, "The optimistic conservatism of Putin's Valdai address",

Russia and Asia

While the gap between Russia and the West has broadened, in 2021 Moscow continued to collaborate actively with numerous Asian countries, especially China, in keeping with recent foreign policy. Especially after the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, Moscow and Beijing significantly strengthened their political, economic and security ties while not going so far as to form an overt alliance.[12] Collaboration in the economic and political spheres increased in 2021. It is particularly significant that Moscow has declared that it considers Taiwan to be an internal Chinese matter, partly mirroring Beijing's approach to Crimea, the annexation of which China has neither recognised nor condemned.[13] The two nations have also carried out joint military manoeuvres on a vast scale in western China and the Sea of Japan, and have arranged strategic bomber patrol missions over north-east Asia. In June, Putin and Xi Jinping extended the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation for another five years and showed interest in furthering their mutual understanding, if only on an informal basis. Cooperation between the parties may, however, have reached its peak and be destined to diminish in coming years.[14]

Inability to agree how to deal with Afghanistan after the US withdrawal points to one potential divergence; Moscow is being particularly cautious in recognising the Taleban and also wishes to involve India in handling the complex situation in the country, something that Beijing vocally opposes.[15]

Asia Times, 5 November 2021.

[12] See also A. Ferrari and E. Tafuro Ambrosetti (Eds.), *Russia and China. Anatomy of a Partnership*, Milan, ISPI-Ledizioni, 2019; and K. Liik, European Council on Foreign Relations, *It's complicated: Russia's tricky relationship with China*, 17 December 2021.

[13] A Kortunov, *Shared Territorial Concern, Opposition to US Intervention Prompt Russia's Support to China on Taiwan Question*, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), 15 October 2021.

[14] A. Lukin, "Have We Passed the Peak of Sino-Russian Rapprochement?", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2021.

[15] E. Wishnick, "Prospects for Sino-Russian Coordination in Afghanistan", *War*

2021 effectively saw a turnabout in relations between Russia and India, which have always been warm but until now underdeveloped. Despite India's warm ties with the United States and its disagreements with China, Russia's most important partner, a visit by Putin to India in early December led to significant advances in four key sectors: the economy, defence, energy and civil nuclear cooperation. This intensification and modernisation of traditional ties is viewed by Moscow and New Delhi alike as part of an explicitly multipolar vision of international relations.[16]

Despite appearances, Russia's relations with Turkey, on the other hand, became a lot colder after Ankara provided essential support for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020, as a result of which Moscow lost its exclusive influence over the South Caucasus, partly to the benefit of Ankara. In parallel, Russian gas, though still important to Turkey, is gradually losing its strategic relevance as exports fall. The two countries' also hold divergent views on Syria and Libya, though these differences have proved manageable.[17]

Along with Beijing, Moscow is also important to Iran, whose new President, Ebrahim Raisi, mistrusting the West, preferred to make his first international visit to the Dushambe Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Tajikistan rather than to the General Assembly of the United Nations.[18]

The Economic and Social Front

Thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the anniversary of which fell precisely in 2021, there can be no denying that the Russian people are now enjoying a period of

on the Rocks, 8 November 2021.

[16] R. Bhatia, *Modernising India-Russia ties*, Gateway House – Indian Council on Global Relations, 9 December 2021.

[17] P. Baev, "Russia and Turkey. Strategic Partners and Rivals", *Russie.NEI. REPORTS*, IFRI, May 2021.

[18] Z. Yazdanshenas, "Iran Turns East", *Foreign Policy*, 26 October 2021.

far greater prosperity than the sadly impoverished decade of the nineties, though enormous social inequality persists, along with significant differences between towns and the countryside.[19] According to World Bank figures,[20] average GDP per capita in Russia was around US$20,000 between 1990 and 2020, with a historic maximum of over US$27,000 in 2019 and a historic minimum of US$12,300 in 1998, the year of the financial crisis and collapse of the rouble.

Nevertheless, 2021 saw the arrival of new challenges for the Russian economy, already under significant strain from stagnation.[21] These were attributable to limited diversification, the collapse in oil prices and the imposition of western sanctions, among other things. Russia also continued to suffer from the economic consequences of the pandemic throughout 2021, with inflation hitting levels not seen since 2016. According to preliminary estimates by Rosstat,[22] consumer inflation rose to 8.39% in 2021, an increase of 4.91% over 2020 despite the central bank raising the interest rate a total of seven times over the year. Inflation impacted both living standards and growth forecasts for 2022, forcing President Putin to demand preventive measures. The Ministry for Economic Development had estimated a growth in Russian GDP of 4.2% for 2021, but partial lockdowns in Moscow and St. Petersburg (the two powerhouses in the national economy) and in other regions during the fourth quarter could limit this figure to 3.9%. Official forecasts for 2022 indicate growth of 3%. According to the economist Sergey Efremov, however, risks

[19] The disparity between regions is such that the average monthly salary in Moscow is more or less equivalent to that in Greece, while that of the nearby Kaluga region – which is certainly not the poorest in Russia – is in line with Bolivia. F. Light, "Three Decades After Soviet Collapse, Life in Russia Could Be Worse", *The Moscow Times*, 31 December 2021.

[20] *Russia GDP per capita PPP*, Trading Economics.

[21] A. Ferrari, *Stability Rather Than Development? Russia's New Stagnation*, Commentary, ISPI, 4 November 2019.

[22] "Russian 2021 inflation accelerates to 8.39%, preliminary data shows", *Reuters*, 29 December 2021.

derived from inflation, fluctuations in the oil market triggered by the Omicron variant of Covid, and downward pressure on the rouble caused by the flight of capital – to say nothing of the uncertainty surrounding Nord Stream 2 – will mean that Russian GDP is unlikely to grow by more than 2.5%.[23]

The pandemic has also had serious consequences in the field of healthcare. Russia is one of the countries worst hit by Covid-19,[24] partly because of the slow pace of the vaccination campaign. This sad record has not only placed the Russian healthcare system under great strain but has also worsened the country's demographic crisis. The Russian population fell by 510,000 in 2020, the biggest drop in 15 years, according to Rosstat.[25] Population decline actually began with the fall of the Soviet Union because of a low birth rate, high emigration and lack of support from the Kremlin.[26] The phenomenon, now aggravated by Covid, is having and will continue to have serious consequences for the Russian labour market and, more generally, for the nation's economy in future years.

The Green Transition

The green transition announced by Russia in 2021 is one development worthy of note. Russia is the largest exporter of oil and gas in the world and therefore a major contributor to climate change: the country is also severely impacted by its effects. Because of high energy production from fossil fuels, Moscow is often accused of maintaining a huge "ecological

[23] S. Efremov, *Il gelido inverno dell'economia russa*, Commentary, ISPI, 23 December 2021.

[24] According to late 2021 estimates by the Russian statistics institute Rosstat, excess mortality in Russia since the start of the pandemic exceeds 600,000, far higher than the official figure (304,000).

[25] "Russia Starts Census Amid Pandemic, Demographic Crisis", *The Moscow Times*, 15 October 2021.

[26] E. Tafuro Ambrosetti, *Russia's Great Disease: The Demographic Decline,* Commentary, ISPI 4 November 2019.

footprint". In reality, Russia occupies fourth place in the world in terms of CO_2 emissions.[27] The Federation is indeed one of the world's worst polluters, but is less guilty than other G20 nations, with specific reference to the United States and China.

Given Russia's importance as an actor in the energy market, the transition towards carbon neutrality of European countries and other key players like China presents a major economic challenge in the form of a likely fall in demand for Russian energy. The EU Green Deal in particular, the carbon neutrality policy that now forms a fundamental pillar of Brussels' economic strategy and, through it, of its foreign policy too,[28] is certainly worrying Russian producers and exporters. Particularly formidable is the proposal to apply a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), a sort of carbon tax that, according to some estimates, could add €33 billion to the costs of Russian exporters between 2025 and 2030.[29]

In the light of international pressure of this kind, therefore, Moscow has accelerated the strategy for reducing CO_2 emissions that it announced a few years back. Russia is also playing an increasingly active role in the international movement to combat climate change. President Putin has listed global warming as the most serious challenge the country will face in coming years,[30] marking a significant change in political rhetoric on this subject. As Dimitry Trenin points out,[31] at the UN's COP26 Climate Change Conference held in November

[27] "Which countries are the world's biggest carbon polluters?", *Climate Trade*, 15 May 2021.

[28] E. Tafuro Ambrosetti, "The 'Climate Dimension' of EU Foreign Policy in the Neighbourhood", Valdai Discussion Club, 17 December 2020.

[29] Gruppo Intesa Sanpaolo, "Russia e Paesi UEEA all'indomani dello shock pandemico e di fronte alle sfide del cambiamento climatico", Comunicato Stampa, 20 October 2021.

[30] "Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 18th Annual Meeting", Valdai Discussion Club, 22 October 2021.

[31] D. Trenin, *After COP26: Russia's Path to the Global Green Future*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 18 November 2021.

2021, Russia was severely criticised for Putin's decision not to take part in person while very few remarked on the size of the Russian delegation in Glasgow: 312 leading officials and business representatives, twice the size of the US contingent and even larger than the British mission.

In the run-up to the COP26 Conference, the Kremlin also revised and approved the latest version of its low-carbon development strategy for the period up to 2050.[32] This considers two possible scenarios, one basic and one intensive (target) that foresees the achievement of carbon neutrality by 2060. This date is seen as an essential deadline to ensure the future competitiveness of the Russian economy and means that the intensive solution is preferred to the basic. Both Russia and the EU therefore agree on the objective of carbon neutrality but choose different routes to achieve it. While the European Union intends to move in the direction of decarbonisation, the Russian approach is more oriented to adaptation to the consequences of climate change and the absorption of emissions through carbon capture, storage and increased forestation, while continuing to promote economic growth.[33] The Kremlin does, however, plan to decarbonise the most polluting areas of industry, partly by using foreign companies (including Italy's Enel and Tecnimont) to supply green technologies to their Russian counterparts.

Though this policy is still evolving (a roadmap for implementing the updated strategy is currently being developed and will be presented in April 2022), the direction is set and, like the EU, Russia now accepts that energy transition is both a necessity and an opportunity for growth. Above all, the Kremlin

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[32] Rasporyazheniye pravitel'stva Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 29 oktyabrya 2021 g. № 3052-r. Pravitel'stvo Rossiyskoy Federatsii (Directive of the Government of the Russian Federation no. 3052-p. 29 October 2021. Government of the Russian Federation).

[33] E. Maslova e E. Tafuro Ambrosetti, *La transizione verde russa e l'UE: rischi e opportunità*, Focus Sicurezza Energetica, Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale, a cura di ISPI, Senato della Repubblica, Camera dei Deputati, Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione internazionale, forthcoming.

should now see the international community's green transition as an incentive to accelerate and invest further in diversifying the Russian economy, which remains far too dependent on income from energy exports.

12. Major External Players in Africa: A "Competitive Chain"?

Giovanni Carbone

Around 15 to 20 years ago, when the United States under the leadership of George W. Bush suddenly discovered that sub-Saharan Africa "had growing geo-strategic importance" and was a "high priority for the Administration" – a belief that in practice was effectively dropped by subsequent presidents – essentially two underlying reasons could be found: the "long war" against terrorism, in which the threat from the Sahara also spread down the continent, and the US energy strategy, where increased diversification in sources was essential. China was not about. It was not even considered. Well, in truth, China was about, but it was not visible in the leading reasons for Washington turning its gaze to Africa. Yet, it did not take long for it to become clear Beijing had begun, from about the turn of the century, the systematic, vigorous penetration of the continent, running hand in hand with increased Chinese momentum across the globe. The American view was of China projecting its shadow across Africa. Despite taking slightly varying practical forms, this is essentially the paradigm adopted by the United States in recent years when looking at Africa. It has sought to regain lost ground in this part of the world and chase the dragon to prevent further expansion, especially now the competition is pretty much across the board. These two major powers are not the only countries in this race. As Washington has its mind on chasing Beijing, it is being stalked by Moscow, which is looking

– albeit with new methods and on a completely different scale – for new ways to trip up and harm the West. One could call it a competitive chain in which China, having decided largely on its own to enter Africa early on, is dragging the US and Russian reactions behind it.

Clearly this is an overly simplistic image. First, sub-Saharan Africa is crowded with external players, well beyond the three mentioned above. The cause is international competition, but one of the consequences is the inevitable fuelling of the challenges and the struggles between these non-African powers. The players moving around and watching each other are not only American, Chinese or Russian. France is trying to keep its historically leading role in a large portion of the region. Beijing has also awakened reactions from other rivals that are concerned about China's rise, especially Japan and India. Closer to Africa, a number of nations in the greater Middle East are increasingly exposed to sub-Saharan Africa, taking with them their complex tangle of antagonisms.

The proliferation of external players in Africa is a good reason to try and make some sense of such a complex picture, perhaps dividing the countries into groups – could one call them "generations" of countries? – based on when they arrived or returned to the continent. One could have the traditional powers (that, at the end of the Cold War, were effectively France, the United States and Great Britain), the first wave of emerging powers (China, of course, but one should include India, Japan, Brazil and Russia) and, now, a second generation of emerging powers (Turkey, South Korea, Indonesia, the Gulf States and a few others). Alternatively, one could group the countries into the great global powers or, at least, those with global aspirations (America and China, with Russia a bit behind) and those regional powers whose projection into Africa is inevitably more limited (the Gulf States and Turkey are the obvious cases, but France is probably in this category as well, as it sees west and central Africa largely as home ground).

Providing a more comprehensive picture of the African scenario would also require some recognition of the actions of those states that actually make up the continental map. Such countries undoubtedly have asymmetric power relations with external players – and among themselves – but they are certainly not entirely passive lands. For starters, basically no states are completely or largely aligned with one of the foreign powers in a way that would keep the door firmly closed to all others. African states generally have political and economic ties to major foreign players that are rivals, although they might favour (or be dominated by) some rather than others, depending on the space this gives them for action.

Given the above provisos and especially the incomplete nature of the picture that will be drawn below, reconstructing and comparing the strategies, commitments and trajectories of China, the United States and Russia can help to understand the form the rivalry among the great foreign powers in Africa is taking and how it might develop.

China and Africa

In 2000, it became clear just how much China was focusing on Africa, after a short period in which it moved a little under the radar. From then, China's presence and story in Africa has grown richer, with innumerable developments and nuances, and increasing attention and preoccupation from the West and beyond. First, it has been about the centrality of mineral and energy resources along with the rapprochement with autocracies of which the Americans and Europeans are not fans. Next comes the unstoppable increase in trade (imbalanced, clearly, but not totally in one direction), followed by the controversial question of land grabbing and the large-scale funding for the enormous infrastructure projects in multiple corners of the continent (ports and airports, dams, roads, railways and so on). The latter bringing the feared "debt trap" – i.e. an African country becoming so indebted to China it has to "handover"

strategic assets to Beijing, although this has never materialised in practice. Additionally, one has to include a range of slightly different aspects, from participation in UN peacekeeping to Chinese inroads into the world of African media. Since being launched in 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative has been the framework for some of this.

The seemingly unstoppable expansion of China in Africa has no equal, but it definitely has political implications both for the many states in which all this has unfolded and for the broader power relations between China and its international competitors. One cannot rule out the possibility that China has reached the height of its African expansion and that the future will hold a contraction or at least stabilisation of Beijing's efforts.[1] In mere financial terms, for example, the US$60 billion put on the table at each of the China-Africa summits in 2015 and 2018 was cut to US$40 billion at the equivalent forum in November 2021. This drop is even more evident when looking at the number of projects in each of the sectors China has focused on and at the bursaries and scholarships offered to African students. Such reductions probably cannot be disentangled from the pandemic and the slowdown in Chinese growth – one can easily find spheres in which collaboration has actually grown, particularly the battle against the pandemic and climate change – but they also hint at a strategic shift.

The current readjustment has both quantitative and qualitative hues, at least temporarily. The Chinese strategy long focused on developing – and funding – African infrastructure, but it now seems to be more about promoting trade, especially a better trade balance to help cut Africa's commercial deficit.

Some observers see China as setting aside its concentration on the structural transformation and industrialisation of Africa, which it aided through infrastructure development, in favour

[1] See, for example, Y. Sun, *FOCAC 2021: China's retrenchment from Africa?,* Brookings, 6 December 2021; "China cuts finance pledge to Africa amid growing debt concerns", *Financial Times*, 30 November 2021; "Africa's ties to China and the West are starting to look more alike", *The Economist*, 4 December 2021.

of seeing the continent as a consumer market for its own products, in a manner not unlike what many other donors do.[2] Should this change prove to be correct, it will be important to understand the broader implications and, for the other major powers, determine the consequences. Yet, on many fronts, China is still the playmaker.

United States and Africa

As touched on above, the United States strode into the new century with an unexpected renewal of interest in Africa. The dual motive of the international war on terrorism and the need to diversify energy procurement drove the G.W. Bush Administration to back the increase in political and diplomatic attention with a series of significant military initiatives (notably, opening a military base in Djibouti and the creation of an Africa Command at the Pentagon) and a substantial increase in development aid. When the next president took office, Barack Obama, expectations were raised, but largely disappointed, with a few exceptions (Power Africa, Trade Africa, US-Africa Leaders Summit) and the first attempt to actually put the overall US strategy down on paper.[3] In general terms, once the framework provided by the Cold War had dissolved, successive US Presidents struggled to outline and adopt an African policy that went beyond a succession of unrelated programmes, such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (Agoa) in Bill Clinton's time, President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief (Pepfar) under Bush, Power Africa from Obama and Prosper Africa in the Donald Trump Administration.[4]

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[2] C. Lopes, *High level readout on FOCAC 2021: Expert view on the evolution of the Chinese commercial footprint in African markets*, Atlantic Council, 30 November 2021.
[3] The White House, U.S. Strategy toward sub-Saharan Africa, June 2012.
[4] A. Hruby, "It's time for an Africa policy upgrade", *Foreign Policy*, 30 November 2021.

In much the same way as happened on other foreign policy fronts, Trump's election to power marked an effective "pivot away from Africa"[5] by Washington, with this new era of disengagement enshrined in the 2018 New Africa Strategy. As the national security axis shifted from fighting terrorism to great-power competition, Africa gained a new role as terrain for the US and China to face off, frankly and directly, without getting overly lost in the kind of flattery and promises of equal partnership that so often characterise the efforts by foreign players to court Africa. Washington did not mince its words in determining that "great power competitors, namely China and Russia, are rapidly expanding their ... influence across Africa ... China uses bribes, opaque agreements, and the strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing's wishes and demands ... Such predatory actions are sub-components of broader Chinese strategic initiatives, including 'One Belt, One Road'... with the ultimate goal of advancing Chinese global dominance".[6]

So, the priority was China, not Africa. The continent was simply swallowed up in the growing clash between Washington and Beijing, which was already playing out in a number of matters and parts of the globe. American leadership had to become central once more and being aligned to Washington at international fora became an explicit condition for African countries, under threat of having their development aid cut. From that moment on, every dollar spent in Africa would serve US priorities.

When the United States became aware of just how much ground it had already lost, it effectively led to a further American retreat, rather than bringing the expected new momentum to this revival. Instead of encouraging increased focus and growing investment, the Administration preferred to reduce the troops and resources in the region, such as those used to battle jihadists

[5] M. Hicks, K. Atwell, and D. Collini, "Great power competition is coming to Africa", *Foreign Affairs*, 4 March 2021.

[6] U.S. Embassy in Senegal, *The Trump Administration's New Africa Strategy – Remarks by National Security Advisor Ambassador John R. Bolton*, 13 December 2018.

in Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon and Somalia.[7] Over this time, trade with Africa was 1.5% of total US foreign trade, down from 3.6% in 2010. The failure of Trump to make even a single visit to Africa was clear proof of this disengagement, the first American President since the time of Ronald Regan not to set foot on the African continent at all. Thus, in complete contrast to the idea of regaining ground lost to China and its harsh criticism of the Chinese approach in Africa, the United States provided absolutely no viable alternative[8] – not even defending democracy was discussed – that could compete with the coherent, concrete strategy adopted by Beijing. America merely had guidelines. In this case, losing ground is likely, so holding what you have is highly improbable.

The growing intensity of global competition is precisely why it would have been necessary to respond to the challenges and to defend, in Africa, those traits that the West likes to see as its own, distinctive aspects: democracy and freedom, free trade and market economy. The US exit was a simplistic response to the evidence that what happens in Africa often goes beyond its borders, from terrorism to migration and the pandemic.[9]

Joe Biden has accepted as one of his leitmotifs, right from when he was on the campaign trail that led him to the White House, a commitment to restoring American global leadership and respect for democracy. Although the President has not yet set foot on the continent in person – partly because of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic – his Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, did go to Africa in November 2021 for a three country tour during which America's draft new strategy was made clear. In a speech entitled *US and Africa. Building a 21st century partnership*, the backbone of Washington's guidelines for the continent was set out, ready to move beyond a first year in office in which the Administration largely limited itself to

[7] M. Hicks, K. Atwell, and D. Collini (2021).

[8] J. Temin, "Africa is changing – and US strategy is not keeping up", *Foreign Affairs*, 8 October 2021.

[9] Cf. M. Hicks, K. Atwell, and D. Collini (2021).

the two big questions: the Tigray crisis in Ethiopia and regime change in Sudan.

The rhetoric is definitely new. China is not mentioned directly even once, confirming the United States does not want to limit the partnerships of African countries with others, but reinforce its own – "We don't want to make you choose. We want to give you choices".[10] – recognising that the competitive context makes its necessary to position itself as the "partner of choice".[11] This also explains the need to flatter African leaders – "The United States firmly believes that it's time to stop treating Africa as a subject of geopolitics – and start treating it as the major geopolitical player it has become"[12] (far easier to swallow than Trump's label of shithole countries) – and to promise to put values at the centre, particularly the defence of democratic values and the institutions that produce them. This is one of the five priorities identified – along with other rather predictable ones (pandemic, climate change, inclusive global economy, peace and security). The visit to Nigeria, Kenya and Senegal was designed to reward three virtuous cases of "democracies, engines of economic growth, climate leaders, drivers of innovation".

For now, though, this new US "strategy" stops here. It is little more than a sign of a change of course – and, if nothing else, greater willingness to remember Africa, starting with proposing the US-Africa Leaders Summit once again in 2022 – before more concrete steps to follow. A return to defending democracy is an essential change in trying to have as many African countries as possible as allies to combat the return of authoritarian practices supported or even actively promoted by countries like China, Russia, Turkey and the Gulf States in Africa and around the world. However, doing this in a coherent, credible manner will have a cost and it will be necessary to make choices, including as to how to deal with established autocracies in the region. This is where the new course will be measured.

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[10] U.S. Department of State, A. Blinken, The United States and Africa. Building a 21st century partnership, Abuja, Nigeria, 19 November 2021.

[11] M. Hicks, K. Atwell, and D. Collini (2021).

[12] A. Blinken (2021).

Russia and Africa

Russia might not have an official "African strategy" – the region does not have a central role in Russia's global strategy[13] – but for a number of years it has shown renewed involvement in sub-Saharan Africa. The clear goal is to affirm, defend or reinforce its positioning and projection of power globally, investing to increase the country's influence and reputation, avoiding the danger of isolation, forging alliances that can be used in multilateral bodies, opening up new frontiers for arms sales, and accessing strategic resources. As Moscow seeks to affirm a multipolar system, it is looking to challenge the West's role and influence in Africa, building alliances and breaking those between African countries and other nations, especially the United States and France. At the United Nations, there has been a clear attempt to build a block of African countries. This has been seen in the voting at the General Assembly on matters like the annexation of Crimea in 2014, support for Syria and, more generally, affirming the principle of non-intervention at times when the West was pushing for condemnation of various authoritarian regimes that were violating freedoms. Russia has vetoed any moves to officially condemn human rights or impose sanctions for war crimes, thus effectively shielding the regimes in countries like Sudan, the Central African Republic and Zimbabwe.

Comparing the Russian approach with the Chinese one is enlightening. In Africa, Beijing is known to have a long-term strategy that is carefully backed and controlled by the State. Thus far, at least, one of the economic cornerstones has been the investment for infrastructure development in Africa. For politics, it focuses on the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of African partners. Moscow is on the opposite side in many senses. It lacks a systematic strategy (not only an official one) and institutional support from the government. By

[13] E. Bonnier and J. Hedenskog, *The United States and Russia in Africa*, FOI (Swedish Defence Research Agency), Stockholm, 2020, pp. 53 and 57.

contrast, there is short-term opportunism. It has not invested in African development – partly because of a lack of available resources – but it has entered into agreements and been part of focused military action. And behind the principle of non-intervention lies spontaneous political interference.

In many ways the two approaches are opposing. While Russia cannot compete with the weight and (economic) appeal of China, Moscow shares the formally "blind" approach to what happens internally in its partner countries (principle of non-intervention). It builds on a kind of shared nostalgia for the anti-imperialism and Pan-Africanism from bygone times. Although it does not have any sort of alliance with China at the moment, one cannot rule out some form of anti-American cooperation developing in the future.

Russia has intervened or tried to intervene in various regions in sub-Saharan Africa: from central Africa (in the Central African Republic) to east Africa (Sudan), from west Africa (in Mali) to southern Africa (in Mozambique). The common thread for all this is fertile ground for deterioration in the relations with Western countries. Moscow seems to act when three conditions are met at the same time:[14] Are weapons needed? Are mineral resources involved? Would it challenge the West? An affirmative answer to all three questions leads to Russia entering the fray, positioning itself as an alternative partner for security cooperation. Given its limited availability of financial and commercial resources, Russia seeks military cooperation agreements (it has signed about 30 with countries in the region since 2014) and provides weapons that are relatively cheap, reliable and available to controversial autocrats (from 2015-19, Moscow was the largest weapons exporter to the sub-Saharan area, with 36% of total imports).[15] In a number of high profile, much discussed cases, its use of mercenaries (notably the Wagner Group and the Rsb Group) has provided a low-risk, low-cost

[14] P. Bax, "Russia in Africa", *Hold your fire!*, Podcast, n. 15, crisisgroup.org, 10 December 2021.

[15] E. Bonnier and J. Hedenskog (2020), pp. 53 and 57.

tool for achieving political influence. This is the core of Russia's unofficial action in Africa. The Wagner Group is far and away the best known and most active of such paramilitary groups. with a presence in the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and perhaps also Mali. Created in 2014, this mercenary group has links that lead to the Kremlin, funding from a much disputed oligarch close to Vladimir Putin, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and a network of mining companies controlled by the latter. Its presence on the ground is flanked by promoting an anti-Western and anti-French narrative in extensive propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Using this modus operandi has not avoided tension with the Americans (in Sudan, for example) or the Europeans (with France in the Central African Republic and Mali). Indeed, such tension is not only a natural consequence of how Moscow operates, but actually part of the goals it pursues.

Still, Russia is no China or America. Its resources and stature are quite different – in absolute and comparative terms – so its goals and strategies must remain within its scope, favouring opportunistic action that is designed, as mentioned, to maximise yields with minimal costs.

Although moments of rediscovery, acceleration and disengagement are not uncommon in Africa, overall the continent is drawing increasing attention from the world's major powers. Their competition is also flowing into the sizeable, accessible sub-Saharan area, guided by interests and shaped by strategies that vary significantly between themselves. In Africa, China, the United States and Russia look like they are chasing each other in order to challenge each other, thus compounding the increasingly dense web of external economic and political rivalries that run through the region.

Conclusion

Giampiero Massolo

Is there a single word that sums up a whole year of developments on the world stage? Looking for one is a conceptually complex task that could yield nothing more than fruitless simplifications. But it might be worth a try anyway, for the useful analytical insights that could emerge in the process. The importance of such insights is plain to see from the scale of the events that punctuated 2021, which started with tumult on Capitol Hill and ended with the worldwide resurgence of the pandemic, stoked by the rapid spread of the "omicron" variant.

Against the backdrop of the health emergency, which is the third major systemic crisis to hit the opening years of the third millennium – after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the economic and financial crisis of 2008 – the world stage seems riddled with dynamics that highlight its magmatic character and remain reluctant to find a point of equilibrium. While the US-led, unipolar world order that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union can be said to have ended with America's gradual disengagement from the world's major crisis areas, the same cannot be said for the bumpy landing that has followed it and that has yet to reach a halt. In other words, we are still in the "G-0" phase described by Ian Bremmer, marked by the absence of any powers capable of translating their desire for supremacy into a global agenda that can be imposed on the world.

Although still the world's predominant economic and military power, the US seems to be focused mainly on domestic

priorities, giving rise to a conservative foreign policy that is essentially geared to the needs of the country's middle class. On several fronts, meanwhile, the US is facing a growing challenge from China, whose steady progress makes it the only possible candidate for the role of Washington's "strategic rival." Russia, after all, is struggling to regain enough international status to match its ambitions, and seems unable to play any role beyond that of "dangerous adversary" that the US has cast it in. And despite the various, more concerned European perceptions, this could end up affecting the balance of power on the continental stage, since the Americans' main concern is to preserve the status quo and avoid pushing Moscow into the arms of Beijing, while Europe aspires to contain Russia's drive for dominance.

To suggest that a bipolar Sino-American system is already in place, however, still seems premature, as borne out by the events of the past year. Engaged in managing unprecedented internal tensions on the economic, financial and social fronts, Beijing has become more assertive on vital issues such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and the South China Sea, while stepping up the implementation of its ambitious rearmament programmes. However, the People's Republic has remained reluctant to take on the full geopolitical responsibility that goes hand-in-hand with superpower status, despite already enjoying such status. So far, this has enabled it to maximise the economic and commercial benefits of projecting its soft power, while minimising the political costs of doing so. But in the long run, this is a pattern that looks incompatible with the expansionary aspirations expressed by the presidency of Xi Jinping.

Ultimately, while the landing point can be seen clearly enough on the horizon, the time it might take to sail there remains uncertain, on a sea buffeted by persistent winds on the surface and insidious currents under water. Against this backdrop, it would be legitimate to pick the term "redefinition" as a key word to reflect the current system of international relations. It's a system in continuous agitation, stirred by a growing and increasingly disparate range of actors (no longer just nation

states, but also international organisations, NGOs, companies, public opinion and individuals), governed by a combination of traditional and new dynamics (such as power politics and hybrid conflicts respectively).

The 2022 edition of the ISPI report builds on these reflections and, as usual, aims to draw conclusions that yield a deeper understanding of the global reality of our times, with a forward-facing look at the developments that might emerge from it in the short and medium term. The aim is to grasp the many changes, or "redefinitions", affecting the building blocks of the international system.

First and foremost, sovereignty. Globalisation has had a destabilising effect on this, and raised questions about the nature of its component parts. The scale of the global challenges facing us, from the pandemic to migration, climate change and economic and social inequality, has highlighted how difficult it is for individual states to retain their ability to control their own territorial communities. Governments, especially in Western democracies, have witnessed the steady erosion of aspects of their sovereignty by non-state actors, who have appeared more capable, at one time or another, of occupying state space, in both traditional and new sectors. Digital data management is a prime example. This has given rise to a paradox: a widespread and growing sense of mistrust of public action has flourished, at precisely the same time that society has been making more pressing demands for security, protection and prosperity – and hence more effective state intervention. In many cases, nation states have reacted to this by turning their focus inwards, to the detriment of international cooperation, and this has been accompanied by a growing perception that authoritarian regimes are more efficient.

So, secondly, power. Traditionally associated with national military might, the perception of power is now increasingly associated with new parameters that are not necessarily linked with the size of a country's arsenal. Cyber attacks, misinformation through the press and social networks, unfair

trade policies, industrial espionage and intellectual property theft are just some of the tools that can be used to inflict damage on other states without recourse to military action. The health crisis, and its corollary the "vaccine war," has thrown up plenty of examples of the weaponisation of practices that do not normally constitute acts of hostility, such as the disclosure of scientific research results, the introduction of health regulations, and restrictions on international tourism for precautionary purposes. In many cases, such practices have had destabilising effects on the institutions, public opinion and economic or health systems of the target countries.

And thirdly, hierarchy. The problematic shift in the balance of power between the US and Chinese superpowers illustrates the most important change taking place in international hierarchies. Russia lies at the margins of this shift, for the reasons set out above, and so too does the European Union. Still in search of a clear identity on the world stage, and despite the economic and financial progress made in response to the pandemic, Europe remains hampered by the requirement for unanimous decision-making on foreign policy questions, which limits its ability to act with a united front on major global issues. The redefinition of global hierarchies leaves plenty of room for manoeuvre that can be deftly exploited by new players such as Turkey, Egypt, Iran and Pakistan, who aspire to boost their status as emerging powers. These are countries whose action is not essential to achieving systemic equilibrium, and which are prepared to extend their respective spheres of regional influence by taking advantage of the power vacuums left by Washington's retrenchment from the wider Mediterranean and the Middle East, and Beijing's focus on South-East Asia.

Lastly, geopolitics. The increasingly intangible nature of global threats has undermined traditional paradigms of security, which are primarily linked with the territorial dimension of conflict between states. Digital, migratory, trade and energy flows now mark the outlines of a new type of geography, which is effectively described by the works of Parag Khanna. These

flows have established themselves as a vehicle of influence, but also as a risk factor. Against this backdrop, in the absence of adequate safeguarding measures, a country's vulnerability can rise in proportion to how closely it is connected to the outside world. The world stage reflects this change too, by forcing governments to reformulate their equations of national interest, and by increasing the veto power of non-state actors such as major companies, transnational criminal networks, NGOs and conduits for the free flow of opinion movements. This tension is also asymmetrical, because the development of global interconnections outpaces the ability of nation states to tackle them at a technical or regulatory level, and ultimately at a national security level.

There was no shortage, in 2021, of clear signs of the new climate pervading the system of international relations, which was further fuelled by the dynamics described thus far. The West's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Australian submarine affair, the ongoing tensions surrounding Ukraine, the migrant crisis between Poland and Belarus, and America's retrenchment from the Middle East and the wider Mediterranean highlight the fact that disorder is the main feature of how the transition is developing. What we are seeing is therefore a series of "aftershocks" from the state of world affairs, to which the various actors involved from time to time are frequently reacting with a degree of impulsiveness that reveals the absence of any clear direction of travel. Tactics are being confused with strategy, on the basis of rationales that sometimes range from the unpredictable to the contradictory.

Since the end of the great ideological conflict of the Cold War, moreover, no cohesive new blocks have emerged, and the existing ones often incorporate strong centrifugal forces. Beyond a few sporadic displays of unity in defence of liberal values, the Western democracies do not yet seem capable of putting in place any practical, coordinated initiatives that might really have any profound impact on the main issues. The Atlantic Alliance itself is preparing to adopt a new strategic concept,

while highlighting the differences of opinion between its members on the organisation's political and security priorities. Authoritarian regimes, meanwhile, despite showing that they have considerable potential to hold the rest of the international community to ransom, by weakening the effectiveness of its initiatives, do not seem able to develop an equally significant potential to form a coalition that could have any lasting impact on the global balance of power.

The almost inevitable result of this is an increase in the level of general conflict along the fault lines running through the quadrants that are critical to international stability, in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, the Sahel and East Africa, as well as in the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific. This situation spawns a wide range of crises that open up plenty of room for manoeuvre for the various state- and non-state actors keen to step onto the world stage as spoilers.

The size of America's and Russia's nuclear arsenals, and the presumably long lead-time before China starts to take on more responsibility in response to global crises, mean that the most likely scenario is one of widespread conflict of medium or low intensity, rather than open hostility with devastating effects on everyone. The Sino-American stand-off, furthermore, is playing out against a backdrop of marked interdependence on the economic, financial and trading fronts, which makes open conflict between Washington and Beijing unlikely, at least in the short term. Moscow, in the meantime, alternates aggressive postures, such as troop movements to Ukraine's borders and growing activism in Africa, with overtures to negotiation with the West, thereby highlighting the *de facto* limitations of a foreign policy that reveals the full range of contradictions between the country's unfulfilled ambition to be a superpower and the reality of a political and economic system which, under the stress of the pandemic, has shown clear signs of running out of steam. This is not to take anything away from Vladimir Putin's ability to leverage Western weaknesses and the coercive power of his nuclear arsenal to try to reshape crucial balances,

such as in Europe, or crisis situations such as in Syria and Libya, to his own advantage. This is invariably done on the basis of maximum gain for minimum pain.

The changes on the world stage described in brief above are opening up new prospects and new opportunities for Italy. The country has acquired a new centrality in global and European dynamics, partly as a result of systemic factors and partly due to action taken by the Draghi government. With the populist phase – for which it has been a test-bench in some respects – now behind it, Italy has successfully launched a new round of reforms, restored a climate of confidence in its pandemic-hit economic system, rolled out a vaccination campaign and completed its plan of projects to be financed from Next Generation EU (NGEU) funding. Underpinned by the international prestige and authority of its Prime Minister, the executive has clearly put Atlanticism and the goal of a stronger Europe within a stronger Western alliance at the heart of its foreign policy, while finding two key allies in Joe Biden on world affairs, and Emanuel Macron on European and Mediterranean issues. This signals a multilateralist and traditional-alliance-based response to challenges that are critical to the national interest, such as the aggressive posture of China, Russia and Turkey in the Mediterranean, the risk of a resurgence of jihadist terrorism in Europe, and the migrant emergency. The result is that the country has regained considerable credibility, just as a combination of circumstances was strengthening its leading role on the international and European stage.

On a global level, Italy has consolidated its image as a bridge-builder between opposing factions, a loyal and reliable partner of Western democracies and a pragmatic yet principled mediator in dealings with autocracies and authoritarian regimes. This can be seen in the results of the G20 Presidency and the COP26 Co-Presidency held in 2021, and the Global Health Summit in Rome, which saw the Italian government make effective use of its "agenda-setting power" to identify creative compromise solutions on issues such as health, the economy and climate

change. The simple fact that the G20 held an unprecedented extraordinary meeting on Afghanistan brought new multilateral depth to the issue at a difficult time, thereby highlighting Italy's ability to bevel the edges of opposing positions and take practical initiatives in a rapidly deteriorating scenario. The alliance with the United States has been reaffirmed as a key factor in protecting Italy's national interest, against the backdrop of a meeting of minds between Draghi and Biden on the irreplaceable role of the Western democracies in the fight against poverty, inequality, climate change and human rights violations. This convergence of views gave rise to a common agenda, in which matters of principle dovetailed with the strategic priorities of both countries.

At the European level, Italy – the beneficiary of the largest slice of NGEU funding – has established itself as a critical test-bench for Europe's ability to overcome the challenges of the pandemic and the economic crisis. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan launched by the Draghi government signals three things: first, Italy's commitment to tackling the root causes of the structural problems that have held the country back for so long; second, its awareness that restoring Europe to growth depends on the success of Italy's reforms; and third, its ambition to help strengthen the full line-up of Western democracies by injecting renewed vigour into Europe. The only route to achieving these goals runs through new collaborations with the largest Member States to generate the necessary critical mass in priority areas such as the reform of the Stability Pact, the common foreign and defence policy, industrial and energy strategies, and the handling of the migrant emergency. The signing of the Quirinal Treaty formalised the new-found entente with France, paving the way for a long-awaited "reset" of bilateral cooperation in Libya and the Mediterranean. The discussions already under way with Germany on establishing a strategic partnership of similar scope between Rome and Berlin could make it possible to complete a three-way cooperation arrangement that would enable the European Union to make the necessary progress to

overcome the constraints of the unanimity rule. In this arena, Britain's departure from the EU, the end of the Merkel era accompanied by the launch of the Scholz chancellorship, and the campaign for France's presidential elections in April, have undoubtedly strengthened Italy's role as a key player in this period of transition and realignment of the balance of power in Europe.

In light of the positive signals emanating from the economic system and the social body, this could also be a period that yields promising prospects on the domestic front. Making them sustainable and long-lasting will be a crucial challenge for the entire institutional system, which will be put to a test of efficiency on both the decision-making and the executive front. To rise to the challenge, the country will have to take collective responsibility for meeting a specific national interest. This will involve streamlining decision-making mechanisms, first of all, by leveraging the regulatory and process innovations introduced by the government, under reforms connected with the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. It will also involve making full, decisive use of all the available instruments, in other words not only resources, but also the many highly skilled professionals who work in the Public Administration. And lastly it will involve focusing on more precise and explicit communication directed at public opinion, with a view to enhancing public trust in the institutions, and raising public awareness of the unavoidably concerted nature of the challenges facing the country. Rarely in Italian history has such an important effort looked so necessary, but at the same time so readily in reach of national capabilities.

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