



Geopolitical overview of conflicts 2020

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Introduction

Francisco José Dacoba Cerviño

«Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free. The violence of the first half of the 20th Century has given way to a period of peace and stability unprecedented in European history.»
European Security Strategy, 2003.

«In the fragile world we live in, symbolic power is not enough. We need to enhance our security and defence credibility.»
Comprehensive Strategy for the Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union, 2016.

Alexandre de Marenches was a French aristocrat and army officer who, between 1970 and 1981, served as director of the French Foreign Intelligence Service¹. Given the credit his intense diplomatic activity earns him, it is worth bringing up in this new Geopolitical Conflict Landscape this statement of his: «When I enter the office of an important person of our time, the first thing I look at is the walls. If there are pictures hanging, it is likely that the person in question is uninteresting. If, on the other hand, I find maps, you have to take him seriously, because he is able to think from a geostrategic point of view»². In successive editions of our Panorama, we at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies have insisted on the idea that Europe, and Spain in particular, is surrounded by a ring of fire around which most of the currently active armed conflicts are located; just take a look at the maps, as recommended by Alexandre de Marenches. Some of these conflicts, such as the case of Libya, are getting closer and closer... and, precisely for this reason, particularly worrying.

But in any case, if there is one factor that has come to affect all aspects of international relations in 2020, both between state and non-state actors,

¹ OCKRENT, Christine, and DE MARENCHES, Alexandre. *Secretos de Estado*. Planeta, 1987.

² <http://estudiosgeograficos.revistas.csic.es/index.php/estudiosgeograficos/article/download/383/383>

it has undoubtedly been the emergence and rapid spread of the new SARS-Cov-2 coronavirus. Its effects are visible in all areas. In the months leading up to the outbreak of the pandemic, the world was in the midst of a widespread outbreak of citizen protests for different reasons, from Paris to Santiago de Chile, from Algiers to Baghdad, from Khartoum to Beirut. And with a dangerous extension to Hong Kong, in a revolt that was difficult to contain, which was forcing the Chinese Communist Party to show its less friendly face, and with undeniable repercussions in Taiwan. The decreed confinements and restrictions on movement froze these demonstrations pending the return to normality. However, this was not the case in the scenarios in which the weapons speak. On the contrary, the evolution of conflicts has been profoundly affected, for the worse, as a result of the pandemic. The institutional weakness of these states has not allowed them to react and offer their populations the health and social protection they needed, which has been skilfully exploited by the warring factions to further delegitimise the respective governments. In scenarios where international troops are involved, they have had to reduce their presence and activity, leaving the field open for terrorist groups or criminal mafias to regain much of the ground previously lost. Far from being extinguished, the clashes are growing in intensity and the chances of resolution are receding.

The crisis, initially a health crisis, has subsequently turned into an economic recession affecting – to a greater or lesser extent – the entire globe, the consequences of which are far from being accurately assessed, but what is certain is that they will be of enormous gravity. Tensions between the two major powers, China and the United States, have increased, with repercussions for the rest of the world³. Europe will have to deal with the economic crisis at the same time as the traditional US ally turns its attention to the challenge posed by China. The withdrawal – whether total or partial – of US military contingents from the scenarios closest to our old continent (the Middle East, Africa, Afghanistan and even from European soil itself) to concentrate their efforts in the Pacific has already been identified by EU leaders as inevitable and, therefore, as a call for Brussels to deepen its commitment to its strategic autonomy. *In the specific area of conflict management, the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), the «headquarters» from which EU military operations are directed, should be able to conduct not only the Union's non-executive military missions, as at present, but also at least one combat mission of up to 2,500 troops. In this sense, the President of the newly constituted European Commission,*

³ PARRA PÉREZ, Águeda. '¿Retos pospandemia?: China pide paso'. IEEE Opinion Paper 80/2020. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEE080_2020AGUPAR_China.pdf

Ursula von der Leyen, clearly defined the institution she now presides over as a 'geopolitical Commission'⁴.

The immediate environment

On the very doorstep of the European Union, it is worth noting that the new European leadership team will have to turn its attention to several of the most immediate scenarios, where some old problems remain entrenched. In the Balkans⁵, for example: countries that, if not given an acceptable horizon of integration, will fall into the hands of the ever-present Russia or the newcomer China. Further north, in addition to the *fait accompli* of Moscow's annexation of the Crimean peninsula, the situation in Ukraine's eastern Donbass region remains pending the development of the Minsk agreements, while incidents in the Sea of Azov between Russian and Ukrainian vessels may have unintended consequences. In Belarus, citizen protests against President Lukashenko's continuation at the helm of the nation continue unabated. In the Middle East, Europe has all but disappeared. Tension in the Eastern Mediterranean is reaching very worrying levels, with the collision of interests of Turkey, Greece and France, to name but a few; not to mention Russia. The war in Libya is a particularly worrying case, given its proximity, as mentioned above. And, of course, Africa as a whole, not just the Maghreb-Sahel. The progress and stability of the neighbouring continent is of vital importance for Europe. The identified need, as a consequence of COVID-19, to shorten the production and supply chains of certain critical materials puts the neighbouring continent at the top of the Union's priorities, as the High Representative himself has repeatedly stated⁶.

The near environment

In this Panorama, we have chosen four nearby scenarios. The first two, Libya and the Syrian-Turkish border area, both have been experiencing widespread armed conflicts that deserve our attention. The evolution of the war in Libya seems to reproduce many of the dynamics, even with the same actors, that we have seen in Syria in recent years. With the particularity that, in this case, we are talking about an area as close to Madrid as Berlin, for example. In the other scenario, the Syrian war shows no signs of an early end, let alone a satisfactory resolution. The most serious fighting is in the northern province of Idlib, bordering Turkey, in a shrinking patch of land where numerous

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/ireland/news/von-der-leyen-commission-union-strives-more_en

⁵ CÓZAR MURILLO, Beatriz. ¿Un triálogo en proceso de descongelación? Unión Europea, Serbia y Kosovo.

http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_investig/2020/DIEEINV06_2020_European_Union_Serbia_and_Kosovo.pdf

⁶ <https://www.elindependiente.com/opinion/2020/03/08/africa-y-la-ue-una-asociacion-para-el-futuro/>

jihadist factions, troops loyal to President al-Assad, militias supported by various powers, and Turkish and Russian forces clash, all in a difficult balance of shifting loyalties and interests that are difficult to reconcile on most occasions.

The other two scenarios are of growing concern for a variety of reasons. In the Persian Gulf, persistent tension between Iran and its regional adversaries, and with the United States, threatens the free flow of hydrocarbons through the Strait of Hormuz. In the Arctic polar ocean, because of the increasing militarisation of the region by coastal states. The gradual disappearance of winter ice in the summer season will in the not-too-distant future facilitate navigation in its waters, as well as access to fishing grounds and to the mineral and fossil fuel resources on the seabed. These circumstances make this ocean a meeting point for the commercial, extractive and geopolitical ambitions of the eight Arctic states and other powers that, like China, claim to be interested in the opportunities that climate change opens up in the far north of the planet.

Many other conflicts are still active in this close environment⁷. The Sahel has been particularly hard hit by jihadist terrorist activity in recent months, but the immediacy of current events arising from the health crisis has prevented us from giving the situation in this region the attention that, for us in particular, it deserves⁸. The death of the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Abdelmalek Droukdel, will not reduce the jihadist threat in the region – quite the contrary. The multiplication of acronyms is due to the proliferation of terrorist groups, aligned with the two major jihadist references, Al Qaeda and Daesh⁹, which have found in the pandemic an opportunity to strengthen themselves and thus recover some of the ground lost to international intervention, now reduced due to the coronavirus. Mali's drift, including the coup d'état, is particularly critical, as is that of Burkina Faso. Nigeria is failing to break the jihadist factions; the area around Lake Chad is hostile terrain for Niger's forces and for French troops deployed there and throughout the Sahel. Nor is Sudan, despite recent positive developments, unaffected by the instability resulting from the continuing violence in Darfur. The Horn of Africa is the object of the ambitions of neighbouring powers, such as Turkey, Israel and the Gulf monarchies,

⁷ ESCOBAR STEMMANN, Juan J. 'El Magreb y Oriente Próximo. *Geopolítica de una región en pandemia*'. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_investig/2020/DIEEEINV07_2020JUAESC_MENA.pdf

⁸ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. 'El Sahel en tiempos de pandemia: ¿Aún peor?'. IEEE Analysis Paper 24/2020. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA24_2020PEDSAN_pandemiaSahel.pdf

⁹ SUMMERS MONTERO, Marta. 'Enfrentamientos entre JNIM y EIGS. Cambios en el equilibrio terrorista del Sahel'. IEEE Opinion Paper 98/2020. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEE098_2020MARSUM_Sahel.pdf

and of others not so close, such as China and Russia. Finally, Egypt has taken a stance on the situation in Libya, is involved in disputes over the delimitation of the waters off its coasts and remains reluctant to build the large Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile because of the repercussions that filling the dam and the control of the river by upstream countries could have on its agriculture¹⁰.

The Eastern Mediterranean, or rather the entire Mediterranean basin, is proving to be a region in turmoil, as the well-known situation on its eastern shore is now joined by the dispute between various coastal countries over the coveted gas reserves located on its seabed, the aforementioned war in Libya and the uncertain evolution of social demands in Algeria. Here again, the European Union does not present itself with a single, strong and relevant voice, but leaves the disputes to Russia, Turkey and some member states that, like France and Italy, defend divergent positions.

In the Middle East, in addition to the conflict in northern Syria and the Persian Gulf, the usual hotspots of tension persist. The war in Yemen, and instability in Iraq. Israel has open fronts with all its neighbours: with Syria, due to the presence in the country of Iranian forces and the Hizbullah militia; with Lebanon, due to repeated frictions with the same militia; and with the Palestinians due to the pressure exerted on them by the Israeli government. But what undoubtedly constitutes a radical shift in relations and geopolitical balances in the region is the signing of the so-called Abraham Accords; sponsored by the United States, they have meant the establishment of open relations between Israel and, for the time being, some Arab countries that, until recently, still proclaimed the need to expel Israel from the Middle East. The perceived Iranian threat, shared by the signatories, has acted as a catalyst for the signing of these agreements.

Finally, the situation of the Kurdish people, spread across four different countries, would remain unresolvable. And the Iranian regime¹¹, under more pressure than ever from the United States and now also from all its neighbours, will continue to look to its growing cooperation with China as an escape valve from the enormous pressure of US sanctions.

The distant environment

Beyond the closest regions identified in the previous section, on this occasion we have considered it appropriate to address other cases of growing conflict.

¹⁰ HIDALGO GARCÍA, Mar. 'La gran presa del Renacimiento: entre la sed de Egipto y el desarrollo de Etiopía'. IEEE Analysis Paper 23/2020. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA23_2020MARHID_Renacimiento.pdf

¹¹ GARCÍA-FRAILE HERNÁNDEZ, Miguel Ángel. 'La dinámica geoestratégica de Irán en Oriente Próximo'. IEEE Opinion Paper 86/2020. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEE086_2020MIGFRA_Iran.pdf

In such an interconnected world where, as COVID-19 has just shown us, distances are shortening and borders are blurring, nothing that happens on the other side of the globe is alien to us. Similarly, neither are the growing tensions or the wars that have already broken out. In this Panorama, we analyse the case of Afghanistan, which, after almost twenty years of international presence, still cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel. The agreement signed between the US and Taliban representatives, significantly without the Afghan government's signature, is interpreted by many as an acknowledgement that, despite their overwhelming superiority, US forces have not won this war either and that there is no point in persisting with the mistake. The question is: what will be the future of an internally divided country, no longer under US tutelage... but possibly with new patronage from other nearby powers?

Without leaving the Indian subcontinent, this year has seen the resurgence, once again, of clashes between the ill-fated neighbours of India and Pakistan. We therefore devote a chapter to the relations between two nuclear powers that have been engaged in an ongoing dispute over the Kashmir region since the very moment of independence of both countries from the colonial power, the United Kingdom. Pakistan relies on its excellent relations with Beijing; India, meanwhile, is simultaneously embroiled in another territorial dispute with the Chinese giant in the vicinity of Tibet. A large part of the explanation for the disagreement between the two most populated countries in the world lies in the importance of water, the control of the sources of the great rivers of the Asian continent, which are located precisely in the Tibetan plain, which is why we include a detailed analysis of the conflicts related to water in China.

And, of course, we could not close without a look at Latin America, a region that deserves and arouses all our interest. And we do so by analysing the social uprisings, which we referred to at the beginning of this introduction, silenced by the tremendous impact the pandemic is having in these countries. But the causes that triggered the protests have not been resolved and it is therefore to be expected that sooner rather than later the population will take to the streets again, perhaps with renewed virulence.

2020 has not been a good year in terms of conflict resolution. If it is any food for thought, after an encouraging downward trend between 2014 and 2016, global military spending has resumed its upward trend¹². The radicalisation of the commercial and technological rivalry between the United States and China is leading the international community towards a polarisation of their relations, and this will undoubtedly also have negative repercussions on the multiple hotspots of armed conflict that year after year have been the subject of analysis in the successive Geopolitical Panoramas of conflicts prepared by analysts at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. The two quotations at the head of this introduction, taken from the European

¹² <https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?end=2018&start=2000>

Union's respective Security Strategies of 2003 and 2016, clearly reflect this trend: if in 2003, a time of unquestionable prevalence of multilateralism, the European vision was one of undisguised optimism, a few years later, in a world that is irrevocably moving towards a multipolar international order, Europe realises that it has to bet on its strategic autonomy and that it has to adopt a more geopolitical approach. The EU's High Representative for Foreign Policy, Josep Borrell, expressed it in these words: «we will not be credible in our ambition to be a geopolitical actor, if we are not capable of solving the problems of our immediate neighbourhood»¹³. Europe now faces a world undergoing a dizzying reconfiguration, with the unexpected addition of a health and economic crisis that only further complicates an already demanding landscape. The future of the European Union¹⁴, and that of Spain, will depend on how it manages the new reality, now with its own capacities. Soft power alone is no longer enough.

Happy reading.

¹³ <https://analytiks.es/debate/josep-borrell-jefe-diplomacia-europa/>

¹⁴ DACOBA CERVIÑO, Francisco J. Europe has no takers. IEEE Analysis Paper 12/2020. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA12_2020FRADAC_Europa.pdf

Chapter One

The Arctic as a space of geopolitical conflict

Federico Aznar Fernández-Montesinos

Resumen

El proceso de deshielo que afronta el Ártico ha alterado el *statu quo* vigente en la región ante la mayor accesibilidad de sus recursos y la aparición de nuevas rutas de transporte, razón por la que los países árticos tratan de ampliar sus aguas. Todo ello en un momento en el que Rusia aspira a recuperar, al menos en parte, el liderazgo del pasado y estalla la rivalidad sino norteamericana. En la región coexisten hasta ahora cooperación y militarización, si bien lo que ha primado en los países hasta ahora es la cooperación. Los países árticos hacen una visión exclusivista de la región en un momento en que la globalización se impone.

Palabras clave

Ártico, geopolítica, recursos, Ruta Norte, Rusia, China, Estados Unidos.

Abstract

The thawing process the Arctic is facing has altered the current statu quo in the region due to the greater accessibility of its resources and the appearance of new transport routes. Because of these reasons, the Arctic countries are trying to expand their waters. All this when Russia aspires to regain, at least in

part, the leadership of the past and the rivalry between China and America is increased. Until now, cooperation and militarisation coexist in the region, if what has prevailed in the countries up to now is cooperation. Arctic countries make an exclusive vision of the region when globalisation is prevailing.

Keywords

Arctic, geopolitics, resources, Northern Route, Russia, China, United States.

Introduction

Polar spaces have many similarities, the most important of which is their extreme nature, which means that they are often treated in a similar way despite their significantly different natures. Antarctica is an isolated land mass – a continent – while the Arctic is physically the opposite – an ocean basin surrounded by the Eurasian and American continents that have served to delimit it.

One is uninhabited, but with a population of about 10,000 researchers in summer and 1,000 in winter. The other has a stable population of 4,000,000 people – half of them in Russia – from more than thirty native peoples (around 10% of the total population) and speaking at least ten different languages. Temperatures in the Arctic are not as extreme as those in the Antarctic, which makes it possible for secular settlements of tribal groups to occur alongside the fauna that exists in both.

All this has led to different statutes. The characteristics of the former have made possible an *ad hoc* agreement, the Antarctic Treaty, thus becoming a legally ordered space. In the second case, the diversity, strength and multiplicity of the interests involved have not allowed this to happen. As a result, if Antarctica has been internationally declared a zone for research and science, free of commercial, economic or military activity, a true global commons; in the Arctic region, each country decides on the exploitation of its resources¹ and geographical advantages. On the other hand, and as a result of the variability of some key elements, there is also no clear and commonly accepted definition of the Arctic; it has been defined as the space inside the 10° isotherm in July, or also as the space inside the tree line, the so-called «tree growth line», i.e., the space where no tree growth is possible. However, despite the sometimes self-interested lack of consensus, the geographical area north of 66° 33' 45" north is generally accepted as the defining geographical element, although there are other definitions that are geographically broader.

We are talking about an area of about 14.1 billion km², approximately 8 percent of the Earth's surface; it includes the Greenland, Barents, Kara, East Siberian, Lavtev, Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. The Arctic ice ocean is centred on the North Pole and reaches up to 80° north. This latitude is exceeded only by Greenland and some Canadian archipelagos, the remaining space being sea. As can be seen, the Arctic is actually a paradoxically solid set of seas. These make up 90% of the region, even though they are covered by an ice floe, and enclosed by continental land and an icy subsoil. In the words of Peter Croker, a member of the Commission on the Limits of the Continental

¹ MOLTÓ, Aurea. 'El Ártico y la política exterior de Canadá'. *Revista Política Exterior*, March 2011.

<https://www.politicaexterior.com/actualidad/el-artico-y-la-politica-exterior-de-canada/>

Shelf, the Arctic is «the only place on the planet where a number of countries enclose an ocean. Moreover, many spaces overlap, unlike the normal boundaries that are defined in the space where another country begins»².

Background to the conflict

As Elena Conde underlines, the Arctic region is politically and geographically diverse. There are eight states with Arctic interests: Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark (through the Faroe Islands and Greenland), Iceland, Russia, the United States and Canada. Each one points out the instrumental aspects of their relationship, thus configuring a multifaceted space of interests that are not sufficiently clear and expressed. **Canada is focusing on the rights of indigenous peoples, the United States is focusing on the environment, Denmark on climate, and Norway on fisheries resources.** But the ultimate goals of each of them go beyond the motivations they enunciate.

These states, all members and constituents of the Antarctic Council –a forum that has so far served to maintain a certain *status quo* in the Arctic region, with governance based on cooperation– add to their national identities a specific identity whose weight varies according to the average latitude of the country as a whole. The five Arctic littoral states (Norway, Denmark, Russia, the United States and Canada) are known as *the Arctic 5*. Of these, four are NATO members (all except Russia); in addition, the group includes two superpowers with global interests³.

And they have different weight in the region; the coasts of Canada and Russia necessarily make their Arctic identity more powerful, and the Arctic is also a priority for Norwegian foreign policy. Although the Arctic is a relevant space for the rest of the states, they maintain a lower profile, due to their own geo-economic status, their membership of the European Union or their geographical situation⁴. It is estimated that around 30 percent of the world's gas reserves and between 20 percent and 13 percent of the world's oil, depending on the source, are located in this area of uncertainty and competition; of these, 50 percent of potential oil reserves and 70 percent of gas reserves are under Russian control. This is a political tool of the first order.

In addition to this, there are also mineral resources: gold, silver, platinum, nickel, lead, molybdenum and tin found on the seabed; and of course, fisheries

² CINELLI, Claudia. 'La «Cuestión ártica» y la Unión Europea'. *Revista Española de Relaciones Internacionales*, 2009, pp. 138163.

³ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. «El régimen de los espacios polares.El espacio ártico», in PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ, Carmen; Cebada Romero, Alicia; and MARIÑO MENÉNDEZ, Fernando M. (dir.), *Instrumentos y regímenes de cooperación internacional*, Editorial Trotta, 2017.

<https://www.investigadoresporelmundo.com/data/100254/assets/Elena%20Conde%20Perez%20El%20regimen%20de%20los%20espacios%20polares@1541512405303.pdf>

⁴ Idem.

(catches in the area account for 4 percent of world catches). And diamonds like those provided by the Diavik mine located on a frozen island ten months a year. These riches, for the most part, are still difficult to access, although in some comparatively warmer areas – such as the Barents Sea – this is already being achieved. In fact, the cooperation that takes place in the area between Russia and Norway explains very well the technology transfers that have made its exploitation possible.

Current status of the conflict

The strategic importance of the Arctic, already in the context of the Cold War, was great as it was the area of least distance between the USSR and the United States, which favoured its militarisation, especially in terms of its airspace.

The Davis Strait, located between Canada and Greenland, connects the Arctic with the Atlantic, in the passage also known by NATO as GIUK (Greenland, Iceland and the United Kingdom). This passage was of great strategic interest because, in the event of armed conflict, it was planned to block it in order to prevent Soviet submarines from accessing the Atlantic and thus exercising a negative domination of this ocean and interrupting the link between Europe and the United States⁵.

This situation continues today as geographical imperatives remain and the Davis Strait remains the main maritime access to the Russian Arctic. Now, as then, the Scandinavian peninsula stands between northwest Russia and the free waters of the Atlantic, providing control of Russia's northwestern sea lanes (Barents and Baltic Seas).

The area north of the Scandinavian peninsula and the Barents Sea is known as the 'bastion area'. This includes both the support bases and the SSBN deployment areas; it is a huge, year-round ice-free sack with the only passable access to it being on the *GIUK*⁶. It is home to the port of Murmansk – by the way, the main Arctic town – and, as in the past, to the Northern Fleet bases where the nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) are based; in fact, two-thirds of Soviet submarines were based there. These strategic sites are located about 100 kilometres from the borders of NATO member Finland and Norway.

⁵ ALBERT FERRERO, Julio. 'Incidencia del deshielo en la geopolítica del Ártico'. *Revista de Marina*, November 2011, pp. 681690.

⁶ MACKINLAY, Alejandro. 'Escandinavia, una geopolítica marcada por lo marítimo'. Research Paper 46/2018 of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. 20 April 2018. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2018/DIEEE046-2018_Escandinavia_A_Mackinlay.pdf

Russia perceives this situation as a vulnerability, both because of insufficient strategic depth to defend its Arctic ports, and because of the compromise in the Northern Fleet's freedom of action, as its units have to operate in areas where Allied naval superiority is manifest, which, if it were the case, would prevent both their transit to the free waters of the Atlantic, and an effective defence of the SSBN deployment areas⁷. The Arctic is connected to the Pacific by the Bering Strait, located between the eastern tip of Siberia and the north-western tip of Alaska and 64 km wide, which represents the shortest distance between the United States and Russia, with depths between 30 and 50 metres and of great strategic importance⁸.

The Arctic is undergoing a melting process that, over the last thirty years, has reduced the thickness of its ice cover by 30-40 percent, according to different studies – in 2015 the ice surface in January had fallen to 9.7 billion km² from 13.38 million in 2007; it is estimated that since 1978 it has lost an ice surface equivalent to five times the size of Spain – making a completely ice-free summer foreseeable within a reasonable timeframe, which some sources put at 2035. It also happens to be the area of the world most vulnerable to warming because, as the ice melts, it gives way to water that absorbs sunlight instead of reflecting it, further melting the ice. It is the 'positive feedback' that explains why the warming in the territory is three-times higher than the global warming. Melting in the region takes place in three distinct areas: the freshwater layer, which covers most of Greenland and comes from glaciers and rainfall (permafrost, on the frozen ground); that covering the glacial Arctic Ocean, i.e., the ice floe (sea ice), whose layer of frozen salt water is usually a few metres thick, which is also decreasing; and finally melting from the waters of the great Siberian rivers⁹.

It is worth recalling at this point and in this context Lenin's dreadful plan to thaw the Arctic, basically consisting of damming the water of Siberian rivers, generating electricity for industrial use and altering the salinity level of the ocean, simultaneously causing ice melt and an increase in ambient temperature¹⁰. In fact, Russian President Vladimir Putin now identifies with Russia's Arctic ambitions by highlighting Russia's early explorations, but also Stalin's propaganda initiative known as the 'Red Arctic'. Yet, even with the immense geopolitical capital that geography endows Russia with, it is not the

⁷ MACKINLAY, Alejandro. 'Escandinavia, una geopolítica marcada por lo marítimo'. Research Paper 46/2018 of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 20 April 2018. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2018/DIEEE046-2018_Escandinavia_A.Mackinlay.pdf

⁸ ALBERT FERRERO, Julio. 'Incidencia del deshielo en la geopolítica del Ártico'. *Revista de Marina*, November 2011, pp. 681690.

⁹ ALBERT FERRERO, Julio. 'Incidencia del deshielo en la geopolítica del Ártico'. *Revista de Marina*, November 2011, pp. 681690.

¹⁰ TOFFLER, Alvin and Heidi. *'Las guerras del futuro'*. Ediciones Plaza & Janés, Barcelona, 1994, p. 178.

former USSR, neither in its ideology nor in a GDP that no longer corresponds to a superpower, but rather to a middle power like Italy. This is particularly important considering that more than 90 percent of the world's international trade is carried out using different sea routes. The North-East Route and the North-West Route are increasingly accessible passes. The second, located in the Canadian Arctic and with a distance of 7000 miles, links the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and will reduce the distance between the United States and Asia by approximately 15 percent.

But it is the North-East Route that currently has the best sailing characteristics. It runs along the Arctic coast and directly connects the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans without the need to cross the Suez and Panama Canals or the Cape of Good Hope. This route was already known in the 17th century, but did not begin to be used until the period after the Russian Revolution, when the country was subjected to international isolation and all possible alternatives had to be explored for purely survival reasons. This route was usable during part of the summer due to improved weather conditions. However, climate change is favouring the progressive expansion of its use. In summer 2017, a ship made the route between Norway and South Korea in just nineteen days, 30 percent faster than the route through the Suez Canal. It was also the first to achieve this without the help of an icebreaker. A year later, in January 2018, another Russian vessel made the journey between South Korea and the port of Sabetta (Russia) in the middle of winter. It was also the first to do so at that time of the year¹¹.

This route is 40 percent shorter in distance between Europe and the Far East, some 3,900 miles, which, as we have seen, is equivalent to twelve to fifteen days, although the adverse weather to be expected in the Arctic and the navigational hazards present in the area reduce the advantage factor to 30 percent. The distance between Tokyo and New York, to give another benchmark, is reduced by 3,700 miles. In 2018, 18,000,000 tonnes were transported along the Russian maritime littoral, which consigned an increase of 80 percent from 2017. In 2019, 26,000,000 tonnes were moved through the same area¹². On the Russian side there is a great asymmetry between the western and eastern parts of the Arctic, and one can even speak of the existence of two Arctics. While the former have been relatively well explored, little is known about the latter; the latter area, hitherto closed to outsiders, has been left open to foreign navigation. As we have seen, resource exploitation has been achieved in the westernmost part (Barents Sea, Yamal Peninsula). However, in the shallower Kara Sea, the constant occurrence of ice severely hampers its exploitation¹³.

¹¹ MERINO, Álvaro. 'Hacia la ruta del Ártico'. *El orden mundial*, 2020. <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas/hacia-la-ruta-del-artico/>

¹² <http://www.elojodigital.com/contenido/18017-el-plan-de-rusia-para-avanzar-en-el-artico>

¹³ SÁNCHEZ ANDRÉS, Antonio. 'Rusia y la geoestrategia del Ártico'. *Real Instituto Elcano*. ARI 63/2010, 6 April 2010.

This route also serves to mobilise the region's natural resources, contributing to the economic development of both the Arctic coast – it has a network of Russian port infrastructures on which it relies, as well as specialised naval means (including nuclear propulsion) and a culture of employment– and the region as a whole, and also serves to relieve congestion on the Trans-Siberian rail route; however, the infrastructure connecting these with the rest of the country is deficient. On the other hand, the branch that runs through the North American continent; on the other hand, there had not been a comparable port development, nor was there a technological culture in keeping with the climate, nor were there any traffic control devices as Russia had done before.

This effort and the working culture associated with the geography give Russia a strategic pre-eminence in international freight transport. But it also strengthens an Arctic mindset and reinforces its political discourse with a factual and legitimising reality, a ratification made in terms of a real and effective presence in the region. On this basis, it tries to dictate the rules under which the activity is carried out in its immediate vicinity even though it runs outside its territorial sea, claiming a legitimate interest, at least of an environmental nature¹⁴. It is the way to mark its political leadership in the region, trying to impose the rules that regulate life in the region as a form of recognition of its primacy. Thus, Russia has given Rosatom, its nuclear agency, bureaucratic control over the route and the ability to limit the traffic of foreign warships by requiring forty-five days' notice and permission from the Russian government¹⁵. Canada has a similar logic, although not as pronounced.

However, the increase in traffic is creating a growing need for coastal infrastructures, but also for regulation (customs, border management, traffic management, etc.), and any contingency – human or environmental – must be foreseen in an environment as extreme as the polar one, which is a challenge in terms of governance and consultation between neighbouring states and users. Another issue in relation to all of the above is that arising from the legal status of the polar areas. These have common bases that have allowed both poles to be treated jointly in what they have in common, creating a sort of 'Polar Law' as there are models that are common and superimposable. However, as mentioned above, their sources of law take full account of their different constitutions and the circumstances and interests surrounding them.

The fact is that Antarctica's nature as an isolated continent has made it possible to create a cohesive legal form, known as the Antarctic Treaty System, centred on the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, which with all the imperfections

¹⁴ SÁNCHEZ ANDRÉS, Antonio. 'Rusia y la geoestrategia del Ártico'. *Real Instituto Elcano*. ARI 63/2010, 6 April 2010.

¹⁵ <https://israelnoticias.com/militar/la-presencia-militar-de-rusia-en-el-artico/>

and loopholes it leaves –including the different way it treats those who have or may have legitimate interests– has created a well-established management regime. This has resulted in the continent becoming a unique nature reserve and an exceptional laboratory. But, in the case of the Arctic, it has not been possible to establish a specific internationalised legal regime, and the primacy of International Maritime Law has been maintained, which is a response to its status as an oceanic space, however frozen it may be. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has not been ratified by all the parties concerned, particularly the United States, which nevertheless refers to it for the settlement of disputes in the region.

Its primacy was explicitly proclaimed by the aforementioned *Arctic 5 at a meeting in 2008*. In addition to this, there are regional legal systems such as European Union law and, of course, the domestic law of the states in the area, which gives rise to the application of a multiplicity of rules in a cohesive and even solid area¹⁶. The weakness of this system lies in the fact that there is no operational body to resolve disputes between the parties –the Arctic Council is a cooperative and soft law instrument– and that we find ourselves in a space where the interests of states and even the international community as a whole can come into conflict with each other. The Arctic has become a space that is the subject of both individual claims and common concerns for the ecological, geopolitical and economic balance of the planet.

Thus, there are no clear jurisdictional rules that are accepted by all parties to define their borders, and there are gaps and grey areas. In fact, there is what has come to be called a 'race for the Arctic' or more precisely for Arctic resources now that they seem more accessible; or rather, there is an image of such a thing, contrary to the cooperative reality that, for the time being, is the common practice and norm. At the same time, it is literally about leaving out those who do not belong to the region. This race is marked by the constant attempt to legally validate the domination of an ever-growing space. It is not strictly speaking a distribution of this sea, but rather an extension of the territory from that already allocated and which acts as a legitimising factor. This is accentuated by the fact that some of the hydrocarbon deposits are often located in areas where ownership is not fully clarified or is disputed. As was the case in Antarctica at the dawn of the Cold War, several countries have sought to justify their presence in the Arctic on the basis of various politically motivated theories.

Not only has the melting ice affected the established *status quo*, but this has been combined with other factors such as technological advances that allow

¹⁶ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. 'El régimen de los espacios polares.El espacio ártico', in PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ, Carmen; Cebada Romero, Alicia; and MARIÑO MENÉNDEZ, Fernando M. (dir.), *Instrumentos y regímenes de cooperación internacional*, Editorial Trotta, 2017.
<https://www.investigadoresporelmundo.com/data/100254/assets/Elena%20Conde%20Perez%20El%20regimen%20de%20los%20espacios%20polares@1541512405303.pdf>

greater accessibility to resources (from hydrocarbons to fisheries) in a more benign climatic context, to which, in addition, the rise in raw material prices has been added in recent years. Thus, it was Canada, the country that in 1907 gave birth to the sector theory, which considered the polar regions as an extension of the coasts of the countries they surround; it goes without saying that theirs and Russia's are the largest. And the Arctic is central to its nation-building discourse, even if it was an underdeveloped region. This would be done by drawing converging lines from the extremities of the circumpolar territories towards the pole, thus marking the territory corresponding to each State. This approach is also beneficial for Russia because of the extent of its Arctic coastline, and has therefore also been argued by a number of Russian scholars. The United States, with the support of Norway and Denmark, is at odds with this position¹⁷.

But it is clear that this theory has not taken off, as it did not lead to a generally accepted practice. Thus, in the early years of the Cold War, the legal fate of the Arctic and Antarctic regions was separated and an *ad hoc* regulatory framework was established there. The standard that was imposed for the Arctic was the Law of the Sea, which was explicitly invoked as a counter to what was seen as a foreign attempt at meddling, namely by the European Union, at an Antarctic Council in Greenland in 2008. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea generally provides for a 12-mile territorial sea and a 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone, which could be extended to the continental shelf. This is the underwater continuation of the continents. The outer limit of the continental shelf must be less than 350 nautical miles or 100 nautical miles from the 2,500-metre isobath, but such an extension must be authorised by the United Nations International Commission for the Limits of the Continental Shelf. The five circumpolar states seek to extend their economic zone and sovereignty on the basis of these rules, as well as the unique features of their location and history.

This gives rise to various problems which, although formulated in legal terms, are undoubtedly of a political nature. We are talking, and let us not lose sight of this despite the legal argumentation, about inherently political problems. The debate on the Lomonosov mountain range or submarine ridge, which practically reaches the North Pole and is simultaneously claimed by Canada, Denmark and Russia (which adds the Mendeleev mountain range to its reasons) as part of the continental platform or margin for extending its waters, is based on this logic and key. In 2007, Russia, in the context of the *Arktika* expedition, placed a flag at a depth of 4,200 metres for the purpose of making a claim.

In doing so, they are trying to move their continental shelf beyond 350 miles, but within the 100-mile limit from the 2,500-metre depth isobath. Canada

¹⁷ NAVAS ITURRALDE, María Fernanda. 'La cuestión ártica'. *Revista Afese, Temas Internacionales*, Vol. 65, n.º 65 (2017).

rejected this approach as archaic – as it has an aftertaste of the so-called Age of Discovery – while announcing the installation of new military bases and a satellite surveillance system in the area; the US also joined in this rejection, although its foreign policy commitment to the Arctic had hitherto been more limited, which was reflected in the resources and means available in the region. Denmark sent a scientific expedition to reconnoitre the area and validate its right¹⁸. What is relevant about the Russian and Canadian approaches is that, if accepted, the 200-mile exclusive economic zone in which countries have the right to exploit existing resources would be counted from the mountain range, and given that the mountain ranges run through the Arctic, both countries are claiming sovereignty over a wide expanse of its waters. The acceptance implies, for example and in the Russian case, a claim on 1.2 million square kilometres of the Arctic Ocean. Due to its cooperative nature, it is worth highlighting the agreement reached in 2010 between Russia and Norway on the basis of which they divided in half an area of 175,000 square kilometres corresponding to their disputed Exclusive Economic Zones in the Barents Sea, establishing a regime of co-management of hydrocarbons and fisheries.

There are also territories that are disputed, but these cannot be classified as major disputes. Such is the case of Hans Island, claimed by Canada and Denmark, in the Lincoln Sea, in the strategic Northwest Passage, where significant quantities of oil and gas can be found; or Franz Joseph Land Island, 1,100 kilometres from the North Pole, which has belonged to Russia since 1926 and has been claimed by Norway ever since.

Canada claims part of the Northern Passage, the Beaufort Sea, as territorial waters, while the United States (and the European Union) maintains that they are international waters, as the territorial sea extends up to 12 miles and the channel extends in some stretches to 60 miles. To justify its reasons, Canada cites technical criteria relating to islands as well as Inuit tribes camping on it during the time it is frozen¹⁹. Russia also seeks to make the waters of the Northeast Passage part of its territorial sea, which could dictate conditions for access or prevent it, which is opposed by the United States and the European Union.

A security dilemma, role of external actors: regional implications

As we have seen, there are many elements of uncertainty and even confrontation in the region, although, until now, disputes have been resolved in a cooperative manner, particularly after the Cold War, when the physical

¹⁸ FIGUEROA GONZÁLEZ, Silvia. 'El Ártico en disputa'. Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Guadalajara. <https://biblat.unam.mx/hevila/TendenciasZapopan/primavera/7.pdf>

¹⁹ FIGUEROA GONZÁLEZ, Silvia. 'El Ártico en disputa'. Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Guadalajara. <https://biblat.unam.mx/hevila/TendenciasZapopan/primavera/7.pdf>

thaw has increased significantly in the region, and with it, the intensity of relations. And globalisation does so outwards, so that the Arctic inevitably becomes part of the global space and its logic.

The point is that the Arctic was not high on the agendas of the major powers as it is now. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the declarations made in Murmansk in 1987 by the then premier of the USSR, Gorbachev, in favour of cooperation, which would mark the policy for the region for the next twenty years: «Let the north of the planet, the Arctic, become a zone of peace; let the North Pole be a pole of peace.» It was the prelude to a disarmament process.

Russian strategic publications today insist on preserving the Arctic as a space of peace and cooperation. En este sentido, Rusia ha fomentado la cooperación tanto bilateral como multilateral con otros Estados con intereses en el Ártico y ha subrayado reiteradamente que se adhiere a la Convención de las Naciones Unidas sobre el Derecho del Mar²⁰. In 2019, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said: «Regarding statements that we are supposedly militarising the Arctic, I can assure you that we advocate just the opposite»²¹. But this assertion is not supported by the facts. Thus, the increase of Russian armaments in the Arctic and the modernisation of existing ones that has taken place since 2000 has a point of contradiction with such statements. This is all the greater considering that this rearmament has occurred at the same time as military spending has been reduced in relation to the country's GDP. This gives greater significance to the political intentionality with which it is done. In 2007 Russia, as it did in the Cold War, resumed its air patrols in the area right up to the border of neighbouring states.

However, after Putin took office, Russia's Arctic policy took on a more assertive dimension. The Arctic became a key point of Russia's strategy in 2008, when the document 'Fundamentals of the Russian Federation's state policy in the Arctic until 2020 and beyond' was drafted. In this document, Russia's Arctic policy is presented in two divergent approaches: on the one hand, cooperation and, on the other, military rearmament with a view to defending its sovereignty²². Following these guidelines Russia placed the Arctic as a regional priority in its 2013 Foreign Policy Concept. In 2014, it established a Joint Strategic Command for the Arctic and air bases have been reopened, coastal defence elements deployed. In 2017, the country had six military bases, sixteen deep-water ports and thirteen air bases, four brigades, and has since installed an 'Air Defence Dome', equipped with S-400

²⁰ FERNÁNDEZ GÓMEZ, Iván. '(Re)militarización del Ártico: ¿cautivos de un dilema de seguridad?'. Universidad de Barcelona, 2019. <https://www.recercat.cat/bitstream/handle/2072/362319/Fern%C3%A1ndez%20G%C3%B3mez%2C%20Iv%C3%A1n.pdf?sequence=1>

²¹ <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20190409/461562689187/rusia-esta-preocupada-por-intentos-de-militarizacion-del-artico-segun-lavrov.html>

²² BAQUÉS QUESADA, Josep, and ARRIETA RUIZ, Andrea. 'La estrategia rusa en el Ártico'. *Revista General de Marina*, November 2019, pp. 731745.

missiles. Its Northern Fleet with ballistic missile submarines, nuclear attack submarines, aircraft carriers... is still impressive. It also has, as proof of the adaptation of its force to the environment, six nuclear icebreakers with Arctic navigation capability, together with twenty conventional icebreakers²³.

At the end of 2019, it published its Northern Sea Route Development Plan.

It is a comprehensive strategy for the next fifteen years that incorporates '84 points and covers a wide range of priorities, from developing the necessary infrastructure and building new ships, to mapping natural resources and launching new satellites and meteorological equipment'. This plan foresees the construction of up to forty ships, including eight icebreakers and sixteen rescue and support vessels, all with a 2035 horizon. But as Alexander Mackinlay reminds us, the problem with the ports and naval bases in the Russian Arctic West is that, in addition to being located close to the Finnish and Norwegian borders, transit between them and the open waters of the Atlantic must take place especially during the winter, shuffling along the Norwegian coast; in fact up to 80% of this Arctic traffic passes through the vicinity of the country. Thus, the situation of Russia's main maritime accesses is complicated to say the least, something that becomes evident in times of tension and which also ties in with Russia's traditional perception of the security of its vast territory²⁴.

In any case, the weight of the Arctic has historically been greater in Russia than in the rest of the countries in the region, which, as noted above, explains the greater development of its coastline and the better quality and quantity of its technical resources. In fact, its policies imply a certain patrimonialisation of this space, as if history and geography granted it a greater right than the rest of the regional actors.

Russia considers the region to be of paramount importance. When Putin visited the Franz Josef Land archipelago in 2008 he already argued that, geopolitically, the Russian state's deepest interests were related to the Arctic and that the region should be dominated²⁵. Not for nothing does it derive 20 percent of its GDP from it. The energy demands of increased human presence and traffic in the region have even led to the deployment of floating nuclear power production platforms, with the Russian Arctic

²³ FERNÁNDEZ GÓMEZ, Iván. '(Re)militarización del Ártico: ¿cautivos de un dilema de seguridad?', Universidad de Barcelona, 2019.
<https://www.recercat.cat/bitstream/handle/2072/362319/Fern%C3%A1ndez%20G%C3%B3mez%2C%20Iv%C3%A1n.pdf?sequence=1>

²⁴ MACKINLAY, Alejandro. 'Escandinavia, una geopolítica marcada por lo marítimo'. Research Paper 46/2018 of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 20 April 2018. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2018/DIEEE046-2018_Escandinavia_A.Mackinlay.pdf

²⁵ BAQUÉS QUESADA, Josep, and ARRIETA RUIZ, Andrea. 'La estrategia rusa en el Ártico'. *Revista General de Marina*, November 2019, pp. 731745.

expected to have the most nuclearised waters on the planet by 2035²⁶. Of the sixty-one large oil and gas fields in the Arctic, forty-three are located in Russia²⁷. To use the words of Vladimir Putin in 2014, in the Arctic there is «a concentration of virtually all aspects of national security: military, political, economic, technological, environmental and resource»²⁸.

Their interests, as we have seen, relate to resources and control of the passes. And there are psychosocial elements to consider: the US presence in the region brings back the old rivalry, in the context of which it also rejects NATO's presence. In this respect, it contests as very hostile the inclusion of Finland and Sweden in this organisation, as a serious alteration of the *status quo* in the vicinity of its territory. Their fear is that the melting ice could replicate in the Arctic what happened in Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War²⁹.

China has important interests in the area – for some analysts it is the Asian country with the most interests in the region – especially considering that 46% of China's GDP depends on maritime traffic. In this sense the country has seven of the 20 largest container terminals in the world, which is the result of the need for raw materials required to become 'the factory of the world'. Companies such as Cosco and China Shipping are among the ten largest container service operators in the world³⁰. The idea of 'peaceful rise' or 'peaceful development' that its political strategy has received over the years tries to express China's will to become a central power in a harmonious way, that is, without endangering the system of balances established at all levels through seduction dynamics. This is known as the 'twenty-four character strategy'³¹.

²⁶ <https://www.infodefensa.com/latam/2019/09/02/opinion-articulo-nuclear.php>

²⁷ CONNOLLY, Gerald E. «NATO and Security in the Arctic report». *OTAN, Subcomité de Relaciones Transatlánticas*, octubre de 2017.

<https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=sites/default/files/2017-11/2017%20-%20172%20PCTR%2017%20E%20rev.1%20fin%20-%20NATO%20AND%20SECURITY%20IN%20THE%20ARCTIC.pdf>

²⁸ CÁNOVAS SÁNCHEZ; Bartolomé. 'El preocupante incremento de la actividad rusa en el Ártico'. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. DIEEE039/2017. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2017/DIEEE039-2017_ActividadRusa_Articulo_BartolomeCanovas.pdf

²⁹ FERNÁNDEZ GÓMEZ, Iván. '(Re)militarización del Ártico: ¿cautivos de un dilema de seguridad?'. Universidad de Barcelona, 2019.

<https://www.recercat.cat/bitstream/handle/2072/362319/Fern%C3%A1ndez%20G%C3%B3mez%20Iv%C3%A1n.pdf?sequence=1>

³⁰ VV. AA. 'Documentos de Seguridad y Defensa 66 Geopolítica del Ártico. Dos visiones complementarias. España-Singapur'. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

³¹ In the words of Deng Xiaoping, «Observe calmly, secure your position, approach matters calmly, hide your capabilities and bide your time, keep a low profile, and never claim leadership».

In 2012, the change in attitude that came with the arrival of Xi Jinping became more visible with the launch of the Silk Road and Belt Initiative insofar as it represented a visible alteration of the *status quo*. Xi considered that the stage of development and low profile with its priority on the economy was coming to an end, which was logical as a GDP equivalent to 15 percent of world GDP was very difficult to hide and he already had a sufficiently developed domestic market³². The regional translation of this global policy has been, as in other cases, a long-term, seductive and accommodating policy aimed at generating cooperation networks and economically influencing Arctic Council members, including the Arctic in its New Silk Road.

This interest in the Arctic is related to its revisionist goal of reframing the system of international relations in order to be recognised as a global power. Moreover, with the progressive cooling of relations with the West, China has moved closer to Russia – both have been part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation since 2001 – seeking to gain strategic depth and avoid an eventual encirclement, even though they do not have an intense trade relationship: Chinese exports to Russia do not reach 2 percent of the total and are unlikely to grow. But China feels it needs a buffer with the West and, in this sense, Russia is it. Because, as a famous Chinese proverb says, «without lips, teeth grow cold».³³ All of which led to the publication in 2018 of a strategy for the region under the name of *China Arctic's policy, in the context of which it defines itself as a 'quasi-Arctic state'*.

With this logic in mind, major investments have been made in Greenland (this territory has 10% of the world's rare earths and is an important geostrategic position). Significant investments have also been made in Greenland – a significant geostrategic position with important mineral resources – Iceland (with which a free trade agreement was reached in 2013, it aims to become a logistics base and is interested in its hydrocarbons); Finland, with which it has a significant trade relationship; Sweden forms part of the financing of projects of the *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank* (AIIB), as do Denmark, Iceland, Finland and Norway.³⁴ To the same end, it implements its strategic partnership with Russia while using its geo-economic and geo-strategic weaknesses to ensure that Russia does not hinder its presence in the area, as it has done in other cases. In this way it can take part in the design of Arctic policies and promote the development of the Russian Arctic for its own benefit.

³² FRÍAS SÁNCHEZ, Carlos Javier. Op. cit.

³³ ZORRILLA, José Antonio (2006). Op. cit.

³⁴ FERNÁNDEZ GÓMEZ, Iván. '(Re)militarización del Ártico: ¿cautivos de un dilema de seguridad?'. Universidad de Barcelona, 2019.

<https://www.recerca.cat/bitstream/handle/2072/362319/Fern%C3%A1ndez%20G%C3%B3mez%2C%20lv%C3%A1n.pdf?sequence=1>

As can be seen, China acts according to the same strategic logic as it does in other territories, seeking access to hydrocarbons and raw materials in the Arctic, but also an alternative –and also a smaller and more economically beneficial – route in anticipation of an eventual closure of the strategic Strait of Malacca. It accepts the status quo and tries to make up for its legitimacy deficit with the long-term commitment that comes with its financing capacity, promoting with it, in the manner of a Marshall Plan, the generation of lasting links with neighbouring countries. Within the controversy between the two countries, the US opposes this presence. In 2019, US Vice President Mike Pence called Iceland's strategic role in the Arctic 'essential' and warned against 'increasing' Russian and Chinese activity in the region.

In military terms, the Chinese navy's capabilities are far inferior, either qualitatively or quantitatively, to those of the US, and it has no ballistic submarines. In 2019 it had only one deep-sea icebreaker, although it had just launched a new class of deep-sea icebreaker, a testament to effort and will. The Russian-Chinese manoeuvres that took place in the Barents Sea in 2017 deserve to be highlighted for their symbolism.

The United States' interests lie in the Alaskan region, where it has significant mineral, oil and timber resources, but its Arctic coastline is small, even if it is located in the vicinity of the Arctic. Likewise, it gives a defensive interpretation of its own intentions but, at the same time, shows its mistrust of Russian rearmament and, above all, of the Chinese presence in the context of the current geopolitical rivalry between the two countries. Moreover, it has always been dogmatic on freedom of the seas, leading it to confront both Canada and Russia over Arctic routes and their right to control them. But the US is not a member of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, so it cannot make formal claims to the territory. In military terms, and because of its superpower status, its overall superiority over any potential contender is clear, especially considering its nuclear capabilities, to which only Russia can compare. And it is able to translate that global superiority to the Arctic arena. Consequently, there has not so much been a rearmament as a moderate build-up of its forces in the region, as the region is covered by its global capacity to act. However, in 2017 it had only one large icebreaker in operation out of four, suggesting that the Arctic is not as relevant for the Americans as it seems to be for Russia, at least until recently.

But in August 2018, the US Navy reactivated the second Fleet in the North Atlantic, which had been dismantled by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. This was summarised at the 2019 Arctic Forum (Finland). «We are entering a new era of strategic engagement in the Arctic», and described «new threats to all our interests in that region».

The Trident Juncture 2018 exercise, with the participation of Finland and Sweden, and Cold Response 2020 (completed ahead of schedule due to the coronavirus crisis; it was a continuation of Defender Europe 2020) with more than 37,000

troops – 20,000 of them American – above the Polar Circle, are an explicit expression of the Alliance's will and commitment to the countries of these latitudes. On the Russian side, and in the best of Cold War traditions – when superpower confrontation took the form of military exercises and technology races, such as the one that led to space travel– Russia has revived military exercises. Thus, the Northern Fleet Ocean Shield Exercise, held in August 2019, took place before or concurrently with Vostok-18, Tsentr-19 and Grom-19 exercises elsewhere in the Arctic. The Vostok-18 exercise was conducted in September 2018 in eastern Russia and partially in the Bering Sea. It involved a total of 300,000 soldiers and was the largest military exercise conducted by Russia since 1981³⁵.

The Norwegian Defence Minister made public his concerns about Exercise Tsentr-19. Norway, because of its proximity to Russia, is very sensitive to security issues and politically very active, having given considerable impetus to the concept of *High North* (another way of referring to the Arctic as well as a strategic concept) at NATO level in its attempt to try to involve NATO more in the Arctic. The High North is the most important strategic priority for Norwegian foreign policy, especially in terms of trade and social opportunities. At the same time, however, it seeks to maintain a constructive, friendly and cooperative relationship with Russia. Norway is obviously concerned about Moscow's actions in the region, which has aggressively built up its forces on its borders and organises exercises there, using its technological advantage as an element of attraction and exchange and thus stabilisation. A sort of official mantra that captures this logic and is often used to refer to the region is 'High North-Low Tension'.

Despite the symbolic character of the Arctic in Canadian identity, the country by far does not play a key role in the area –and this is explicitly recognised at the political level– when it claims to be trying to encourage its development in order not to be left behind in the current struggle. In the words of Prime Minister , Stephen Harper, «use it or lose it». From his rhetoric and political gestures one can deduce his intention to exchange the country's traditional internationalism and middle power status for 'continentalism' and great power status. In this logic, it has hindered the European Union's access to the area (vetoing, for example, its entry as an observer in the Antarctic Council) and is trying to distance NATO from the region³⁶.

A ten-year strategic plan for the country's Arctic region was presented in 2019, which includes a reinforced military presence in that area, asserting, in relation to the Northwest Passage – which has seen a 17 percent increase

³⁵ <https://israelnoticias.com/militar/la-presencia-militar-de-rusia-en-el-artico/>

³⁶ PERREAULT, Francois. 'El «tira y afloja» político sobre la gobernanza del Ártico: el viaje de China hacia la condición de observador permanente', in VV. AA. 'Documentos de Seguridad y Defensa 66 Geopolítica del Ártico. Dos visiones complementarias. España-Singapur'. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

in traffic since 2017 – that «Canada remains committed to exercising its sovereignty» over that passage, which other countries, including the United States, consider to be international waters. It further states that «there is growing international interest and rivalry in the Canadian Arctic by state and non-state actors seeking to benefit from the region's numerous natural resources and strategic position»³⁷. Canada (and Russia, as we have seen) seeks to limit access to the affairs of the zone to coastal states only, i.e., also excluding Iceland, Finland and Sweden. This undoubtedly weakens the EU's position in the Arctic and also NATO's own position, which does not like its presence in the area. However, the lack of legislation is a window of opportunity for governments outside the area to try to become involved in its affairs³⁸.

Denmark incorporates the contradictions of its relationship with Greenland and the largely self-governing Faroe Islands. The country is an example of how the Arctic space overlaps with other spaces – in this case the European space – without taking precedence over them, contributing to both its diversity and its identity. The logical consequence of this mixture is that EU law does not apply to either the Faroe Islands or Greenland because of their autonomy from the Danes. The Danish strategy has a clear global perspective, and economic opportunities, scientific knowledge and global cooperation are key components of its policy. It has invested heavily in recent years to strengthen its military capabilities and plans to create an Arctic Response Force. China's presence in Greenland is viewed with particular suspicion by the United States, which has attempted to acquire the island, a request that was once publicly rejected as extravagant. Denmark brings us to the role of the European Union in the Arctic. In their relations with the organisation, Arctic states fall into three categories: member states (Denmark, Finland and Sweden), associate states (Norway and Iceland) and strategic partners (Canada, the United States and the Russian Federation). The European Union has been heavily involved in the Northern Dimension, working with Russia, Norway, Iceland and Finland, working with Russia, Norway, Iceland and Finland³⁹.

This has led to a rebound effect that has brought about increased cooperation with the European Union, including the creation of an 'Arctic window' in the

³⁷ <https://www.infobae.com/america/mundo/2019/09/11/canada-anuncio-un-plan-para-aumentar-su-presencia-militar-en-el-artico/>

³⁸ SÁNCHEZ ANDRÉS, Antonio. 'Rusia y la geoestrategia del Ártico'. *Real Instituto Elcano*. ARI 63/2010, 6 April 2010.

³⁹ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. 'El régimen de los espacios polares.El espacio ártico', in PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ, Carmen; Cebada Romero, Alicia; and MARIÑO MENÉNDEZ, Fernando M. (dir.), *Instrumentos y regímenes de cooperación internacional*, Editorial Trotta, 2017.

<https://www.investigadoresporelmundo.com/data/100254/assets/Elena%20Conde%20Perez%20El%20regimen%20de%20los%20espacios%20polares@1541512405303.pdf>

Northern Dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy⁴⁰. However, it will be formally excluded from these policies by Canada's veto of its observer status on the Antarctic Council because of its embargo on imported seal products. Thus, in the face of Chinese success, we find European disenchantment. The European Union has traditionally been a long-standing actor in the Arctic. Its contribution to the economic, scientific and social development of the area is remarkable. The European Union's interests in the Arctic region cover different aspects such as the environment, energy, transport and fisheries. In line with this, the EU aspired to influence its legal regulation, but this was not possible due to the reluctance of both Canada and Russia, which in 2008 put the brakes on such a possibility⁴¹.

Against their wishes, there has been a relative regression of EU policies towards the region, or a cap, despite the EU's Arctic state parties – Denmark, Finland and Sweden – having a clear interest in the region. In this way, the EU's interests in the Arctic region began to focus on environmental issues, mainly related to the phenomenon of climate change. Subsequently, it has been oriented towards the geopolitical and strategic aspects of this space, integrating them into the design of its maritime policy, only to lose strength later on⁴². It is obvious that any country in this hemisphere looks northwards with interest, and Spain is no exception. However, these interests do not seem to have been clearly defined, except for fisheries and scientific research.

There is no perception in our country of the possible business opportunities arising from the changes that are taking place in the area; nor is there an established culture or adequate knowledge of a region that is commonly presented to public opinion as being imbued with a certain exoticism and adventure; indeed, in the opinion of some experts, more incentives are needed for companies that naturally tend to stay in comfortable, close and familiar environments, ignoring other options and the possible mechanisms for making them possible. This is even more difficult when they are formulated in terms of positioning and in terms of the future or change. To give examples of possible windows of opportunity, our port traffic will undoubtedly be affected by the opening of new routes, the shipbuilding industry will have a new field for research and development, and there will also be new challenges for fisheries and energy resources with climate change⁴³.

⁴⁰ CINELLI, Claudia. 'La «Cuestión ártica» y la Unión Europea', *Revista Española de Relaciones Internacionales*, 2009, pp. 138163.

⁴¹ VV. AA. 'Documentos de Seguridad y Defensa 66 Geopolítica del Ártico. Dos visiones complementarias. España-Singapur'. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

⁴² CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. 'Geopolítica del Ártico. Especial referencia de los intereses de España en la región ártica' in VV. AA, 'Documentos de Seguridad y Defensa 66 Geopolítica del Ártico. Dos visiones complementarias. España-Singapur'. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

⁴³ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. 'Geopolítica del Ártico. Especial referencia de los intereses de España en la región ártica', in VV. AA, 'Documentos de Seguridad y Defensa 66 Geopolítica

Spain has interests in the region, starting with hydrocarbons (energy security is always a factor to consider and Repsol⁴⁴ is present) and the research being carried out there, in which it is taking an active part. These are embodied in the Spanish Polar Committee, as well as in various expeditions and projects. The role of the Ministry of Defence in the fabric of our country's relationship with the Arctic must be acknowledged here, and this is complemented by the publications on the area, many of which are the result of the work of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has an ambassador for Polar and Arctic Affairs. As far as fisheries are concerned, it should be recalled that 5% of total catches are taken in the Arctic. Let us not forget that Canada's nationalistic exclusivism led to the halibut dispute in the mid-1990s when Canada unilaterally extended its Exclusive Economic Zone beyond 200 miles.

In this respect, there is now a risk of a progressive enlargement of the continental shelves and thus a possible change in the international water regime. Also in this area, and until a relatively recent substantial improvement as a result of a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2013, our country has been in confrontation with Norway in whose waters part of the fishing activity takes place⁴⁵.

This ties in with the idea that Spain also has political interests in the area. To begin with, it has to promote as much as possible a legal regime for the region that is favourable to its economic interests, or at least not incompatible with them, providing legal certainty for business and benefiting from the accessibility that climate change is offering, whether in terms of resources or in terms of transport. The interests and opportunities of Spanish companies must be defended and their potential in the area must be highlighted, and their involvement in the region must be encouraged⁴⁶. Spain has observer status in the Arctic Council. In this sense, our country should promote internationalism, as the intervention of multilateral bodies may facilitate greater understanding and the easing of tensions in the region, while bringing the Arctic into its national context⁴⁷.

del Ártico. Dos visiones complementarias. España-Singapur'. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

⁴⁴ VELÁZQUEZ LEÓN, Sonia. 'La internacionalización del hielo: nuevos actores en el Ártico', Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. DIEEA 024/2015. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2015/DIEEE024-2015_Artico_SoniaVelazquez.pdf

⁴⁵ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. 'Geopolítica del Ártico. Especial referencia a los intereses de España en la región ártica', in VV. AA, 'Documentos de Seguridad y Defensa 66 Geopolítica del Ártico. Dos visiones complementarias. España-Singapur'. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

⁴⁶ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. 'Geopolítica del Ártico. Especial referencia a los intereses de España en la región ártica', in VV. AA, 'Documentos de Seguridad y Defensa 66 Geopolítica del Ártico. Dos visiones complementarias. España-Singapur'. Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2014.

⁴⁷ MORERA CASTRO, María. 'Spain's interests in the Arctic', Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies DIEEE058, 9 June 2016.

Conclusions and foresight

Any disruption of the international *status quo* is potentially conflictual; not for nothing is war a bloody reordering of geopolitical relations. And as Elena Conde argues and as can be seen, climate change through melting ice has broken with the remoteness and marginality of this region. As an easement, it transforms constants into variables – in this case evident even in the change from solid (ice) to liquid (water) – altering the socio-economic foundations of the geographical environment and making it foreseeable that in the not-too-distant future human activity will be much more intense, which increases the strategic relevance of the Arctic space⁴⁸. Thus, the lack of agreement on sovereignty over the Arctic seas, the discovery of important resources in its subsoil, the improvement of access brought about by climate change, and the trade routes to be opened up, all point to the emergence of future disputes in this still partly unknown land. All of which implies a higher level of international effervescence.

This hinders the governance that the enormous challenges to be faced demand, hindering their improvement, whether through *ad hoc* formulas such as the Antarctic Treaty or through the strengthening of the Antarctic Council, which is a cooperative and 'soft law' instrument. Not surprisingly, the lack of governance favours the logics of power in a space where there is an asymmetrical distribution of power. Yet the Arctic has been incorporated into the globalisation process and subjected to its dynamics; it is no longer and cannot be a canton apart. And it is even natural: for example, the climate in the region influences the climate of Eurasia as a whole.

Consequently, a correct understanding of their situation cannot be made solely in a local context, but must be carried out within the context of global logics. Arctic states need to strike a balance between regionalising some issues and excluding non-Arctic states; and internationalising other issues while including non-Arctic Council members in the decision-making process. In the logic of globalisation, the Arctic does not belong exclusively to the Arctic states, even if it contributes to their identity. Nor can the analysis of the current situation be reduced solely to the classification of the actors into two antagonistic blocs, as was the case during the Cold War; history does not repeat itself except as a farce. These blocs would eventually consist of Russia and the other actors. The point is that in the second bloc all actors have their own legitimate interests and are fighting for them; there are even

http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2016/DIEEE058-2016_Espana_Artico_MariaMorera.pdf

⁴⁸ CONDE PÉREZ, Elena. 'El régimen de los espacios polares. El espacio ártico', in PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ, Carmen; Cebada Romero, Alicia; and MARIÑO MENÉNDEZ, Fernando M. (dir.), *Instrumentos y regímenes de cooperación internacional*, Editorial Trotta, 2017.

<https://www.investigadoresporelmundo.com/data/100254/assets/Elena%20Conde%20Perez%20El%20regimen%20de%20los%20espacios%20polares@1541512405303.pdf>

actors such as China that paradoxically serve as a bridge between the two. This space is joined by organisations such as NATO and the European Union, which have their own dynamics.

Thus, the Arctic looms large in Canadian construction discourse that incorporates great powers, but Canada's presence in this ocean is not comparable to that of Russia. Denmark is far from Greenland, which puts significant stress on its self-government relationship and attracts the interest of other actors in the area. The proximity of the Scandinavian peninsula and Finland to strategic Russian territories means that they are under significant pressure from Russia. China's presence in the region is the result of a policy of accommodation and «peaceful rise» that allows it to engage with Russia and NATO members at the same time. This is made possible by their financing capacity and a hybrid approach, i.e., different according to the level considered. In this way, it diversifies and secures the resources and routes that its needs demand.

China provides Russia with the technological bases and capital for hydrocarbon exploitation, allowing it to escape sanctions stemming from its actions in Ukraine and gain a foothold in the international market on the basis of its ability to control a larger share of resources. Its geopolitical rivalry with the United States is here transposed to a local level. Russia is the historical and emotional heir of the former USSR and, with it, its grievances and phobias; it feels its security concerned by NATO's expansion into its immediate neighbourhood. The assertiveness it has been displaying, especially since 2008, in its relations with the West has demonstrated its will to regain a relevant place in global geopolitics, even if this does not correspond to its current economic capabilities. It regards the Arctic as its backyard and seeks to avoid its strategic envelopment, stemming from the accessibility that melting ice brings. In addition, and not least, this area provides 20 percent of its GDP.

In the Arctic there are contradictions, and a kind of rivalry has developed over access to resources, but there are no major territorial disputes. The struggle between states is being waged in terms of the future and in terms of international law, and on the basis of a change that has not yet fully materialised. But even if it is approached in legal terms, we should never lose sight of the fact that we are facing political confrontation. Yet it cannot be ignored, indeed it must be emphasised for its reality, that the formula that has so far prevailed in the region is cooperation. However, the intense militarisation process that has taken place in the region in recent years cannot be overlooked either.

This is a space in which militarisation and cooperation coexist at the same time; an example of this deeply contradictory spirit can be found in the relations that have been detailed between Norway and Russia. It is to be expected that rationality will prevail, as it has done so far, but when the

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human factor enters the equation nothing is certain. Recalling the dictum of Master Sun Tsu: «Keep your friends close and your enemies much closer.»

Chronology

CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT	
DATE	EVENTS
1553	The search for the Northeast Passage begins.
1585	Exploration of Davis Strait.
1725	First expedition to Kamchatka.
1773	First expedition to the North Pole.
1878	Exploration of deep Greenland begins.
1907	Sector theory.
1947	The Cold War begins.
1959	Antarctic Treaty.
1982	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.
1987	Murmansk Declaration by Premier Gorbachev.
1991	End of the Cold War.
1996	The Arctic Council is established.
2007	Resumption of Russian air patrols in the Arctic area.
2008	The Arctic Council agrees on the applicability to the Arctic of the applicability of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.
2010	Agreement between Russia and Norway on the Barents Sea.
2014	A Russian Joint Strategic Command for the Arctic is established.
2017	Russian-Chinese naval manoeuvres.

Chapter Two

Tibet's water: a vital resource for China

María del Mar Hidalgo García

Resumen

Para conseguir el propósito de ser la primera potencia mundial en 2050 China debe afrontar el problema del aumento de la demanda de agua y energética, por lo que el Tíbet se ha convertido en una cuestión de supervivencia y una región clave para su seguridad hídrica. El control que ejerce sobre el Tíbet le permite ejercer de potencia hidrohegemónica, al controlar las cabeceras de los principales ríos asiáticos.

La gestión de estas aguas compartidas es un tema crítico, ya que, aunque el agua casi siempre es un factor de cooperación, también puede convertirse en un factor de conflicto. Si bien la política china a este respecto ha sido mejorar la colaboración con sus vecinos ribereños por sus propios intereses políticos y económicos, algunos de ellos perciben el afán controlador de recursos hídricos y la acusan de estar realizando una sigilosa guerra de agua.

Palabras clave

China, Tíbet, Mekong, Lancang, Brahmaputra, conflictos hídricos.

Abstract

To achieve the goal of being the first world power in 2050, China must face the problem of increasing demand for water and energy. Tibet has become a matter of survival and a key region for its water security. The control it exercises over Tibet allows it to exercise a hydro-hegemonic power by controlling the headwaters of the main Asian rivers.

The management of these shared waters is a critical issue since, although water is almost always a cooperative factor, it can also become a conflict factor. While Chinese policy in this regard has been to improve collaboration with its riverside neighbours for their own political and economic interests, some of them perceive the desire to control water resources and accuse it of waging a stealthy water war.

Keywords

China, Tibet, Mekong, Lakang, Brahmaputra, water conflicts.

Introduction

China's total water availability is around 2,000 cubic metres per person per year, which is about one third of the world average. According to some estimates, China may experience an annual water deficit of 200 billion cubic metres in the coming decades, mainly due to increased water demand in the industrial and urban sectors. However, these figures are not homogeneous across China, as most of the provinces with the highest water demand are located on the east coast of the country¹.

In addition to this demand-supply deficit problem, China faces another major problem related to its water resources, namely pollution, which affects more than 85% of watercourses in major cities and 80 percent of groundwater. Rapid urbanisation is accelerating the degradation of ecosystems such as lakes and wetlands, also leading to increased flood risks².

Water security issues have been of concern to the Chinese government for several decades. In 2005, the then Minister of Water Resources declared that China faced the challenge of «fight for every drop of water or die»³. Although several regions of China are facing water shortages, the water problem is more related to the impact it may have on China's economic growth, as Premier Wen Jiabao pointed out: «The survival of the nation of China is threatened by the loss of water supply⁴.»

China has 20 percent of the world's population but only 7 percent of the world's water resources⁵, so water availability is among the lowest in the world. This disproportion, coupled with its economic growth that demands large quantities of this vital resource, may lead to increased tensions over water both internally and externally, making relations with neighbouring countries more difficult. And while water has globally been a source of collaboration, in China's case it may prove to be a source of disputes or a tool for coercive diplomacy.

In China, water demand is growing by 10 percent per year in most cities and by more than 5 percent per year for industrial use. In addition to scarcity, one of the biggest water-related problems facing China is pollution. More than half of the population drinks water contaminated with organic waste and more than 75% of surface water is unsuitable for drinking and fishing. Some 30% of the water is not even suitable for agriculture and industry.

¹ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/06/28/chinas-water-wars/> Date of consultation: 15 July 2020.

² Ibidem.

³ <https://chinadialogue.net/en/climate/10583-china-is-heading-towards-a-water-crisis-will-government-changes-help/> Date of consultation: 03 September 2020.

⁴ http://www.iberchina.org/files/2018/China_s_looming_water_crisis.pdf. Date of consultation: 03 September 2020.

⁵ Idem.

For this reason – almost survival – the Tibet region is a critical region for China. The altitude of the Tibetan plateau makes it an area with large glaciers, extensive alpine lakes and huge waterfalls. These water reservoirs supply water to a large part of the world's population as they are the headwaters of Asia's major rivers, including the Yellow River, the Yangtze, the Mekong, the Yarlung Tsangpo-Brahmaputra, the Salween and the Sutlej, among others.

The Tibetan Plateau is the largest and highest plateau in the world. Located in the centre of Asia, it is surrounded by the world's highest mountains: to the west by the Karakorum range, to the north by the Kunlun mountain range and to the south by the Himalayan range. From east to west this plateau stretches for 2,500 km, occupying an area of 2.5 million square kilometres⁶.

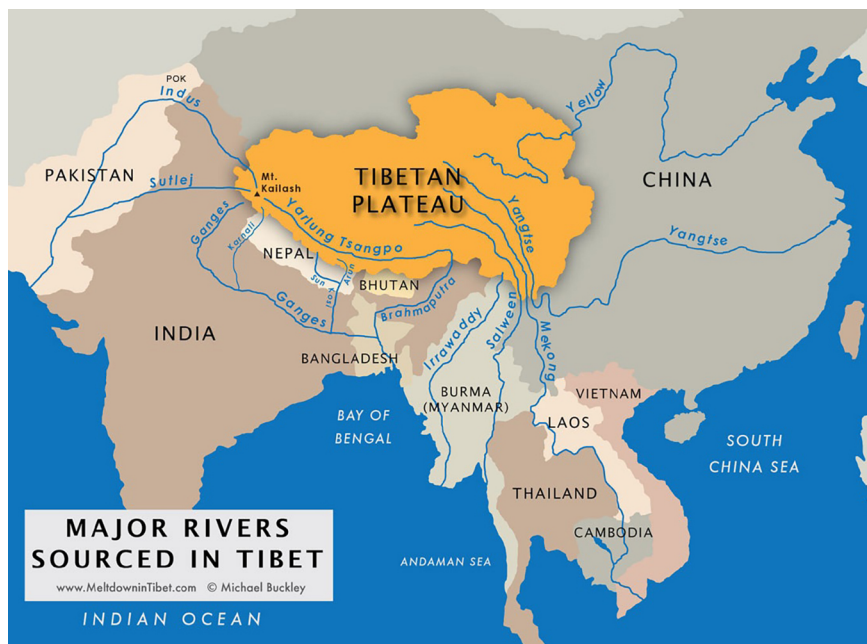


Figure 1. Rivers originating in the Tibetan plateau. Source: https://www.meltdownintibet.com/images/plateaumap_lg.jpg

This huge plateau, together with the Himalayan range, the Hindu Kush, the Parmir and the Tian Shan mountains, form part of the Himalayan mountain range (HKH) of what is known as the 'third pole' as it contains the third largest freshwater reserves, after the Arctic and Antarctica⁷. The region as a whole covers 5 million km², has an average altitude of 4,000 metres and contains more than 100,000 km² of glaciers. This region is also called the 'Water Towers of Asia'

⁶ https://www.atc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ATC_Environment_Report_2016_update.pdf Date of consultation: 20 July 2020.

⁷ <https://public.wmo.int/en/resources/bulletin/third-pole-climate-warming-and-cryosphere-system-changes>. Date of consultation: 20 July 2020.

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as it is the source of ten major rivers in Asia: the Amu Darya, Brahmaputra (Yarlungtsanpo), Ganges, Indus, Irrawaddy, Mekong (Lancang), Salween (Nu), Tarim (Dayan), Yangtse (Jinsha) and Yellow River (Huanghe). The basins of these ten rivers cover an area of 9 million km², of which 2.8 million km² are in the Himalayan System region. Along their courses, millions of people depend on these rivers for domestic use, agriculture, electricity generation and industry. All these rivers are fed by rainwater, snowmelt and groundwater⁸.

The Himalayan System is therefore a critical region for the water security and socio-economic development of the countries located in its river basins. Approximately one fifth of the world's population depends on water from the third pole, representing a GDP of about \$12,700 trillion⁹.

Of the ten rivers that rise in the Tibetan Plateau, eight are transboundary, flowing through sixteen countries: China, India, Nepal, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Thailand, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, Uzbekistan, Laos and Kyrgyzstan. There is a big difference in water dependency between them, with Turkmenistan having the highest water dependency of 97 percent.

From a geographical and hydrological point of view, the Tibetan plateau often refers to the location of Tibet, and there is a correlation between the Tibetan plateau and the Tibetan area from a historical, ethnic and cultural point of view. Thus, the three provinces of Tibet (Ü-Tsang, Amdo and Kham) are roughly the size of the Tibetan plateau.

Today, the Chinese government has divided this Tibetan area into several administratively separate areas: the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region (which includes almost half of historical Tibet, with Ü-Tsang province and part of Kham), Qinghai, two Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures and one Tibetan Autonomous County in Sichuan, one Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and one Tibetan Autonomous County in Gansu and two Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures in Yunnan¹⁰.

From a hydrological point of view, China is in a privileged position as the hydro-hegemonic power in the region, following its occupation of Tibet in 1950. China shares more than forty surface waterways and more than twenty aquifers with its seventeen neighbours¹¹. The management of these shared waters is a critical issue because, although water is almost always a factor of cooperation, it can also become a factor of conflict. While China's policy in this regard has been to improve collaboration with its riparian neighbours,

⁸ <https://www.grida.no/resources/6702>. Date of consultation: 20 July 2020.

⁹ <https://public.wmo.int/en/resources/bulletin/third-pole-climate-warming-and-cryosphere-system-changes> Date of consultation: 20 July 2020.

¹⁰ https://www.atc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ATC_Environment_Report_2016_update.pdf. Date of consultation: 2 October 2020.

¹¹ <https://www.chinawaterrisk.org> Date of consultation: 2 October 2020.

some of them perceive China's controlling eagerness for water resources and accuse it of waging a stealthy water war.

Moreover, like the other two poles, the Himalayan system is suffering the effects of global warming more rapidly than other regions of the planet. These changes can alter the interactions between the atmosphere, cryosphere, hydrosphere and biosphere of the whole area. This problem is compounded by the construction of large hydroelectric and water diversion projects, as well as unregulated mining, which threaten to provoke a water crisis between states that share river basins¹².

Background

In addition to a physical protective barrier from a geographical point of view, Tibet is a vital issue for China because of the water and mineral resources present in the area. For this reason, China will not relinquish its hold on Tibet despite international pressure to defend the cultural and social values of the Tibetan people.

Although this chapter focuses on potential conflicts over the control of water from rivers originating in the Tibetan plateau, it is necessary to briefly review the history of the relationship between Tibet and China over the region, as it is key to understanding the hydro-hegemonic power that the Asian giant holds over its basin neighbours.

For China, Tibet is an inalienable part of Chinese territory and considers that Tibetans have always been part of the large multinational Chinese family. The so-called 'Tibetan independence' issue is originally a product of aggression by imperialist nations¹³.

Since the 13th century, Tibet had been part of the Mongol Empire and enjoyed relative autonomy due to harsh climatic and orographic conditions. In the mid-19th century, the Dalai Lama went so far as to close borders to foreigners as both the Russians and the British showed some interest in Central Asia. For the latter, Tibet was seen as a 'buffer' region to prevent the Russian threat from bordering India.

Difficult terrain delayed the British presence in Tibet but they eventually agreed, forcing the Dalai to flee to India and sign a trade agreement to displace his Russian rival. In 1906, the Convention between China and Britain was signed, in which Britain declared non-interference in Tibet in return for

¹² SHRESTHA, A., and GHATE, R. (2016). Transboundary water governance in the Hindu Kush Himalaya region: *Beyond the dialectics of conflict and cooperation*. HI-AWARE Working Paper 7. Kathmandu: HI-AWARE.

¹³ <http://www.embajadachina.org.pe/esp/ztzl/zgxz/t423776.htm> Date of consultation: 20 October 2020.

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compensation. The importance of this agreement lies in the fact that it is the basis on which China argues its rights over Tibet.

Although the Dalai Lama's return was facilitated for the first few years, China gradually became more ambitious to take over the government of Tibet, and the Dalai Lama was again forced to flee. The situation took a turn with the declaration of the Republic of China. The Dalai Lama returned, and China withdrew its presence in the region. For Tibet, this was a recognition of its independence by China, while for China it was seen as a parenthesis in the region's sovereignty, as it was never intended to cease exercising it.

In 1912, Tibet declared its independence, but in 1950 China finally occupied the territory by force and annexation took place with the signing of the agreement known as the 'Seventeen-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet' signed by a 15-year-old Dalai Lama. In this agreement Beijing demanded that Tibet be recognised as belonging to Chinese territory and in return China agreed to accept Tibet's political system, the status of the Dalai Lama and to maintain indigenous Tibetan structures. The Agreement established for Tibet an autonomous administration headed by the Dalai Lama.

The following years saw the expropriation of monasteries, as well as various actions against different sectors of Tibetan society, which China considered feudal. The dissatisfaction of the Tibetan population led to the Litang revolt in 1959, which claimed thousands of victims. The result was the exile of the Dalai Lama, the loss of the possessions of the monks and the Tibetan aristocracy, and attacks on Tibetan culture and social life.

In 1965 the Tibetan territory was reorganised as the Tibet Autonomous Region, becoming an administrative region with the same legal status as any other Chinese province. In the years that followed, Tibet suffered repression of anything Buddhist and even encouraged the migration of Chinese people to the region¹⁴.

Den Xiaoping's accession to power in 1978 offered a turning point by allowing religious freedom and the opening of thousands of Buddhist temples, while still exercising sovereignty over Tibet. Since then, there have been many events, riots and accusations of human rights violations, but there have been several rounds of negotiations between the Chinese government and the Tibetan authorities on the future of Tibet. The result is that the Dalai Lama accepts China's military presence and renounces political independence but claims cultural and religious autonomy¹⁵.

¹⁴ <https://vaventura.com/divulgacion/historia/breve-historia-del-conflicto-tibet-china/>
Date of consultation: 10 July 2020.

¹⁵ http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2015/DIEEE063-2015_Tibet_CarolinaAlberto.pdf. Date of consultation: 3 October 2020.

In 2006 China completed the railway line connecting Golmud and Lasa. It is one of the highest railways in the world, very difficult to build but of great economic interest to China as it allows it to transport goods and equipment to and from Tibet more quickly and cheaply. This infrastructure has made it easier for China to exploit mineral resources and build large dams¹⁶.

The presence of water and natural resources in Tibet are key to understanding China's interest in continuing to exercise sovereignty over the region. One could say that it is like the heart that must beat to continue the very survival of this Asian power.

This sovereignty over Tibet has allowed China to be in a privileged position to control water resources flowing through transboundary basins, including India and Southeast Asian countries.

In 1997, the United Nations Convention on the Law of International Watercourses was adopted for non-navigational purposes and entered into force in 2014 after signature by Vietnam. China was one of the three countries that voted against, arguing for the need to give more prominence to sovereignty and its disagreement with the established dispute resolution mechanisms¹⁷.

The Convention established three main rules:

- Factors relevant to equitable and reasonable utilisation (Articles 5, 6, 7).
- Obligation not to cause significant harm (Article 7).
- Regular exchange of data and information (Article 9).

Generally speaking, upstream states base their interests on the principle of reasonable and equitable use, while downstream countries focus on the principle of the obligation not to cause harm.

From the point of view of cooperation, and despite the fact that China voted against the Convention, there are agreements on joint management of the transboundary river basins originating in Tibet. However, these agreements appear to be insufficient to equitably manage shared waters in this Asian region, in an environment of rapid economic growth and rising demand for water and energy resources.

Current situation

Over the last few decades, China has achieved impressive economic development, making it the world's second largest economy. However, as

¹⁶ <https://www.equaltimes.org/la-rapina-del-agua-del-tibet-por#.X2249D9xeUk> Date of consultation: 3 October 2020.

¹⁷ <https://www.chinawaterrisk.org/opinions/chinas-water-sharing-treaties-reciprocity-in-practice/> Date of consultation: 4 September 2020.

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the region develops, environmental problems are emerging that threaten the economic model that has been the basis for this growth. These problems include: pollution and scarcity of water resources and the influence of climate change.

Global warming is particularly evident in the Himalayan region, where rising temperatures are melting glaciers and reducing snowfall, with very negative consequences for China's rivers, both its own and those in basins shared with its neighbours.

For several years now, China has become the world leader in dam construction. Almost half of the world's 58,000 dams are Chinese¹⁸. With these mega water projects China aims to achieve its climate ambitions of reducing greenhouse gas emissions as well as meeting its growing demand for water resources. But, in addition, the construction of dams on international rivers gives it a certain capacity to use transboundary waters as a tool of coercive diplomacy against its neighbours¹⁹. However, there is also room for collaboration, although as is characteristic of China's international policy, water-related agreements are not multilateral, but have a 'one country, one treaty' approach²⁰.

The Lancang-Mekong Basin

The Mekong River (Lancang in Chinese) rises in the Tibetan plateau in China. It is 4,350 km long and runs through five other Southeast Asian countries: Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. Around 60 million people depend on the river and its resources²¹.

The Mekong is vital for the food security and survival of the people along its course, providing 80 percent of the protein consumed by 60 million people in the region. In addition, the Mekong River is rich in biodiversity and its waters constitute the world's largest freshwater fishery worth US\$17 billion a year²². The Mekong River Basin is also rich in energy and mineral resources including oil and gas, as well as gold, copper, lead, zinc, phosphate, potash, coal and gemstones.

¹⁸ <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2020/06/16/china-leverages-tibetan-plateaus-water-wealth/> Date of consultation: 3 October 2020.

¹⁹ <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2020/06/16/china-leverages-tibetan-plateaus-water-wealth/> Date of consultation: 04 September 2020.

²⁰ <https://www.chinawaterrisk.org/opinions/chinas-water-sharing-treaties-reciprocity-in-practice/> Date of consultation: 04 October 2020.

²¹ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/how-meaningful-is-the-new-us-mekong-partnership/> Date of consultation: 10 October.

²² <https://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/Catch-and-Culture/CatchCultureVol-21.3.pdf>

Rapid economic and population growth in both China and Southeast Asian countries is leading to unsustainable exploitation of river-related resources such as water, fisheries, energy and timber. In addition, the recent construction of dams and hydroelectric power plants together with deforestation and illegal wildlife trafficking also contribute to the growing instability of the basin's populations due to declining agricultural productivity, unemployment and poverty.

From an environmental point of view, the Mekong Basin faces several challenges arising from the consequences of climate change and pollution. The Mekong River, like other rivers originating in the Himalayan System, is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change that are expected to impact the region more severely in the coming decades.

From a geostrategic point of view, the Mekong Basin faces several challenges. Firstly, it is worth highlighting China's role as a hydro-hegemonic power, controlling the headwaters of the river, which puts it in constant tension with the other states located downstream, due to the proliferation of dams and hydroelectric power plants.

Secondly, the Mekong plays a vital role in China's trade and supply route expansion strategies. Within the scope of the 'One Belt One Road' initiative, China sees the Mekong basin as the gateway to the Indochina peninsula and thus to the South China Sea, so part of China's ambition is to increase the river's navigational capacity.

Thirdly, tensions in the lower part of the basin are worth noting as the Mekong forms part of the international border between Myanmar and Laos, as well as between Laos and Thailand²³. The lack of border demarcations in some areas are a permanent source of border conflicts. Due to the low military presence, these areas provide a suitable environment for illicit activities such as arms trading, smuggling, human and drug trafficking.

Drug trafficking is a very serious problem for the Mekong Basin countries, especially in the so-called 'golden triangle' between Myanmar, Laos and Thailand, which are the largest producers of opium and methamphetamine. The Mekong River is not only a source of resources, but also the main route for transporting drugs.

In 1995, in view of the disadvantaged position vis-à-vis China, the lower basin countries: Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam established the Mekong River Commission to work together to ensure the sustainable development of the river²⁴ as set out in the Agreement on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River²⁵ signed the same year. This agreement is in line with the UN Convention on the Law of International Watercourses, as Article 5 of the Convention obliges Member States to use water in a reasonable

²³ <https://riodelplaneta.com/rio-mekong/> Date of consultation: 04 October 2020.

²⁴ <https://www.mrcmekong.org/> Date of consultation: 04 October 2020.

²⁵ To see the text: <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/policies/agreement-Apr95.pdf>

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and equitable manner; Article 7 also establishes the requirement to prevent adverse effects on the development of the area. In addition, Article 8 makes States liable for damage they may cause to other Member States under international law. The establishment of the Commission has achieved two main objectives. On the one hand, the union of the countries of the lower basin vis-à-vis China and, on the other hand, China can find a single interlocutor, since although it is not part of the Commission, it is listed as an observer.



Figure 2. The Lancang-Mekong Basin. Source: Creative Commons.

Based on the Cooperation Agreement, the Mekong Commission's main mission is to exchange information between member states, as well as to provide a mechanism for a state to notify and submit for consultation its intention to carry out a dam project on the river.

This cooperation has led to greater integration and understanding among all countries in the Lancang-Mekong basin, as China prefers to call it. In 2012, Thailand proposed an initiative to achieve basin-wide sustainable development and received a positive response from China. This led to the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Framework in 2016. This framework shares a vision of 'shared driver, shared future' and aims to provide and foster the development of the region with a culture of equality, trust, mutual assistance and affinity.

The LCM is based on three pillars: security and political, sustainable development, and cultural and social. It has five priority areas where in addition to water resources it focuses on connectivity, productive capacity, transboundary economic cooperation and poverty reduction.

Despite the establishment of this framework for development cooperation in the Mekong region, China's main strategic rivals, such as India and the United States, continue to argue that the Chinese government could use water as a geopolitical tool for coercive diplomacy. Accusations based on scientific studies.

A decrease in the water level of the Mekong River was noted at the end of 2019. The Mekong Commission states attributed this to insufficient rainfall due to the delayed onset of the monsoon, as well as its early retreat due to the effects of the El Niño current.

The impact of this drought had serious consequences for the lower basin countries. For Thailand, one of the world's largest sugar exporters, it meant losses of 30 percent. In Vietnam, the lack of flow has increased saline intrusion, damaging rice crops.

Although China has also admitted that it has been hit hard by the drought, there are opinions based on satellite imagery that argue that China has not suffered from the drought to the same extent. According to a study published in April 2020²⁶, the researchers compare the supposed natural flow of the river based on the amount of water in the upper reaches of the Mekong with the actual flow in the lower reaches, concluding that dam construction is altering the river's flow. To do this, researchers have used satellite data from 1992 and 2019, establishing estimates of river height in Chiang Saen, northern Thailand.

²⁶ BASIST, A., and WILLIAMS, C. (2020). Monitoring the Quantity of Water Flowing Through the Mekong Basin Through Natural (Unimpeded) Conditions, Sustainable Infrastructure Partnership, Bangkok.

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This study has served as evidence for the US to accuse China of grabbing water from the Mekong. However, for China, and even the Mekong Commission itself, they question the data provided by the study²⁷. For its part, China has also produced scientific reports arguing that the drought affects the entire basin and that the dams help to alleviate the effects of water scarcity.

In August 2020, the third meeting of the Lancang-Mekong cooperation platform took place virtually. This meeting was held at a key moment for the state of the river, as for the second year in a row it is experiencing new record low levels. The water level is below two thirds and rainfall has also decreased by 70 percent²⁸. At the meeting, China agreed to share hydrological data with the lower basin nations²⁹. With this important step, China achieves three objectives: to further strengthen cooperation with the Mekong Basin countries, to demonstrate to the rest of the world who holds the leadership of the Mekong Basin region, and to expose the US manipulation of information on the Mekong Basin, which, according to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Wenbin, is only aimed at creating problems in the area³⁰.

Water in the Sino-Indian border disputes

The Yarlung Tsangpo-Brahmaputra basin is 3,800 km long and is the highest waterway on the planet. The river rises in the Tibetan plateau and flows through three countries (China, India and Bangladesh) before joining the Ganges River in the Bay of Bengal. The river is given three names depending on the country through which it flows: Yarlung Tsangpo in China, Brahmaputra in India and Jamuna in Bangladesh. The river-related interests of these three countries are also different. For China, its interests focus on hydropower and diversion of water to other economically growing but water-deficient regions; for India, its main focus is on supply and storage capacity due to the river's orography; and for Bangladesh, its interest is in controlling the intrusion out of its mouth. Many and sometimes conflicting interests make it difficult to reach agreements between the riparian countries³¹.

²⁷ http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/Understanding-Mekong-River-hydrological-conditions_2020.pdf Date of consultation: 14 October 2020.

²⁸ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/china-southeast-asian-leaders-meet-to-discuss-the-mekongs-plight/> Date of consultation: 14 October 2020.

²⁹ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1809126.shtml Date of consultation: 14 October.

³⁰ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1202491.shtml> Date of consultation: 4 October 2020.

³¹ SHANTA, Hasina (2018). *Tsangpo-Brahmaputra: A Perception Study from Riparian Perspectives*. Journal of Sustainable Development. 11. 33. 10.5539/jsd.v11n3p33.



Figure 3. Yarlung Tsangpo-Brahmaputra river basin. Source: Creative Commons

In the case of the China-India standoff, water is increasingly being used, not as a weapon of war, but to exert pressure on other simmering border conflicts between the two powers such as Arunachal Pradesh and the Galwan Valley, taking advantage of the absence of binding agreements and treaties on water use in their transboundary basins.

For India, China's use of water as a pressure measure was evident in the 2017 Doklam crisis over its refusal to share hydrological data, which led to the flooding of the Brahmaputra River in Assam. However, China did share data with Bangladesh, which demonstrates the intentionality of not providing the data. The Indian government's unease materialised in the form of a refusal to attend the first One Belt One Road Initiative meeting in 2017.

There are also accusations from India that China might pollute water resources as a coercive or retaliatory measure. In 2018, the water of the Siang River, which is one of the tributaries of the Brahmaputra, turned murky and greyish just before entering Indian territory. The water became unfit for human consumption due to accumulated sediment. The event affected agricultural production in the Siang Valley, in particular rice production in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, as well as fishing activities. China argued that the state of the water was due to an earthquake in Tibet³², but according to Indian sources the water had already changed its appearance before the earthquake occurred and even if it is true that the earthquake could have caused this damage, the appearance of the water should have returned to its

³² <https://www.thequint.com/news/environment/china-india-brahmaputra-contamination-construction> Date of consultation: 05 October 2020.

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original state over the days, which has not happened. Some Indian sources indicate that turbidity is due to the use of resins in water projects³³.

For India, China's proliferation of dams on transboundary rivers such as the Brahmaputra is one of the greatest threats to its water security, as overexploitation of water resources adversely affects water quantity, both in the occurrence of floods and the forced displacement of populations. China is building five dams on the Yarlung Tsangpo and India suspects that the works could also be used to divert the river's waters to other Chinese provinces just before it enters the state of Arunachal Pradesh. This assumption is based on the fact that China has already blocked the Xiabuqu River, one of the tributaries of the Brahmaputra that originates in Tibet due to the construction of the Lalho project³⁴.

Although about 70 percent of the water contributing to the Brahmaputra in Assam comes from rainwater and tributaries in the Indian part of the Arunachal Pradesh region, these dams have raised alarm bells that they may have an impact on the ecosystem of Northeast India by blocking the flow of minerals and the migratory movement of fish³⁵.

This diversion has a serious impact on the populations of northeast India and catastrophic economic consequences in the river delta in Bangladesh due to saline intrusion. The site where China intends to build these dams is close to the disputed territory of Arunachal Pradesh. In some sections the Yarlung Tsangpo flows within 10 km of this territory.

According to Chinese sources, China intends to exploit the hydroelectric potential of the Yarlung Tsangpo to supply electricity to Tibet, which is politically and economically marginalised from the rest of China³⁶. However, China could employ a «block and divert» tactic. There is no shortage of arguments when one considers the demand for water needed by China's eastern provinces, which are its economic engine. The south-north water diversion project and the west-east power transfer project are part of China's strategy for further development.

On the other hand, some sources suggest that China may be building 'liquid bombs' by creating artificial lakes, the water from which could be intentionally poured into rivers to create floods. An alleged example of this situation occurred in 2004 when a lake began to form in the Parechu River,

³³ <https://es.scribd.com/document/441671366/India-and-China-The-Freshwater-Dispute-Amongst-the-Two-Thirsty-Asian-Giant-s>. Date of consultation: 4 October 2020.

³⁴ <https://www.clearias.com/lalho-project/> Date of consultation: 15 October 2020.

³⁵ <https://thedi diplomat.com/2015/04/water-wars-china-india-and-the-great-dam-rush/> Date of consultation: 14 October.

³⁶ http://www.china.org.cn/china/2012-06/02/content_25547029.htm Date of consultation: 3 September 2020.

a tributary of the Sutlej that originates in the Himalayas³⁷. Despite China's cooperative attitude in that event, doubts have now re-emerged as a 1214 metre rise in the Parechu River was observed in June 2020³⁸. These doubts are also based on the construction of dams on the Lasa River that began in 2013 with the intention of turning it into a series of artificial lakes³⁹.

In the Galwan Valley, China's hydro-hegemony is also felt. The Line of Actual Control (LAC) is a barely defined boundary across the valley. It is a cold and inhospitable place, but it happens to be the direct route between India and Aksai Chin, a disputed region between the two economic powers occupied by China and declared as part of China's Xinjiang province, but which India insists belongs to the Ladakh district. One of the actions taken by China, following the recent fighting in the valley in mid-2020, was to cut off the flow of the Galwan River, a tributary of the Indus, to prevent water from entering Indian territory⁴⁰.

Situated at more than 4,200 metres above sea level, this valley is much more than just a passage route. It is one of the most important freshwater reserves in the world due to the presence of the Siachen glacier. This glacier is located in the Himalayan Mountains on an undefined border between Pakistan, India and China. In 1984 the Indian Army occupied this glacier at 7,000 metres above sea level and since then India, Pakistan and China have maintained a permanent presence there. From this glacier originates the Nubra River which, together with the tributaries of the Galwan Valley, joins the Indus. More than 200 million people depend on water from this source, as the Indus provides water for the world's most extensive irrigated agriculture. By the time it reaches the sea, human activity has used up almost 95 percent of its flow⁴¹.

The Siachen Glacier is 76 km long and covers an area of 700 km². This glacier together with 18,000 others forms the heart of the Indus Basin. Its eastern side is the Galwan Valley, which is the disputed territory between China and India. This glacier is one of the main reasons why China is so interested in the area. Like many of the region's glaciers, Siachen is shrinking at an alarming rate and is expected to occupy one-fifth of its current extent by 2035. Some Indian sources accuse China of diverting water from the Galwan River because, according to satellite photos, in some areas of the river, riverbed stones can be seen indicating a lack of water⁴².

³⁷ http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=1569 Date of consultation: 15 October.

³⁸ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-china-relations-and-geopolitics-water>. Date of consultation: 15 October 2020.

³⁹ <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/exclusive-china-damming-lhasa-river-artificial-lakes>. Date of consultation: 15 October 2020.

⁴⁰ <https://www.news.com.au/world/asia/galwan-valley-water-turned-china-india-dispute-fatal/news-story/ef93517cea8b5f6f383011272d498394>. Date of consultation: 14 October 2020.

⁴¹ Idem.

⁴² <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/how-china-channelled-galwan-river-to-claim-territory-1691142-2020-06-21> Date of consultation: 04 October 2020.

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China's hydro-hegemonic power seems to know no bounds. Even in the vicinity of the Pakistani-occupied territory of Kashmir, China intends to build five dams north of the Indus River. One such project is the Diemer Bhash dam to be completed in 2028, to be built through a joint venture between China and Pakistan. *This project will be part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)*⁴³.

It is feared that these projects will not only negatively affect water availability in India and Pakistan, especially between monsoon seasons, but also the lack of silt needed for agriculture.



Figure 4. Location of the Siachen Glacier. Source: prepared internally with Creative Commons map.

The role of external actors

In the role played by external actors, a distinction must be made between two situations that are related but use different channels offered by international relations. On the one hand, China's geostrategic rivals fear that China will act as a hydro-hegemonic power and use water for coercion and pressure, as well as its appropriation to serve its own economic interests. On the other

⁴³ <https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/news/pakistan-finally-gives-green-light-controversial-i/>. Date of consultation: 01 October 2020.

hand, there is the question of Tibet, where there is great sensitivity towards the defence of its autonomy.

Both the countries of the lower Mekong basin and some of China's strategic rivals, such as India, believe that the Chinese government is using its hydro-hegemonic power in the Mekong basin, as China has built eleven dams in the upper reaches of the river, which, according to the countries concerned, has led to a reduction in the river's flow. The construction of dams on the upper reaches of the Mekong River is altering the river's ecosystem and its natural course, with serious repercussions for the countries in the lower basin.

In terms of the first view, China's control of water in the lower basin countries has become a geopolitical issue for the United States of similar importance to China's intended control of the South China Sea. For years it has been the United States that has sought to promote the development of the lower Mekong basin, a role that is now being taken over by China's control of the river's water. It appears that the Mekong has become a new front of confrontation between these two economic powers⁴⁴.

In 2019, the Lower Mekong Initiative was launched, involving Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and the United States. The main objective of this platform is to address the transnational problems of political development in the region. This platform receives funding from the Friends of the Lower Mekong (FLM) group, which includes Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, the European Union, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank^{45, 46}.

The success of this initiative has led to the establishment of the Mekong-US partnership launched on 11 September 2020, to which the US will contribute \$52 million, and which includes Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar⁴⁷.

This partnership contributes to fostering synergies between the ASEAN and US vision for the Indo-Pacific region as they share ASEAN's own principles such as centrality, openness, transparency, good governance, equality, mutual benefit, transparency and respect for sovereignty. This partnership is also intended to be complementary to other existing initiatives in the Lower Mekong River Basin such as the Mekong River Commission⁴⁸. It also aims to establish channels to advance greater diplomatic and technical cooperation

⁴⁴ <https://in.reuters.com/article/us-mekong-river-diplomacy-insight-idINKCN24P0K7>
Date of consultation: 04 October 2020.

⁴⁵ www.lowermekong.org Date of consultation: 14 October 2020.

⁴⁶ <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/ciencia/201907061087907738-cientificos-detectan-rayos-energia-ultra-alta-procedentes-espacio-tibet/> Date of consultation: 15 October 2020.

⁴⁷ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/how-meaningful-is-the-new-us-mekong-partnership/> Date of consultation: 14 October 2020.

⁴⁸ <https://mm.usembassy.gov/mekong-u-s-partnership-joint-ministerial-statement/>
Date of consultation: 14 October 2020.

among its members to transform the energy sector towards the sustainability that is fundamental to the stability and prosperity of the region.

On the other hand, Japan has always shown great commitment to the Mekong Commission partners. Since 2001, Japan has provided around \$18 million for various projects related to drought and flood management, irrigation systems, climate change and environmental management. The first Japan-Mekong meeting was held in 2009 and has taken place every year since then. In 2008, the five Commission countries and Japan signed the Tokyo Strategy 2018 project, which has enabled projects in three main areas: connectivity, people-centred society, and environment and disaster management. The Mekong Industrial Development Vision 2.0 (MIDV2.0) and the Mekong-Japan initiative for sustainable development in line with the 2030 Agenda have also been established.

As far as the situation in Tibet is concerned, despite the fact that the Dalai Lama has renounced autonomy and his pacifist messages, many organisations are still fighting for the cause. India as a haven for exiles and the United States with its support for the Dalai Lama in his struggle against Chinese communism would be the main stakeholders in supporting a new outbreak of mobilisation, including from Tibet itself. But to avoid this, China is accelerating the area's development and secularisation in order to avoid any future instability.

On the other hand, Tibet's peculiar characteristics make it a very interesting place for research on climate change and its influence on the planet, as well as from an astrophysical point of view. In this field, the scientific collaboration between China, Russia and Japan should be highlighted⁴⁹.

Conclusions and outlook

Asia faces serious challenges in ensuring its water security. Rapid growth and development in China and India have exacerbated some of the long-standing water problems, such as pollution and scarcity. Although infrastructure is being improved, the reality is that hundreds of millions of people do not have access to safe drinking water⁵⁰.

According to the region's development projections, China, India and Pakistan will not have enough water to ensure food and energy security with the current export-led development pattern. A comparison of water use figures in relation to GDP per capita between the US and China and India gives some idea of the scale of the problem. To reach a GDP per capita of \$50,000, the

⁴⁹ <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/ciencia/201907191088078424-rusia-y-china-buscaran-en-el-tibet-el-tercer-polo-de-la-tierra/> Date of consultation: 10 October 2020.

⁵⁰ <http://www.waterpolitics.com/2018/09/19/liquidity-crisis-does-asia-have-enough-water-to-develop/>. Date of consultation: 10 October 2020.

United States uses 1,543 m³/person, which represents only 16 percent of the total renewable water resources, i.e., 9,538 m³/person. In the case of China this share of renewable water is 2,018 m³ per person and 1,458 m³ in the case of India. In the case of Pakistan it is even lower. To address this situation, it is necessary to continue development but with less water use and less pollution of water resources⁵¹. Among the solutions being considered are the transformation of economies based on agricultural services, less water-intensive industry and greater efficiency in agriculture.

In addition to these measures, there is also the possibility that countries may try to improve their access to water to the detriment of other countries with which they share basins, and this is precisely the situation that can degenerate into conflict, as decisions taken by upstream states such as China will have repercussions for the rest. To avoid such situations, further agreements, whether bilateral or multilateral, will be needed to ensure equitable water use.

To achieve the goal of being the world's leading power by 2050, China must address the problem of rising water and energy demand, making Tibet a matter of survival and a key region for its water security. Its control over Tibet allows it to act as a hydro-hegemonic power by controlling the headwaters of the main Asian rivers. On the other hand, China also faces serious environmental problems due to river pollution. The Yellow River, closely associated with Chinese culture, is a polluted river, badly degraded by industrial activity.

Some of China's strategic rivals, such as India, fear that the Chinese government is using its hydro-hegemonic power to take unilateral actions, such as building dams in the upper reaches of rivers that can lead to a decrease in river flows, altering ecosystems and affecting countries in the lower basin. There are also suspicions that China may use water as a means of coercive diplomacy in its border disputes with China and to build the economic corridor project linking the Indochina peninsula with the overland route to Europe. In view of the events of recent years, China could take various types of action due to its position of strength as the hydro-hegemonic power. Water pollution, concealment of hydrographic data, diversion of water or accumulation in the form of lakes to cause flooding (known as 'liquid bombs') are some of the fears of its strategic rivals, mainly India. Water will therefore play an increasingly important role in the border disputes between China and India.

In the case of the Lancang-Mekong basin, water has proved to be a factor in cooperation with the recently created Lancang-Mekong Initiative, which aims to boost the economic and social development of the countries bordering the river basin. In its well-known win-win strategy, China intends to seek synergies between the LCM – which groups the five countries of the Lower Basin (Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar and Cambodia) – and the New International

⁵¹ Idem.

Land-Sea Trade Corridor. This corridor connects the autonomous regions and provinces of western China with the AESAN countries and the Eurasian continent. Through this corridor, countries export their products to markets in Central Asia and Europe. In fact, the China-China border has seen a 256% increase in the number of goods trains crossing its border⁵². This corridor is the main argument to make its basin neighbours see that its purpose is to foster cooperation, increase production and improve infrastructure to achieve greater connectivity and development in the region.

The Mekong basin is key to China's economic claims and for this reason it has promoted new diplomatic tools with countries in the region, but it is also necessary to recognise that these countries can do little to counter China's hydro-hegemonic power over the Mekong. At the latest meeting of the Lancang-Mekong Initiative, China has committed to share hydrological data with its lower basin neighbours, demonstrating its open and transparent attitude and exercising a new diplomacy in the region but with a leadership position based on its hydro-hegemony. This collaboration in data sharing is essential for the development and stability of the countries of the lower basin, especially in an increasingly complex and worrying scenario of climate change and natural disasters. Without this data, it is very difficult to improve the capacity for water resources management and disaster prevention.

The recently launched Mekong-US Partnership demonstrates the US interest in continuing to play a leading role in the Indo-Pacific region alongside its maritime presence. This cooperation agreement aims, on the one hand, to promote development, prosperity and stability in the region, but, above all, it seeks to counteract the power that China is exercising in the region by controlling the river's water through the construction of large hydrological projects. These fears are based on China's ongoing policy in the South China Sea of expanding the area of islands within its territorial waters.

Finally, it is worth noting that China's great concern about water is not so much because of scarcity but because it is vital for its economic growth. China needs water and it has it because of its control over Tibet. The major water projects it is building are focused on energy production and water distribution to the northern and eastern provinces, which are the growth engines of China's economy. For China, therefore, Tibet is the epicentre for realising its aspirations to become the world's leading power. Its control over Tibet's resources is a strength, not only in terms of access to resources but also as a tool for exerting pressure on the countries with which it shares a basin. But Tibet is also a great weakness for the Asian giant.

Although the Dalai Lama, exiled in India, has renounced his claims to Tibetan independence, there are many doubts about what will happen to

⁵² https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1809126.shtml
Date of consultation: 19 October 2020.

his succession, given his advanced age, 85, and the Chinese government's detention of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, who had been appointed in 2015 as Panchan Lama, the second most important figure in Tibetan Buddhism and whose release is being demanded by the United States⁵³.

Today, some six million people live in Tibet. There are some 150,000 Tibetans in exile, including 100,000 in India. Many were not born in Tibet and are second or third generation.

Some of China's ongoing projects are on mountains considered sacred, and for this reason one of China's actions in the region has been based on a lessening of Tibetan religious sentiment. As long as the Dalai Lama is alive, the situation will continue as before, but there are several scenarios that arise after his death. The first is for China to appoint a new Dalai Lama, more in line with its political and economic interests. Another scenario could be that the Tibetans in exile propose a new Dalai Lama as a council, as the Catholics do in the election of the pope, and in turn the Tibetans living in Tibet propose another one to look after their interests. This situation could lead to clashes that could destabilise the region. And the third scenario, and perhaps the most worrying, would be that upon the death of the current Dalai Lama a liberation movement, similar to the intifada, would rise up in Tibet, which would be a highly destabilising scenario involving armed intervention by China.

Although the chapter has dealt with some water conflicts related to rivers originating in the Tibetan plateau, it is also worth at least briefly mentioning China's role in water tensions in Central Asia.

The One Belt One Road initiative – which as noted above is one of the Chinese government's foreign policy priorities – may be affected by tensions over water management in Central Asia. Tensions exist between Kazakhstan and China over China's intentions to increase water diversion from the Ili and Irtysh rivers to meet water demand for the oil sector in the Xinjiang region. In fact, in the late 1990s China built a canal that transfers water from the Irtysh River to several basins in the northern part of Xinjiang⁵⁴.

The Irtysh basin is shared by China, Kazakhstan and Russia and is the main source of water for some 15 million people, mostly in Kazakhstan including its capital Astana. On the other hand, Lake Balkhash, which receives 80% of its water from the Ili River, could become a desert in the coming decades.

Water conflicts between Central Asian countries could destabilise the region and derail the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative. Since the late 1990s, the different interests between the upper and lower basin countries have been a continuous source of tension in Central Asia.

⁵³ <https://www.milenio.com/internacional/medio-orient/eu-exige-ubicacion-inmediata-sucesor-dalai-lama-china> Date of consultation: 19 October 2020.

⁵⁴ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/02/02/can-china-solve-central-asias-impending-water-crisis/> Date of consultation: 14 October 2020.

Tibet's water: a vital resource for China

It is in China's own interest to take the lead in mediating tensions between Central Asian countries, and this depends on how it manages the Ili and Irtysh river basin to avoid tensions with Kazakhstan. In this way, China could take a leading role in the region in the same way it is doing in the Mekong Basin, that is, by implementing initiatives that promote the region's development through the expansion of renewable energies and the introduction of improvements in food production systems.

Chronology

CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT	
DATE	EVENTS
1950	China occupies Tibet.
1965	Reorganisation as the Tibet Autonomous Region.
1995	Establishment of the Mekong Commission.
1997	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses is adopted.
2006	Completion of the Golmud-Lasa railway line.
2014	The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses enters into force.
2016	Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Framework (Lancang-Mekong Cooperation).
2017	First meeting of the One Belt One Road Initiative.
2019	Launch of the Lower Mekong Initiative.

	China	India	Bangladesh
* GDP per capita (USD)	18,200 (2018)	7,200 (2017)	4,200 (2017)
* GDP growth rate	6.9 %	6.7 %	7.4 %
* Population	1,394,015,977 (2020)	1,326,093,247 (2020)	162,650,853 (2020)
* Middle Ages	38.4	28.7	27.9
Growth rate	0.32 % (2020)	1.1 % (2020)	0.98 % (2020)
Population below the poverty line	3.3 %	21.3 (2011)	24.3 % (2016)
Military expenditure	1.9 % GDP (2019)	2.4 % (2019)	1.3 % (2019)
Exports (dollars)	2.49 trillion (2018)	304 billion (2017)	35.5 billion (2017)

	China	India	Bangladesh
Imports (thousands of dollars)	2.14 trillion (2018)	52.2 billion (2017)	7.56 billion (2017)
** Agricultural water abstraction (103m ³ /year)	385.2	688	31.5
** Industrial water abstraction (103m ³ /year)	133.5	17	0.77
** Municipal water abstraction (103m ³ /year)	79	56	3.6

* Data from CIA World FactBook.

** AQUASTAT data.

	Thailand	Cambodia	Laos	Vietnam	Myanmar
GDP per capita (USD)		4,000 (2017)			
GDP growth rate		6.9 % (2017)			
Population		16,926,984 (2020)			
Middle Ages		26.4			
Growth rate Population		1.4%			
Population below the poverty line		16.5 %			
Military spending		2.3 % (2019)			
Exports (USD)		11.42 billion			
Imports (thousands of dollars)		14.37 billion			
Agricultural water abstraction (103m ³ /year)					
Industrial water abstraction (103m ³ /year)					
Municipal water abstraction (103m ³ /year)					

Chapter Three

Conflict on Turkey's southern border

Felipe Sánchez Tapia

Resumen

La evolución de acontecimientos en su frontera sur durante los últimos años ha sido enormemente desestabilizadora para Turquía. Hechos como la invasión norteamericana de Irak en 2003 y la expansión de las «primaveras árabes» a primeros de 2011 han ido configurando conflictos de distinta naturaleza en una amplia área de inestabilidad a lo largo de los casi 1.300 km de frontera con Siria e Irak. El establecimiento de una entidad kurda prácticamente independiente en el norte de Irak con posibilidades reales de expansión hacia la vecina Siria, la vertiginosa expansión del yihadismo en todas sus modalidades, el terrorismo étnico encarnado por la rama siria del *PKK* y la corriente de refugiados que huyendo del conflicto se asientan sobre territorio turco son las cuestiones, quizás, más relevantes cuyas consecuencias se dejan sentir fuera de los límites geográficos de estos países.

La implicación de potencias de orden regional o global añaden dificultades adicionales a la ya de por sí complicada gestión de toda esta conflictividad para una Turquía que, lejos de obtener los resultados pretendidos, ha caído en una situación de aislamiento diplomático.

Palabras clave

Turquía, Siria, Idlib, Irak, PYD, YPG, PKK, yihadismo, refugiados.

Abstract

The evolution of events in its borders during the last years has been greatly disruptive for Turkey. Occurrences like the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the expansion of Arab Springs at the beginning of 2011 have been creating different kinds of conflicts in a vast unstable area across the almost 1,300 km of the Syrian-Iraqi border. The establishment of a practically independent Kurdish entity in Northern Iraq, which has real possibilities of expanding towards Syria, the ethnic terrorism embodied by the Syrian branch of the PKK, and the flow of refugees who escape from the conflict and settle in Turkish territory are perhaps the most relevant issues whose consequences are unfelt outside of the geographic boundaries of said countries.

The implication of regional or global powers adds further difficulties to the already complicated management of this whole turmoil for Turkey, which, far from obtaining the desired outcomes, has fallen into a situation of diplomatic isolation.

Keywords

Turkey, Syria, Idlib, Iraq, PYD, YPG, PKK, jihadism, refugees.

Introduction

Situated in a pentagon of instability with the Balkans, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Black Sea¹, Turkey's foreign policy and security strategy is affected by multiple and diverse conflicts whose effects are felt in the regional alliances and international organisations to which it belongs. A member of the Atlantic Alliance since 1952, its contribution in terms of commitment and force contribution in the more than seventy years of NATO's existence is indisputable. But it is also true that in the complex scenario in which history has placed the Turkish nation, NATO provides Turkey with an invaluable security guarantee. A hypothetical armed aggression by Iran or Syria, for example, would oblige allies to come to their aid and, without the need to reach that point, since 2012 various nations have been reinforcing Turkish defence capabilities during the Syrian conflict².

For some years now, the Atlantic Alliance has been debating how to deal with problems from the south that threaten the stability of its allies. And while there have been many initiatives in this regard, they have not always been properly coordinated with each other, which makes it difficult to achieve the desired results. The reasons for this situation are manifold: from the variety of threats to the European space to the difficulty of finding an effective way to deal with them. It is easier to deal with one big threat than a multitude of small threats of a diverse and complex nature. Above all, however, it is the differing views and concerns of the countries directly affected that make it difficult to design and implement an effective NATO strategy for the southern flank. While there is an understanding of the causes of instability in this space (terrorism, demographic problems, human smuggling, etc.), it is more difficult to agree on the geographical limits of possible application of this strategy and the very nature of these threats. What is understood from Spain as the southern orientation of the Alliance does not necessarily coincide exactly with what is interpreted by this concept from Italy, Greece or, let alone Turkey.

This is the difficulty and hence the desirability of knowing the different perspectives. This paper aims to analyse the causes of instability and problems affecting the eastern sector of NATO's southern flank, which for the purpose of this paper encompasses Turkey's land borders with Syria and Iraq, the effects of which are felt in contiguous geographical spaces such as the eastern Mediterranean, even reaching as far as the Libyan coast.

¹ ÇAKAR, Nezihi (Secretary of the Turkish National Security Council in the early 1990s). *Turkey's Security Challenges, Perceptions*, Vol. I, Issue 2, June-August 1996, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, SAM Strategic Research Centre, available at <http://sam.gov.tr/tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/3.-TURKEYS-SECURITY-CHALLENGES.pdf> (accessed June 2020).

² Since 2015, Spain has deployed a PATRIOT missile battery for this purpose.

It is not the intention here to analyse NATO's strategies in this region, nor to make proposals or recommendations, but rather to identify the causes of instability in the far southeast from the perspective of Turkey, through which NATO borders Iran, Iraq and Syria. To do so, we will first analyse how Turkey has dealt with the problems on its southern border and then look at the intervention of foreign powers to determine how this intervention affects Turkey's position in the region.

Turkish intervention in northern Iraq and Syria

To refer to instability in the area adjacent to Turkey's southern border is simply to state the obvious. Although the problems affecting the region date back centuries, two events have set the pace of conflict over the past two decades: the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent power vacuum caused by the fall of Saddam Hussein, and the 'Arab Springs' which, since late 2010, have spread across North Africa and the Middle East and, in the case of Syria, have ended up degenerating into a full-blown civil war. Let us see how.

Northern Iraq

Since the US-led invasion in 2003, multiple conflicts have overlapped on Iraqi territory: a civil war with sectarian overtones, an insurgency against the international occupying forces, a power struggle between different Shiite factions against the backdrop of the influence of neighbouring Iran, and the semi-rebellion of a Kurdish administration in northern Iraq in defiance of central power in Baghdad, to cite perhaps the most prominent. This conflict has greatly conditioned Turkey's relations with the Baghdad government, which have never been easy, although Ankara generally favours a stable Iraq with which it can engage in trade³. Of particular interest to Turkey are the oil resources of the Kurdistan Autonomous Region (KAR)⁴, with whose government it has established a privileged relationship that allows it to import oil directly from the region without the consent of the federal authorities, creating considerable friction⁵.

³ CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. *Iraq after Daesh: between internal and external pressure*, Geopolitical Panorama of Conflicts 2019, Chapter 8, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019 (pp. 249274). Available at http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/panorama_geopolitico_conflictos_2019.pdf (accessed September 2020).

⁴ The KAR Ministry of Energy declares proven reserves of 45 billion barrels of oil and about 707 bcm of gas and estimates potential additional reserves of about 5,600 bcm.

⁵ For years, the federal and autonomous regional governments have been engaged in a bitter dispute over the KAR's direct exports. In 2018, the two governments reached an agreement for the export of oil from Kirkuk through the KRG-owned pipeline, which has a capacity of 1,000,000 barrels per day. However, this agreement could hardly be implemented due to the lack of agreement on the contribution that the federal government would have

But what has most marked relations between Turkey and Iraqi institutions is the more than 35-year conflict with the far-left ethnic terrorism embodied by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The fact that after its expulsion from Syria in 1999 the PKK was able to set up its headquarters in the Qandil Mountains, an area now theoretically controlled by the KRG, has forced Turkey to carry out regular military operations on Iraqi territory, where it has even established semi-permanent bases (Figure 1).

This is causing deep unease in the central government in Baghdad because, although a security agreement established in 2007 guarantees the collaboration of both governments in the fight against the PKK, the Iraqi government has never authorised the entry or presence of Turkish troops on its territory beyond what is considered 'hot pursuit'. Turkey has routinely overstepped these boundaries to the irritation of Baghdad, which considers Turkish incursions a blatant violation of its sovereignty. However, institutional rhetoric aside, the central government lacks either the capacity or the will, or both, to put limits on the PKK's presence on its territory.

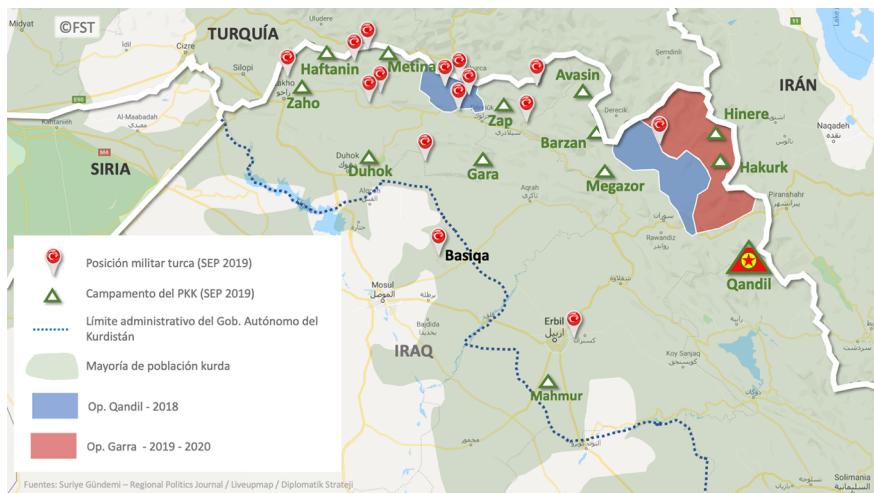


Figure 1. Turkish operations in northern Iraq. Various sources. Prepared internally

More recently, following various operations in 2018, since the end of May 2019 the Turkish army has been conducting Operation Claw (*Pençe Harekatı*) to eradicate the PKK's presence in northern Iraq. Renamed 'Tiger Claw' since 17 June 2020, the operation is still ongoing, having neutralised a total of 320 Kurdish militants in the last three months, according to the Turkish Defence Minister⁶.

to make to the KAR's budget if the KAR were to hand over the management of these fields to the federal government.

⁶ *Turkish military neutralised 320 PKK militants in northern Iraq - Defence Ministry*, AHVAL NEWS, 5 September 2020, available at <https://ahvalnews.com/operation-claw-tiger/>

The outbreak of the Arab Spring in late 2010 was interpreted in Turkey as a magnificent opportunity to export the Turkish model of political Islam across a Muslim world in turmoil, and the government spared no effort to provide political support to the movement that best aligned with the AKP's ideology: the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). *Despite never having exceeded 20 percent of actual political support, it soon became the dominant force in the Syrian National Council⁷, a coalition of organised opponents with international assistance, which later (2013) transformed into the current Syrian National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC).* From the outset, Turkey openly positioned itself against the Assad regime, leading the cause of those who demanded his removal from power as a precondition for a political solution to the conflict. And even today, despite the pragmatism that Erdoğan has shown on other occasions, the removal of Assad at the head of the Syrian regime remains Turkey's priority objective.

Nevertheless, Turkey was reluctant to involve its armed forces (TSK) directly in these early stages, and military support for the opposition forces was carried out exclusively through indirect means. In 2014, Turkey, in collaboration with the United States, initiated through its intelligence services (MIT), without the apparent involvement of the TSK, a 'Syrian Train and Equip Program' for opposition militias grouped under the name of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the effectiveness of which, however, left much to be desired⁸.

Gradually, support and funding from various sources, including most notably the Persian Gulf monarchies, gradually imposed sectarianism and radicalism among the regime's opposition groups, so that by the end of 2013 jihadists enjoyed considerable prominence on the ground. Among the myriad of radical groups that proliferated at that time among the opposition to the regime, one of the most prominent was, of course, Daesh, born as the Iraqi branch of Al Qaeda (AQ) under the name of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI)⁹ and which, taking advantage of the porous border, was able, from 2011, to expand easily into a Syria in the throes of revolutionary effervescence. Daesh

turkish-military-neutralised-320-pkk-militants-northern-iraq-defence-ministry?language_content_entity=en (accessed in September 2020).

⁷ SAPAG M., Pablo. *Siria en perspectiva: de una crisis internacionalmente mediatizada a la reconstrucción física y política*, Ediciones Complutense, 2019, pp. 8082.

⁸ BLANCHARD, Christopher M., and BELASCO, Amy. 'Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding and Issues for Congress', Congressional Research Service, 9 June 2015, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R43727.pdf> (accessed August 2020).

⁹ Its original leader was the Jordanian Abu Musab al Zarqawi Al Zarqawi, who was killed by a US drone in 2006. Following the model of local franchises, ISI enjoyed wide operational autonomy from the outset and its actions were marked by an extreme and indiscriminate brutality that did not escape the criticism of Al Qaeda headquarters, with whom it had always had complicated relations. The rope was finally broken in 2013, when, acting fully independently, it became known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS).

soon developed into a formidable military force that exerted tight control over large swathes of the country, including major urban centres such as Raqqa in the Euphrates Valley, where it established its capital.

Already under the name Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS), Daesh¹⁰ made international headlines when, in June 2014 and in the course of a major offensive, in which it managed to occupy large territories in northern Iraq, its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi¹¹, proclaimed the Caliphate. By then, the Kurdish ¹²PYD party, which had already succeeded in establishing a Kurdish autonomous entity (Western Kurdistan or Rojava) in 2012, had also considerably expanded its territorial dominance in northern Syria (Figure 2).

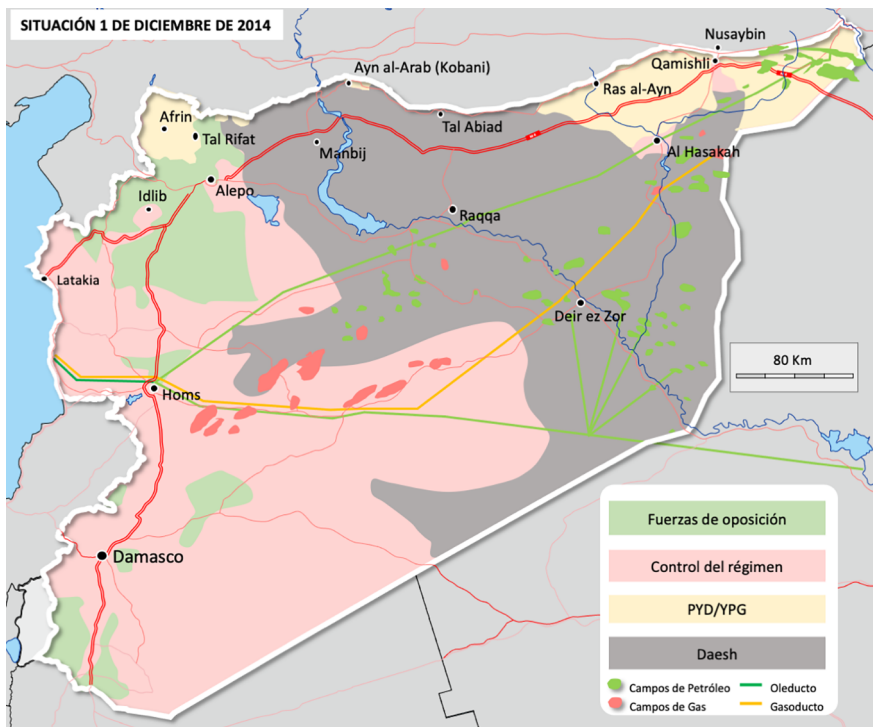


Figure 2. Territorial control in Syria in 2014. Various sources. Prepared internally

¹⁰ Daesh is the Arabic acronym for ISIS. However, the term can be interpreted in Arabic in a pejorative sense and translated as 'intolerant' or 'one who sows discord'. Others translate it as 'deserving to be stepped on'. One way or another, this is why Daesh itself rejects its use. See *Paris Attacks: What Does Daesh Mean and Why Does ISIS Hate It?*, NBC News, 14 November 2015, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/paris-attacks-what-does-daesh-mean-why-does-isis-hate-n463551> (accessed September 2020).

¹¹ Al-Baghdadi was eliminated in October 2019 by US special forces near Idlib.

¹² PYD, *Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat*, Democratic Union Party.

In the summer of 2014, Daesh and PYD met in the border town of Kobani, where the world witnessed live the harsh siege to which the jihadists subjected the Kurdish PYD (YPG) militia . The resistance of the latter, which in the eyes of world public opinion became the last bastion capable of stopping the barbarity represented by Daesh, gave their cause an international recognition that, to a large extent, they still enjoy today. So much so that the US, when it was, to some extent, forced to intervene in the face of Daesh's manifest expansion in autumn 2014, found no better ally to establish itself in the area than the PYD/YPG.

This is an extremely controversial issue whose consequences are felt on the other side of the border, for, far from being watertight organisations, the PYD is but the Syrian branch of the Turkish PKK, with whom it shares leadership, objectives and, on many occasions, exchanges activists. SEEKING TO REDUCE TENSIONS, THE US has consolidated a coalition of different, mostly Arab, militias around the YPG/YPG under the name Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). But this is only a cosmetic gesture, as the YPG/YPG remains the largest and leading force in the SDF. This is currently the biggest stumbling block to smooth and honest relations between the US and Turkey.

Turkish military intervention

The unstoppable expansion of both Daesh and the YPG/YPG, this time with US support, and the resumption of the internal conflict with the PKK after the failure of the reconciliation process in 2015 convinced the Turks of the need to change their strategy and intervene directly in northern Syria. Daesh had come to occupy a large swathe of land on its border (between the towns of Killis and Jarablus). More worryingly, however, the PYD was threatening to launch an offensive to seize the latter's holdings west of the Euphrates River from Daesh. This move would have linked the PYD to the Afrin enclave and extended its dominance along the entire border, establishing a corridor linking the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq to the Mediterranean.

It was more than Turkey could tolerate. Between November 2016 and February 2017, Turkey successfully conducted Operation Euphrates Shield, driving Daesh from the border and curbing YPG/YPG aspirations. The role of the TSK in the planning and conduct of operations was decisive, although the presence of Turkish troops on the ground was limited and the main operational effort was borne by the FSA.

Under similar conditions, two other operations were subsequently carried out to limit the expansion of the YPG/YPG: Operation Olive Branch in the Afrin enclave (2018) and Operation Source of Peace (2019) in the border sector between the towns of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn (Figure 3).

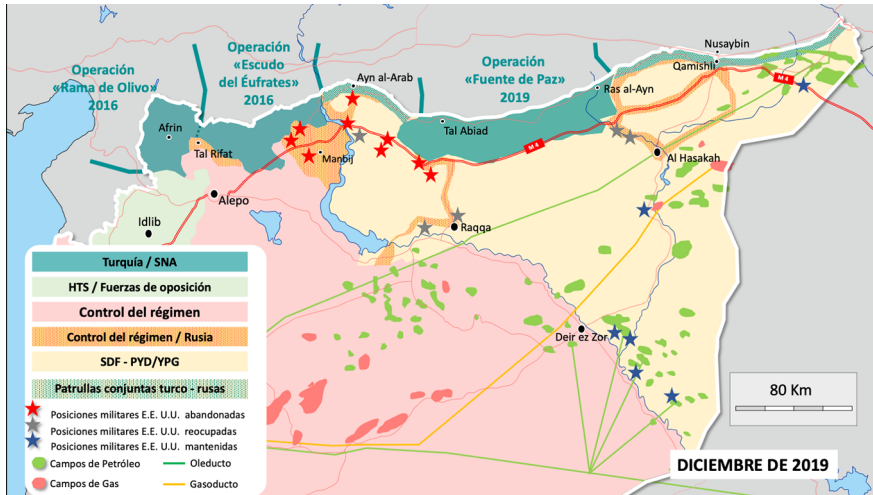


Figure 3. Turkish military operations in northern Syria. Various sources. Prepared internally

None of these operations could have been carried out without the approval, or at least the consent, of either the United States or Russia, which ultimately benefited the most. In October 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met in Sochi to reach an agreement that ensured that Turkish forces would remain in the area between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn at a depth of 32 km. *Russian forces ensured the withdrawal of the YPG to a distance of 30 km along the rest of the border, where, in addition, joint Russian-Turkish patrols were agreed to be conducted in a 5 km deep strip* (Figure 3). Essentially, this agreement remains in force today.

For the United States, the balance has been less positive. Following a new announcement of a withdrawal from Syria by President Trump, US forces left considerable space for Turkish forces to intervene, much of which was immediately occupied jointly by Syrian and Russian forces. Although US forces interrupted a withdrawal that had never actually begun and reoccupied some of the abandoned positions, Russian and Syrian forces are still on the ground disputing control of the area with the Americans, resulting in sporadic clashes.

Operations in Idlib. Rise of jihadism

The second front targeted by Turkish military operations is Idlib province, an area where the TSK has maintained an extensive military deployment since October 2017. After a period of intense fighting between the Syrian army and opposition forces, including direct clashes between Syrian and Turkish military forces, a ceasefire was agreed between Russia and Turkey on 5 March 2020, which, against all odds, is still in place as of September 2020.

How did this situation come about? In the following paragraphs we will try to answer this question, but before doing so it is useful to pause briefly to identify the forces in contact, differentiating between opposition forces and regime or regime-supporting forces.

Warring factions in Idlib

Regime forces and related militias

Unlike the opposition, which has become highly sectarian, the Syrian armed forces maintain a non-denominational character like all other state institutions. *These forces, totalling some 130,000 troops, are complemented by paramilitary forces, such as the National Defence Forces, local militias created for territorial defence missions, with some 50,000 troops, local militias (non-denominational, such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, SSNP, Shiite, Sunni, Christian, Druze) and various nationalities (Pakistani, Afghan, Iraqi, etc.), which in total contribute some 50,000 additional troops*¹³. These include the Lebanese militia Hezbollah, whose intervention in the conflict in support of the regime has at times been decisive. Obviously, both the armed forces and militias operate throughout the country, and it is difficult to estimate the number of troops currently engaged in operations in the Idlib enclave.

Opposition forces

With regard to the opposition, it is necessary to differentiate between two large blocs: groups that are part of Turkish-sponsored organisations and militias whose common denominator is their radical Islamic character, with different affiliations and which, in principle, act autonomously (Figure 4).

Among the former, we consider the numerous militias financed, trained and equipped by Turkey which, since the beginning of the war in 2011, have been grouped together, initially under the name of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and, since December 2017, have formed the basis of another broader formation, the Syrian National Army (SNA). The SNA is at least nominally under the Syrian Interim Government established in 2013 under the umbrella of the Istanbul-based National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC).

The SNA brings together forces of all ideologies, not excluding jihadists that some consider «moderate» and who make up the National Liberation Front (NLF), most notably *Ahrar al-Sham*. According to *Military Balance 2020*, the SNA would have about 70,000 combatants, 20,000 SNA and 50,000 NLF.

The latter include *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), which operates independently, and *Hurras al Din* (HD), which maintained its allegiance to the parent

¹³ *Military Balance 2020*.

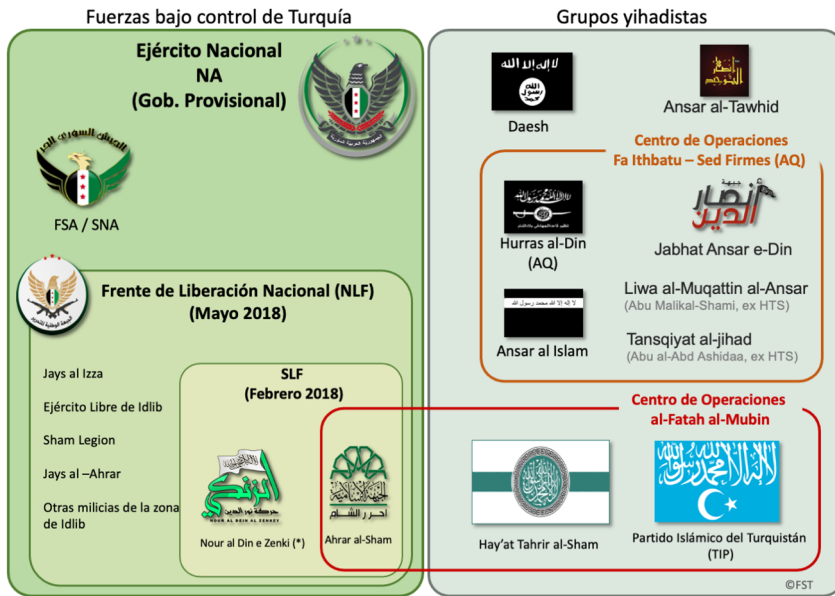


Figure 4. Main opposition groups in Idlib, Syria. Various sources. Prepared internally

company and continues to operate as an Al Qaeda franchise. Both stem from the January 2017 split from what was until then the only al-Qaeda brand in Syria: *Jabhat al Nusra*¹⁴. There are other jihadist groups with some activity, such as the *Uyghur al-Hizb al-Islāmī al-Turkistānī* (Turkistan Islamic Party - TIP) or *Ansar al-Tawhid* (Defenders of Tawhid13), but they are smaller and can hardly carry out operations without the consent of HTS.

HTS is undoubtedly the best organised and most effective militia in the Idlib area, which has allowed it to dominate most of the territory of Idlib province, including its capital. Today, according to its leader *Abu Muhammad al-Jolani*, HTS is a jihadist movement independent of AQ, which has renounced its international agenda and is focused on governing the Syrian territory under its control¹⁵.

Hurras al-Din (Faith Keepers Organisation-HD) is the real Al Qaeda franchise in Syria, with a jihadist ideology and, unlike HTS, an international agenda. Its relations with HTS are complicated and although at some point they have even signed cooperation agreements, sporadic armed clashes between

¹⁴ European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2019, EUROPOL, p. 38.

¹⁵ 'The Jihadist Factor in Syria's Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani', ICG, 20 February 2020, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/jihadist-factor-syrias-idlib-conversation-abu-muhammad-al-jolani> (accessed May 2020).

members of both factions have been documented¹⁶. *HD does not exercise territorial dominance in Idlib and its ability to conduct military operations is largely dependent on the consent of HTS.*

As we have mentioned, Daesh also maintains a covert presence in Idlib, although the presence of HTS as the dominant militia, with whom they maintain great rivalry, means that their military activity in this part of the country is very limited. Today, it can be considered that Daesh has effectively been militarily defeated and is barely able to exert any territorial control¹⁷. However, it must be acknowledged that they retain some residual capacity with which they are able to target security forces in both Iraq and central Syria. In fact, such attacks have seen a significant spike in 2020 compared to 2019¹⁸. No one can rule out the possibility that the situation will evolve unfavourably and that Daesh will regain its offensive and attacking capacity not only in Syria and Iraq, but also on the other side of the border, where it has already perpetrated attacks of great magnitude and impact (Suruç and Ankara in 2015, Istanbul in 2016 and 2017, causing more than 300 deaths).

It is difficult to establish the number of fighters in the jihadist ranks. HTS may have an estimated 20,000, HD an estimated 2,500 and Daesh an estimated 10,000 in Syria and Iraq. These factions organise themselves into so-called 'hubs', coordination structures formed at a particular time and for a particular tactical purpose, without ever involving a merger or the formation of a coalition. *At present, HTS leads the al Fatah al Mubin 'hub' and Al Qaeda militias are grouped around HD in the Fa Ithbatu 'hub'.*

The attack on Idlib

As Figure 2 shows, by mid-2014 the situation of the Syrian Arab Army was rather precarious, unable to contain the continued expansion of opposition forces, mostly of a jihadist nature. This situation forced Russia to take action to prevent the fall of an allied regime that was also its only foothold in the Middle East. From September 2015 onwards, a fine-tuned military intervention based primarily on air support was more than enough to not only prevent the fall of the Syrian regime, but also to enable it to recapture

¹⁶ *Hay'at Tahrir violates agreement with fa ithbatu, launches large attack in western Idlib*, Southfront, 25 June 2020, available at <https://southfront.org/hayat-tahrir-violates-agreement-with-fa-ithbatu-launches-large-attack-in-western-idlib/> (accessed September 2020).

¹⁷ President Trump announced the 'official' defeat of ISIS in December 2018.

¹⁸ VORONKOV, Vladimir. *Eleventh 'Report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat'*, 24 August 2020, available at https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/200824_sc_briefing_11th_isil_report_ousg_as_delivered.pdf (accessed September 2020).

large portions of territory, including Aleppo¹⁹, and eventually corner the opposition. The jihadist factions had no choice but to retreat to the enclave of Idlib, where, however, the then al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, *Jabhat al-Nusra*²⁰, held sway. It should be noted that the concentration of militia members occurred not only because of direct military pressure on jihadist groups, but largely in the framework of processes undertaken by the Ministry of State for National Reconciliation Affairs that allowed those who did not want to join them to move safely to other fronts, from where they could continue the fight against the state itself²¹. Be that as it may, by the end of 2017 the regime had recovered a large part of the national territory where, excluding vast uninhabited desert areas, more than 80% of the population is concentrated (Figure 5).

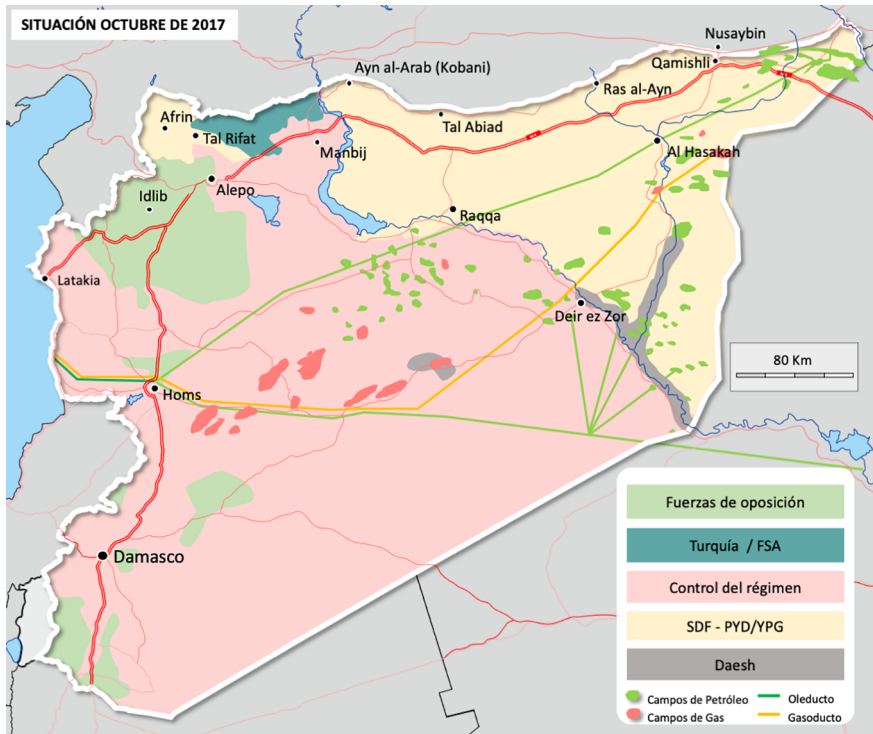


Figure 5. Territorial control in Syria in 2017. Various sources. Prepared internally

¹⁹ Aleppo, with a population of over 4,000,000, was the most populous city in the country before the war. It has now been overtaken by the capital, Damascus.

²⁰ Recall that it was not until January 2017 that *Jabhat al-Nusra* mutated into HTS after breaking with al-Qaeda.

²¹ SAPAG M., Pablo. *Op. cit.*, p. 271.

Under these conditions, the government considered it was time to regain control over the Idlib enclave. The campaign waged between September 2017 and February 2018 by government forces against the growing number of jihadist groups in the area soon threatened to provoke a new flow of refugees into Turkish territory with unpredictable consequences. The tense situation was contained *in extremis* thanks to the agreement reached in September 2018 between Russia, Iran and Turkey, which established a demilitarised buffer zone between opposition and Syrian forces. In this agreement, Turkey was responsible for dislodging the jihadist groups active in the enclave from the strip, opening the land routes between Damascus and the town of Aleppo (M5 motorway) to traffic. As monitors of the agreement, Turkey deployed twelve military observation posts along the demilitarised zone, while Russia and Iran deployed another twelve and seven respectively (Figure 6).

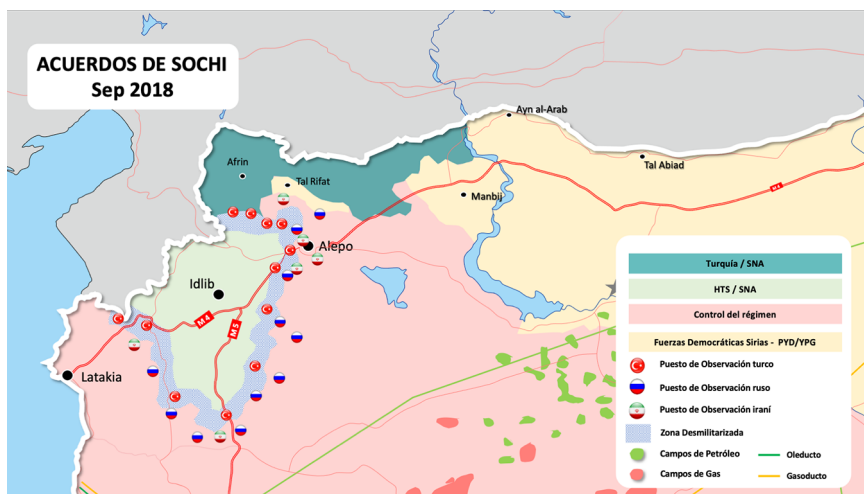


Figure 6. Sochi Agreements, September 2018. Various sources. Prepared internally

Whether due to inability or unwillingness, Turkey never fulfilled the agreement, which finally exhausted Russia's patience and, in spring 2019, gave the Syrian army the green light to take military action against the opposition forces. In the course of this offensive, the Syrian Army was able to recapture considerable tracts of land, including the entire M5 motorway, which has been opened to traffic under its control.

The offensive was directed against the opposition forces present in the enclave of Idlib, without distinction. *This includes the Ankara-backed non-jihadist opposition forces grouped in the SNA.* Fearing, once again, the flow of refugees that the regime's offensive threatened to push into its territory, Turkey opted to militarily occupy additional positions in Idlib, establishing numerous strongpoints in key areas of terrain throughout the province. At the same time, it maintained and reinforced its twelve observation posts,

part of which were overrun and surrounded by Syrian forces in their advance. Thus, the TSK, which until then had limited itself to supporting the rebel forces, became involved in direct fighting with Syrian forces and, indirectly, with Russian support forces²², with the consequent risk of escalation of the conflict, until a new Russian-Turkish agreement reached on 5 March 2020 was able to halt the offensive²³ (Figure 7).

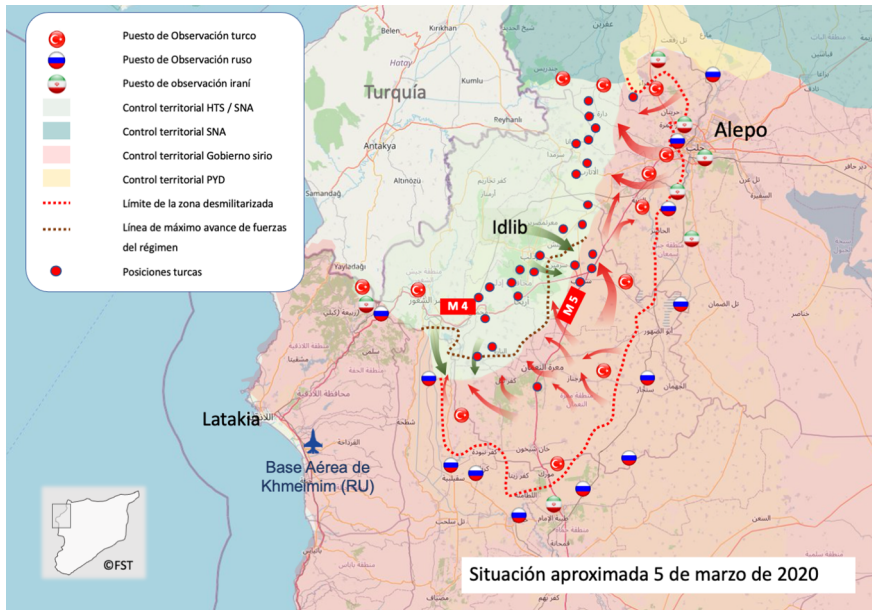


Figure 7. Situation in Idlib, agreements of 5 March 2020. Various sources. Prepared internally

Not without difficulty, the ceasefire has remained in place to this day, although skirmishes along the line of contact between regime forces and jihadists occur daily. On the other hand, Turkey and Russia have carried out numerous joint patrols along the M4 highway, but with great difficulty and frequently under attack by jihadist militias who refuse to recognise the validity of the Russian-Turkish agreement and in any case do not accept the Russian presence in the area²⁴.

²² Fundamentally intelligence, air support and ground fires.

²³ SÁNCHEZ TAPIA, Felipe. *Syria's future is at stake in Idlib*. Documento Análisis IEEE 19/2020. http://www.ieee.es/contenido/noticias/2020/05/DIEEEA19_2020FELSAN_Idlib.html (accedido en septiembre de 2020).

²⁴ *The situation is tense to the point that, at the time of writing (September 2020), Russia has announced a halt to these patrols until calm returns. Russia says to resume patrolling of Syrian highway with Turkey when situation calms*, REUTERS, 21 September 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-russia/russia-says-to-resume-patrolling-of-syrian-highway-with-turkey-when-situation-calms-idUSKCN26C2K0?il=0> (accessed September 2020).

Turkey is devoting considerable efforts to brutalising jihadist factions, in particular HTS, which has otherwise been left in a delicate situation. Firstly, because the very strong pressure that the Syrian forces have exerted on the group throughout this offensive has considerably degraded its operational capacity, which it is now trying to restore through the restructuring and recovery of its units²⁵. Politically, HTS is trying to clean up its image in the international community by presenting itself as an opposition group that only seeks a political solution for the country, without posing a threat to the rest of the world²⁶.

Since the beginning of the ceasefire, the Arab-Syrian army has reinforced its positions in what could well be preparations for a new phase of the offensive with the intention of recapturing at least all the territory of Idlib located south of the M4 highway linking the M5 (Damascus-Aleppo) highway with Latakia. The Turkish army has done the same as it has reorganised its deployment in Idlib, evacuating the most exposed positions and observation posts²⁷, in what appears to be preparations to repel an imminent Syrian offensive. Should hostilities resume, it is to be expected that the fighting will be on a larger scale.

Regional rivalry and external powers

Since the outbreak of the first riots in late 2010, the situation in the country has evolved from mere street riots to a complex civil war in which external actors interact with each other. Syria is currently the scene of multiple proxy wars, where the rivalry between regional powers (Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Israel) is overlapped by the intervention of former colonial powers such as France and the UK, and finally by the global powers, Russia and the US.

Iran's expansion

Although essentially rival regional powers, relations between Turkey and Iran have traditionally been marked by pragmatism. And while the two powers have been poles apart on the continuation of the Assad regime, they have been able to compartmentalise the issues in such a way that their overall diplomatic,

²⁵ *Tahrir al-Sham takes advantage of Idlib ceasefire to restructure, reorganize*, The Reference, 22 April 2020, available at <https://www.thereference-paris.com/11314> (accessed May 2020).

²⁶ Statement by Abdel Rahman Atun, head of the HTS Shari'a Council, in *Coups on allies: HTS rids Syria's Idlib of opponents*, Middle East Eye, 19 September 2020, available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coups-allies-hts-rids-syrias-idlib-opponents> (accessed September 2020).

²⁷ In late October 2020 Turkey evacuated four observation posts (including Morek and Shir Maghar) and two additional military positions in the vicinity of Saraqib, at the junction of the M4 and M5 motorways. *Turkey to abandon some observation stations in Syria's Idlib*, Middle East Eye, 19 October 2020, available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-idlib-turkey-observation-posts-abandon> (accessed October 2020).

trade and other relations have remained unscathed. More than that, since January 2017 Iran and Turkey have been promoters, together with Russia, of the Astana peace process, a tripartite forum that has had the virtue of reaching agreements on partial issues (de-escalation zones, ceasefires, etc.), albeit at the cost of delaying negotiations for a definitive political solution.

Iran's reasons for intervening in these 'power vacuum' spaces are not so much a quest for dominance *per se* as an attempt to gain strategic depth. On a regional scale, this strategic depth can be interpreted under the logic of 'offensive realism' proposed by John Mearsheimer as a «search for opportunities to alter the balance of power by acquiring greater shares of power at the expense of rival powers»²⁸, although in this case, and with defensive intent, it is about limiting a US penetration perceived by Iran as the greatest threat to the survival of its regime since the 1979 revolution²⁹. From the Iranian perspective, the establishment or maintenance of like-minded regimes in Syria and Iraq has become a priority in its external action.

In order to expand its influence, Iran has made use of classic sources of power, such as trade and the strengthening of cultural and religious ties, but above all it has made use of the most powerful tool at the disposal of its foreign policy: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Over the years, this military force has created a network of militias and paramilitary groups that, as proxies, has allowed the IRGC to actively participate in conflicts in both countries.

The removal by the US in January 2020 of its legendary commander, General Qasem Soleimani, dealt a severe blow to the IRGC, although it is still difficult to assess the extent to which the organisation's effectiveness has been damaged. The Iranian response was swift, and a few days later Iranian missiles hit US bases in Erbil and near Baghdad without causing fatal casualties among the troops stationed there. Few consider this attack to be the last word, and further action with international repercussions against US personnel or interests in Iraq or elsewhere in the world cannot be ruled out.

Arab countries

In November 2011, Arab League states agreed by a large majority³⁰ to suspend Syria's membership of the organisation and withdraw their ambassadors from Damascus³¹, a decision based, admittedly, on a shared

²⁸ MEARSHEIMER, John. 'The tragedy of great powers politics', updated edition, Norton & Company, 2014, p. 21.

²⁹ SADEGHI-BORUJERDI, Eskandar. 'Strategic depth, counterinsurgency and the logic of sectarianization, the Islamic Republic of Iran's doctrine and its regional implications'. SECTARIANIZATION, C. Hurst & Co., 2017, p. 164.

³⁰ Eighteen countries in favour, Yemen and Lebanon against, Iraq abstained.

³¹ 'Arab League decides to suspend Syria', Al Jazeera, 12 November 2011, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/11/13/arab-league-decides-to-suspend-syria/> (accessed September 2020).

hostility towards the Assad regime. It was this hostility that encouraged Arab countries from the outset to support opposition groups that, as the goal of Assad's overthrow receded, became increasingly radical. And that is where the coincidences end. The different attitudes towards the Muslim Brotherhood organisation, which, as mentioned above, achieved a dominant position within the opposition, ended up dividing the Arab world in general, and the GCC countries in particular, into two major blocs: Qatar on the one hand, which chose to support the Brotherhood, and the Saudi-led bloc, around which the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt, which consider the MB a terrorist organisation, aligned themselves. This positioning for and against the MB has also had the effect of aligning these blocs for and against Turkey, as we have said, a fervent promoter of the political Islam represented by the Brotherhood and which, in the eyes of the Saudi-led bloc, has become a threat that must be contained. This involves not only Syria, but also the Mediterranean³² and even Libya, where Turkey and the anti-Turkish bloc have manifestly placed themselves on opposite sides.

Turkey's advances and the failure to promote regime change in Syria have led the anti-Turkish bloc to substantially change its strategy. Assad has become a lesser evil and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt have made gestures of ostensible rapprochement, either by reopening embassies³³, proposing Syria's readmission to the Arab League or expressing willingness to participate financially in the country's reconstruction. *It is also this issue that has advised this bloc of countries to support, at least financially, the SDF, the US-sponsored formation led by the Kurdish PYD.*

It is in this anti-Turkish context, moreover, that we can fit the rapprochement between these countries and Israel, a country whose relations with Turkey are not going through the best of times. This rapprochement has concluded with the signing of peace agreements with the UAE and Bahrain in September 2020, a circumstance that would hardly have happened without Saudi Arabia's approval.

Israel

Israel watched Iran's gradual penetration into Syria with concern, but refrained from overt intervention until 2017. *It was the confluence of the Iranian presence with the growing presence of the Lebanese group Hezbollah, accused of perpetrating attacks from Syria on Israeli territory, that led to a campaign of*

³² 'UAE pushing for Arab-European alliance to curtail Turkish encroachment', The Arab Weekly, 17 June 2020, <https://theArabweekly.com/uae-pushing-arab-european-alliance-curtail-turkish-encroachment> (accessed September 2020).

³³ 'UAE reopens Syria embassy in boost for Assad', REUTERS, 27 December 2018, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-emirates-idUSKCN10Q0QV> (accessed September 2020).

airstrikes against Iranian targets and their proxies across Syria since mid-2017. Although there is no evidence, there are strong suspicions that these attacks have also been carried out on Iran's proxies in Iraq, the PMFs, most likely from SDF-controlled Syrian territory. Some sources even claim that these attacks have been financed by Saudi funding³⁴. All these circumstances suggest that there is some collaboration between Israel and the SDF, which opens a new front in deeply frayed Turkish-Israeli relations.

Colonial powers

In this section, we consider the United Kingdom and France to be the instigators of the secret pact known as Sykes-Picot, which during the course of World War I divided the remnants of the Ottoman Empire between the two countries. Both countries, along with the European Union as a whole, adopted a stance against the Assad regime from the outset, demanding his resignation, imposing harsh economic sanctions on the Syrian state and individuals linked to it, and finally withdrawing their embassies at the beginning of 2012. In fact, the European Union's very tough attitude towards Assad was promoted by France, a country that plays a considerable role in the development of European policies in the Mediterranean area and, in particular, in Syria³⁵.

Several interests are driving France to the Mediterranean area and Syria, starting with a strong interest in regaining the influence it wielded when it was a true regional power. Syria and Lebanon have been territories under French mandate, and France therefore considers itself entitled to regain the influence it once exercised, ignoring the fact that, to a large extent, the current problems derive from what happened in those years.

But the second reason has much to do with energy and the involvement of its flag carrier TOTAL in Syria and in Mediterranean waters, where it enjoys exploration and exploitation concessions granted by the Cypriot government. *Before the outbreak of the war, TOTAL, in addition to having established strategic partnership agreements with the national oil and gas companies, was a 50 percent shareholder, together with the state-owned Syrian Petroleum Company, in the Deir Ez Zor Petroleum company, licensed to exploit the Jafra, Qahar and Atalla fields³⁶, located in the area controlled by the SDF since 2017.*

³⁴ «EXCLUSIVE: Israeli strikes in Iraq launched from SDF-held Syria, Baghdad believes», *The Middle East Eye*, 27 August 2019, available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-israeli-strikes-iraq-launched-sdf-bases-baghdad-believes> (accessed September 2020).

³⁵ SAPAG M., Pablo. *Op. cit.*, p. 139.

³⁶ TOTAL, press release of 4 September 2008, available at <https://www.total.com/media/news/press-releases/syrie-total-signe-trois-accords-petroliers-et-gaziers> (accessed September 2020).

France has entered Syria with the help of the United States and is deploying a small contingent precisely in the areas of territorial control of the SDF. Its support for the YPG/YPG is an additional sticking point to a series of clashes with Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean and Libya. The two countries have already clashed in the Mediterranean in an incident, which has not been made public, in which France has called on the other EU members to impose sanctions on Turkey, a stance of extreme harshness that has not, however, been supported by the majority of EU members³⁷. These issues, coupled with the French position of outright opposition to EU membership, make France one of Turkey's most uncomfortable European partners.

The UK also has interests in the Syrian energy sector and deploys its military forces in the same area of SDF control as the US and France. But unlike the latter, its exit from the EU forces the UK to look for alternative trading partners, and Turkey presents itself as a possibility that cannot be dismissed. The UK's stance towards Turkey is cooperative and British companies are involved in numerous joint projects with Turkish companies, most visibly in the strategic defence sector³⁸.

Global powers

Russian Federation

As noted above, Russia was compelled to intervene in 2015 to prop up a regime that, had it fallen, would have jeopardised Russia's presence across the Middle East. However, far from committing a 'massive force', Russia opted to deploy a modest air component, which bore the brunt of the operations, complemented by a relatively small ground contingent of some 3,000-4,000 men³⁹, mainly with advisory missions, fire support, mobility and counter-mobility operations, coastal defence, military police and special operations. Moreover, the presence of private security companies, such as Wagner, which at certain times had up to 2,000 troops on the ground⁴⁰, ensures effective action while denying the involvement of its armed forces in events in which it is not convenient to be involved. The small size of the Russian contingent always leaves room for escalation if the evolution of the situation requires it, which gives great flexibility to its intervention and avoids being swept up in events and unintentionally involved in a conflict that is difficult to resolve.

³⁷ In October 2020. It cannot be excluded that this will be done at a later stage.

³⁸ SÜNNETÇİ, İbrahim. 'Past and Present Cooperation within the Defence Industry Between Turkey and the United Kingdom', DEFENCE TURKEY, no. 83, 1622 July 2018.

³⁹ TRENIN, Dimitri. 'What is Russia up in the Middle East?', Politi Press, 2018, p. 67.

⁴⁰ GRAU, Lester, and BARTLES, Charles. 'The Russian ground-based contingent in Syria', Russia's war in Syria, Ch. 4, Foreign Policy Research Institute, pp. 6789.

But however tight and successful the eventual outcome, military intervention in a conflict such as Syria carries enormous risks. What has led Russia to take these risks?

In addition to legitimate concerns about the development of Islamism during the Syrian conflict, which has the potential to reverberate on Russian territory, instability in its immediate surroundings is a cause for concern in Moscow. From the Russian point of view, the instability that has spread throughout the Middle East as a result of revolutionary processes is nothing more than the result of geopolitical engineering by the West in general and the United States in particular. The risk of this phenomenon spreading to Russia's neighbours and even to the Russian Federation itself is very real for Russian strategists, and limiting Western influence in the Middle East is therefore essential for Russian security.

The energy factor cannot be overlooked among Russia's motivations for intervening in the Middle East. As a country whose growth as a power has been based on the strength of the energy sector, Russia cannot remain oblivious to events in this part of the world. This is attested to by its participation in the OPEC+ forum or the penetration of its energy companies throughout the Middle East (Figure 8).

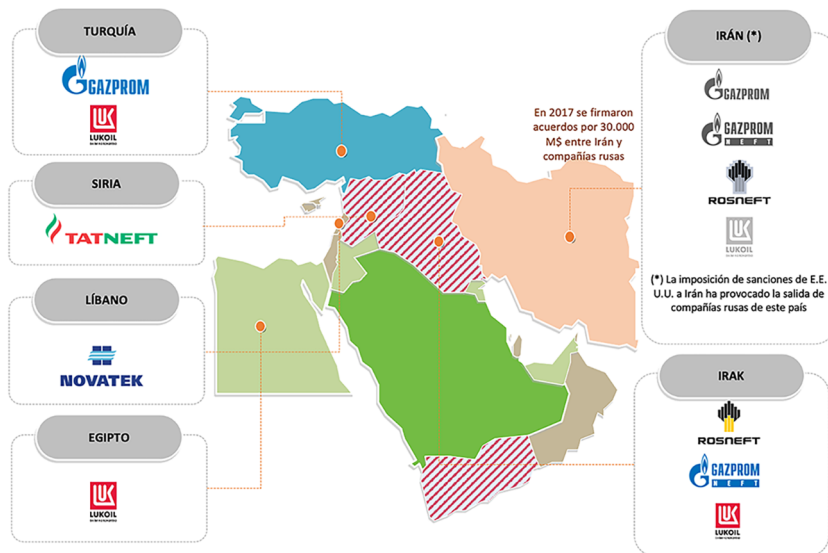


Figure 8. Involvement of Russian energy companies in the Middle East. Various sources. Prepared internally

Finally, having shown itself capable of sustaining a 'friendly' regime in difficulty, Russia has greatly enhanced its credibility and prestige as a stabilising global power across the region, showing itself to be a reliable and

capable potential ally. To a large extent, the objectives of Russia's intervention in Syria can be assessed as having been satisfactorily achieved. *nited States*

The US is the global power par excellence, so the reasons for its presence in Syria and Iraq must be analysed from a global perspective in the first instance and a regional one in the second. From a global point of view, the National Security Strategy identifies the challenge to US hegemony from the global 'revisionist powers' Russia and China as the first of the threats that the US must confront⁴¹, and it is imperative to limit the expansion of these rival powers into regions that could endanger US supremacy.

The Middle East is obviously one of them and, despite the 'pivot to Asia' policy already promoted under Obama, the US cannot abandon a region that would be immediately occupied by its rivals. The priority given to China's threat to US hegemony seems to be shared by both Republicans and Democrats, making it difficult to see one or the other Administration doing a U-turn on US strategy towards the region after the November 2020 elections. The US withdrawal from the Middle East, which has already begun, will continue at a greater or lesser pace, although, as noted above, it will not be complete.

Containment of Iran in support of its staunch ally, Israel, is the second of the objectives pursued in the region, and the fight against international terrorism, a goal largely achieved, would complete the picture. A fourth motive, generic to the entire Middle East region since the Carter Doctrine of 1981, could be added: energy, given the resources that exist in significant quantities in northern Iraq and to a lesser extent in northern Syria. President Trump declared the exploitation of Syrian oil wells one of the objectives of his presence in Syria and recently Delta Crescent Energy has signed an agreement with the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in northeast Syria for the establishment of at least two refineries in the area, which has not been welcomed by the British company Gulfsands, which has had exploitation rights in the area since 2003⁴².

In support of these objectives, the US currently maintains a military contingent in Iraq of some 5,200 troops, which will soon be reduced to around 3,000⁴³, concentrated in a few bases and military installations, while in Syria the numbers, which have always been more modest, currently stand at around 500 troops.

⁴¹ *National Security Strategy 2017*, p.48. <http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017.pdf> (consultado en octubre de 2018).

⁴² *British Company Concerned over its Oil 'Rights' in Northeastern Syria*, ASHARQ AL-AWSAT, 13 September 2020, available at <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2504826/british-company-concerned-over-its-oil-%E2%80%98rights%E2%80%99-northeastern-syria> (accessed September 2020).

⁴³ 'US to Reduce Troop Levels in Iraq to 3,000', *The New York Times*, 9 September 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/us/politics/iraq-troops-trump.html> (accessed September 2020).

What will happen with this military presence? This remains one of the key issues of the moment. Among other considerations because, without the presence of troops in Iraq, operations in Syria are simply unsustainable.

Against the backdrop of a growing confrontation between US and Iranian forces, or their proxies, on Iraqi soil, intensified after the elimination of IRGC commander General Qasem Soleimani, political pressure is mounting in Iraq for an American departure that is seen by many, not just Iranian-backed parties, as a drag on the country's stabilisation.

The presence of troops in the country is justified by an exchange of diplomatic notes in 2014 under the 2008 bilateral Strategic Framework Agreement⁴⁴. But from a legal point of view, the presence in Syria is more problematic. On more than a few occasions, both the Assad government and his supporters, Russia and Iran, have denounced an illegitimate presence under international law, as it is an intervention without a mandate from the UN Security Council, without having been requested to do so by the internationally recognised government and without legitimate self-defence having been invoked. The presence of the United States in the UN Security Council as a permanent member guarantees that in no case will there be a condemnatory resolution on this issue, but no doubt this argument can be used by its opponents in the eyes of world public opinion to weaken the US position.

China

With strong commercial interests in the region (energy imports, development of the new Silk Road, etc.), China's military presence in Syria and Iraq has so far been non-existent. The ability of Chinese companies to operate in highly unstable environments, as well as their dependence on the state, which allows them to assume greater risks, both physical and commercial, have allowed Chinese companies to penetrate Iraq's *upstream* oil sector, taking advantage of the gap left by Western companies, forced to suspend a large part of their activities in the south of the country due to the generalised violence. China's CNPC currently has stakes in the West Qurma-1 (32.7 %), al-Ahdab (37.5 %), Halfaya (45 %) and Riumalia (46.3 %) fields⁴⁵.

In Syria, where it has scrupulously stayed out of the conflict, China presents itself as a potentially key player in the future reconstruction of the country, which could give it considerable leverage in the development of its new Silk Road project. Chinese investments in the ports of Tartus and Latakia, albeit in competition with Russia, could complete the increasingly dense network

⁴⁴ 'Iraq and US Policy', Congressional Research Service, 29 September 2020, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/IF10404.pdf> (accessed October 2020).

⁴⁵ 'CNPC in Iraq. Sustainability Report', CNPC, 2019, available at <https://www.cnpc.com.cn/en/Enlag/201907/a2082cc9c4444eaa99c973dd0e021847/files/3d2c41de747d4c7aa6a5e8157f188f4f.pdf> (accessed October 2020).

of Chinese-controlled (managed) ports in the Mediterranean (China's state-owned COSCO Lines already operates marine terminals in Greece, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt).

China has repeatedly shown its interest in participating in reconstruction and increasing its presence in the country, and has launched numerous humanitarian aid projects⁴⁶. There is no mention of an increase in its military footprint, but as its interests in the region grow, the possibility that China may eventually be compelled to ensure its security by deploying military forces must be taken into account.

Conclusions and foresight

Developments on Turkey's southern border over the past thirty years have been enormously destabilising. Firstly, because the US intervention in Iraq in both 1991 and 2003 has made possible the consolidation of an independent Kurdish entity on its border, a circumstance that, despite the good relations established, generates enormous uncertainty in Ankara. Not surprisingly, the autonomous region of Kurdistan, which, as demonstrated by the 2017 referendum, maintains its independence aspirations intact, can serve as a successful model for other countries with Kurdish minorities, such as Turkey, to emulate. And second, because the uprisings in Syria in the context of the Arab Spring have degenerated into a complex civil war that no one is able to control, a situation that poses considerable security challenges.

The first of these is terrorism, a phenomenon that has two distinct faces: ethnic terrorism embodied by the PKK and its Syrian affiliate, the PYD (with its corresponding armed wings), and Islamist terrorism of a jihadist nature.

Ethnic terrorism poses an existential threat to Turkey because the aspirations, aims and objectives of these groups involve the destruction of the Turkish state as we know it today. *The consolidation of an independent Kurdish entity led by the PYD in northern Syria (Rojava) is a real nightmare for the Turkish government, and the fact that members of the Atlantic Alliance support this possibility only adds to the difficulty.* This is undoubtedly the primary cause of Turkey's deteriorating relations with the US, France and, to a lesser extent, the UK.

On the other hand, jihadist terrorism is another of the Turkish government's current concerns. Turkey faces not only the certain possibility of becoming the scene of attacks by jihadist groups concentrated in Idlib, as has happened in the past. Turkey faces, above all, the problem of unwittingly becoming a terrorist harbouring ground for terrorists in hiding. Many of them are also

⁴⁶ 'China to play bigger role in Syria's reconstruction, development process', XINHUANET, 12 February 2018, available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-02/12/c_136967861.htm (accessed October 2020).

Turkish nationals, as an estimated 9,000 Turkish nationals may have joined IS forces during the conflict. Their return is proving to be a real headache for the Turkish authorities⁴⁷. So far, Turkey has managed to limit the risks through enormous police and judicial pressure, but, as in Western countries, the release of former Daesh fighters from prison after serving their sentences is a difficult problem to deal with.

The second challenge is represented by the refugee flows that have been spreading from Syria to neighbouring countries since the beginning of the conflict. The nearly one million displaced people concentrated in Idlib province put tremendous pressure on the Turkish border. Allowing them passage would add to the more than 3.5 million refugees already on its territory, which, in addition to being a heavy economic burden, represents a considerable security problem. Turkey will most likely choose to open its borders with the EU, which would add further tension to already strained relations.

All these issues would be exacerbated in the event of a more than likely resumption of the regime forces' offensive, which would push both jihadists and refugees into Turkish territory. A lasting solution to the crisis in Idlib is therefore essential for the security of Turkey, which is maintaining contacts with Russia at a technical level to avoid escalation as long as the work of the Constitutional Commission in Geneva to find a political solution to the conflict is not completed. The negotiations are complex, and the positions clearly diverge. Russia seeks to secure control of the M4 highway and reduce Turkey's military footprint in Idlib. Ankara's starting point is the return of regime forces to pre-offensive positions, i.e., to the contact line at the end of 2018, which is frankly disconnected from reality. To complicate matters, both countries are watching developments and their respective positions, once again at odds, in the northeast of the country and in Libya with a sidelong glance. *Russia, which has always maintained open lines of communication with the PYD*, has initiated some rapprochement with Kurdish political parties that could lead to demands for inclusion in the Geneva Constitutional Committee, from which, due to Ankara's demands, they have been excluded. Both would be interested in establishing coordination mechanisms that would allow them to compartmentalise problems and address them individually, something they have traditionally been able to do in other fields to safeguard their relations. But it will not be easy.

The effects of these developments on the internal cohesion of the Atlantic Alliance cannot be ignored. As we have noted, geopolitical realities place the allies at opposite poles in both Syria and Iraq. The situation is repeated in adjacent theatres, as has recently manifested itself in the Eastern

⁴⁷ 'Calibrating the Response: *Turkey's ISIS Returnees*', ICG, Report no. 258, 29 June 2020, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/258-calibrating-response-turkeys-isis-returnees> (accessed September 2020).

Mediterranean, Libya and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This is a difficult situation to manage and will tend to exacerbate intra-alliance tension, making unity of action difficult. This cannot exclude armed clashes between allies.

The management of Turkey's problems on various fronts has led the country into what some have called 'diplomatic solitude', a situation characterised by the country's isolation on the international stage accompanied by unilateral military operations not only on the southern border, but also, without interruption, in the adjacent maritime areas (eastern Mediterranean) and as far as North Africa. Indeed, Turkey's geographical situation presents specific security problems that require *ad hoc* solutions. But its resolution will always be easier through cooperation, considering that isolation can lead Turkey into a no-win situation.

Chapter Four

The Persian Gulf: a cold war in overheated waters

José Ignacio Castro Torres

Resumen

El nuevo orden mundial ha ocasionado que la región del golfo Pérsico sea el escenario de la competición de los grandes actores por ejercer su influencia y limitar el poder de sus posibles rivales globales. En paralelo a este conflicto existen otros regionales, en los que la lucha por la hegemonía local ha configurado dos grandes bloques que dividen a los Estados de la zona. Sin embargo, las nuevas relaciones hacen que los países ribereños de este gran mar se sientan cada vez más inseguros, buscando nuevas alianzas o enfrentándose a situaciones de tensión, aumentando exponencialmente los riesgos de conflicto.

Palabras clave

Golfo Pérsico, petróleo, Irán, Arabia Saudí, potencias globales.

Abstract

The new world order has caused the Persian Gulf region to become the competition scene among big players for influence and power constraint of their potential global rivals. In parallel to this conflict, there are other regional ones, in which the struggle for local hegemony has formed two large blocs dividing the

states in the area. However, the new relationships make this great sea coastal countries feel increasingly unsafe, seeking new alliances or facing situations of tension, increasing risks of conflict exponentially.

Keywords

Persian Gulf, oil, Iran, Saudi Arabia, global powers.

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Introduction

Within the Greater Middle East, the Persian Gulf region is particularly relevant because of the confluence of a large number of state and non-state actors, both global and regional. This is compounded by the instability and volatility of events in the region, which often leads to unexpected events, leading to crisis situations that are difficult to manage.

Geopolitically, the territories and waters of the Gulf bend to the strength of the Iranian Zagros Mountains, which form a veritable wall that gives Iran a position of superiority over the surrounding environment.

The foothills of this mountain range drop into the Gulf waters forming a series of islands, bays and inlets that reinforce Iran's privileged position and give it the ability to control the shipping channels through the Strait of Hormuz in very shallow waters where maritime traffic is severely restricted. The rest



Figure 4.1. Physical map of the region, showing Iran's orographic strength over the other riparian states. Source: On the world map. Large detailed map of Persian Gulf with cities and towns. <http://ontheworldmap.com/oceans-and-seas/persian-gulf/large-detailed-map-of-persian-gulf-with-cities-and-towns.html>. Accessed on 10 August 2020

of the coastal territories have a very moderate altitude and no significant islands for the control of navigation channels.

In addition to the territorial arrangement described above, the Gulf's waters and adjacent lands contain the world's most important oil and gas reserves.

If energy resources are important because of their abundance, water resources are important because of their scarcity. In an environment of climate change and population growth, states in the Arabian Peninsula are forced to rely on desalination plants, making them high-value targets in the event of conflict.

Equally, the different forms of government often make them antagonistic to each other. The Gulf monarchies are being prolonged through dynastic successions, and it is unclear whether their rulers' orientations will be able to follow the path of continuity that their traditions have so far set.

The regimes coalesced around Saudi Arabia view Iran's Islamic regime, which emerged from a popular revolution that led to the establishment of a theocracy, with a quasi-pathological fear. The possibility of something similar happening in their own countries forces them to take special prevention and containment measures, without their effectiveness being truly clear.

This regional instability is heightened by the competitiveness of the major global powers, which see the region as a chessboard on which a new game has begun in which the players have changed, as have their interests.

The United States appears to be retreating from the field, returning to its traditional concept of naval air power. Its interests in the area, as defined by the Carter Doctrine, may have changed due to its increasing domestic oil production and the capacity to increase it thanks to the oil shale deposits¹. Moreover, China's rise and projection in the Pacific region has shifted US concerns to this area, which is much closer to US territory.

For its part, China, hungry for energy resources and raw materials for its growing industry, sees the Gulf region as an excellent source of hydrocarbons. At the same time, the power vacuum left by the Americans tends to be filled by Chinese influence, which could find an excellent niche market in the Gulf, while also using it as a staging area for the so-called Silk Road and Belt and Road on its way to Europe and the African continent.

Russia's interests are also present through the influence it exerts on its southern axis of geopolitical projection, which reaches through the ex-Soviet territories of Central Asia to the Gulf via Iranian soil. The Russians also exert their influence through relations with the Saudis, with whom they have on

¹ In 1980, US President Jimmy Carter proclaimed that US interests in the Persian Gulf would be defended by force if necessary. This statement followed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and fears that the USSR would expand into the region.

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several occasions negotiated oil prices and with whom they could establish arms and nuclear technology markets.

Background to the conflict

The waters of the Persian Gulf have traditionally been used for the extraction and transport of energy products to Europe and also to Southeast Asia, when this global region experienced a sharp increase in industrial growth.

On the other hand, the long-standing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has led to tense situations between the two regional players, although no major direct confrontations have taken place. *So far, this struggle for regional leadership has led them to indirectly support different actors across the greater Middle East, shifting their conflict into a proxy war to extend their respective influences.* The situation in Yemen, the Saudis' real backyard, is taking an increasingly critical turn and could be the one that directly implicates both contenders.

The year 2017 was particularly critical for a series of events that affected all actors involved, as Qatar was accused of supporting terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and Daesh by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), who also considered the Qataris to be interfering in their domestic politics. The severance of relations and the closure of borders had a particular impact on Qatar. The situation was exploited by the Iranians and Turks to strengthen their relations with the Qataris, compensating for the shortcomings through an air bridge².

The Saudi accusations were deemed illegitimate and the conditions they and their partners imposed were seen as interference in internal Qatari affairs³. This event further radicalised the blocs of regional powers in the region, with Qatar, Turkey and Iran aligned, and Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Oman and the recognised government of Yemen on the other.

Later that year, the situation in Yemen would become even more tense. By way of background, 2015 saw the intervention of a Saudi-led Arab coalition in support of the internationally recognised government of former General Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi. *This intervention was intended to avert the danger that the Iranian-allied Houthi movement could provoke in Saudi Arabia.* It also sought to keep the Hadi government in power, in opposition to the previous president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had reconciled with the Houthis.

² BBC News. 'Qatar crisis: What you need to know'. Published 19 July 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40173757> accessed 1 September 2020.

³ CHUGHTAI, Alia. 'Understanding the blockade against Qatar'. Aljazeera. 5 Jun 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/5/understanding-the-blockade-against-Catar> Accessed 15 August 2020.

Qatar-Gulf crisis: The 13 demands presented by the blockading countries

Qatar rejected the accusations and list of demands by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt.

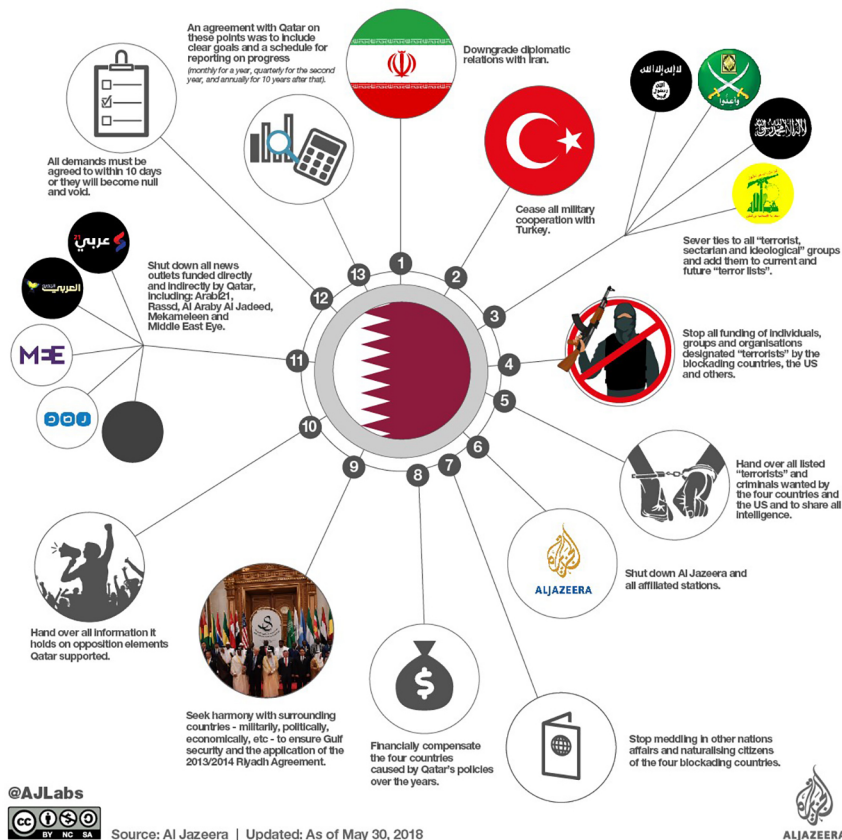


Figure 4.2. Demands submitted by states that blockaded Qatar during the 2017 crisis. Source: CHUGHTAI, Alia. 'Understanding the blockade against Qatar'. Aljazeera. 5 June 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/5/understanding-the-blockade-against-Catar> Accessed 15 August 2020

In late 2017, Saleh had announced that he disagreed with his current side in the Yemeni civil war and was in favour of seeking dialogue with the Arab coalition. The Houthi reaction resulted in Saleh's death and the elimination of members of his pro-Houthi militias, and the Houthi movement seized all power⁴.

⁴ WINTOUR, Patrick. 'Yemen Huti rebels kill former president Ali Abdullah Saleh'. *The Guardian*. Mon 4 Dec 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/04/former-yemen-president-saleh-killed-in-fresh-fighting> consultado el 8 de septiembre de 2020.

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In the northern Gulf region, the situation seemed to stabilise after the then Iraqi President Haider al-Abadi announced the defeat of Daesh in Iraqi territory. This territorial victory had been falsely sealed, as the movement shifted back to the insurgency with the support of many Sunni tribes. On the other hand, the so-called Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), mostly Shi'a, had been the dam against the threat of Daesh and now had a status within Iraq that made their disarmament unfeasible.

The year 2018 was even less hopeful than the previous one, as US President Donald Trump made good on his election promise to withdraw from the international nuclear deal with Iran. *This agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)*, was signed between Iran and the P5+1 Group in 2015⁵.

However, the Americans' exit from the JCPOA came as a real blow to the Iranians, who radicalised their positions in the face of the American 'maximum pressure' position, offering an opposition of 'maximum resistance', beginning a pulse that would increase tension in the months that followed.

Current status of the conflict

The impact of the Iraq crisis on the Gulf conflict

The 2018 parliamentary elections were a reflection of the sectarianism and ineffectiveness of Iraqi public life. The results left behind Abadi's defeat, despite having defeated Daesh, and shaped a political landscape in which pro-Iranian Shi'a supported by many of the FPM were pitted against other Shi'a supporters of Iranian non-interference and grouped around the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. For their part, Sunnis were relegated outside their majority fiefdoms⁶.

During 2019, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) acted with the support of coalition forces, but their results were not as expected, as they normally did not have the capacity to hold on to the conquered terrain and had to withdraw after the operations were conducted. This gave the insurgency the ability to return and proselytise or exact revenge on the civilian population⁷.

⁵ Arms Control Association. 'The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance': <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance> (accessed on 10/09/2020) The P5+1 group consisted of the member states of the UN Security Council, joined by Germany. From a European perspective, it was also called the EU 3+3 Group.

⁶ HASHIM, Jamal, and AHMED, Shaalan. 'News Analysis: Iraqi gov't faces tough hurdles 1 year after national elections'. Xinhua. 12/05/2019. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/12/c_138052780.htm accessed 15 September 2020.

⁷ Office of Inspector General. Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve. Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | 1 April 2019-30 June 2019. Department of Defense, 2019. <https://www.dodig.mil/In-the-Spotlight/Article/1926768/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-quarterly-report-to-the-u/> accessed 15 September 2020.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic provided further support for the insurgency. *This was due to the use of ISFtroops to enforce curfews, to the detriment of area clearance operations*⁸.

Containing the insurgent threat in a terrain as vast as Iraq requires accurate intelligence on the operational environment. *Intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) means are particularly useful for this purpose*. The coalition's coalition assets of this kind were drastically reduced when the Americans decided to redirect them to the Gulf region bordering Iran due to increased tension between the two actors⁹.

The Iranians are not capable of directly confronting a power like the US, so, according to the Americans, they have used the PMF to carry out attacks against coalition bases on Iraqi territory.

In reaction, US forces carried out retaliatory actions against the FPM. With the Iraqi government in a state of paralysis and collapse, popular demonstrations of discontent began to emerge, which the Iranians could exploit if they were able to turn them to their advantage¹⁰.

*Meanwhile, the Iranians intensified their expansion campaign in the Middle East through proxies and irregular forces under the leadership of General Qassem Soleimani, head of the Qods Force, an elite unit of the Pasdaran, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards*¹¹.

In early 2020, Soleimani was on a trip through several Middle Eastern countries, which was suspected to have been used to coordinate actions with various Shiite leaders in the region. The Americans were aware of this trip and learned that the next stop would be Baghdad and that the Iranian leader's possible intention might be to plan attacks against US troops in Iraq. Moreover, Soleimani had an appointment with the then Iraqi president, Adel Abdul Mahdi, who was reportedly aligned with Iranian interests¹².

⁸ O'DONNELL, Sean W. Office of Inspector General. Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve. Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | 1 April 2020-30 June 2020. Department of Defense, 2020, p.14. <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/04/2002470215/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE%20APRIL%201,%202020%20-%20JUNE%2030,%202020.PDF> accessed 20 September 2020.

⁹ Op. Cit. p.46.

¹⁰ CORDESMAN, Anthony H. 'America's Failed Strategy in the Middle East: Losing Iraq and the Gulf'. Center for Strategic and International Studies. 02 January 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/americas-failed-strategy-middle-east-losing-iraq-and-gulf> accessed 16 September 2020.

¹¹ France24. 'Soleimani, «living martyr» who rose above Iran rifts'. 07 January 2020. <https://www.france24.com/en/20200107-soleimani-living-martyr-who-rose-above-iran-rifts> Accessed 18 September 2020.

¹² FELLMAN, Sam. 'Why Iran's Qassem Soleimani was on a not-so-secret trip to Iraq when he was assassinated'. Business insider, 06 Jan 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/>

At the time of Soleimani's arrival in Baghdad, Iraqi security forces had just contained a riot that threatened to storm the US embassy in reaction to the punitive operations against the FPM. The Americans believed that the pro-Iranian Shiite organisation Khatib Hezbollah was behind this and that Soleimani was planning attacks on four other diplomatic facilities. *By then Trump had given the green light to the operation to eliminate Soleimani, which was carried out by launching several missiles from a remotely piloted aerial vehicle (RPAS)*¹³. Soleimani's death came alongside that of Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis, leader of the Hashed Al Shaab militia.

The announcement of Soleimani's death came as a real shock in Iran, where expressions of grief and vows of revenge were simultaneously lavished. Tehran's reaction was to launch several missiles from Iranian soil against US facilities in Iraq, but it is feared that this operation was only a symbolic act and that the real retaliation is yet to come¹⁴. In the midst of diplomatic and military tension, Iranian air defence forces shot down a Ukrainian airliner, further escalating the crisis¹⁵.

Trump's final decision may have been triggered by the embassy issue, in an election year, where the shadow of the tragedy at the US consulate in Benghazi could derail the US president's political aspirations if a similar event were to occur.

Tension in the waters: Iran's naval potential

Disagreements at the international and regional level have been reflected in the most sensitive area of the Gulf, the shipping lanes of the tankers that extract a fifth of the world's oil resources to the areas of global consumption. Both the Americans and Iranians have accused each other of behaving aggressively and destabilising the region and their rival's interests. Following

what-qassem-soleimani-was-doing-in-iraq-before-assassination-2020-1?IR=T accessed 17 September 2020.

¹³ BROWNE, Ryan, and LEBLANC, Paul. 'Trump claims Soleimani plotted to blow up US embassies Anchor Muted Background'. CNN. 10 January 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/09/politics/trump-soleimani-us-embassy/index.html> accessed 20 September 2020.

¹⁴ SANDLER, Rachel. 'Iran Launches Missiles At US. Troops In Iraq In Retaliation For Soleimani Killing'. Forbes, Jan 7, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelsandler/2020/01/07/iran-launches-missiles-at-us-base-in-iraq-in-retaliation-for-soleimani-killing/#4e0148ba167c> Consultado el 21 de septiembre de 2020.

¹⁵ SCHWARTZ, Matthew S. 'Iranian Report Details Chain of Mistakes In Shooting Down Ukrainian Passenger Plane'. 12 July 2020. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/12/890194877/iranian-report-details-chain-of-mistakes-in-shooting-down-ukrainian-passenger-pl?t=1601199994078> accessed on 20 September 2020.

sabotage carried out with mines of Iranian origin. However, the Iranians denied any involvement in the events¹⁷.

This attack was combined with an attack from Yemen immediately afterwards on the Saudi *East-West* pipeline, to which reference will be made in the next section, both incidents possibly reflecting Iran's resolve to respond to the US embargo by altering oil prices.

In view of the turn of events, the Americans prepared in case they had to intervene in the area, sending the USS *Abraham Lincoln* carrier battle group and an air force bomber wing.

The situation worsened further when two more tankers were attacked with mines near the Strait of Hormuz in June. The incident occurred while Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe was in Iran mediating between the Iranians and the Americans, who accused Iran of this new incident¹⁸.

*Shortly afterwards, Iran shot down a US Global Hawk RPAS, allegedly for trespassing into its airspace. US military representatives denied this meddling by showing the drone's flight. No retaliatory action was taken by the US against Iranian anti-aircraft systems for fear of causing high casualties*¹⁹.

In early July, British forces seized the Iranian-owned oil tanker *Adrian Darya-1* off the coast of Gibraltar because it was allegedly carrying oil for the Syrian government in violation of EU sanctions. For the Iranians, this intervention was at the behest of the Americans and they threatened to capture a British oil tanker in retaliation.

Fearing the Iranians, the British sent *HMS Duncan* to the area, which joined *HMS Montrose*, already deployed in the area. Soon after, three vessels attempted to seize the BP *British Heritage* tanker, which was prevented by the *Montrose*.

Despite British precautions, the Iranians were able to carry out their threat and seized the British-flagged *Stena Impero* for «violating international maritime rules» and arrested its crew. The British-owned *Liberian oil tanker Mesdar* was also captured, although its crew was allowed to continue their voyage. In September, the *Stena Impero* was released coinciding with a series of diplomatic moves, led by France, offering a line of credit to Iran to reduce pressure from US sanctions, provided the Iranians agreed to comply with the terms of the *JCPOA*²⁰.

¹⁷ BBC News. 'Four ships «abotaged» in the Gulf of Oman amid tensions'. 13 May 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48245204> accessed 21 September 2020.

¹⁸ The Japan Times. 'Japan distancing itself from US claims of Iranian involvement in tanker attacks'. 18 June 2019. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/06/18/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-distancing-u-s-claims-iranian-involvement-tanker-attacks/> accessed 22 September 2019.

¹⁹ HENNIGAN, W. J., and WALCOTT, John. 'Trump Suggests Iran Mistakenly Shot Down a US. Drone. Iran Says It Was Very Much on Purpose'. Time, 21 June 2019. <https://time.com/5611310/trump-iran-drone-shot-down/> accessed 22 September 2019.

²⁰ BBC News. 'Stena Impero: Seized British tanker leaves Iran's waters'. 27 September 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49849718> accessed 22 September 2020.

How it happened: Stena Impero's route through the Strait of Hormuz

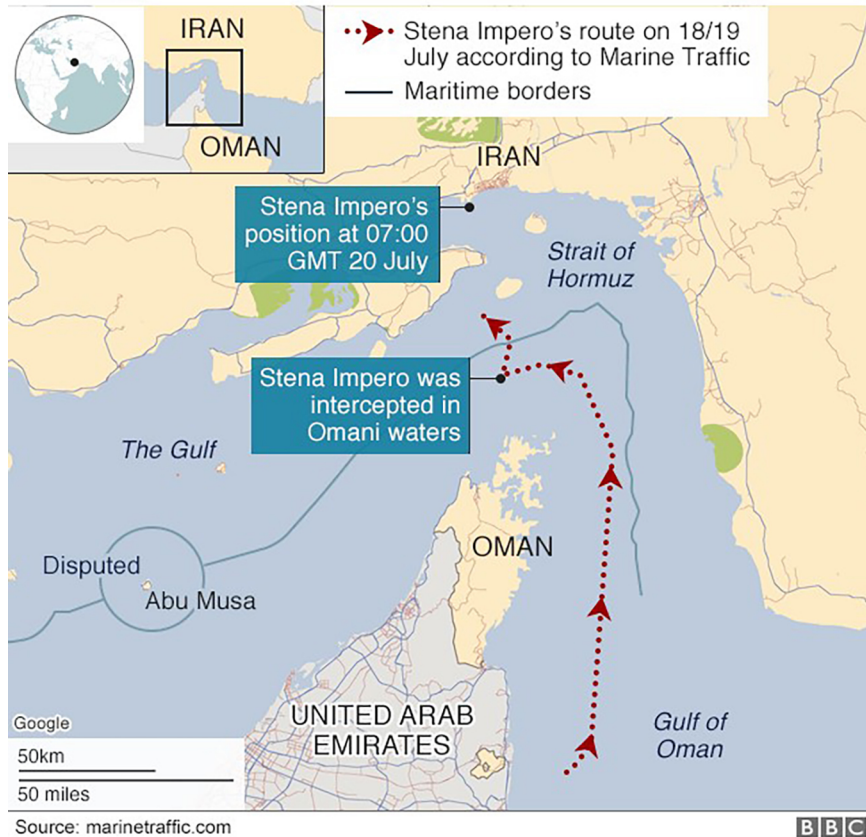


Figure 4.4. Iranian seizure of the tanker Stena Impero. Source: BBC News. 'Stena Impero: Seized British tanker leaves Iran's waters'. 27 September 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49849718> accessed 22 September 2020

Tensions rose especially high on 14 September 2019, when an attack with eighteen drones and seven cruise missiles targeted the Saudi Khurais oil field and the Abqaiq refinery. The temporary damage led to a halving of oil production, which could be compensated for by Saudi reserves²¹.

The attack was first attributed to the Houthi movement from Yemen, as they had carried out a similar action against the *East-West* pipeline in May

²¹ HUBBARD, Ben; KARASZ, Palko, and REED, Stanley. 'Two Major Saudi Oil Installations Hit by Drone Strike, and US. Blames Iran'. *The New York Times*, Sept 15, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html> accessed 23 September 2020.

(described above). However, the Saudis blamed Iran because of the direction of origin of the aircraft and missiles²².

According to press leaks, four months before the attack, Pashdaran leader General Hossein Salami, Ayatollah Khamenei's top military adviser General Yahya Rahim-Safavi and a deputy to General Qasem Soleimani, head of the Qods Force, met in Tehran. The purpose of the meeting was to devise the best retaliation against the US for its withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the imposition of sanctions. *In order to choose the most appropriate target, an attack on a US High Value Target (HVT), which could include one of its bases in the region, was considered first.* However, this option was discarded due to fears of a devastating US reaction²³.

The next proposal would be the election of a Saudi HVT, the main Iranian adversary, which would indirectly harm US interests. Early options included Saudi ports or airports, but these were also ruled out because of the massive casualties that could result from collateral damage. Finally, targeting analyses pointed to Saudi oil facilities as more suitable, as they could cause a major media impact, inflict significant damage on their adversary and send a resolute message to the US. Moreover, the popularity of the Saudis was not at its best after the media publicised several of their actions in Yemen²⁴.

Although the attack may have been conducted from the Ahvaz air base, attribution could never be proven because the erratic trajectory of the drones and missiles could not fix the launch point, as could have been determined if they had followed a straight trajectory through the waters of the Gulf. It also highlighted the vulnerability of Saudi critical facilities and the inefficiency of its costly air and missile defence system²⁵.

In October 2019, an Iranian oil tanker was attacked in the Red Sea off the Saudi port of Jeddah, spilling part of its cargo into the sea. Iranian President Hassan Rohani said that a political solution to the conflict should be sought, showing the regime's friendly face²⁶.

In January 2020, Qassem Soleimani was killed by a US RPAS, bringing the crisis to a head. This was a real message from the Americans about their resolve in the face of Iranian actions as a whole.

²² Idem.

²³ Reuters. 'Special Report: «Time to take out our swords - Inside Iran's plot to attack Saudi Arabia'. 25 November 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks-iran-special-rep-idUSKBN1XZ16H> accessed 23 September 2020.

²⁴ Idem.

²⁵ SHAIKH, Shaan. 'Iranian Missiles in Iraq'. Center for Strategic and International Studies. 11 December 2019. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-missiles-irak> accessed 23 September 2020.

²⁶ BBC News. 'Gulf tanker attacks: Iran releases photos of «attacked» ship'. 14 October 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50040670> accessed 21 September 2019.

Both the US and the UK maintain a military presence in the Gulf states, with the US having the headquarters of the central command of its naval forces in Bahrain, as well as the command of the Fifth Fleet. Similarly, the UK has a naval base in Bahrain to support its ships. In Qatar, the Americans operate the air operations coordination centre for the Middle East, as well as an expeditionary fighter wing. A British combat unit of this type is also deployed in Qatar. It appears that these two small Gulf states have secured the protection of both powers in exchange for allowing the bases to be established. This would ensure their security against both Saudi and Iranian hostile actions.

However, in high-stress situations, the Gulf waters could be too dangerous for such valuable naval units as aircraft carriers. Moreover, they would be trapped if they wanted to go out into the free waters of the Indian Ocean.

As a result, both the Americans and the British have turned to Omani ports further away from Iranian influence. The Americans have established a framework agreement to operate the port facilities at Duqm, where they tested the berthing capabilities of the aircraft carrier *USS George HW Bush* (and thus the entire Nimitz class). Meanwhile, the British navy has entered into an agreement to establish a permanent support base in Duqm, taking into account that the port's draught allows the berthing of the new aircraft carriers *HMS Queen Elizabeth* and *HMS Prince of Wales*²⁷.

The framework agreement with the Americans also allows for the use of the important port of Shalalah, providing strategic options for both the Gulf and Yemen conflicts²⁸.

The traditional relationship of neutrality that Oman has always shown must be taken into account. *The first steps towards the JCPOA* were taken thanks to the efforts of its former leader, Sultan Qaabos, who always maintained a position of equidistance in the Gulf, signing cooperation treaties with the Iranians as well as with the Saudis and Chinese, among others. His recent death and the accession to the throne of his cousin, Haitham bin Tariq al-Said, leave a question mark over the continuity of Omani policy²⁹.

²⁷ *The Maritime Executive*. 'US Navy Gains Access to Strategic Omani Seaport'. 03-25-2019. <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/u-s-navy-gains-access-to-strategic-omani-seaport> accessed 22 September 2020.

²⁸ HELLER, Christian. 'US Secures Access to Oman's Crowded Ports'. Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. 06 May 2019. <https://agsiw.org/u-s-secures-access-to-omans-crowded-ports/> accessed 23 September 2020.

²⁹ DUE-GUNDERSEN, Nicolai. 'The Two Sultans of Oman: from Qaboos to Haitham bin Tariq'. *Al Bawaba*, February 19th, 2020. <https://www.albawaba.com/opinion/two-sultans-oman-qaboos-haitham-bin-tariq-1340223> consultado el 23 de septiembre de 2020.

Proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Yemen conflict

The Saudi intervention in Yemen to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Iranian-allied Houthi movement is not without disagreement among Gulf Arabs due to the particular interests of the different actors.

Saudi Arabia's concern about a conflict in its own backyard has been compounded by the possibility of seeking a free-water outlet for its oil production. Currently, most Saudi oil flows to the rest of the world by sea through the Iranian-controlled Strait of Hormuz.

Another possibility is the shipment of oil resources via the *East-West* pipeline to Red Sea ports. However, the capacity of the pipeline is limited and delays the shipment of product to Asian markets. A serious drawback is the necessary passage of oil tankers through the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, which if controlled by the Houthis would also be indirectly controlled by Iran. On the other hand, ships' outflow to the Mediterranean is limited by the draught of the Suez Canal.

The Saudis are therefore planning to build a pipeline through the Yemeni province of Al-Mahrah, located near the border with Oman³⁰. The construction of the Nishtun pipeline and port would be a relief valve for the Saudis, although it would require the support of local tribes and exceptional security measures along the pipeline route³¹.

The aforementioned Saudi military intervention in Yemen dates back to 2015, when President Hadi wanted to give the country a federal constitution, in opposition to the Houthis and former president Saleh. Despite these coalition efforts, the Houthis have always maintained the ability to act against critical Saudi and Emirati installations, which depend on oil and water to ensure their economic well-being and survival. As tensions in the Gulf waters rose in the spring of 2019, the Iranian-allied Houthi movement reacted in defence of its protector, making incursions into Saudi Arabia and attacking high-value targets in both Saudi Arabia and the Emirates.

A few days after the aforementioned attack on the four tankers in Emirati waters, there was an RPAS attack on the Saudi East-West pipeline. The action on two pipeline pumping stations not only led to the temporary disruption of the pipeline, but also demonstrated that the hinterlands of the Arabian Peninsula were vulnerable to Houthi actions. Although Iran has always denied involvement in the events, they were the main beneficiaries of these actions.

³⁰ *Middle East Monitor*. 'Saudi Arabia prepares to extend oil pipeline through Yemen to Arabian Sea'. 03 September 2018. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180903-saudi-arabia-prepares-to-extend-oil-pipeline-through-yemen-to-arabian-sea/> accessed 22 September 2020.

³¹ ORKABY, Asher. 'Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen Is About Oil'. *The National Interest*, October 24, 2019. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/saudi-arabia%E2%80%99s-war-yemen-about-oil-90736> consultado el 22 de septiembre de 2020.

Authorship was unclear, as components of Chinese and German origin were found in the wreckage of the RPAS.

Drone Incidents and Potential Range of Houthi Drones

The Houthi drone arsenal is a growing threat to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Most attacks have hit southwest Saudi Arabia and Yemen, but recent strikes suggest drones can now hit Riyadh, Dubai and Abu Dhabi.



Sources: Stratfor analyses, Wall Street Journal, Reuters, BBC, NBC

Copyright Stratfor 2019

Figure 4.5. Range of RPAS launched from Yemen against Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. Source: Stratfor. 'A Saudi Pipeline Attack Amps Up Suspicions on the Arabian Peninsula'. 14 May 2019. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/saudi-pipeline-attack-amps-suspicions-arabian-peninsula-iran-hutis-oil-sanctions> accessed 23 September 2020

While the Saudis struggle to contain the Houthi threat, not all of their allies share the same interests. The Emiratis began their involvement in the Saudi coalition, but gradually reduced their forces until their complete withdrawal in February 2020. The Emiratis appear to have achieved their goals of stemming the imminent Houthi threat to the south and east by liberating

Aden and Mocha. They also succeeded in driving Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula out of the port of Mukalla, finally alleviating maritime insecurity. But the Emirati withdrawal meant that the separatist government in the south, led by Aidarus al-Zoubaidi, gained a position of strength over the Hadi government, establishing its capital in Aden³².

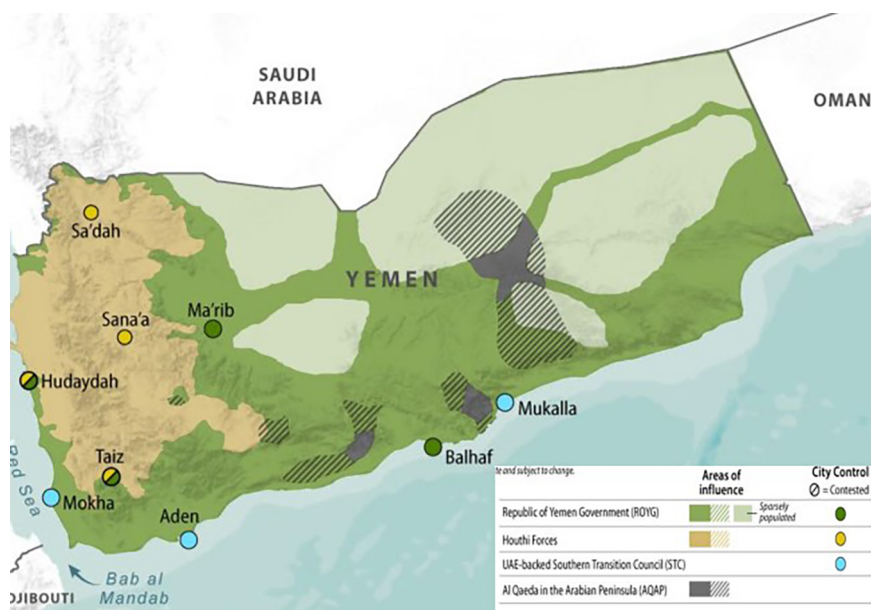


Figure 4.6. Representation of the main contenders in the Yemeni conflict. Source: SHARP, Jeremy M. Yemen: 'Civil War and Regional Intervention. Congressional Research Service. Washington DC. 2020, p. 2

The Emirati position seems to be moving away from Saudi positions by supporting a different candidate, while shifting its strategy towards the use of 'soft power' to control Yemen's southern ports, mainly Aden. It thus offers itself as an ally to the United States, independent of the Saudis, as an alternative to Qatar in the use of this type of power³³.

Role of external actors

The Americans have changed their policy since President Obama's conception of a 'pivot to Asia', which envisaged an integration of China into the liberal

³² JALAL, Ibrahim. 'The UAE may have withdrawn from Yemen, but its influence remains strong'. *Middle East Institute*, February 25, 2020. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/uae-may-have-withdrawn-yemen-its-influence-remains-strong> consultado el 24 de septiembre de 2020.

³³ YOUNES, Ali. 'Analysis: The divergent Saudi-UAE strategies in Yemen'. *Al Jazeera*, 31 Aug 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/31/analysis-the-divergent-saudi-uae-strategies-in-yemen/> consultado el 25 de septiembre de 2020.

order. *President Trump's subsequent Indo-Pacific posturing brands China as a competitor that needs to be limited in its conception of the 'Silk Road and Belt and Road' (OBOR). In late 2018 Trump issued the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), investing \$1.5 billion for this initiative. However, the Western Pacific area, which includes the Gulf, did not a priori fall within this new North American concept*³⁴.

The Gulf monarchies have so far been embedded within the US liberal order, but the possibilities opened up by other actors such as China could change the fragile balance of power in the region. For its part, Iran has strengthened its partnership with China, as its geographical position is key to the *OBOR*³⁵ initiative. Meanwhile, Russia has always been interested in the region and has sought a relationship that would allow it access to the region, finding in Iran an important ally of convenience.

The United States and the United Kingdom. The maritime power alliance

After a series of gruelling US ground interventions and the disappearance of US energy dependence, there is less interest in direct involvement in the Gulf conflicts. However, control of oil resources could give them an advantage over their rivals. Moreover, a large part of the region's armaments are produced by the United States. As if this were not enough, the Americans believe that the possible destabilisation of the area would eventually have repercussions for them, mainly due to terrorist actions³⁶.

For the Americans, the containment of Iran is of paramount importance, as the Iranians are at the centre of all events in the Middle East, be it nuclear proliferation, the peace process or the global fight against terrorism. The US has therefore pursued a policy of 'maximum pressure', which could lead to a more dangerous Iran if it spirals into destabilisation³⁷.

In this environment of controversy and risks of over-extension, the role of the United States seems to be returning to positions prior to the events of 2001, in which US 'hard power' was based on its naval air power, with ground interventions relegated to more limited actions.

The Iranians have managed to fix a significant portion of US naval aircraft potential in the Gulf, while the US has other priorities in other parts of the

³⁴ Congress. Gov. S.2736 - *Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018*. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/2736/text/es> accessed 25 September 2020.

³⁵ FULTON, Jonathan. 'The Gulf between the Indo-Pacific and the Belt and Road Initiative'. *Rising Powers Quarterly*, 2018, vol. 2, issue 2, p. 176.

³⁶ KAYE, Dalia Dassa. Interview on US relations in the Persian Gulf. Council on Foreign Relations, 13 February 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/conference-calls/us-relations-persian-gulf> accessed 26 September 2020.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

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world. It is worth noting the effort the US navy is making, maintaining one of its four large, permanently deployed aircraft carriers. Collaboration with the British is therefore important in order not to lock additional resources into the area. The UK has a limited ability to field a naval air combat group, and can continually maintain other naval and air capabilities³⁸.

China and the OBOR initiative. Opportunities in the Persian Gulf

The main reason for China's presence in the Gulf is its interest in energy products, as it extracts 43 percent of its oil resources from the Gulf. The main exporters are Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Oman. Trade relations with the region are also very important for China, which is currently the largest trading partner of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries³⁹.

It also has good trade relations with Iran, although the Iranians are more dependent on the Chinese than vice versa. In this context, a twenty-five-year strategic partnership between China and Iran was signed in the summer of 2020. The Chinese lifeline will consist of more than \$400 billion of investment assistance in major economic sectors, including defence⁴⁰. *In return, China will obtain advantageous conditions for its OBOR initiative*, including the new commercial port of Jask, which would be in addition to the Chabahar port and the railway project to the Zahedan hub.

Relations of convenience between Russia and Iran

Russia's relations with Iran have been improving as the US has hardened its stance towards the Iranians. Since President Trump's inauguration, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has made around 30 trips to Moscow. Russia is using its efforts in the Gulf to fix US forces there and avoid pressure on its immediate periphery. It is therefore understandable that it has conducted major naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman and other regions of the Indian Ocean in cooperation with the Iranians and Chinese. Russia's cooperation is not only in the field of security, but there are also multiple channels of economic and political communication⁴¹.

³⁸ BROOKE-HOLLAND, Louisa. 'UK forces in the Middle East region'. BRIEFING PAPER. Issue 08794, 14 January 2020. *House of Commons Library*, p.1.

³⁹ PERTEGHELLA, Annalisa. 'Is China a Security Force for the Persian Gulf?'. ISPI, 10 March 2020. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/china-security-force-persian-gulf-25358> accessed 27 September 2020.

⁴⁰ SALEH, Alam, and YAZDANSHENAS Zakiyeh. 'Iran's Pact With China Is Bad News for the West'. *Foreign Policy*, 09 August 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/09/irans-pact-with-china-is-bad-news-for-the-west/> accessed 27 September 2020.

⁴¹ KHOSHNOOD, Ardavan. 'Iran-Russia ties: Never better but maybe not forever'. *Middle East Institute*, February 12, 2020. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-russia-ties-never-better-maybe-not-forever> consultado el 27 de septiembre de 2020.

However, these good relations are not likely to continue in the long term, as the Iranians are aware that the Russians are using them again and again throughout history. The Russians have an interest in Iran's military dependence and in Iran not developing a weapons programme of its own or diversifying its sources. In this way, it is able to obtain compensation, such as the concessions for the development of the Iranian nuclear power programme⁴². The lack of consistency in this alliance makes Iran look to China for support.

The Gulf Arab states have two major points of disagreement with the Russians. On the one hand, its relationship with Iran, as Saudi Arabia is totally antagonistic. On the other hand, Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict in favour of the Al-Assad regime, due to Gulf Arabs' support for certain rebel groups. On the latter issue, the Russians have made successive approaches to the Gulf countries, with Oman and Kuwait considering that without Assad the Syrian crisis cannot be resolved⁴³.

Russia's rapprochement continued with Barheim, which made Saudi Arabia wary, as the Manama government has always been linked to the Saudi regime⁴⁴. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made a series of contacts in the region, which should lead to good trade relations with Kuwait and the Emirates and the possibility of arms sales in the future⁴⁵. In early 2020 Lavrov called on Gulf countries to start establishing collective security mechanisms with Russia and to get rid of unilaterally imposed sanctions⁴⁶.

Conclusions and foresight

The Gulf conflict is the consequence of a series of global and regional tensions, which in a multipolar world is changing the realignments of the actors involved.

⁴² *Deutsche Welle*. 'Opinion: Putin's power games may get out of hand'. <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-putins-power-games-may-get-out-of-hand/a-51907064> accessed 28 September 2020.

⁴³ ALMAQBALI, Mazin Musabah, and IVANOV, Vladimir Gennadievich. Russia's relations with gulf states and their effect on regional balance in the middle east. *RUDN Journal of Political Science*, 2018, vol. 20, issue 4, pp. 538540.

⁴⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 542.

⁴⁵ ИСКЕНДЕРОВ, 'Петр. Россия и Персидский залив: окна возможностей/Russia and the Persian Gulf: Windows of opportunity'. Фонд стратегической культуры. <https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2017/09/06/rossia-i-persidskij-zaliv-okna-vozmozhnostej-44604.html> accessed 25 September 2020.

⁴⁶ EURACTIV.com 'Russia urges Persian Gulf nations to consider a joint security mechanism'. 15 Jan. 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/russia-urges-persian-gulf-nations-to-consider-a-joint-security-mechanism/> accessed 27 September 2020.

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The region's importance has shifted from being the world's most significant oil basin to a situation where its status as a global energy reserve is somewhat less significant, but where its position as a communications hub has become very important.

The main players in the international arena, consisting of the United States, China and Russia, have different views from those they held in the past. For the Americans, interest in energy reserves has waned after their domestic production has been boosted by large reserves and shale exploitation. However, control of the area is important to prevent global rivals from occupying its power vacuum, to manage China's expansion and to maintain an important arms market in the Arabian Peninsula states. In order to continue its presence, it does not consider that it should become overly involved in gruelling ground conflicts, so its traditional naval aviation potential could be considered sufficient with the addition of British assets.

China is in dire need of energy sources and those provided by the Gulf are vital to the development of its important economy. Furthermore, the Silk Road and Belt strategy configures the region as an obligatory transit zone that would connect Chinese territories with European and African territories by land and sea, with particular relevance to the ports located along the Indian Ocean coast. *The land and maritime strips of the OBOR initiative* would have north-south communication corridors that could run through the region.

In the meantime, Russia continues its search for an exit to open waters through its southern axis of geopolitical projection. Control of Central Asia would give it a position of global advantage if it were able to manage the trade of raw energy and textile materials from these territories to the Indian Ocean. Likewise, the realignment of regional powers would open up new markets for the Russians, mainly in oil extraction, nuclear energy and armaments.

These three major powers must necessarily relate to the Gordian knot that is Iran's position. The strength of Iranian territory establishes a bulwark of power projection, which also controls the exit of the Strait of Hormuz. Another important feature is that its position makes it a geopolitical pivot, as it is the crossroads of East-West and North-South Asian communications. Thanks to its large population and energy reserves, it has significant latent power. On top of all this, its rulers have been able to resist pressure from the Americans, seeking alliances of convenience with Russia and putting themselves in the hands of China, which could cause dependency problems in the future.

For their part, the Saudis and like-minded Gulf regimes fear Iranian expansion and that the example of their theocratic regime will eventually catch on with their subjects. The new world order raises questions for these states, as many are dependent on US protection, although China and Russia offer them new possibilities. The stance of more neutral countries in the region, such

as Oman or Qatar, could serve as an example to seek a position of beneficial balance in the midst of a global competition for power.

As a final recapitulation, one could conclude that the Gulf region is a region where the interests of global powers converge, bearing in mind that there is a major regional conflict going on in parallel. This is why instability and power struggles are, and will be, so significant in this area. Regardless of how the conflict is resolved in the short to medium term, the region will remain convulsive, at least until oil resources become less relevant. Even so, its crossroads position will always magnify the Gulf's importance.

ANNEX I - Table: Chronology of the conflict

CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT	
DATE	EVENTS
June 2017	Start of the Qatari diplomatic crisis.
December 2017	Assassination of former President Saleh by Houthi militias in Yemen.
	President Abadi declares victory over Daesh in Iraq.
May 2018	<i>President Trump announces US withdrawal from JCPOA.</i>
	Parliamentary elections in Iraq without being able to form a government.
April 2019	Increasing the US embargo against Iran.
May 2019	Four oil tankers are attacked in Emirati waters. Attack on the Saudi <i>East-West</i> oil pipeline from Yemen.
June 2019	Two oil tankers are attacked near the Strait of Hormuz.
	The US positions a naval air battle group and a bomber wing in the Gulf.
	UK captures Iranian oil tanker off Gibraltar.
	Iran captures two British oil tankers in Gulf waters.
September 2019	Attack on the Khurais oil facility and the Abqaiq refinery in Saudi Arabia.
January 2020	Assault on the US embassy in Baghdad. Death of General Soleimani.
February 2020	Emirati withdrawal from the coalition in Yemen.
August 2020	China and Iran sign a strategic agreement.

Chapter Five

Afghanistan: an endless conflict... is peace impossible?

Juan Alberto Mora Tebas

Resumen

El conflicto de Afganistán sigue siendo uno de los más mortíferos del mundo para los civiles (más de 100.000 muertos desde 2010). Han muerto más personas como resultado de los combates en Afganistán que en cualquier otro conflicto actual.

Sin embargo, parece haberse abierto una ventana a la esperanza, al ponerse en marcha un proceso de paz destinado a finalizar veinte años de combates entre los Estados Unidos y sus aliados contra los talibanes. De momento ha dado como resultado la firma de un Acuerdo de Paz entre Estados Unidos y los talibanes (29 de febrero de 2020) y el inicio de las conversaciones intraafghanas (Doha-Catar, 12 de septiembre de 2020).

En 2010, la premio Pulitzer Maureen Dowd predijo «Afganistán no es solo un «cementerio de imperios», es la madre de los círculos viciosos», quizás estemos ante un espejismo de paz y el país vuelva a la «casilla de salida», debido a un entorno incierto y volátil.

Palabras clave

Guerra de Afganistán, Talibán, ISIS-K, OTAN, Acuerdo de paz, Irán, Pakistán.

Abstract

Afghanistan Conflict remains one of the deadliest in the world for civilians (more than 100,000 dead since 2010). More people have died as a result of the fighting in Afghanistan than in any other ongoing conflict.

However, a window of hope seems to have been opened, as a peace process aimed to complete twenty years of fighting between the US and its allies against the Taliban. This process has so far resulted in the signing of a Peace Agreement between the US and the Taliban on 29 February 2020, and the initiation of intra-Afghan talks on September 12 at Doha (Qatar).

In 2010, the Pulitzer Prize winner Maureen Dowd predicted «Afghanistan is not just a 'graveyard of empires', it is the mother of vicious circles», maybe we are facing a mirage of peace and the country will «go back to square one» due to an uncertain and volatile environment.

Keywords

Afghanistan War, Taliban, ISIS-K, NATO, Peace Agreement, Iran, Pakistan.

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y probablemente sea el cementerio del imperio»¹.

James G. Stavridis.

Supreme Allied Commander Europe-SACEUR (July 2009-May 2013)

Introduction

Three geopolitical regions converge in Afghanistan, home to three different civilisations:

- East: Pakistan with Sunni Muslim population (90%) and Shiite Muslim population (7%).
- To the north: the Central Asian plains crossed by the Amur Darya and Sir Darya rivers. In this region, Christian Orthodox civilisation is emerging, amidst the majority religion of Islam, not forgetting China and its millenary culture, which has a growing influence in the region.
- To the west: the plateaus of Iran, with its Shiite influence and from where Sunni Islamic civilisation also arrives from the Arabian Peninsula.

Afghanistan was born as one of the consequences of the 'Great Game'², as both powers agreed to leave it as a 'buffer state' in the face of the impossibility of conquering it.

At the end of 2019, Robert Malley, President and CEO of the *International Crisis Group (ICG)*, published an article on the ten conflicts to watch out for in 2020, first and foremost of which was Afghanistan³.

The conflict in Afghanistan remains one of the deadliest for civilians (more than 100,000 dead since 2010)⁴. More people have died worldwide as a result of the fighting in Afghanistan than in any other current conflict.

However, a window of hope seems to have opened with the launch of a peace process aimed at ending twenty years of fighting between the US and the Taliban. In 2019, for the first time since the war began, Washington

¹ *Some have called Afghanistan the graveyard of empires, and it probably is the graveyard of empire.* KHAZAN, Olga. 'SACEUR: Five Years to Go Before We Can Really Disengage'. Interview with Admiral James Stavridis (*Supreme Allied Commander Europe, SACEUR*), 9 May 2013. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/saceur-five-years-to-go-before-we-can-really-disengage-from-afghanistan/>

² During the 19th century, this term was used to describe the geostrategic dispute between the Russian Empire and the British Empire in their struggle for control of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

³ MALLEY, Robert. 'Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2020'. *International Crisis Group*. 27 December 2019.

⁴ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). 'Afghanistan: 10,000 Civilian Casualties for sixth straight year'. 22 February 2020.



Figure 5.1. Afghanistan. Geopolitical situation

prioritised reaching an agreement with the insurgents. After months of talks, US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban leaders agreed and signed a draft text. On 29 February 2020, after more than a year of direct negotiations with the Taliban, the United States signed this historic agreement in Doha, Qatar, aimed at paving the way for a political settlement of the war in Afghanistan, the longest in American history⁵.

In order to gain a better understanding of this long war, it is useful, before going into the current situation, to review its background and evolution, to continue with the role and interests of the most important external actors, and to end with some conclusions and foresight, a rather difficult exercise given the internal fragility and volatility of the environment, which makes it particularly appealing.

Background to the conflict

Prior to the US invasion, Afghanistan had been in a state of near-constant war for more than twenty years. The term 'Afghan war' can refer to more than six

⁵ *International Crisis Group (ICG). 'Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace'. Report no. 311/ASIA.11 August 2020.*

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conflicts (or different phases of the same conflict, or various combinations in between) that have taken place on Afghan soil since 1978, which could be grouped as shown in Figure 5.2⁶.

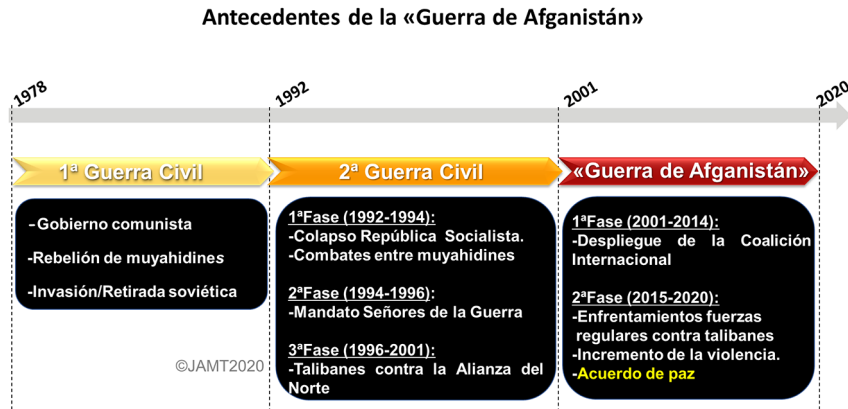


Figure 5.2. Background to the 'war in Afghanistan'. Timeline. Prepared internally

1st Civil War (1978-1992): installation of a communist government- rebellion of the mujahideen-Soviet invasion/withdrawal

On 27 April 1978, Afghan President Mohammad Daud Khan was assassinated in a Soviet-backed military coup that installed a communist government, triggering the mujahideen rebellion⁷. Supported by the US, the UK and Muslim-majority countries (Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in particular), they overthrew the communist government by assassinating President Taraki, installed by Moscow a year earlier as the leader of its puppet regime. This prompted the Soviets to invade the country on 24 December 1979⁸. The USSR deployed close to 100,000 troops, and after suffering more than 15,000 deaths, they withdrew on 15 February 1989, under the terms of the Geneva Accords. In April 1992, the Jamiati Islami and Shura-i Nazar mujahideen entered the capital with the approval of the communist generals who had agreed to surrender the city so that it would not be damaged. They overthrew the communist government and created the Islamic State of Afghanistan, through the Peshawar Accords (Peshawar-Pakistan, 24 April 1992), a peace and power-sharing agreement to which most Afghan factions would join.

⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 'Afghan War 1978-1992'. Wars, Battles & Armed Conflicts.

⁷ Mujahidines: 'Aquellos que participan en la yihad'.

⁸ YUSUFZAI, Rahimullah. 'The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan'. *Arabnews*. 19 April 2020.

2nd Civil War. 1st Phase (1992-1994): collapse of the Socialist Republic/Mujahideen clashes

By 27 April 1992 all the main Islamist factions had arrived in Kabul and the next day the last president, Hafez, left for exile. The immediate goal of the Islamic State government was to suppress the factions that had not signed the Peshawar Agreement.

In May, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of Hezbi-e-Islami, *one such faction*, began a campaign of rocket and artillery attacks on the capital that continued into the summer. These bombings were the main feature of this new phase of the war in which between 1,800 and 2,500 people were killed, causing more than 500,000 displaced persons⁹. In contrast to the Soviet occupation, rural areas remained relatively calm during this period.

2nd Civil War. 2nd Phase (1994-1996): Warlord rule

By November 1994, the Taliban had captured the entire province of Kandahar and, after rejecting the offer to join a coalition government, marched on Kabul in 1995. On 27 September 1996, the Taliban, with military support from Pakistan and financial support from Saudi Arabia, seized Kabul. Upon entering the capital, former President Najibullah, confined under UN protection at Kabul airport, was assassinated by the Taliban. Only the military coalition of ethnic groups opposed to the Taliban government, known as the Northern Alliance, was able to defend north-eastern Afghanistan against the Taliban.

2nd Civil War. 3rd Phase (1996-2001): Taliban against the Northern Alliance

In May 1997, the Taliban prepared a major offensive to the north, seizing Mazar-e Sharif on 24 May and taking up positions on the border with Tajikistan, while anti-Taliban forces maintained pressure on Kabul with rocket fire and artillery fire. On 28 October 1997, the State of Afghanistan was officially named the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Its leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, proclaimed himself 'emir of the believers'.

Afghanistan war. 1st Phase (2001-2014): Deployment of the International Coalition

On 11 September 2001, the attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania killed nearly 3,000 people and injured more than 10,000. Osama Bin Laden,

⁹ *Human Rights Watch (HRW). 'Blood-Stained Hands. Past Atrocities in Kabul and Afghanistan's Legacy of Impunity'. Report 2005. 06 July 2005.*

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leader of the Islamist terrorist group Al Qaeda, was quickly identified as responsible. The Taliban who ran Afghanistan and protected Bin Laden refused to hand him over, so a month after 11 September, the United States, invoking Article 51 of the UN Charter on the right to self-defence, launched a series of air strikes to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a base for terrorist operations and to diminish the military capacity of the Taliban regime. The first targets were both military sites belonging to the Taliban group in the government and Al Qaeda training camps¹⁰.

Two months after the US and its international and Afghan allies launched their attacks, the Taliban regime collapsed, and its fighters dispersed into Pakistan. In 2004, a new US-backed government came to power, but the Taliban still had strong support in the border areas in northwest Pakistan, known as the 'tribal areas', and earned hundreds of millions of dollars from drug trafficking, mining and taxation.

In principle, there were two military operations:

- Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)¹¹: October 2001-December 2014.
- International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)¹²: April 2008-December 2014.

In December 2014, international NATO forces ended their combat mission, bringing to an end the gradual transition process known as *Inteqal* (in Dari and Pashtun), which began in 2011, and leaving the Afghan army in charge of the fight against the Taliban. This shift allowed the Taliban to seize more territory and begin launching improvised explosive devices (IEDs/VBIEDs) attacks¹³ against government and civilian targets.

Afghanistan war. 2nd Phase (2015-2020): Afghan regular forces fighting Taliban and other Islamist insurgent groups. Increased violence. Peace agreement

On 1 January 2015, Operation Freedom's Sentinel (SFO) began as part of the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission (RSM) . *SFO* had two purposes: counterterrorism and working with allies as part of *RSM*¹⁴.

¹⁰ BBC-News. 'Why is there a war in Afghanistan? The short, medium and long story'. 29 February 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49192495>

¹¹ For more information on *Operation Enduring Freedom* (OEF), visit <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/search.htm?query=%22Operation+Enduring+Freedom%22+>.

¹² Para más información sobre *International Security Assistance Force* (ISAF), visitar: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm

¹³ *IED/VBIED: Improvised Explosive Device/Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device*.

¹⁴ For further knowledge of this period, read: CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. 'The eternal Afghan conflict: the same pieces in different positions on the chessboard'. Chapter 6 of the *Geopolitical Panorama of Conflicts-2018*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE). Available at: http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/panorama_geopolitico_conflictos_2018.pdf

Current status of the conflict

2018

The war seemed militarily unmanageable and remained highly unpopular. The Americans, who had never considered negotiating with the Taliban, decided to remove the taboo on talks. Eighteen years of conflict, 2,438 dead, more than 20,000 wounded and a colossal financial effort estimated at \$4 billion had passed¹⁵.

By the end of the year, 2018, the Taliban were openly active in 70% of Afghanistan¹⁶ and, according to a UNAMA report¹⁷, 2018 was the deadliest year since 2001 with almost 3,800 civilians and 10,000 members of the Afghan security forces killed¹⁸.

2019

On 7 April, the Afghan government announced the formation of the thirty-seven-person High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR)¹⁹ to provide political advice in negotiations with the Taliban²⁰.

On 7 September, after the Taliban acknowledged killing an American soldier, President Trump cancelled peace talks that would not resume until mid-January 2020, following a series of goodwill gestures by the Afghan government and the Taliban.

On 28 September, presidential elections were held, with President Ghani winning (50.64%), while the then chief executive Abdullah won 39.52% of the vote²¹.

Throughout 2019, the US sought to negotiate a deal with the Taliban that would commit them to take action against international terrorist groups, in exchange for these commitments, and the start of intra-Afghan negotiations,

¹⁵ LAFAYE, Christophe, and GIL, Inés. 'Le temps joue à l'avantage des Talibans, qui parviennent à utiliser les échéances électorales pour faire pression par la violence'. *Les clés du Moyen-Orient*. 28 September 2019.

¹⁶ *BBC News*. 'Why is there a war in Afghanistan? The short, medium and long story'. 29 February 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49192495>

¹⁷ UNAMA: *United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan*.

¹⁸ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). 'Afghanistan Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 2018'. 23 February 2019.

¹⁹ *HCNR: High Council for National Reconciliation*.

²⁰ *United Nations*. 'The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security'. *Report of the Secretary General (A/74/993-S/2020/809)*. 18 August 2020, p. 19.

²¹ *Idem*.

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the US would agree to a timetable for the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan.

Formally, the peace negotiations were conducted under the auspices of Qatar and Germany, which have played a central role. The negotiations did not include the Afghan government because the Taliban do not recognise it as legitimate. But their representatives were present, albeit in a personal capacity²².

During 2019, attacks attributed to terrorist activities continued to increase in number and complexity, with assaults involving multiple attackers and suicide bombers targeting Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF)²³, government buildings and civilian targets, including international organisations. The results of the terrorist attacks between 1 January and 30 September are 1,618 civilians killed and an additional 4,958 injured²⁴.

2020

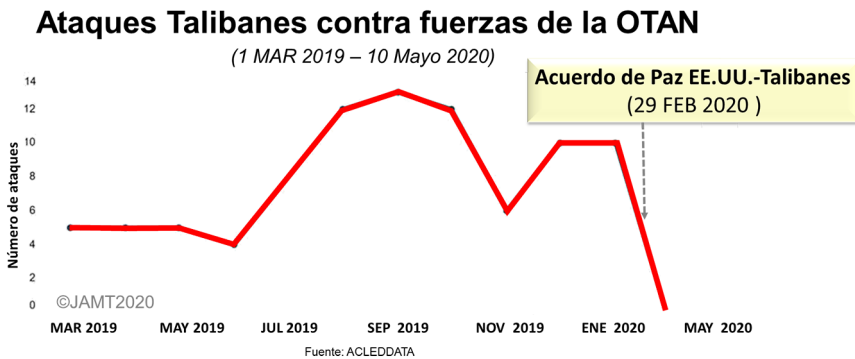


Figure 5.3. Evolution of Taliban attacks against NATO forces (1 March-10 May 2020).
Source: ACLEDDATA

On 21 February, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo announced that US negotiators had reached an understanding with the Taliban on a «significant reduction in violence throughout Afghanistan», a period that began the following day²⁵ (see Figure 5.3).

²² LAFAYE, Christophe, and GIL, Inés (2019). *Op. cit.*

²³ ANDSF: *Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.*

²⁴ US Department of State. 'Country Reports on Terrorism 2019', p. 151.

²⁵ *United Nations* (2020). *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

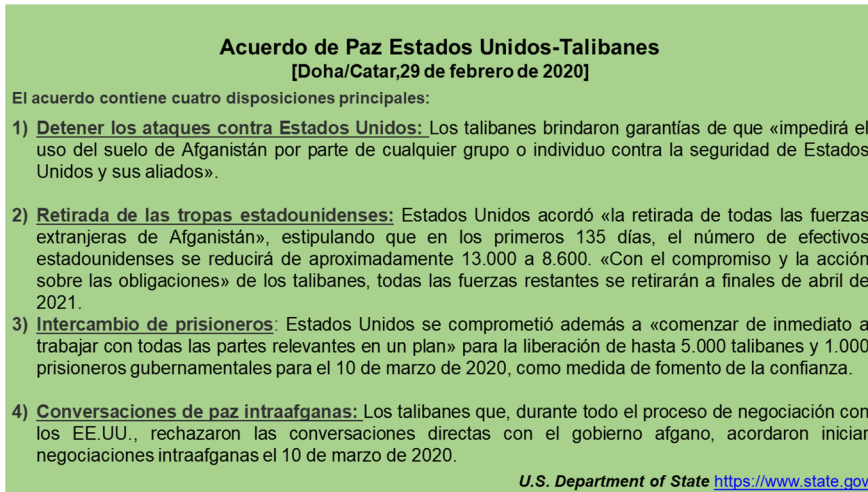


Figure 5.4. The most important points of the Afghanistan Peace Agreement between the United States of America and the Taliban (Doha-Catar, 29 February 2020). Source: US Department of State

United States of America and the Taliban (Doha-Catar, 29 February 2020). Source: *US Department of State*.

On 29 February, the Agreement for Peace in Afghanistan between the United States of America and the Taliban was signed in Doha (Qatar) (see Figure 5.4), at the same time as a Joint Declaration by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Peace in Afghanistan was signed.

Today, the Taliban are at their strongest since 2001, controlling or dominating much more territory (almost half of the country) than when international troops left Afghanistan in 2014 (see Figure 5.5).

On 9 March, Ghani was inaugurated as president for a second term. The other candidate, Abdullah, declared the election results fraudulent and illegal and held his own inauguration ceremony the same day. On 11 March, Ghani decreed the dissolution of the Chief Executive's Office and signed a decree for the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners in two phases. The first 1,500 prisoners would be released on the basis of age, health and remaining sentence. The remaining 3,500 Taliban prisoners would be released on condition of progress in intra-Afghan negotiations and a further decrease in violence. All releases required guarantees that the prisoners would not return to combat. The Taliban spokesman described the decree as 'unsatisfactory' and reiterated the demand that the 5,000 prisoners be released before the start of negotiations²⁶.

²⁶ *United Nations* (2020), *op. cit.*, p. 19.

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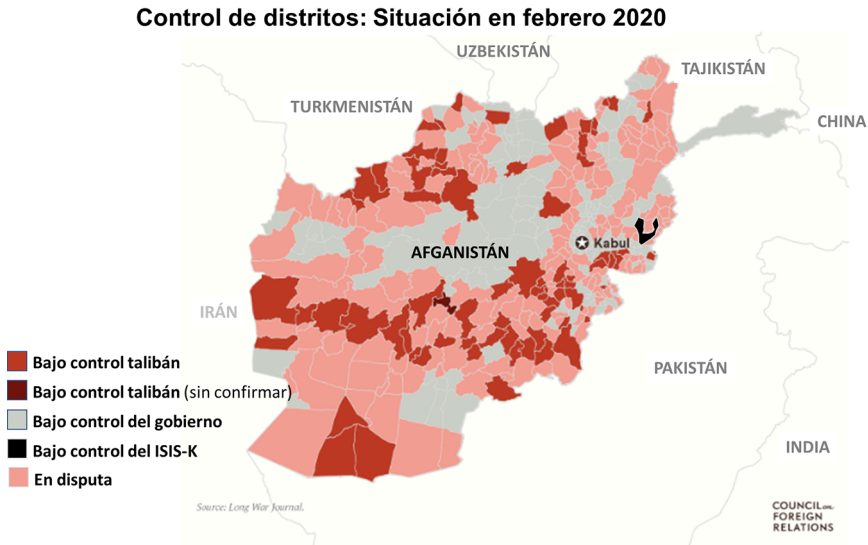


Figure 5.5. District control: situation in February 2020. Source: Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)

On 17 May, after two months of negotiations between Ghani and his rival Abdullah to form a government, they signed a pact that overcame almost three months of political deadlock and paved the way for the formation of a government.

Preparations to launch a peace process continued with the creation of a representative negotiating team and confidence-building through prisoner releases, but attacks persisted because the Taliban rejected calls for a ceasefire²⁷.

The first half of 2020 saw fluctuating levels of violence affecting civilians, with 3,458 civilian casualties documented (1,282 killed and 2,176 injured)²⁸. These civilian casualty figures represent a 13% decrease compared to the first six months of 2019²⁹.

While attacks continued, the observance of ceasefires on the occasion of the main Sunni holidays, *Eid al-Fitr* (2324 May) and *Eid al-Adha* (31 July)³⁰, gave impetus to intra-Afghan negotiations. The spread of COVID-19, exacerbated by violence, natural disasters and food insecurity led to a surge

²⁷ United Nations (2020), *op. cit.*, p. 34.

²⁸ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). 'UN Urges Parties to Prioritize Protection of Civilians and Start Talks'. 27 July 2020.

²⁹ LAWRENCE, J. P. 'Taliban unlikely to support keeping US counterterrorism in Afghanistan'. *Stars and Stripes*. 12 August 2020.

³⁰ Religious holidays at the end of the month of Ramadan and Feast of the Sacrifice or Feast of the Lamb.

in humanitarian needs and an estimated 14 million people will require humanitarian assistance by 2020³¹.

On 14 July, the US announced that it was reducing its troop strength to 8,600 and had transferred five bases to its Afghan partners, in accordance with the Joint Declaration and Peace Agreement.

On 2 August, the government reported the release of 4,917 Taliban prisoners, while the Taliban reported the release of 1,005 ANDSF personnel they were holding.

On 14 August, the Afghan government released 80 of the remaining 400 Taliban, days after the move was recommended by a consultative meeting of the Loya Jirga. *Ghani, who was under no legal obligation to consult the extra-constitutional body, accepted the Loya Jirga's recommendation on 10 August.*

The first intra-Afghan peace talks were scheduled to begin on 20 August in Qatar³², but were cancelled after final obstacles arose due to disagreements and delays in the release of prisoners.

Role of external actors

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has exerted a strong influence in Afghanistan and was one of the main sources of funding for the mujahideen in their fight against the Soviets. It was also one of only three countries, along with Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, to recognise the Taliban government. After the fall of the Taliban, it became a major contributor to Afghan reconstruction. (e.g., the Afghan trunk road project, Afghanistan's largest mosque, etc.).

Central Asian countries

Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) perceive stability and security in Afghanistan in a broader regional context. Uzbekistan, which wants to become the key regional leader and economic link to Afghanistan, has played a constructive role in reconciliation and seeks to use its position to expand trade links, allowing it to ship Afghan goods to China.

Some of these countries have expressed concern about the potential destabilisation of the region due to the spread of ISIS-K across Central Asia³³.

³¹ *United Nations* (2020).

³² Where the Taliban established a political office in 2013, at the invitation of Qatar.

³³ US Department of Defense. 'Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan'. *Report to Congress*. December 2020, p. 26.

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China

Its interests are mainly economic, as it hopes to integrate him into the *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*³⁴. China, the country's largest foreign investor, is interested in tapping Afghanistan's vast natural resources. Moreover, Beijing is concerned that terrorists, especially Uighurs, could use the Wakhan Corridor³⁵ to establish links within China.

Their relationship, which until 2015 was mostly limited to economic issues, has evolved to place greater emphasis on political and military engagement. To this end:

- Supports the signing of the US-Taliban Peace Agreement.
- It integrates Afghanistan into new multilateral security mechanisms, such as the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM)³⁶.
- It promotes economic integration between Afghanistan and Pakistan, both to weaken Western influence and to counter India's role and strategic expansion in the region³⁷.

United States

The United States, under the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, made major strategic mistakes that have reduced the prospects for peace. The denial of the existence of a form of Afghan state during the period of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the removal of the Taliban from the negotiating table during the Bonn Agreements (5 December 2001) allowed the Taliban, with Pakistani support, to return to the Afghan political game in the summer of 2003. The Taliban, who proposed a state counter-model opposed to the 2004 Constitution, rallied the disgruntled and made them loyal thanks to money from trafficking or foreign 'sponsors'.

Talks between the Taliban and the Americans go back a long way. Although there was already a dialogue before 2001, it was actually President Donald

³⁴ *TheOne Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative.*

³⁵ The Wakhan Corridor is a narrow geographical corridor (350 km long and 13 to 65 km wide) located in the Pamir mountain range connecting Afghanistan and China. It is part of Afghanistan's Badakhshan province and borders Tajikistan to the north and Pakistan to the south, as well as China's Xinjiang province to the east. ³⁵ This step may play an important role in the future as an energy corridor for alternative pipeline routes to the existing pipelines transporting energy products to China.

³⁶ On 3 August 2016, a new alliance was formed in Asia: *Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination*

³⁷ *Mechanism* to jointly combat terrorism. It comprises China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

³⁷ US Department of Defense (2020), *op. cit.*, p. 26.

Trump who relaunched the negotiation process in the summer of 2018. In fact, the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan is one of the most important issues in his campaign for re-election on 3 November 2020³⁸.

In reality, the US had no better option than to seek a deal with the Taliban. Continuing with the *status quo* only offered the prospect of an endless war, while withdrawing precipitously without prior agreement could presage a new civil war with multiple fronts and far more violence than in the 1990s.

Washington, which had already been reducing the number of US forces in Afghanistan, was reduced from 12,000 to 8,600 as part of the agreement with the Taliban (29 February 2020). There are plans to further reduce the number of US military personnel to as few as 4,000 by 3 November 2020³⁹.

Gulf States

All Gulf States seek a stable Afghanistan and support a ceasefire and peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), together with Saudi Arabia, aim to minimise Iranian and Qatari influence in Afghanistan. In this vein, Qatar hosts the Taliban Political Commission (TPC)⁴⁰ and provides the venue for the relevant parties to engage in dialogue on the implementation and follow-up of the Agreement⁴¹.

India

For quite some time, it has tried to play an active and dominant role in countering Pakistan, an initiative doomed to partial failure as Pakistan has played a vital and active role in the Peace Agreement. The Indian government did not support US efforts to reach a consensus with the Taliban and was also unwilling to legitimise the group as a political interlocutor. The Indian government, which does not support the Taliban politically, does support the Afghan government, reiterating its support for an Afghan-led and -controlled peace process.

Its main objectives would be to:

- Find a strong strategic partner in South Asia, mainly to counter Pakistan.
- Prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for anti-India armed groups.
- Maintain Afghanistan as a gateway to Central Asian markets⁴².

³⁸ LAFAYE, Christophe, and GIL, Inés (2019), *op. cit.*

³⁹ Interview with President Donald Trump on the *Axios* on HBO news programme. 03 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/trump-confirms-plans-to-further-reduce-us-troop-numbers-in-afghanistan>

⁴⁰ TPC: *Taliban Political Commission*.

⁴¹ US Department of Defense (2019), *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁴² MAIZLAND, Lindsay. 'US-Taliban Peace Deal: What to Know'. *Council on Foreign Affairs* (CFR). *Backgrounders*. 02 March 2020.

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To this end, it focuses its aid mainly on four categories: humanitarian assistance, large infrastructure projects, small and community projects, education and capacity building. A significant deterioration in security could negatively affect the distribution of this aid. It should be noted that India has traditionally had strong ties with Afghanistan and remains the largest regional donor (\$3 billion since 2001, to develop infrastructure and promote business)⁴³.

India will not give up easily on its geopolitical pretensions in Afghanistan and could seize opportunities to maintain and instigate the lack of understanding in the region.

Iran

Despite strong religious, linguistic and cultural ties and a shared 912 km border, relations between the two countries are somewhat complicated, although Afghanistan remains one of Tehran's most important foreign policy neighbours and has even signed a defence cooperation agreement with the government in Kabul⁴⁴.

For a long time, Shiite-majority Iran has seen the Sunni Taliban as an enemy, especially as it has been supported by its rivals (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). In 2001, Iran accepted US efforts to overthrow the Taliban and since then Iranian leaders recognised that the Taliban would still retain some power in Afghanistan, so they began to improve their relations, which are mainly hampered by drug trafficking from Afghanistan through Iran and Iranians' own opium addiction⁴⁵.

Iran's interests would include:

- Eliminating the US/NATO presence, and try to replace them.
- Eliminating ISIS/Daesh franchises.
- Enhancing economic and security ties with the Afghan government.
- Securing water rights.
- Improving border security⁴⁶.

During 2019, Iran increased its influence on both the Taliban Political Commission and the Afghan government in order to increase its role in the reconciliation process and secure Iranian interests in the future agreement. The Iranians described the agreement as illegitimate because it did not include the Afghan government or neighbouring countries.

⁴³ US Department of Defense (2020), *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁴⁴ KAURA, Vinay. 'Iran's influence in Afghanistan'. *Middle East Institute*. 23 June 2020.

⁴⁵ MAIZLAND, Lindsay (2020), *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ US Department of Defense (2020), *op. cit.*, p. 26.

Pakistan

Pakistan has publicly supported the US-Taliban agreement as a way to end the conflict in Afghanistan.

Although its military leaders have long been accused of backing terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Kashmir (indeed, Taliban and Haqqani network leaders continue to receive safe haven in Pakistan), there is no doubt that a lasting peace on its western border would benefit it directly and across a wide spectrum. Afghan stability would help not only with tribal misgivings on the western border, but also in expanding economic ties, mainly through the east-west expansion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Afghanistan, which would bring its own advantages to the whole project and benefit not only Pakistan and China, but also the Afghan people as a whole. Pakistan also hopes that after the intra-Afghan peace talks, a favourable, cooperative regime will be in place that will conduct a foreign policy with little Indian influence⁴⁷.

Meanwhile, Pakistani security forces are erecting fences along the Afghan border to stem the flow of anti-Pakistan activists into their territory. Its army continues to conduct counter-terrorism operations against ISIS-K and ISIS-Pakistan, and the operational networks of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) operating within its borders⁴⁸.

Russian Federation

Moscow hopes to revive the ties created after a decade of occupation and which had frayed following its withdrawal in 1989. It therefore wants to take a leading role in the peace process and increase its influence to counterbalance the US and NATO presence in the region⁴⁹.

To this end, it supports the Taliban politically and considers them a key element for a stable Afghanistan. It also provides them with limited material support (funding, ammunition and light weapons) to further operations against ISIS-K⁵⁰.

Russia, together with China, has also actively supported the Afghan peace process and facilitated the resumption of talks. This would aim to:

- Gain greater influence in Afghanistan.
- Accelerate US military withdrawal.
- Address security challenges that may arise after such a withdrawal, such as potential cross-border violence in northern Afghanistan.

⁴⁷ GUL, Anun. 'Trends on Afghan Peace Agreement'. *Analysis of STRAPHASIA*. 29 March 2020.

⁴⁸ US Department of Defense (2019), *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁴⁹ MAIZLAND, Lindsay (2020), *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ US Department of Defense (2019), *op. cit.*, p. 23.

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In late February, Kremlin officials expressed support for the Agreement and offered to facilitate intra-Afghan negotiations (IAN)⁵¹.

Russia is likely to continue to support US-Taliban reconciliation efforts in the hope that reconciliation will prevent a long-term US military presence.

European Union

The European Union (EU) has a long-standing cooperative relationship with Afghanistan. In close coordination with Afghanistan's international partners, it is committed to supporting the people of Afghanistan on their path to long-term peace, security and prosperity, and with the Afghan Government to fight corruption, improve oversight, enable economic growth, reduce poverty and strengthen democratic institutions⁵².

The Cooperation Agreement, approved by the Council on 17 December 2015, lays the basis for developing a mutually beneficial relationship in a number of areas, including rule of law, health, rural development, education, science and technology, counterterrorism, organised crime and drugs. The EU-Afghanistan partnership, aimed at strengthening the country's institutions and economy, is guided by the EU Strategy for Afghanistan (2017), which includes a results-oriented dialogue on human rights, especially those of women and children, as well as a dialogue on migration⁵³.

On 26 August 2018, the European Union and Member States adopted the Roadmap for EU Engagement with Civil Society in Afghanistan (2018-2020). This document identifies the objectives of cooperation with civil society organisations for the coming years and the actions to be taken in three key areas: enabling environment, structured participation and roles and capacity building⁵⁴.

On 28 May 2020, the European Council adopted conclusions reaffirming the European Union's political commitment to support the people of Afghanistan on their path to peace. This support is conditional on ensuring the protection and promotion of values based on republican and democratic principles. It reiterates support for a negotiated political settlement leading to lasting peace and reconciliation, which should build on the democratic and human rights achievements of the last nineteen years⁵⁵.

⁵¹ Idem, p. 25.

⁵² Delegation of the European Union to Afghanistan. 'Afghanistan and the EU: U relations with Country'. 01 March 2016.

⁵³ European Commission. 'Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development between the European Union and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan'. Council Decision 2015/0303 (NLE). 17 December 2015.

⁵⁴ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/49997/eu-country-roadmap-engagement-civil-society-afghanistan-2018-2020_id

⁵⁵ European Council. 'Council conclusions on the Afghanistan peace process and future EU support for peace and development in the country'. *Press Release*. 29 May 2020.

The European Union's support for the peace process takes the form of five points:

1. Help make the peace process more inclusive.
2. Support reforms, including security sector reform (SSR)⁵⁶.
3. Provide incentives for the reintegration of ex-combatants.
4. Have the European Union as a guarantor of the peace process.
5. Support cross-border trade and infrastructure as well as regional connectivity⁵⁷.

Spain

From the outset, Spain was involved alongside its allies in the pacification and reconstruction of Afghanistan. It initially participated in Operation Enduring Freedom, with medical support, transport aircraft, ships and helicopters. Our country's largest contribution, however, came as part of the expansion of ISAF's deployment.

Since 2018, Spanish troops have been contributing to the General Staff tasks at headquarters in Kabul, as well as providing training, advice and assistance to Afghan logistical bodies, the Afghan National Command for special operations and a Special Operations battalion (*Kandak*), and providing protection and security to the personnel deployed.

At the beginning of 2020, Spain had some 70 military personnel deployed⁵⁸.

Conclusions and foresight

United States

It should be more realistic in betting on the Taliban's political trajectory. The Taliban's links to al-Qaida run deeper than the US administration would like to admit, and it should prepare for the likelihood that the Taliban will continue to facilitate al-Qaida. Limiting such support will require multilateral diplomacy, especially with countries (allies or adversaries) in the region that have a vested interest in preventing Afghanistan from becoming a base for international terrorism.

⁵⁶ SSR: Security Sector Reform

⁵⁷ European External Action Service (EEAS). 'High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini visits Afghanistan'. *Press Release*. 29 March 2019.

⁵⁸ Ministry of Defence. 'Misiones permanentes en el exterior. Actuales. *Resolute Support* (Afganistán)'. Accessed 28 September 2020. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/misiones/en_exterior/actuales/listado/afganistan.html

Iran

Whatever Afghanistan's future holds, Iran will be a major player because it is well positioned to help achieve a delicate balance in Afghanistan. It has long-standing positive relations with members of the non-Pashtun Afghan population, including influential individuals and groups from the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara communities who wield political power in the current Afghan Executive. Its close relations with extremist jihadist groups could pose a major challenge to US intentions to end its involvement in Afghanistan (especially if tensions between the two countries escalate again).

Civil society ® *excluded from the peace process*

Organisations of all kinds (human rights defenders, victims' associations, etc.) wished to have conveyed their position and their feelings, they would have liked their expectations and requests to have been heard, and they feel excluded, even though they were the first victims of the war.

After almost twenty years of progress in their status and rights, women fear a dramatic setback. Although they do not deny the disparities between urban and rural areas, as in the provinces women's lives have changed little in recent years and this is undoubtedly one of the main failures of the Kabul government.

Security Situation ® *Unpredictable and volatile*

Terrorist groups pose a real threat to Afghanistan's stability. The Afghanistan-Pakistan border region remains a sanctuary for several groups, including Al Qaeda (AQ), and ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K). Some of these groups know that without the coalition's presence, effective counterterrorism (CT) pressure will be reduced. This situation encourages them to develop their capabilities, which represents a greater threat to the region because of the possibility of projecting westwards.

Islamic State of the Greater Khorasan (ISIS-K)

The Islamic State's regional affiliate is consolidating in Afghanistan. Over the past eighteen months, it has continued to expand its presence in several eastern provinces, carrying out major attacks in Kabul and being responsible for an increase in suicide attacks against civilians; responsible for 20% of civilian casualties in 2018 and 12% of total recorded casualties in 2019. It is not only the Afghan government that is fighting against this organisation, but also the Taliban, as ISSIS-K opposes poppy cultivation.

Taliban-Al Qaeda relations

The Trump Administration maintains that the Taliban will keep the Accord and break with Al Qaeda. But the truth is that they have not publicly renounced it, nor have they taken any discernible action to limit the movements of this and other transnational terrorist organisations. After the Agreement, when pressed to clarify their position, Taliban representatives avoid mentioning Al Qaeda. According to a United Nations report, *Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)* is said to have some 500 fighters, «covertly active in twelve provinces» and there have been numerous meetings between its leaders during negotiations with the Americans⁵⁹.

Despite the Agreement, there is still no formal ceasefire, so the security situation remains unpredictable and highly volatile. It is worth remembering that a hasty US withdrawal, a return to civil war and the general chaos that would follow, would facilitate the rapid and wider establishment of the Islamic State in Afghanistan.

Implementation of the Peace Accord ® *Three unknowns: political system, ceasefire and minority rights*

It seems unlikely that the Taliban will clearly renounce contact with Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups and commit to a lasting ceasefire until they perceive that intra-Afghan talks sufficiently secure their objectives. On the other hand, a progressive reduction of violence seems realistic in order to make progress in the negotiations.

The biggest unknowns could be:

- What kind of political system is to be put in place.
- How to manage the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) processes⁶⁰, both of the Taliban and of the security and defence forces.
- What rights will be maintained for women and ethnic and religious minorities.

Intra-Afghan Conversations ® *Two conflicting views*

These talks had been delayed for six months because of deep disagreements over the controversial prisoner exchange. On 12 September 2020, the Afghan government and the Taliban began historic peace negotiations in Doha, Qatar,

⁵⁹ United Nations. 'Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team'. S/2020/415.27 May 2020, pp. 11 and 12.

⁶⁰ DDR: *Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration*.

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in the presence of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Negotiations promise to be tough, as the two social projects seem irreconcilable.

On the one side is President Ghani's government, which insists on maintaining the young republic and its constitution, which has enshrined many rights, especially for religious minorities⁶¹ and women. On the other side are the Taliban, who once again reiterated their desire to establish a system in which the law is dictated by rigorous Islam and do not recognise the Kabul government, which they describe as Washington's 'puppet'. Ghani will try, as far as possible, to secure control of the peace process and attempt to retain power, as there is speculation that intra-Afghan negotiations could lead to a neutral interim government. It could also be expecting Washington's policy on Afghanistan to change after the US elections (November 2020), should Democratic challenger Biden unseat President Trump, who has made US military withdrawal a foreign policy priority.

On the other hand, the Taliban are starting from a position of strength, following the bilateral agreement with the US, but it will take time for them to make the transition from armed insurgency to political negotiation and to achieve internal consensus on negotiating positions. They will also have to tackle the task of convincing their tens of thousands of fighters and their rank and file not only of the idea of a negotiated peace, but also of an integrated Afghan society.

In the end, Afghanistan remains deeply divided on key issues. Taliban negotiators are likely to oppose any proposal to establish a permanent counter-terrorism presence, as the Americans have proposed leaving a residual force to prevent the country from again becoming a platform for global terrorism. Importantly, the withdrawal of all US and allied forces by mid-2021 does not depend on the success of intra-Afghan talks, but on the Taliban breaking ties with al-Qaida and ensuring that terrorist groups do not use Afghan soil.

It will be important that the process culminates in a peace agreement between the Afghan parties that reaffirms commitments to international human rights standards, contributes to peace and security in the region and allows refugees and displaced persons to return to their homes in a dignified and orderly manner. An inclusive peace process, in which women, youth and victims of the conflict are meaningfully represented and which offers the best hope for a lasting solution⁶².

⁶¹ Afghan Shiites account for 15% and the majority are Duodecimans or Imamis, the majority branch of Shiism. They are mainly located in the western provinces of Herat and Farah.

⁶² NB. These talks began on 12 September 2020, with no significant progress reported at the time of going to press on 26 October 2020.

Certainly, the will of some of the external actors such as the US, Russia, China and/or Pakistan is required to ensure that the process comes to an amicable end, but perhaps we are facing a mirage of peace and the country is back to square one due to an uncertain and volatile environment. The only attempts to sabotage the peace process would come from the Afghans themselves, or even from a regional power that has felt neglected during the peace negotiations.

Let us hope that the international community has learned from the successes (many) and mistakes (too many) resulting from its actions, military and civilian, in a multi-ethnic tribal-based society and knows how to apply them to the conflicts that emerge in regions with a strong tribal presence (Syria, Iraq, Sahel, Central Africa, Horn of Africa, etc.).

‘Afghanistan is more than a «graveyard of empires».
It is the mother of vicious circles.’

‘Seven Days in June’. *The New York Times*. 22 June 2010.
Maureen Dowd, *Pulitzer Prize winner 1999*.

Annex I

Afghanistan: geopolitical indicators

Area (km ²) ⁽¹⁾	652,860
Population (est. 2020) ⁽²⁾	38,928,000
Growth rate (annual % of population. 2015-2020) ⁽²⁾	2.47
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 births) ⁽²⁾	52
Life expectancy ⁽²⁾	64.28
GDP (2017; USD million)	19,101.35
Annual rate (% GDP growth, 2019)	2.9
Income per capita (USD) ⁽³⁾	502.1
Defence Budget (USD million, 2019) ⁽⁵⁾	238
% GDP in Defence (2019) ⁽⁵⁾	4.2

⁽¹⁾ ⁽³⁾ ⁽⁴⁾ World Bank.

⁽²⁾ United Nations. *World Population Prospects: 2019 Revision*.

⁽⁵⁾ SIPRI *Military Expenditure Database*.

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Chronology of the conflict

CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN MAIN MILESTONES	
Date	DESCRIPTION
2001	
11 Sept	4 coordinated terrorist attacks against multiple targets in the US kill nearly 3,000 people.
12 Sept	NATO condemns the attacks and offers its support. For the first time, it was decided to invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty (collective defence clause).
7 Oct	Following the Taliban's refusal to hand over Osama Bin Laden and close terrorist training camps, the US launches air strikes against Al Qaeda and Taliban targets. Ground forces deploy two weeks later, initiating Operation Enduring Freedom .
13 Nov	The Taliban leave Kabul, which falls under the control of the Northern Alliance.
14 Nov	UN Security Council Resolution 1378 (UNSCR 1378) calls for a central role for the UN in establishing a transitional administration and invites peacekeepers to Afghanistan.
5 Dec	Bonn Agreement: UN-sponsored, Afghan interim authority formed. Hamid Karzai is sworn in as head of the interim government. It also envisages an international peacekeeping force to maintain security in Afghanistan.
20 Dec	UNSCR 1386 authorises the deployment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in and around Kabul.
27 Dec	The Council of Ministers agrees on the participation of Spanish troops in ISAF .
2002	
Jan	The first ISAF contingent deploys under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.
Jun	The Loya Jirga elects Karzai as interim head of state until the 2004 elections.
Nov	The US military begins establishing Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) to coordinate redevelopment with UN agencies and NGOs. Some of these PRTs would be taken over by NATO member states.
2003	
11 Aug	NATO takes command of ISAF.
2004	
4 Jan	The Loya Jirga approves a new constitution .
28 Jun	NATO Istanbul Summit: 4 new PRTs in the north.

CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN MAIN MILESTONES	
Date	DESCRIPTION
Sept	ISAF expands west , controlling PRTs in Herat and Farah provinces and a Forward Support Base (Herat). NATO-led ISAF provides security assistance in 50 percent of the territory.
9 Oct	Karzai wins presidential election with 50% of the vote.
29 Oct	Osama Bin Laden takes responsibility for the 9/11 attacks.
2005	
19 Aug	Spanish troops take over the Qala-i-Naw PRT.
Sept	NATO temporarily deploys 2,000 additional troops to support provincial and parliamentary elections.
18 Sept	Legislative elections. Seats are reserved for women: 27% in the lower house and 22% in the upper house.
2006	
31 Jan.	London Conference: Afghanistan Compact, a five-year peacebuilding plan, is launched.
5 Oct	The process of NATO expansion throughout Afghanistan is complete.
2007	
6 Mar	First major joint (ISAF-ANDSF) counter-insurgency operation in the south.
2009	
17 Feb	President Obama announces the deployment of 17,000 additional troops to counter the resurgent Taliban.
27 Mar	President Obama announces a new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. It also decides to deploy 4,000 soldiers as ANDSF trainers.
3-4 Apr	NATO Strasbourg/Kehl Summit: 5,000 additional troops agreed to be sent to train ANDSF and provide security for the presidential elections.
30 Aug	marred by widespread attacks and lengthy investigations into vote counting and fraud; they remain unresolved for a couple of months.
21 Nov	NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A) is activated .
Dec	After reviewing the military campaign, President Obama decides to deploy an additional 30,000 troops and promises to begin withdrawing US troops in the summer of 2011. NATO foreign ministers announce the deployment of another 7,000 troops.
2010	
28 Jan.	London Conference: representatives from over seventy countries discuss plans to gradually hand over responsibility for security to FSNSAs.

Afganistan: an endless conflict... is peace impossible?

CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN MAIN MILESTONES	
Date	DESCRIPTION
Sept	Parliamentary elections: overshadowed by violence, fraud and delays in announcing results.
20 Nov	it is agreed to initiate the transfer of responsibility for security to the NFSAs in 2011, to be completed in 2014. A declaration on <u>Enduring Partnership</u> , a long-term framework of political and practical support, designed to continue after the ISAF mission, is signed.
2011	
22 Mar	President Karzai announces the first set of Afghan provinces and districts to begin transitioning to Afghan security leadership.
1 May	Osama Bin Laden is killed by US special forces in Pakistan.
22 Jun	President Obama announces the withdrawal of 10,000 troops by the end of the year and the remaining 20,000 by the summer of 2012.
18 Jul	NATO begins security handover to Afghan forces.
2012	
11 Nov	The withdrawal of Spanish troops begins.
2013	
1 Apr	The Afghan National Defence University is established to train ANDSF officers.
18 Jun	President Karzai announces the launch of the fifth and final tranche of the transition and puts Afghan forces in charge of security throughout the country.
24 Nov	Bilateral Security Agreement with the US providing for troop presence after 2014; necessary to allow US soldiers to remain in Afghanistan after ISAF withdrawal.
2014	
5 Apr	Presidential elections (1st round): majority turnout.
14 Jun	Presidential elections (2nd round): between Ghani and Abdullah.
29 Sept	After months of negotiations over the disputed election results , Ghani is <u>sworn in as president</u> .
30 Sept	The status of forces between NATO and Afghanistan is signed. Ratified by Parliament, it provides the legal framework for a <u>new NATO-led non-combat mission</u> (Resolute Support) to train, advise and assist Afghan security forces and institutions from January 2015.
12 Dec	The UN Security Council unanimously adopts Resolution 2189, approving the new Resolute Support Mission .

CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN MAIN MILESTONES	
Date	DESCRIPTION
28 Dec	President Obama ends the ISAF-NATO mission, concluding the process of gradually transferring security responsibility to the Afghans.
2015	
1 Jan.	NATO launches the <i>Resolute Support Mission (RSM)</i> to continue providing training, advice and assistance to the ANDSF.
11 Dec	<u>Attack on the Spanish embassy in Kabul</u> , two national policemen from the embassy's security team were killed.
2019	
28 Sept	Presidential elections.
2020	
9 Mar	Inauguration of President Ghani.
29 Feb	Peace Agreement (US-Taliban) in Doha (Qatar).
17 May	Political agreement between President Ghani and the chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah.
14 Jul	The US announces a reduction to 8,600 troops and the transfer of five bases.
9 Aug	<i>The Loya Jirga</i> approves the release of the last 400 Taliban prisoners.
12 Sept	Intra-Afghan talks begin in Doha (Qatar).

Chapter Six

The Indo-Pakistan conflict: the never-ending story

José Pardo de Santayana

Resumen

Desde la partición de la India británica y el nacimiento de la India y de Pakistán la relación entre ambos Estados se ha caracterizado por el conflicto; la disputa por Cachemira permanece como su gran instigador. Este enfrentamiento tiene además las dimensiones nuclear, convencional y terrorista que interaccionan entre sí.

La disputa permanente no solo ha incidido en las difíciles relaciones entre ambos vecinos, es además uno de los principales causantes de la interminable guerra de Afganistán, de ella se deriva uno de los mayores peligros de proliferación nuclear que existe en el mundo, actúa como catalizador del terrorismo radical islámico, condiciona enormemente los sistemas de alianzas regionales, está desviando recursos y atención de Nueva Delhi e Islamabad y está obstaculizando seriamente el desarrollo económico de ambas partes, sobre todo de Pakistán.

La emergencia de Asia y el nuevo orden global que de ello se deriva están devolviendo la atención y el protagonismo a esta interminable contienda.

Palabras clave

India, Pakistán, conflicto, Cachemira, guerra convencional, arma nuclear, terrorismo.

Abstract

Since the partition of British India and the birth of India and Pakistan, the relationship between the two States has been characterised by conflict; the dispute over Kashmir remains its great instigator. This confrontation also has several dimensions that interact with each other: nuclear, conventional and terrorist.

The permanent dispute has not only affected the difficult relations between the two neighbours, it is also one of the main causes of the endless war in Afghanistan, from which derives one of the greatest dangers of nuclear proliferation that exists in the world, acts as a catalyst for radical Islamic terrorism, greatly influences regional partnership systems, is diverting resources and attention from New Delhi and Islamabad and is seriously hampering the economic development of both states, especially Pakistan.

The emergence of Asia and the resulting new global order are bringing attention and prominence back to this endless struggle.

Keywords

India, Pakistan, conflict, Kashmir, conventional war, nuclear weapons, terrorism.

The Indo-Pakistan conflict: the never-ending story

Introduction, a panoply of conflicts

We live in times of growing tensions in global geopolitics. The world's attention is increasingly turning to Asia. Despite conflicts and rivalries, the continent has been able to take advantage of the post-World War II *Pax Americana* to boost its economic growth. Through successive waves of development, first Japan, then the Asian tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong), then China, and now South and Southeast Asia, Asia has been modernising and reclaiming its place in the world. Trends suggest that the 21st century could be the century of Asia.

The festering Indo-Pakistan conflict is severely conditioning regional geopolitics, crippling the economies of both states, most notably Pakistan, could torpedo Asia's ultimate emergence and fourth wave of development, and there is always the looming threat that a major incident or uncontrolled situation could trigger a nuclear catastrophe.

Since the partition of British India in 1947 led to the creation of these two independent states, conflict and military confrontation have been a constant feature of the relationship between India and Pakistan. The two have fought four conventional wars (1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999) and there have been numerous armed skirmishes and military disputes. The Kashmir conflict is the focal point of all these conflicts, with the exception of the Indo-Pakistani and Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, which resulted in the secession of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

Both states have developed nuclear programmes, terrorism has made its appearance and minor armed incidents have become recurrent. In addition, there is the sensitive issue of the sharing of water from the Indus, the backbone of Pakistan's lifeblood and essential to its livelihood.

There have been several attempts to improve the relationship, notably the Shimla (1972), Lahore (1999) and Agra (2001) summits, but the dispute over the Siachen glacier between 1984-2003, the intensification of the insurgency in Kashmir in 1989, the development of nuclear programmes, as well as the 1999 Kargil war have been successive obstacles in the way of Indo-Pakistani appeasement. Some confidence-building measures have been successful in reducing tensions, and international pressure has played an important role throughout.

If India has the advantage of its size, demographics – one-sixth of the world's population – and rapidly developing economy, Pakistan enjoys a privileged geopolitical position at the intersection of the Indian subcontinent with the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as the hinterland of the People's Republic of China with the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Intense hostility between the governments in New Delhi and Islamabad has prevented the construction of cross-border infrastructure

linking India with Central Asia and the Middle East that would greatly benefit all parties.

Both states also have serious governance problems. New Delhi has to contend with the serious social and economic problems of its huge population, with periodic ethnic and religious violence, as well as with the powerful governments of its various regions. Pakistan is experiencing a severe economic crisis that has stunted its growth; it is an artificial and unstable country comprising five very different territories with strong tensions between them and very limited control over large parts of two of these territorial entities, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; it suffers the internal consequences of Islamic radicalism, has suffered a protracted civil war and has failed to bring the armed forces under civilian rule. An added problem has been the almost permanent dispute in Pakistan between military and civilian power and a rather autonomous military intelligence agency (*Inter-Services Intelligence*) that has favoured military solutions over diplomatic ones and makes it difficult to know who is really responsible for Pakistan's actions.

At present, rising nationalism, which governments are stoking for domestic reasons, is hampering efforts at appeasement, a process that both regional powers nevertheless need both to harness the full potential of the fourth wave of Asian development and to find their place in the new global and regional order. China's omnipresence, the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and the global nuclear realignment are setting the geopolitical agenda in the subcontinent.

Background, a poisoned independence

The partition of British India in 1947 (Figure 1) gave rise to several states: the dominions of India and Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma (today's Myanmar). London favoured the fragmentation of what had been the jewel in its crown in order to reward the Indian Muslims who had been most loyal to it and contributed troops to World War II; to retain greater control over the independent territories, following the principle of «divide and rule»; and out of fear of inter-religious tensions that it did not know how to control. In this way, the Muslim League, which aspired to a nation based on Islam according to the 'Two Nation Theory', succeeded in winning over the Indian National Congress, which promoted the non-violent independence of a unified India, where all religions, languages and ethnicities of the subcontinent would have a place.

The partition of the subcontinent was thus made on the basis of religion, with the Muslim-majority territories going to Pakistani rule and the rest to the Indian Union. The highly violent context in which it took place resulted in the loss of up to two million lives and the displacement of more than a

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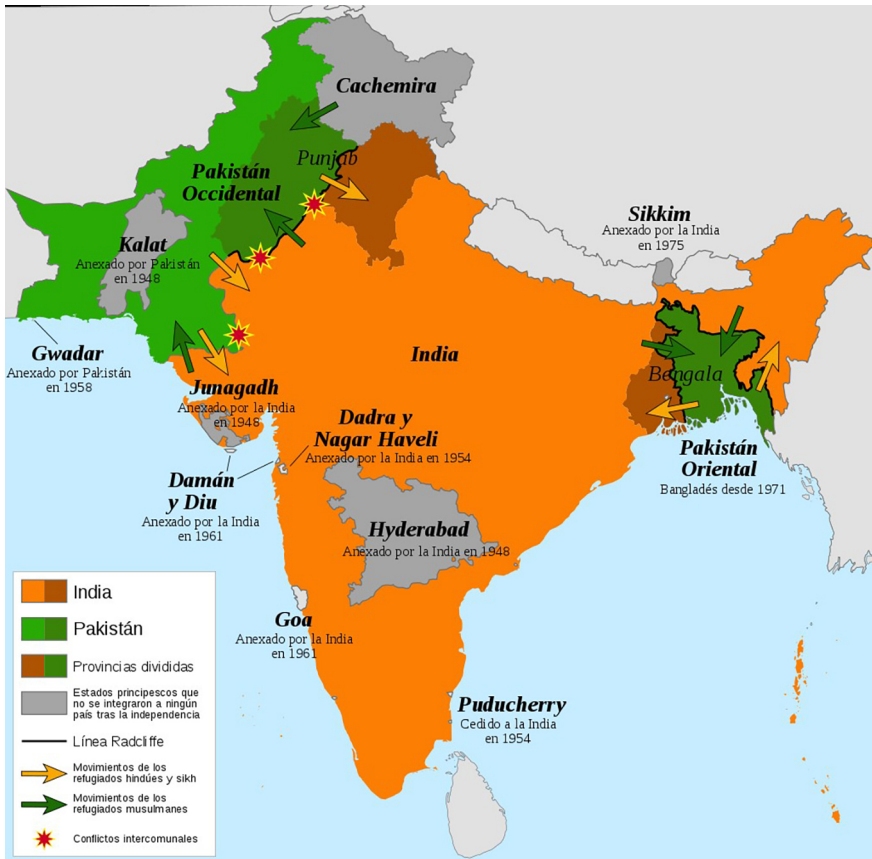


Figure 1. Partition of British India. Source: Wikipedia

dozen million people. UNHCR estimates that 14 million Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims were displaced during partition, the largest mass migration in human history.¹

Paradoxically, the British Empire, which through a modern bureaucracy and an extensive network of railways had achieved the greatest unity and integration the region had ever known in its history, left in its departure the most indelible border, a deep scar that time seems unwilling to erase.

India emerged as a pluralistic, non-denominational nation with a Hindu majority and a large Muslim minority, while Pakistan eventually became an Islamic republic. After independence, the two great South Asian nations established diplomatic relations, but violent partition and numerous

¹ *Rupture in South Asia*. The State of the World's Refugees 2000: Fifty years of Humanitarian Action, chapter three. ACNUR, 1 January 2000.

territorial claims hindered their understanding. For its part, India was born with a clear pacifist and non-aligned vocation in disputes between great powers, which initially weakened it vis-à-vis both Pakistan and China.



Figure 2. Partition of Kashmir. Source: BBC

Kashmir, always Kashmir

After centuries of Hindu and Buddhist rule, the Mughal Empire incorporated the region in the 15th century, converting the population to Islam. In the 18th century came the Afghan, Sikh and Punjabi invasions. In the mid-19th century, the British East India Company took control of Kashmir and sold it to the Hindu maharaja of Jammu, creating the Muslim-majority princely state of Jammu and Kashmir², with significant Hindu and Sikh minorities and a complex ethno-religious territorial mosaic.

After the partition of British India in August 1947, Jammu and Kashmir, as well as some other principalities, remained independent territories that were advised to join one of the two dominions (Figure 1). Maharaja Hari Sing decided not to join any of them. However, popular revolts soon erupted and, in early October, armed groups with the covert support of Pakistani rule and the intervention of Pashtun militias took control of some border districts.

² TRISTAN, Pierre. 'Kashmir History and Background'. ThoughtCo, 03 July 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/kashmir-history-and-background-2353435>

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At the end of that month, alarmed by the situation, Hari Sing requested military support from New Delhi, which linked such military support to the incorporation of Jammu and Kashmir into India. The maharaja agreed.

First Indo-Pakistani War (1947-1948): Kashmir is divided

The Indian government moved troops into Kashmir but Pakistan refused to recognise the princely state's incorporation into India. The war ended with a UN-brokered ceasefire agreement signed in January 1949. *The line of separation of forces, known as the Line of Control (LoC)*, determined the territorial division (Figure 2), with two-thirds of the principality under Indian control (Kashmir Valley, Jammu and Ladakh) and one-third under Pakistani control (Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan). The Security Council resolution called for a referendum in which the people of the disputed territory themselves were to decide on their future, which has never taken place.

Second Indo-Pakistani War (1965), now or never!

In the early decades of the Cold War, Pakistan was supported by the United States because it formed, along with Turkey and Iran, the southern buffer belt to the USSR, giving it armed forces superior to India's in all but quantity. Moreover, the recent Sino-Indian war of 1962 had highlighted New Delhi's military weaknesses and forced India to devote a priority effort on that front. The Indian armed forces embarked on a major reform and development programme, so over time the Pakistani military advantage faded. Islamabad was also backed by Beijing.

Pakistan and India had other border disputes. In 1956, India eventually took control of the Rann of Kutch, a barren region in the Indian state of Gujarat, and in January 1965 Pakistani patrols began raiding the territory. In August, the weak Indian response encouraged Islamabad to go on the offensive in the Kashmir region. On 6 September, India counterattacked further south, near Lahore. Pakistan managed to hold off the enemy onslaught with heavy casualties on both sides, an intense air engagement and one of the most important tank battles after World War II. Again, with UN support and under Soviet and American pressure, the two countries agreed to a ceasefire. In 1966, India and Pakistan signed an agreement in Tashkent (in the former USSR) to resolve their problems peacefully.

Third Indo-Pakistani War (1971), Bangladesh gains independence from Pakistan

The territorial division of Pakistan and the dominant position of West Pakistan, where the capital was located, eventually triggered a civil war in East Pakistan in March 1971 with brutal repression from Islamabad.

The rebel movement gained the support of India, which took in some ten million refugees, and tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad continued to escalate. Pakistan had American and Chinese support, India had Soviet support. The Indian military waited until winter to start the war, when the dry terrain would make operations easier and the Himalayan passes would be closed by snow, preventing any Chinese intervention.

On 3 December, the Pakistani Armed Forces launched a pre-emptive air strike, which did not prevent the Indian Army from penetrating deep into East Pakistan, obtaining the surrender of the Indian Army on the 16th. Fighting also took place on the western border and at sea, with the conquest of some 14,000 square kilometres of Pakistani land territory and a clear Indian naval advantage. The war came to an end with the birth of Bangladesh, leaving Pakistan greatly weakened against India.

The following year, the Simla Agreement was signed, in which both sides pledged not to use force over border issues. India returned to Pakistan the territory it had captured during the war in order to create a 'lasting peace' and to assert that it had no territorial ambitions. In 1976, trade and diplomatic relations were re-established, and it seemed that the two countries had embarked on the path of some reconciliation.

Nuclear weapon enters the scene

From the outset, India's nuclear policy gravitated around its relations with China, which had conducted its first nuclear test in 1964. In 1974, in defiance of international pressure, New Delhi responded by taking the same step. Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto reacted by saying that Pakistan would have to develop its own arsenal, even if the country 'had to eat grass' to pay for it³. However, India would not conduct its first tests until May 1998, half a month after India conducted its second nuclear tests, making both states de facto nuclear powers⁴. In August 1999, the Government of India made it known that its nuclear weapons were exclusively for deterrence and that India would follow a no-first-use policy. The US government immediately imposed sanctions on both India and Pakistan in an attempt to isolate them from the international community.

A worrying by-product of Pakistan's nuclear dimension is the unsoundness of its state and its history of illicit nuclear dealings with North Korea, Iran

³ BORREGUERO, Eva. *India y Pakistán: el dilema nuclear*. ARI issue 68/2004, Real Instituto Elcano, 14 April 2004. <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/a838de004f0187bdbdc1fd3170baead1/ARI-68-2004-E.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=a838de004f0187bdbdc1fd3170baead1>

⁴ GARRIDO REBOLLEDO, Vicente. *El programa nuclear de India: mito y realidad*. Issue 62, Política Exterior, 21 September 2012.

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and Libya⁵. However, since 2008 and despite not being a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, India has been taking important steps towards its integration and acceptance as a nuclear power by the international community.

Afghanistan clouds the geopolitical situation and keeps Pakistan on the map

The Afghan-Pakistani relationship was marked from the beginning by the dispute over the Durand Line that divides the Pashtun territory in two and delimits their common border. In the 1970s, the growing influence of Moscow – New Delhi's ally – in the Kabul government prompted Islamabad to covertly support Islamic factions in Afghanistan hostile to the established power. The peak came with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989). The United States and its allies joined Pakistan in defeating the Soviets by supporting the mujahideen. The Pakistani city of Peshawar, near the Afghan border, became the headquarters of the insurgency and, at the end of the war, Al Qaeda was also born there. *Pakistan saw a proliferation of madrassas or Koranic schools that introduced radical versions of Islam to the country.*

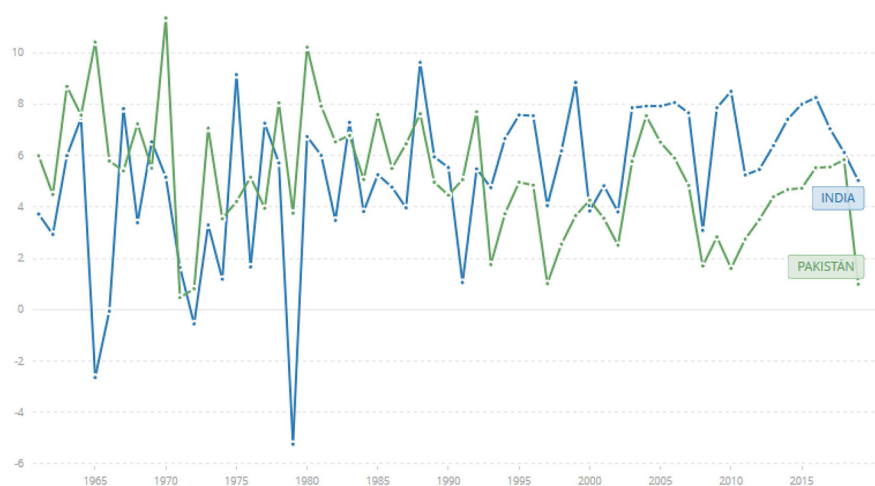


Figure 3. India and Pakistan GDP growth 1960-2019 in % per annum. Source: World Bank

As the Soviets withdrew from the neighbouring country, the war continued, albeit at a lower intensity. Pakistan was transformed: weapons and militias proliferated, and the morale of victory gave wings to radical Islamism, which

⁵ TORRES VIDAL, Carlos. 'India y Pakistán, potencias nucleares de facto'. Strategy Notebook 205, IEEE, 'Nonproliferation and Nuclear Arms Control at the Crossroads', September 2020. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_205_NoProliferacionControlArmasNucleares.pdf

since 1979 – the year of the Iranian revolution – had gained a strong foothold in the Middle East⁶. The model of insurgency, which had proved so successful in Afghanistan, was then tested in Kashmir.

Radical Islamism took root in large sections of society. The country embraced the national ideology of defending its Muslim identity, with the army as its main guarantor. For its part, the economy that had grown faster than India's thanks to US support lost its momentum and from the 1990s onwards was overtaken by that of its neighbour (figure 3), with serious consequences for Pakistan's aspiration to maintain strategic parity with India.

Pakistan was also the birthplace of the Taliban movement that would eventually seize power in Kabul in 1996, and which would host Al Qaeda on its territory. After 9/11 with the US intervention in Afghanistan, Islamabad once again became a necessary ally of Washington. Since then, the relationship between the US and Pakistan has taken on a contradictory dimension, with the Americans needing Pakistani cooperation but reproaching Pakistan for the fact that enemies of the Afghan government and US troops find sanctuary in the tribal territories bordering Afghanistan. *In 2008, the term AfPak was born*, emphasising that solving the Afghan problem requires simultaneously addressing the relationship with Pakistan in its multiple ideological, political, governance, economic and security dimensions.

On the other hand, the Taliban movement developed a Pakistani branch that in 2004 sparked an insurgency and then degenerated into a vicious civil war that lasted from 2007 to 2017.

India has logically maintained positions in Afghanistan that are the opposite of those of Pakistan. Of particular significance was the suicide bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul on 7 July 2008 that killed fifty-eight people and in which the Pakistani intelligence service was accused of involvement.

Siachen Glacier Conflict (1984-2003)

The Siachen Glacier (Figure 2), an uninhabitable region covering some 2,300 square kilometres and averaging 5,400 metres above sea level, eventually became a bone of contention as a result of the vague demarcation of this territory in the Karachi Agreement of July 1949, which determined the division of Jammu and Kashmir. India was concerned that through this region Pakistan could gain access to the Karakorum Pass, which facilitates communication between Pakistan and China. In April 1984, the Indian Army decided to deploy forces in the glacier area, ahead of the neighbouring country, and occupied the crossing points. Pakistan launched assaults again in 1987 and 1989. It is not clear that such operations really made any strategic sense beyond nationalist assertion.

⁶ FIEDMAN, Thomas L. 'How We Broke the World'. *The New York Times*, 30/05/2020.

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Operation Brasstacks (1986-1987)

In the winter of 1986-1987, the Indian Armed Forces conducted a four-month military exercise near the Pakistani border that was the largest troop mobilisation in the subcontinent involving 600,000 men. For its part, Pakistan responded with a large mobilisation and military exercises. Tensions ran high until March 1987, putting Pakistan's nuclear facilities on high alert. There were fears of nuclear war.

Kargil War (1999)

As the 20th century drew to a close, escalating tensions due to Pakistan-backed separatist activities in Kashmir, as well as nuclear tests by both countries in 1998, led to an increasingly belligerent atmosphere. In an attempt to defuse the situation, in February 1999 the two countries signed the Lahore Declaration, pledging to seek a peaceful, bilateral solution to the Kashmir conflict. *However, during the months of that winter, the Pakistan Army infiltrated irregular forces behind the LoC into the high mountain sector of Kargil in Kashmir and occupied Indian posts abandoned during the winter months. From there it threatened the road linking the vast and sparsely populated surrounding region with the rest of India. In May 1999, the Indian Army discovered this and went on the offensive, backed by its air force, which enabled it to recapture many of the occupied positions. In July, under international pressure and at the cost of heavy casualties, the Pakistani force withdrew from the remaining part.*

Terrorism

Kargil was the last proper war between the two armies. The turn of the century also transformed the logic of the India-Pakistan conflict from the primacy of conventional confrontation to a conflict with three interlinked planes: nuclear, terrorist and numerous border incidents, with a sustained diplomatic effort to seek appeasement. A summit was convened in Agra in 2001, but the talks did not take place. In 2004, with a new government in place in India, the two countries agreed to extend the nuclear test ban and to establish a hotline between their foreign secretaries to avoid misunderstandings that could lead to nuclear war. Other initiatives followed which, without achieving much progress, at least prevented the many disputes that were constantly arising between the two Asian powers from escalating into major confrontations.

Terrorist attacks also made their appearance in India proper. On 24 December 1999, an Indian Airlines flight en route from Kathmandu to New Delhi was hijacked. The 13 December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament was the most dramatic attack allegedly carried out by Pakistani terrorists. The situation brought the two nations to the brink of a nuclear confrontation

in 2001-2002. International efforts facilitated the cooling of tensions. On 18 February 2007, the Samjhauta Express bombings took place. At least 68 people were killed. Between 26 and 29 November 2008, the Indian city of Mumbai suffered a series of twelve terrorist attacks carried out by ten members of an Islamist terrorist organisation. India complained that given the complexity of the attacks, the perpetrators «must have had the support of some official agencies in Pakistan».

Kashmir insurgency and military incidents

The end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan prompted the insurgency in Kashmir, where violence, repression and hatred took root. Pro-Pakistani groups *Hizbul Mujahideen* (HM) and *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT) ended up dominating the fighting in opposition to Indian security forces and opposing guerrillas.

Between 2001/2002, in response to attacks by the Indian Parliament and the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly, there was the largest troop build-up on either side of the LoC. Tensions eased following international diplomatic mediation and the withdrawal of forces in October 2002.

After 9/11, Pakistan began to withdraw its support for insurgent groups and in 2004 Islamabad and New Delhi initiated the Composite Dialogue Process, which significantly reduced the number of casualties. However, from 2008 onwards, in response to the violent repression of peaceful protests, a new wave of militancy erupted in Kashmir⁷. The number of incidents in the region has been enormous and has become routine. Pakistan accuses India of not respecting basic human rights, New Delhi blames Islamabad for being behind the popular uprising and terrorist attacks.

In 2008 there was a major show of force in the aftermath of the Mumbai terrorist attack. Pakistan put its air force on alert and moved troops to the Indian border. The tension soon subsided, and Pakistan withdrew its troops from the border. The second decade of the 21st century has seen a proliferation of border incidents with some casualties and a small number of forces involved.

Insurgency in Balochistan

The insurgency in Pakistan's Balochistan province was born after independence and has remained one of the country's major security concerns. It has recently caused tensions with India, which Islamabad has accused of supporting militant groups and terrorist organisations such as the Balochistan Liberation Army.

⁷ 'The Armed Conflict Survey 2020', IISS, p. 266.

The Indus River water conflict

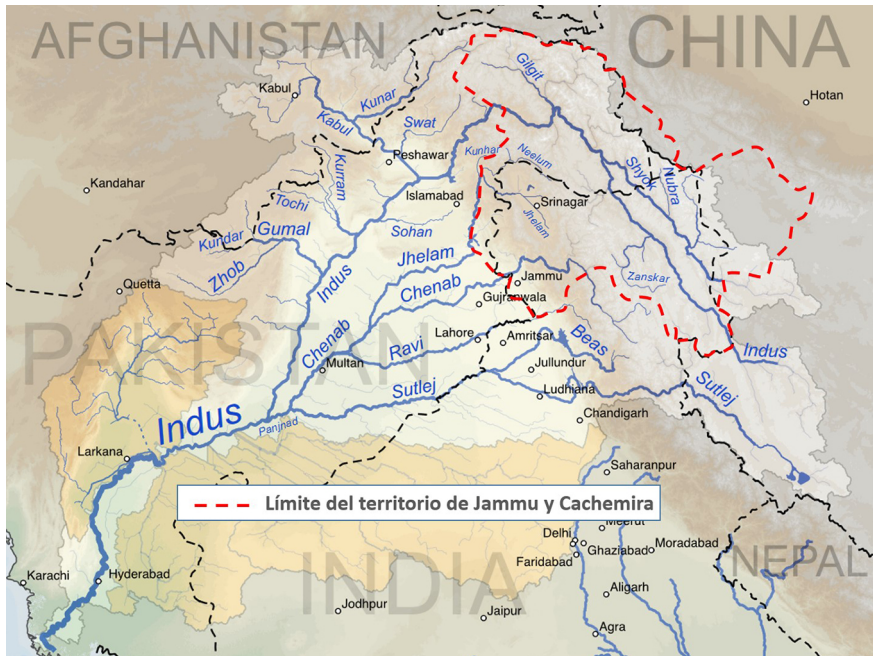


Figure 4. Indus River Basin. Source: Prepared internally

The Indus River is the backbone and lifeblood of Pakistan, a country that is overpopulated in large parts, water-stressed and in increasing need of water. In addition, the country has created a canal system – one of the most extensive in the world – that allows for the irrigation of 190,000 km². However, as can be seen in Figure 4, the Indus and its main tributaries flow through Indian territory, largely in Jammu and Kashmir, before reaching the neighbouring country.

After partition, Pakistan felt its livelihood threatened. The issue was hotly disputed until on 19 September 1960, under the auspices of the World Bank, the two countries signed the Indus Water Treaty in Karachi, which regulates the distribution of water from the Indus River and its tributaries, with India getting 16% and Pakistan the remainder. It sets out detailed regulations for India on construction projects on the three western rivers, which, however, has not alleviated Pakistani fears that India could create floods or droughts in Pakistan, especially in times of war.

Since then, the Treaty has been respected, which has not prevented India from threatening to revoke it after the 2016 Uri attack. Prime Minister

Narendra Modi declared that «blood and water cannot flow together»⁸. So far, such threats have not materialised. However, India decided to restart the Tulbul project on the Jhelam River in the Kashmir Valley, which had earlier been suspended in response to Pakistan's objections.

Current situation

In 2014, the arrival of the charismatic Narendra Modi to power brought about a rather profound transformation of regional relations and balances. Modi is determined to put India in its rightful place among the superpowers. In March 2019, India successfully launched an anti-satellite missile, joining the exclusive club of aerospace powers, along with the United States, Russia and China. Hand in hand with the determined prime minister has also come a rise of Hindu nationalism⁹.



Figure 5. India's strategic presence in the Pacific Ocean. Source: CSIS

India's new ambition has seen New Delhi definitively shake off its tradition of non-alignment. The main driver for the redefinition of its geopolitical role is the emergence of China, which is threatening the *status quo* in South Asia: China's New Silk Road, with its infrastructure in all corners of India, is creating a sense of encirclement in New Delhi; Beijing's growing interest in

⁸ Rowllatt, Justin. 'Why India's water dispute with Pakistan matters'. *BBC News*, 28 September 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-37483359>

⁹ MAGRI, Paolo. Introduction to the document 'India. The Modi Factor'. ISPI, 2018.

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the Indian Ocean and the construction of a military base in Djibouti makes it uneasy; the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, one of the main branches of the Chinese New Silk Road, and its enhanced military cooperation inevitably cloud the Indo-Pakistani relationship¹⁰. While Pakistan remains a tactical problem in the short term, it is China that is increasingly becoming the decisive parameter of Indian defence modernisation¹¹. Moreover, border incidents between Beijing and New Delhi, in 2017 in Doklam and 2020 in Aksai Chin, have taken a quantum leap, intensifying border tensions between the two.

Delhi has responded by joining the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a security initiative that brings together the US, Australia, Japan and India to contain China, and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, a joint initiative with Japan that aims to compete with China's New Silk Road. Moreover, the growing importance of the Indian Ocean is forcing India to develop a powerful naval force, to build military bases in the Indian Ocean and to enter into agreements with other powers with a presence in the Indian Ocean (Figure 5).

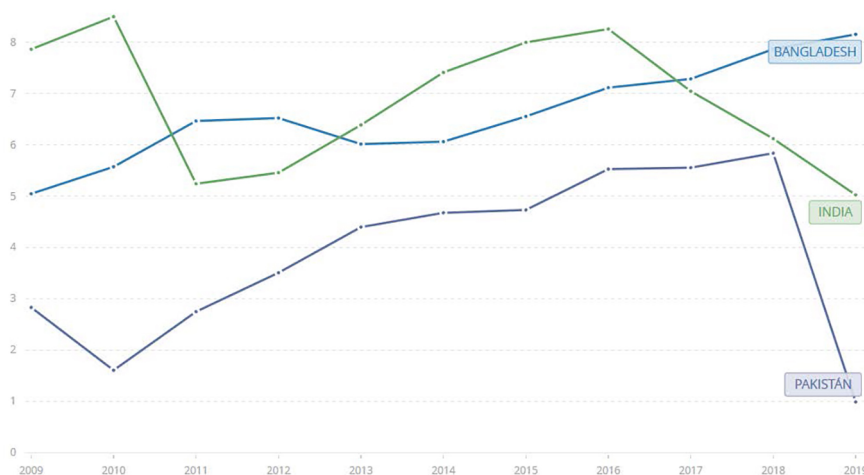


Figure 6. GDP growth of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh in % per annum. Source: World Bank

However, the tense strategic relationship does not prevent the two Asian giants from maintaining an ambivalent relationship of rivalry and cooperation, the latter especially in the economic sphere, where China has become India's main trading partner.

¹⁰ TRAMBALLI, Ugo. 'Modi's World. Vision of a «Potential Superpower»'. ISPI Report, 'India. The Modi Factor', 2018, p. 121.

¹¹ ELBRACHT, Romina, and Bolmer, Ann-Margret. 'Between Arms Race and Alliance. How Pakistan and China Are Driving Indian Defence Policy'. Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung, International Reports 3/2019.

While India is trying to marginalise Pakistan, not disdaining the possibility of new tensions both in Kashmir and in the sensitive issue of relations with the internal Muslim minority, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan wants to convey an image of dialogue. However, its control over the country's affairs is limited, as the armed forces still wield a great deal of power. On the other hand, Islamabad is torn between an alarming economic situation and the strategic relevance gained by the US desire to leave Afghanistan. Prior to the coronavirus crisis, which is hitting Pakistan very hard, economic growth had fallen from 5.8 percent in 2018 to 1% in 2019 (Figure 6). India, however, was growing at 5 percent in 2019 and Bangladesh, without so many strategic burdens, at 8.2 percent¹².

Hindu nationalism

The Indian subcontinent is being shaken by a renewed rise of religious and ethnic nationalism and the strengthening of political parties and movements representing diverse identities within states. In the case of India, the current ruling BJP and its leader are trying to solve a series of problems, some of them pending since independence in 1947: the excessive strength of the regions vis-à-vis the central state, resulting in an overly fragmented market and administration, the dominance of regional religious and ethnic identities over the common Indian identity, Islamist terrorism allegedly instigated by Pakistan, the status of Kashmir, and tensions and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims¹³. This has an impact on Pakistan, where it has also generated waves of internal nationalism in response.

Kashmir, the Pulwama crisis and regional status change (2019)

Since 2016, fuelled by the rise of nationalism and with large youth participation, the situation in Kashmir has become even more tense with frequent shootings and protests. In February 2019, the Pulwama suicide attack (Figure 2) produced the most acute crisis in the Indo-Pakistan relationship in two decades. *In that year, the 3,000 LoC violations* were a very significant spike, although the number of fatalities (280) was down compared to 2018.

Forty Indian paramilitaries were killed in the Pulwama attack, for which Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) claimed responsibility. *In response, Indian aircraft crossed the LoC to bomb a suspected JeM training camp in Balakot, Pakistan. Islamabad responded with air strikes against targets on the Indian side of the LoC, shooting down an Indian MiG-21.* It was the first time India had

¹² World Bank data (<https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>).

¹³ WAHA, La Toya. 'Religious Nationalism in South Asia. *Building Nations, Breaking Communities?*' International Reports 2/2020.

attacked Pakistan proper since 1998 and the first time the Indian Air Force had conducted an offensive operation against Pakistan since the 1971 war. Tensions eased after 1 March, when Pakistan returned the downed Indian pilot.

Adding fuel to the fire, India's then minister for roads and water resources, Nitin Gadkari, declared that all water currently flowing into Pakistan in the three eastern rivers will be diverted for various uses to Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan. The situation was heavily conditioned by the upcoming general elections in May and Prime Minister Modi made this confrontation an important part of his campaign message¹⁴.

Even more controversial has been the Indian government's decision in August of that year to repeal Articles 370 and 35-A of the Indian Constitution, removing the autonomy enjoyed by the state of Jammu and Kashmir and carving out of the region the Buddhist-majority area of Ladakh, which became another «union territory». These articles allowed Jammu and Kashmir to have its own state legislature, whose laws restricted permanent residence and ownership of land in the region to Kashmiris. Revoking these articles is seen by many Kashmiris as an attempt to change the demographics of the Muslim-majority territory¹⁵. The decision was accompanied by a strong crackdown and raised waves of nationalism both in the Kashmir region itself and in Indian and Pakistani societies, limiting the Pakistani government's ability to manoeuvre and adding a further obstacle to relations between Islamabad and New Delhi. Kashmiri resentment was at an all-time high¹⁶.

Nuclear dimension

Global geopolitical dynamics are weakening the levees against nuclear proliferation. Three countries: Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia pose the greatest threat. Moreover, there are rumours that Pakistan may be collaborating with Saudi Arabia in this regard¹⁷. Asia's emergence and the new ambitions of its powers are leading to a regional arms race and a militarisation of its international relations. Thus, from 2014 to 2018, 40 percent of all global arms purchases went to that region. In 2018, significant levels of nuclear rearmament were observed by Pakistan, China and India. While China has invested in expanding and diversifying its nuclear arsenal, both India and

¹⁴ SCHAUS, John. 'Hold My Chai: Escalation and De-Escalation Scenarios in South Asia'. CSIS Commentary, 1 March 2019. (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/hold-my-chai-escalation-and-de-escalation-scenarios-south-asia>).

¹⁵ DALTON, Melisa. 'Indian Revocation of Kashmir's Special Status'. CSIS Critical Question, 12 August 2019 (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/indian-revocation-kashmir-special-status>).

¹⁶ 'Raising the Stakes in Jammu and Kashmir'. Crisis Group Asia Report issue. 319, 5 August 2020.

¹⁷ BREWER, Eric. *Towards a More Proliferated World*. CSIS Report, 2 September 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/toward-more-proliferated-world>

Pakistan have increased the amount of fission material, which could lead to a significant increase in the number of nuclear weapons in the next decade¹⁸. China, whose primary motivation is to match its great American rival, maintains an active and diverse ballistic missile development programme, improving its missile forces in number, capability and type. Current Chinese missile investments indicate that Beijing is restructuring its missile forces to re-establish deterrence and deal with a new and possibly more hostile threat environment¹⁹. However, the number of Chinese nuclear warheads is about twenty times smaller than that of the United States and Russia, so without a significant reduction by the latter, the size of China's nuclear force will tend to grow exponentially.

Given its relative weakness in the conventional realm and its aspirations to gain global power status, New Delhi is pursuing the goal of matching China's nuclear arsenal – in 2018 India had between 130 and 140 nuclear warheads, China more than 290 – putting enormous pressure on India's nuclear programmes. The main purpose of nuclear weapons is not actual deployment, but rather deterrence to maintain the *status quo* between India on the one hand and China and Pakistan on the other. India is the only country in the world that faces two opponents with nuclear weapons on its borders. Like New Delhi, Beijing also has a no-first-use policy, which implies the use of nuclear weapons only in the event of a nuclear attack and not as a defence against conventional forces²⁰. India has the nuclear triad as part of its doctrine of 'minimum credible deterrence'.

Pakistan's inferiority has emphasised its 'first strike' nuclear doctrine, although this would only be initiated 'if and only if' Pakistan's armed forces were unable to stop an Indian invasion. Logically, such a force would also be used in response to a nuclear strike against Pakistan, whose nuclear bases are real underground fortresses.

India's acquisition of Russian, US and Israeli missile defence systems and frequent military exercises along Pakistan's borders to practice limited warfare doctrines create alarm in Pakistan. In addition, India's growing conventional military capability, coupled with its *Cold Start* doctrine, which gives it the flexibility to mount large conventional strikes, has led Pakistan to develop an asymmetric response strategy based on low-yield tactical nuclear weapons. In turn, India has sought to undermine Pakistan's strategy

¹⁸ SIPRI Yearbook 2019. 'Armaments, disarmaments and International Security', Summary, 2019, pp. 10 and 11. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/yb19_summary_eng.pdf

¹⁹ SINGH, Nopur: 'A Looming Nuclear Arms Race in East Asia?' *Indian Defence Review*, 25 September 2017. <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/a-looming-nuclear-arms-race-in-east-asia>

²⁰ ELBRACHT, Romina, and BOLMER, Ann-Margret. 'The Between Arms Race and Alliance. How Pakistan and China Are Driving Indian Defence Policy'. Adenauer-Stiftung, International report/3, 2019, p. 28.

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by emphasising its readiness to deploy more powerful strategic nuclear weapons if Islamabad resorts to atomic weapons, even if it uses tactical nuclear weapons in a 'limited' way on its own territory against advancing Indian troops. New Delhi has also explored the possible use of 'surgical strikes'. The dispute is more of a psychological and intimidatory nature and is based on ambiguity, but it inevitably raises tensions and brings nuclear strategy to the fore²¹.

Afghanistan

In 2018, eighteen years after sending forces into the country to overthrow the Taliban and destroy Al Qaeda, the US decided to negotiate its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Washington agreed to direct talks with the Taliban without a ceasefire or Afghan government presence, and sought assurances that Afghanistan will not harbour Al Qaeda or other extremist groups after Western forces leave. Pakistan's cooperation in the negotiations was essential²². As of February 2019, there have also been intra-Afghan talks. Both the Taliban and the government aspire to be the dominant political power in the country after the US withdrawal.

On 29 February 2020, representatives of the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement in which the Taliban agreed to prevent terrorists from using Afghanistan to threaten the United States or its allies. Under the agreement, Washington agreed to first reduce its forces from approximately 13,000 to 8,600 within one hundred and thirty-five days, and then to fully withdraw all remaining forces over the next nine and a half months, conditional on the Taliban's adherence to the agreement.

Peace agreements to date do more to accelerate a US and allied withdrawal than to create conditions that could lead to a lasting and secure peace. The Taliban remain committed to their ideology and have good reasons to negotiate, but without seeking real peace²³.

Islamabad has a lot at stake in the Afghan peace process. If the Taliban are legitimised as part of the Kabul government, it will remove a major element of friction in its relations with Washington, which accuses Pakistan of supporting the Taliban, the US being Pakistan's largest foreign donor and

²¹ For further information, see TORRES VIDAL, Carlos. *India y Pakistán, potencias nucleares de facto*. Strategy Notebook 205, IIEE, 'Nonproliferation and Nuclear Arms Control at the Crossroads', September 2020. http://www.iecee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_205_NoProliferacionControlArmasNucleares.pdf

²² 'The Armed Conflict Survey 2019'. IISS, published by Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, May 2019, p. 225.

²³ CORDESMAN, Anthony H. *Afghanistan: The Prospects for a Real Peace*. CSIS report, 7 July 2020. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200708_Afghan_Peace_GH3.pdf

one of its biggest export markets. Moreover, the peace process has provided the Pakistani government with an opportunity to cooperate with US officials.

New Delhi sees the Taliban as too dependent on Pakistan and does not want to see them in the Afghan government. It also fears that the country could become a sanctuary for armed groups operating on Indian territory.

Role of external actors

Today's three major geopolitical powers, the United States, China and Russia, have always been involved in Indo-Pakistani relations, supporting one side or the other and seeking to avoid excessive escalation. During the Cold War, Washington found in Islamabad an important ally against the USSR; since the Sino-Indian war of 1962, Beijing has had close relations with Pakistan, which has led to it being called 'the Chinese Israel', the only setback being anti-Chinese Islamist terrorism based in Pakistan; in contrast, New Delhi, despite its non-aligned position, has always maintained close ties with Moscow²⁴, which today remains its main arms supplier.

The nuclear programmes of both countries led to their estrangement from the US superpower and the imposition of sanctions. Moreover, the US has viewed with great concern that a country as unstable as Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons, which has led to an ambivalent relationship of antagonism and a necessary relationship. Since the deployment of US troops in Afghanistan, this ambivalence has been accentuated as Pakistan has become an indispensable partner in the US military operation and a sanctuary for its enemies.

The Kargil war in 1999 facilitated US-Indian rapprochement, after the end of the Cold War had removed the biggest obstacle. Today, China's emergence has removed New Delhi's reluctant non-alignment, which has tightened its strategic relations with Washington. Moreover, since Trump became president, the relationship has been strengthened. There is empathy between the two leaders, with the relationship between the world's two largest democracies more focused on the security sphere²⁵.

Russia continues to maintain good relations with India, but is rehearsing a measured rapprochement with Pakistan; some accommodation in Afghanistan is facilitating this. The diplomatic gambles of the three global powers involve a difficult balancing act.

²⁴ Roy-CHAUDHURY, Rahul. 'The United States' role and influence on the India-Pakistan conflict', Disarmament Forum, 2004, p. 31. https://www.peacepalacelibrary.nl/ebooks/files/UNIDIR_pdf-art2117.pdf

²⁵ MENON, Shivshankar. 'League of nations. How Trump and Modi Refashioned the US-Indian Relationship'. Foreign Affairs September/October 2020, pp. 132 and 133.

Conclusion

The traumatic independence of India and Pakistan in 1947 and their dispute over Kashmir have conditioned relations marked by recurrent conflict and mistrust. Traditionally, New Delhi was backed by Moscow and Islamabad by Washington and Beijing. Conventional wars dominated until the end of the 20th century, four in all, one of which, in 1971, separated Bangladesh from Pakistan, leaving Pakistan significantly weakened against India.

In the 1980s, the Afghan-Soviet war brought profound changes to the region. Islamabad feared that an ally of New Delhi would entrench its position in Afghanistan, a country that was hostile to it because it questioned the validity as a border of the Durand Line that divides Pashtun territory between the two neighbours. Pakistan trained and armed, in collaboration with the United States and its allies, Islamic fighters from around the world to oppose Soviet forces. The Soviet defeat gave wings to radicalism and served as a ferment for the birth of Al Qaeda in Peshawar, near the Afghan border.

Pakistan became an unstable country, radical Islamism took root, and the state strengthened its ideological profile around its Muslim identity, with the army as its main guarantor; the country itself was also threatened by militias and terrorist groups that had found refuge in its territory. The Afghan insurgent model was used in Kashmir against India, with terrorism making its appearance in the Indo-Pakistan conflict.

There have also been many rapprochement efforts and diplomatic efforts by both neighbours to ease tensions. At all times, international pressure has played a key role in preventing wars and disputes from escalating.

The other vector of transformation in the Indo-Pakistan conflict was the nuclear weapon. In 1974 India responded to the 1964 acquisition of this weapon by China, which had defeated it in the 1962 border war. This in turn boosted Pakistan's nuclear programme. In 1998, both countries already had nuclear capabilities. Pakistan is also presented as a country that has favoured nuclear proliferation and could do so again, and its instability and internal tensions reinforce the seriousness of this threat.

India has always maintained a no-first-use doctrine. To compensate for its conventional weakness, Pakistan maintains that, in addition to responding to an enemy nuclear attack on the same terms, it will employ tactical nuclear weapons if it is unable to stop an Indian force penetrating its territory by other means. In recent years the nuclear doctrinal dialectic between the two neighbours has taken on the character of a Byzantine argument, leaving room for misunderstandings and heightening tensions between them.

The 21st century has seen countless border incursions and military incidents under the shadow of nuclear escalation. In February 2019, a suicide attack in Pulwama, Kashmir, triggered the most acute crisis in the Indo-Pakistan relationship in two decades.

The rise of China, the reordering of the global nuclear order, the new ambitions of Narendra Modi's India and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan are redefining regional geopolitics. New Delhi, which aspires to gain great power status, has shaken off its tradition of non-alignment and is strengthening its strategic ties with Washington. Government-sponsored Hindu nationalism is creating tensions in India's Muslim communities. This, coupled with the change in the territorial status of Jammu and Kashmir, has inflamed the mood in Pakistan. Washington's decision to definitively abandon Afghanistan has brought Islamabad back into the limelight, a key factor in facilitating negotiations.

The spin-offs of the Indo-Pakistan conflict are numerous, making it of global and regional relevance: it is hampering the economic development of both contenders, most severely that of Pakistan; it serves as a catalyst for terrorism in the region; it may limit India's ambitions and slow down the hoped-for rise of Asia; and it could light the fuse for a panoply of highly explosive disputes.

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Chronology

CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT	
DATE	EVENT
1947	Partition of British India and independence of India and Pakistan.
1947-1948	First Indo-Pakistani war.
1960	Indus River Water Treaty.
1962	Sino-Indian border war.
1964	First Chinese nuclear test.
1965	Second Indo-Pakistani War.
1966	Tashkent Agreement.
1971	Third Indo-Pakistani war and Bangladeshi independence.
1972	Shimla Agreement.
1974	First Indian nuclear test.
1979-1989	Afghan-Soviet war, Pakistan supports and trains Afghan insurgency.
1984-2003	Siachen glacier conflict.
1986-1987	Operation Brasstacks.
1989	Insurgency begins in Kashmir.
1996	Taliban take Kabul with Pakistani support.
1998	Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests, nuclear parity of both.
1999	Kargil War.
1999	Lahore Summit.
1999	Hijacking of Indian Airlines flight Kathmandu-New Delhi.
2001	Agra Summit.
2001	Terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament.
2001	9/11 and the deployment of US troops in Afghanistan.
2001-2002	Deployment of troops from both countries on the border.
2007	Samjhauta Express bombings.
2008	Demonstration of force at the border.
2008	Mumbai terrorist attacks.
2014	Narendra Modi becomes Prime Minister of India.
2019	Pulwana crisis.
2019	India changes the territorial status of Jammu and Kashmir.
2019	India successfully launches an anti-satellite missile.

GEOPOLITICAL INDICATORS FOR INDIA	
Type of government	Parliamentary federal republic.
Capital	New Delhi.
Most populated city	Bombay.
Surface	2,974 km ² .
Natural resources	Coal (world's 4 th largest reserve), antimony, iron, gold, manganese-ore, bauxite, rare earths, titanium, natural gas, diamonds, oil and arable land.
Currency	Indian Rupee.
GDP per PPP	9,474 billion (2017 data) 3 rd
GDP per capita	7,200 (2017 data).
Exports	304.1 billion USD. Partners: Estados Unidos 15.6%, EAU 10.2%, Hong Kong 4.9%, China 4.3%.
Imports	452.2 billion USD. Partners: China 16.3%, Estados Unidos 5.5%, EAU 5.2%, Arabia Saudí 4.8%, Suiza 4.7%.
Population	1.3 billion (July 2020 data).
Population growth	1.1%
Peoples	Indo-Aryan 72%, Dravidian 25%, Mongolian and others 3%.
Official language	Hindi and English.
Languages	Hindi 43.6%, Bengali 8%, Marathi 6.9%, Telugu 6.7%, Tamil 5.7%, Gujarati 4.6%, Urdu 4.2%, Kannada 3.6%, Oriya 3.1%, Malayalam 2.9%, Punjabi 2.7%, others 8%.
Religion	Hindu 79.8%, Muslim 14.2%, Christian 2.3%, Sikh 1.7%, other or unspecified 2%.
Urbanisation	34.9%
Growth of the urbanisation rate	2.37% p.a.

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GEOPOLITICAL INDICATORS OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF PAKISTAN	
Type of government	Parliamentary federal republic.
Capital	Islamabad.
Most populated city	Karachi.
Surface	771 km ² .
Natural resources	Natural gas, iron, copper, salt, arable land.
Currency	Pakistani Rupee.
GDP per PPP	1,061 billion USD (2017 data).
GDP per capita	5,400 USD (2017 data).
Exports	32.88 billion USD. Partners: USA 17.7%, UK 7.7%, China 6%, Germany 5.8%, Afghanistan 5.2%, UAE 4.5%, Spain 4.1%.
Imports	53.11 billion USD. Partners: China 27.4%, UAE 13.7%, USA 4.9%, Indonesia 4.3%, Saudi Arabia 4.2%.
Population	233 million.
Population growth	2% p.a.
Peoples	Punjabi 48%, Pashtun 15.4%, Sindi 14.1%, Saraiki 8.4 %, Mujajiki 7.6%, Baluchi 3.6%, others 6.3%.
Official language	Urdu and English.
Languages	Punjabi 48%, Sindi 12%, Saraiki 10%, Pashto 8%, Urdu 8%, Baluchi 3%.
Religion	Muslim 96.4% (Sunni 85-90%, Shi'a 10-15%).
Urbanisation	37.2%
Growth of the urbanisation rate	2.5% p.a.

Chapter Seven

Libya: An active fuse in an unstable Mediterranean?

Pedro Sánchez Herráez

Resumen

Libia, país nacido de un proceso descolonizador en 1953, ha presentado siempre un alto grado de descohesión interna, tanto de las tres regiones que la conforman como por la preponderancia del componente tribal en su sociedad.

Su riqueza en hidrocarburos y su posición geográfica y geopolítica la hacen un objeto de deseo en un mundo global en plena reconfiguración y pugna entre las nuevas potencias.

La caída de Gadafi en 2011 generó un periodo de guerra civil e inestabilidad, en principio con carácter guerra civil, pero que debido a la intervención indirecta y cada vez más directa de nuevas potencias se corre el riesgo de que el conflicto libio, a modo de espoleta, active una guerra internacional en el Mediterráneo.

Palabras clave

Libia, Mediterráneo, Turquía, Egipto, Unión Europea, hidrocarburos.

Abstract

Libya, a country born from a decolonisation process in 1953, has always exhibited a high degree of internal lack of cohesion, both from the three regions that make it up and due to the preponderance of the tribal component in its society.

Its wealth in hydrocarbons and its geographical and geopolitical position make it an object of desire in a global world in full reconfiguration and struggle between the new powers.

The fall of Gaddafi in 2011 generated a period of civil war and instability, in principle with a civil war character, but due to the indirect and increasingly direct intervention of new powers, there is a risk that the Libyan conflict, as a fuse, activate an international war in the Mediterranean.

Keywords

Libya, Mediterranean, Turkey, Egypt, European Union, hydrocarbons.

Introduction

Libya, a complex 'state'?

Libya, with a rich and intense history, like most Mediterranean countries, was born as an independent country in 1953, following its independence – the first colony to achieve independence in Africa – from Italy, the colonial metropolis.

Under the reign of Idris I, its first and only king, the awareness of the artificiality of the new state is great: the external borders, designed according to external geopolitical criteria, are in many cases nothing more than literal lines in the sand, which say little or nothing to the nomadic tribes whose life is trade across the desert sands; the regions that make up Libya, Tripolitania in the east, Cyrenaica in the west and Fezzan in the south, present historical rivalry and few elements of cohesion¹, to which is necessary the existence of cities in which one tribe is the majority and which have and claim a certain degree of autonomy, like 'city-states'². And last but not least, the tribal component, a nuclear aspect in Libya and of prime importance, not only for issues related to identity or customs, but also for reasons directly linked to governance and power.

At the beginning of its independent life, the country was almost destroyed by the Second World War – much of the North African campaign was fought on its soil – mired in poverty and with a population of around one million, in a territory about three and a half times the size of Spain. Libya had been constituted on a federal model with a high degree of decentralisation, with its three regions as major constituent elements, each with its own legislative elements and in permanent competition with each other – indeed, even the capital is in flux between Tripoli and Benghazi, in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica respectively. And despite the discovery of large oil deposits, which were to be exploited by foreign companies, this decentralisation left the central government little room for manoeuvre in designing policies to develop national interests, which was exploited by foreign interests to gain control of the country's wealth and key aspects of the country.

The sum of the pan-Arab waves that shook the region – with Egypt's President Nasser, who came to power after a coup d'état with little resistance in 1952, as a reference and model for the Arab world – accusations of corruption and

¹ VANDEWALLE, Dirk J., 'A history of modern Libya', *Cambridge University Press*, New York, 2006, pp. 4041.

² VV. AA, 'La Primavera Árabe, del sueño a la pesadilla', Analysis and Foresight Centre, Technical Office of the Civil Guard', *Revista Enfoque*, 17 March 2016, p. 8. Available at https://intranet.bibliotecasgc.bage.es/intranandt-tmpl/prog/local_repository/documents/17868.pdf
pdf Note: all internet links in this chapter are active as of 12 October 2020.

the country's rarefied environment led to a coup from which Colonel Gaddafi emerged as the country's new leader in 1969.

After Libya's early days of pan-Arabism, in 1977 Gaddafi established an authoritarian regime with a very personal model, the 'Jamahiriya'³, a term that could be translated as 'Government of the people' or 'State of the masses'. Gaddafi nationalised the oil industry, promoted land reform, created the Great Man-Made River to provide water to desert areas, established social security, increased wages, boosted literacy and the distribution of electricity to the population, often free of charge, all of which led to spectacular economic and human development growth in the country, which became a major recipient of emigration due to its high standard of living. But Qaddafi was also accused of financing terrorism, which led to the cities of Tripoli and Benghazi being bombed by the United States in 1986, he suffered international sanctions in the late 1980s for the in-flight explosion of two airliners... the figure of Qaddafi and Libya's role in the world was always full of apparent paradoxes.

In Libya there were, and are, some 140 tribes, and more than in the regions⁴. It was at this level that Gaddafi sought stability for his government; he knew the Libyan reality perfectly well and was able to manage it in a way that suited his interests, relying on like-minded tribes, balancing one with another, making pacts and, above all, using the everlasting game of carrot and stick. But despite centralisation, despite the concentration of power in Gaddafi's hands, there was no effort to unite Libya as a single state, as a common good for all Libyans; rather, the complicated balances of power were managed to keep Gaddafi in power.

Within the framework of the Arab Spring in 2011, revolts took place in certain areas of Libya, revolts which, as in the rest of the Arab world, began as social movements and turned into political and revolutionary protests, and which were harshly repressed by Gaddafi, generating an armed confrontation between groups and tribes loyal to and opposed to Gaddafi. The United Nations Security Council, on 17 March of the same year, authorised the use of force, explicitly excluding the land option, to protect civilians and populated areas and, finally, and despite a real or apparent ceasefire decreed in Libya, by means of an air intervention that began on 19 March 2011, in addition to an arms embargo and other measures, Gaddafi's military capabilities were degraded. After Gaddafi's defeat in the battle of Tripoli on 22 August, the regime's fate was sealed, although resistance from the last bastion loyal

³ Based on the so-called 'Green Book', where Gaddafi tries to expose his system. Available at https://web.archive.org/web/20121114182152/http://free-news.org/PDFs/EL_libro_Verde_de_Gadafi.pdf

⁴ SÁNCHEZ DE ROJAS DÍAZ, Emilio. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Geopolitical Panorama of Conflicts 2016, Madrid, 2016, Chapter 3, 'Libya: trying to «stitch together the remnants» of the revolution', p. 78. Disponible en http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/Panorama_Geopolitico_Conflictos_2016.pdf

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to Gaddafi, Sirte, continued until 20 October, when he was finally defeated, captured and killed. What would be called Libya's first civil war is over.

Idris I's regional federal model was unable to move the country forward or create a national consciousness; Gaddafi's model, very much centred on himself and supported by the tribes, achieved spectacular economic successes – thanks to Libya's hydrocarbon wealth – but no real national consciousness, no conception of Libya as a unitary state.

Would this, with international assistance and despite Libya's complexity, be the opportunity to build a nation-state?

Background to the conflict

If in a global world there is nothing, or almost nothing, that is strictly 'local', what is certain is that the structural situation in Libya induces a conflict that is apparently internal in nature, a civil and almost tribal war; but precisely as a consequence of this globalisation, given the country's geographical and geopolitical position and its wealth in hydrocarbons, the opening of gaps and spaces, the appearance of fissures in the nation makes it possible to incorporate a multiplicity of actors into the conflict in pursuit of their interests, giving it a powerful resonance on a regional and even global scale.

Libya: the fracturing of a 'state'?

International attempts to contribute to the creation of a stable government in Libya are running up against a complex reality. After the fall of Gaddafi and in the ensuing environment of instability and power vacuum, there was no governing institution⁵, the tribes are the main security actors and also generally the most trusted by the population⁶. But, following secular habits, they engaged in a series of disputes⁷ to gain power, to settle real or supposed debts between them and to settle rivalries by means of arms.

In this situation of disputes at the tribal level, an attempt was made to create government structures at the national level; a National Transitional Council was initially created and elections were held in 2012, from which the General

⁵ HOUSE OF COMMONS, 'Libya: Examination of intervention and collapse and the UK's future policy options', Foreign Affairs Committee, Third Report Session 2016-2017, 14 September 2016, p. 23. Available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmfaaff/119/119.pdf>

⁶ AL-SHADEEDI, Al-Hamzeh, and EZZEDDINE, Nancy. 'Libyan tribes in the shadows of war and peace', Clingendael, CRU Policy Brief, February 2019, p. 6. Disponible en https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/PB_Tribalism.pdf

⁷ AL QASEM, Abu. 'Libyan tribes: part of the problem or the solution?' *Middle East Monitor*, 8 August 2018. Disponible en <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180808-libyan-tribes-part-of-the-problem-or-a-solution/>

National Congress of Libya (GNC) was created, based in Tripoli, a body which from its inception was a forum for disputes between moderates and Islamists, between supporters of different options and tribal groups, a body which, given the lack of consensus and the constant mutual accusations, became highly ineffective.

In this power vacuum and in this space of instability that is Libya, terrorist groups and organised crime networks flourish, becoming one of the main countries from which irregular immigration⁸, channelled by human trafficking mafias, attempts to reach Europe, while the Islamic State, faced with the harassment suffered in other parts of the planet, especially Syria and Iraq, takes advantage of the security vacuums to establish itself in the territory and occupy important parts of the country.

The situation continues to show no signs of improving, and in a welter of successive extensions of mandates, elections held and not accepted, elections postponed, the figure of Marshal Haftar emerges, a new 'strong man' who orders the dissolution of the NGC, with a strong presence of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist political organisation considered terrorist by several nations. *And Haftar, a furious radical anti-Islamist, brought together a coalition of militias and tribes under the name of the Libyan National Army (LNA) and launched attacks against radical Islamist groups in several areas of Libya, especially in the east, the area where the marshal was strongest, starting, in May 2014, what would be called the 'second Libyan civil war'.*

Anarchy and chaos spreads; in the midst of the fighting, new elections are held in June 2014 to elect the Parliament, the so-called House of Representatives (HoR), based in Benghazi, with the end result that both the CGN and the new HoR proclaim themselves as the legitimate government of Libya, while the fighting continues: fighting for control of the oil infrastructure, for expelling radical Islamists from Libya, for achieving political power in the country, for tribal issues, and so on.

The international community exerted pressure, a meeting materialised in the Moroccan city of Sijrat on 17 December 2015, at which the so-called 'Libyan National Accord' was reached⁹, which created a so-called Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, as well as an attempt to share power between the different chambers and existing bodies... but the struggle continues, and each of the sides, increasingly nucleated around Haftar (LNA) and al-Sarraj (GNA), seek allies or listen to and accept offers of support from other countries.

Despite the fighting, the means for exploiting the oil wealth have generally been safeguarded; beyond the cuts, blockades and disputes over the control

⁸ EURONEWS. 'Immigration hell in Libya', 9 December 2016. Available at <https://es.euronews.com/2016/12/09/el-infierno-de-la-inmigracion-en-libia>

⁹ Disponible en http://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/announcement_of_national_reconciliation_agreement.pdf

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of wells, pipelines and terminals, and despite the harshness of the fighting, the infrastructure has not suffered serious damage¹⁰, as all the parties to the conflict, as well as the different tribes and armed groups that roam Libya, aspire to 'own' a part of this great wealth.

The attacks by Haftar's forces on the Islamic State led the terrorist group to take refuge in the southernmost and unpopulated region of Fezzan in 2016, although it continues to wait for any opportunity to expand again¹¹ throughout the country. The trump card of the fight against jihadist terrorism has won Haftar many international supporters, despite the fact that the government internationally recognised by the United Nations is the one in Tripoli.

Warring sides, factions and tribes reflect a country that is completely broken, where there is also a struggle against Islamic radicalism, but with abundant oil wealth and a significant geopolitical and geographical position... if the first civil war in Libya already had an international presence, in the initial framework of this military intervention, the second Libyan civil war has become the occasion awaited by many nations on the planet to achieve their interests.

The Fracturing of Libya: a window of opportunity for other nations?

In a world immersed in a global reordering, after the end of the bipolar world, after the relative withdrawal of the United States from certain areas of the planet and after the rise of China as the world's second economic power, new spaces and spheres are being created in which countries and powers, with or without an imperial past, are trying to exploit these possibilities. And the Mediterranean is a very important space in this new regional and global contest; one only has to look at Russia's¹², or a neo-Ottoman Turkey¹³, to visualise this new reality.

The global situation generated after the economic crisis of 2008, of considerable intensity and duration, has taken its toll on both shores of the

¹⁰ SUÑER MARZARÍ, Ricard. 'The war in Libya and oil resources: Order within chaos?' Opinion Paper 41/2020. 28 April 2020. Disponible en http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEE041_2020RICSUN_Libia.pdf

¹¹ ALJAZEERA, ISIL. 'Will bounce back if Libya civil war doesn't end, study warns', 9 August 2020. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/9/isil-will-bounce-back-if-libya-civil-war-doesnt-end-study-warns>

¹² SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. 'Russia in the Mediterranean: Cold War 2.0?', Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Analysis Paper 31/2019, 20 November 2019. Disponible en http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2019/DIEEEA31_2019PEDSAN_Rusia.pdf

¹³ PRIETO ARELLANO, Fernando. 'The surprising recovery of the former sick man. Neo-Ottomanism as a pivot and catalyst of Turkey's new foreign policy', Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Framework Document 19/2013, 26 November 2013. Disponible en http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_marco/2013/DIEEEM19-2013_Neootomanismo_Fdo.PrietoArellano.pdf

Mediterranean - in varying proportions - which, added to a long process of generalised disenchantment of the populations towards their governments, has led to the outbreak of revolts and revolutions: from the so-called 'Arab Spring' that began in 2011, with such an aftermath of wars and setbacks in quality of life and freedoms that it has come to be called the 'Arab Winter'¹⁴ to the movements of the 'indignados', 'chalecos amarillos' and other expressions of popular disenchantment that are sweeping Europe and the West, generating a high degree of instability throughout the Mediterranean¹⁵.

Added to this complex and changing environment is the discovery of large hydrocarbon reserves in the eastern Mediterranean¹⁶, and the consequent potential construction of a new gas pipeline to southern Europe, which introduces new factors into the regional and global balance equation, as well as including new countries involved in this issue, which are directly involved in the way it is resolved, due to the generous economic and geopolitical dividends that can be obtained, or not, depending on how the equation is resolved.

On the other hand, in addition to these 'new' issues, the 'usual' disputes, differences and struggles continue to exist: for leadership in the Maghreb, for leadership in the Arab world, for the leadership of Islam, for the – global – control of energy resources...

Consequently, from the United States – for it is still the global superpower – to Russia, via the Gulf states and almost all the Mediterranean nations, including the international organisations to which they belong – the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the European Union (EU), etc.– and non-state actors – such as international terrorist groups and transnational organised crime gangs– the multiplicity of actors and interests is enormous and, in many cases, a 'zero-sum game'.

Thus, more or less clearly, with a greater or lesser degree of involvement and, in some cases, with a certain margin of ambiguity –considering that the GNA government is the one internationally recognised by the United Nations - Russia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan and France are aligned on the side of Haftar (LNA), while Turkey, Qatar and Italy are aligned on the side of Al-Sarraj (GNA).

And all of these parties involved can significantly improve – or worsen – their regional or global leverage in Libya.

¹⁴ DW, 'Luego de la primavera llega el «invierno árabe»', 14 January 2016. Available at <https://www.dw.com/es/luego-de-la-primavera-llega-el-invierno-%C3%A1rabe/a-18977818>

¹⁵ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. '¿Arderá el Mediterráneo... sur?'. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Analysis Paper 04/2020, 19 February 2020. Available at http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA04_2020PEDSAN_Mediterraneo.pdf

¹⁶ ICEX, 'Continúan los descubrimientos de gas en el Mediterráneo', May 2018. Available at <https://www.icex.es/icex/es/navegacion-principal/todos-nuestros-servicios/informacion-de-mercados/paises/navegacion-principal/noticias/NEW2018787233.html?idPais=CY>

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Current status of the conflict

After the armed conflict began apparently on a national level, as a confrontation between rival factions (tribes), the truth is that it has gradually become internationalised, to the point that not only are foreign disputes being fought on Libyan soil, but also the possibility of other countries fighting directly in Libya has arisen.

A new 'war of the others'?

In 2019, after years of disputes and conflicts – in varying degrees of intensity – in Libya, and after multiple attempts at mediation and reaching agreements, most of the territory was controlled by Marshal Haftar, except for some small areas and except for Tripoli, the country's capital.

Libya: Battlefield for the others as well?

Haftar launched a powerful offensive to conquer Tripoli on 14 April 2019. And this action, which was intended to be a rapid and forceful campaign to achieve total control of the country, turned into a war of attrition, a war of attrition, in which the supply of fighters and military resources was constant, not only from Libya's different factions, groups and tribes – further complicating, if possible, the complex relationship between communities and the possibility of future agreements¹⁷ – but also, to a large and growing extent, from outside the country.

Tripoli is a large city, home to the majority of Libya's population, the seat of the UN-recognised government and a complex target to conquer if it is reasonably defended, as the ratio of forces and capabilities to occupy a city has to be clearly on the side of the attacker. The battle for Tripoli could clearly decide the course of the war, as the seizure of the capital and major cities of a country has always been one of the objectives of wars; and in an increasingly urbanised and tribalised world, this secular reality is gaining more and more specific weight¹⁷.

But the offensive bogged down in the city's suburbs, soldiers of fortune and contractors poured in on both sides, and war materiel and equipment was provided in increasing numbers by the Allies on each side, including the use of aircraft in direct attacks on ground targets.

And, as a turning point, on 27 November 2019 Turkey and the GNA – as the Libyan government – unilaterally declared the extension of their exclusive economic zones –which generated a new conflict in the eastern Mediterranean, in the

¹⁷ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro. 'Libya: The 21st century model of conflict?'. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Analysis Paper 21/2019, 03 July 2019. Available at http://www.ieee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2019/DIEEEA21_2019PEDSAN_Libia.pdf

midst of the effervescence caused by the discovery of hydrocarbons in its subsoil¹⁸– in addition to signing a military cooperation agreement between the two nations, which involved not only channelling a growing flow of mercenaries from Syria, but even sending regular Turkish troops after the authorisation of its parliament¹⁹.

Thus, the massive arrival of Turkish personnel and assets from January 2020 enabled the GNA to reverse the situation when Haftar's victory seemed almost certain, breaking the siege of Tripoli, forcing the Marshal's forces to retreat and gaining control of several key areas – Sabratha, Sorman and the Al-Watiya airbase – and even initiating an advance eastwards towards the stronghold of the rival forces and the key area in the control of Libya's oil flow, the Gulf and the city of Sirte.

Faced with the advance of GNA forces²⁰ eastwards, in what appeared to be a complete turnaround and the possibility of Haftar's total defeat – in a geographical sequence, Tripoli and Sirte, which apparently harks back to the process of defeating Gaddafi – in July Egypt authorised the dispatch of troops to Libyan soil and set red lines, the cities of Sirte and Al Jufra, which if occupied by GNA forces would lead to a direct Egyptian military intervention on Libyan soil.

The situation is complicated by the fact that, in addition to the more or less indirect disputes between many countries in Libya, the qualitative leap that has occurred is the consideration that two major nations²¹ such as Egypt and Turkey run the serious risk of a direct clash between them on Libyan soil. So how is the fighting in Libya going?

Libya: Testing ground for battle procedures?

In addition to the conglomerates of forces and factions that are aligned, and not always on a permanent basis, war activity in each group has increasingly relied on mercenary forces and contractors.

The private Russian security company Wagner, which supports Haftar, significantly increased the troops and resources provided to attempt the conquest of Tripoli, personnel and means began to arrive in a more

¹⁸ SÁNCHEZ TAPIA, Felipe. 'What is Turkey looking for in Libya?' Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Analysis Paper 06/2020, 03 March 2020. Disponible en http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2020/DIEEEA06_2020FELSAN_TurquiaLibia.pdf

¹⁹ EUROPA PRESS. 'El parlamento de Turquía autoriza el envío de tropas a Libia'; 2 January 2020. Available at <https://www.europapress.es/interna> <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-parlamento-turquia-autoriza-autoriza-envio-tropas-libia-20200102154659.html>

²⁰ RTVE: 'Egipto autoriza el envío de tropas al exterior ante la situación en Libia'; 20 July 2020. Disponible en <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20200720/egipto-autoriza-envio-tropas-exterior-ante-situacion-libia/2030640.shtml>

²¹ Geopolitical data on these countries can be found at the end of this chapter.

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significant way in September 2019, which seemed likely to tip the balance in favour of Marshal's forces²². *But the Turkish security company SADAT, which has apparently been active in Libya since 2013²³, and is reportedly close to the Erdogan regime and used to channel Sunni Islamists from Syria to Libya, is also increasing its support for the GNA.*

In January 2020 Turkey began sending thousands of Syrian mercenaries to Libya to support the Tripoli government, while Syrian and Sudanese mercenaries are also lining up on Haftar's side²⁴; and it is these troops that are gradually assuming the brunt of the battle, so that in many of the frontline areas it is essentially mercenaries and contractors from both sides that are fighting each other.

But it is not only foreign mercenaries and contractors that constitute a very significant, and growing, part of the warring parties; although the looting of Qadhafi's arsenals after his fall filled the country – and the entire region, with the associated destabilisation induced in Mali and the rest of the Sahel – with weapons, advanced weapons systems flow into Libya²⁵, to both sides, from anti-aircraft missiles to anti-tank guided missiles, target designation systems and drones – it is even reported that the world's largest drone battle has taken place in Libya²⁶ – ... and all this despite the existing arms embargo. Foreign weapons and combat procedures are tested on Libyan soil. And in the cities, where most Libyans live.

Libya: What about those of us who live on the battlefield?

The blocking of most oil production since January 2020 as part of the disputes between the GNA and the LNA has cost the country some \$2 billion a month, adding to the already existing economic crisis²⁷, in the context of disputes over the sharing of export profits.

²² WEHREY, Frederic. 'With the help of Russians fighters, Libya's Haftar could take Tripoli', Foreign Policy, 5 December 2019. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/05/libya-khalifa-haftar-take-tripoli-russian-fighters-help/>

²³ AHVALNEWS, 'Turkish military contractor Sadat has always been in Libya', 4 January 2020. Available at <https://ahvalnews.com/sadat/turkish-military-contractor-sadat-has-always-been-libya>

²⁴ BLOOMBERG. 'Hundreds of Russian, Syrian mercenaries quit Libya's front lines', 23 May 2020. Available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/20200525/hundreds-of-russian-syrian-mercenaries-quit-libya-s-front-lines>

²⁵ VEST, Nathan. 'Can anything stop the flow of advanced weapons into Libya', Defence One, 13 December 2019. Disponible en <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/12/can-anything-stop-flow-advanced-weapons-libya/161892/>

²⁶ VEST, Nathan, and COLIN P. Clark. 'Is the conflict in Libya a preview of the future of warfare?', Defense One, 2 June 2020. Available at <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/06/conflict-libya-preview-future-warfare/165807/>

²⁷ THEECONOMIST: Oil blockade continues to ravage economy, 4 March 2020. Disponible en <http://www.eiu.com/industry/article/1459158129/oil-blockade-continues-to-ravage-economy/2020-03-04>

Although the international community only authorises the sale to the Libyan state oil company, which is managed by the GNA and receives the revenues from its sale, and after rejecting Haftar's attempt to create a parallel oil export company²⁸, most of the infrastructure and oil fields are in the hands of the LNA. Libya's greatest wealth, and for the moment almost the only one, is still not at full capacity, the cost of war is high, and community and tribal rivalries have been exacerbated.

On the other hand, the situation of the majority of the population is extremely complex; in addition to the exhaustion that exists after years of war and hardship, the number of cases and deaths from COVID is increasing rapidly, which the authorities are trying to combat by means of curfews and restrictions on movement, creating difficulties for the survival of populations that literally 'live from day to day'. And protests are growing over poor living conditions throughout the country – in all areas – constant power and water cuts – the result of damaged infrastructure and lack of maintenance – as well as government corruption, and since the closure of the oil wells, there is not only an economic crisis in Libya, but also a liquidity crisis. And in such an environment, rising commodity prices, high unemployment and deteriorating living standards have a serious impact on populations. One million people are in need, out of the country's total population of just over 6 million, and displaced persons are close to half a million, amounting to some 425,000 people, in addition to the presence of some 600,000 migrants and refugees on the territory.

Demonstrations and protests against the lack of basic services and corruption have been going on for weeks in Tripoli, prompting GNA leader Fayeze Al-Sarraj to proclaim that he would resign «before the end of October»; but in the east of the country demonstrations are also taking place for the same reasons: in Benghazi protesters even stormed and set fire to the headquarters of the eastern Libyan «government» and attacked the city's town hall, and protests with social undertones are spreading throughout the territory controlled by Haftar, whose security forces reportedly fired on demonstrators in some localities, and where the prime minister of the Libyan government based in Tobruk, Abdullah al-Zani, resigned.

Beyond sectarian affinities and discourses, given these circumstances, it is likely that in Libya the general perception, after almost a decade of instability and war, is that we are facing a new 'war of the others', a war that 'others' are waging on Libyan soil, for reasons outside Libya itself and where militias and armed groups have become the power on the ground... could it be that this situation, or its perception, constitutes a simile of what happened in Lebanon in its long civil war (1975-1990)? The following paragraph could well be a transposition of this sentiment, simply by changing the gentility: «(...) most Lebanese simply feel that they were caught up in the logic of a war in which

²⁸ THE ECONOMIST. 'Oil production nears complete shutdown', 24 January 2020. Disponible en <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1078967691&Country=Libya&topic=Economy&subtopic=Forecast&subsubtopic=External+sector>

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a conglomerate of militias had usurped the State, thus feeling that they were innocent victims, because, in the end, this was a 'war of the others', the main causes of the war had nothing to do with «real Lebanon» and it was triggered from above (...)»²⁹.

However, in a self-reinforcing process, it may be the 'war of the others'... but it is still a war in which 'some' ask for support from 'the others' and those 'others' may also end up fighting each other in a much larger conflagration, in a new edition of what has secularly been known as the 'Balkan curse', but this time in North Africa.

A new 'Balkan curse'?

Tensions have been growing, swords have been raised and the situation seemed close to getting completely out of control, given the seemingly immovable positions of the opposing sides.

Egypt's drawing of red lines regarding the Gulf of Sirte reflects a kind of ultimatum, a point of no return, since the loss of this area, full of oil terminals, would mean the end of the LNA's influence and real capacity for action and pressure in Libya, would mean its defeat... and that of its allies?

Moreover, the struggle between Egypt and Turkey goes beyond maintaining Sirte and Khufrat as red lines, as the port of Misrata would be viewed with concern by Cairo if it were to become an Ottoman base. And, furthering this concern, an agreement has been signed³⁰ whereby, with Qatari funding, a tripartite centre would be set up in Tripoli, including a fighter training centre, a matter discussed at the meeting held during the visit of the Qatari and Turkish Defence Ministers to Tripoli on 17 August 2020³¹. Such an agreement would provide not only for the establishment of bases, but also for the deployment of forces and advisors³². The presence of a potential Turkish air base in Al-Watiyah, and a naval base in Misrata, is perceived as a potential threat by Egypt.

Consequently, the Libyan conflict has a direct impact and complicates the situation in North Africa, the Sahel, southern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean

²⁹ SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, and RODRIGUEZ BARRIGÓN, Juan Manuel. *El conflicto del Líbano*, Colección Conflictos Internacionales Contemporáneos, issue 11, Ministry of Defence-Universidad Carlos III, Madrid, 2009, p. 76.

³⁰ SEENEWS, *Turkey, Qatar, GNA agree to turn Misrata port to Turkish naval base*, 18 August 2020. Available at <https://see.news/turkey-qatar-gna-agree-to-turn-misrata-port-to-turkish/>

³¹ TRT World, *Turkey, Libya and Qatar agree on signing a military deal*, 17 August 2020. Available at <https://www.trtworld.com/africa/turkey-libya-and-qatar-agree-on-signing-military-deal-38967>

³² ATALAYAR, *Qatar enviará asesores militares a Libia para apoyar al Gobierno de Trípoli*, Atalayar, 19 August 2020. Available at <https://atalayar.com/content/qatar-enviar%C3%A1-asesores-militares-libia-para-apoyar-al-gobierno-de-tr%C3%ADpoli>

enormously³³. And large nations can be drawn directly into the fray; it could be that the 'delegated forces' eventually lead to the direct confrontation of their 'constituencies', as has so often been the case in the Balkans.

But the simile does not end there, as the solution to this type of problem, of confronted spaces and people, has been, on many occasions, the 'balkanisation'³⁴ of the country, the fragmentation of the country into confronted territories and communities, as one of the potential ways of dealing with the complex interplay of local, regional and global interests. *For this reason, the partition of Libya, the real fracturing of the country³⁵ in the face of Haftar's apparent loss of the possibility of total victory and the also apparent difficulty for the GNA to obtain a military victory, has been put forward as a hypothesis that is not impossible.*

On the other hand, steps have been taken for years in the east of the country to create state structures in order to achieve as much autonomy as possible, from the creation of a central bank parallel to Tripoli's in Benghazi, with Libyan currency printed in Russia –which has been declared fake by several nations³⁶ – to the opening of embassies in other nations³⁷, in addition to the aforementioned attempt to create an oil exporting company outside Tripoli's existing one. The fracturing of a country and the secession of a territory cannot be improvised.

International complexities and the attempted shift in the balance of power in the region, or the emergence of new nations eager to occupy a 'good place in the sun', make the search for diplomatic support crucial, both for the purpose of gaining recognition of a new independent state - or new entity - and by the 'ally' nation, the one granting recognition, as a means of obtaining the fulfilment of its interests through the 'new sovereign nation'.

But when the process of partition begins, especially in spaces as complex as Libya, the result may not only be a fracture between East and West... suffice it to recall the three secular regions that make up the country, or the powerful tribal component that is at the core of the country. And balkanisation often

³³ MEGERESI, Tarek. 'Geostrategic dimensions of Libya's civil war', 18 May 2020. Available at <https://africacenter.org/publication/geostrategic-dimensions-libya-civil-war/>

³⁴ SPANISH LANGUAGE DICTIONARY. 'Balkanisation': *Dismemberment of a country into warring communities or territories*. Real Academia Española, Tricentenary Edition (online) 2019 update.

³⁵ EL GOMATI, Anas. 'Could Libya be partitioned?', Foreign Policy, 19 August 2020. Disponible en https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/19/khalifa-haftar-libya-partition/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=24442&utm_term=Editors%20Picks%20OC&?tpcc=24442

³⁶ COINWORLD. 'Countries contest legitimacy of Russian-printed Libyan notes', 15 June 2020. Disponible en <https://www.coinworld.com/news/us-coins/countries-contest-legitimacy-of-russian-printed-libyan-notes>

³⁷ Reuters. 'Libya's eastern government opens Damascus embassy, pledges united fight against Turkey', 3 March 2020. Disponible en <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-libya/libyas-eastern-government-opens-damascus-embassy-pledges-united-fight-against-turkey-idUSKBN20Q1GJ>

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results in spaces with micro-capacities and where, in an environment of growing instability, terrorists and organised crime networks would undoubtedly thrive. Just look again at the Balkans.

And this would be extremely worrying for neighbouring countries, for Algeria, where the memory of the 'black decade'³⁸, the presence of terrorist groups on its territory and its very large southern border with the very unstable Sahel condition security and the perception of security; for Tunisia³⁹, with a worrying germ of jihadism on its territory, as well as for Egypt itself. Control of the territory as a single unit is essential to guarantee its security and exercise the legitimate monopoly of violence.

But the difficulty of achieving this end, or the ease of considering fragmentation, reaches almost unimaginable limits in Libya, as the possession of control of a resource or a key point of land makes it possible, in the absence of cohesion and a sense of unity, to create 'micro-taifas'. Indeed, the Cairo meeting between the two sides at the end of September 2020⁴⁰, in an attempt to create a lasting ceasefire, has addressed issues such as confidence-building measures, security arrangements and the role of the Petroleum Facilities Guard, which is supposed to protect the oil facilities to safeguard the country's main wealth, but which is often made up of militias and local groups with their own agendas and interests.

And all it takes is for a 'micro-taifa' to gain the support of several nations –for whatever reasons, which are not always transparent or obvious– to create an entity that will continue to be a source of permanent instability. And given Libya's importance on the international chessboard, potential 'godparents' for a new birth might not be lacking.

Role of external actors

If in any conflict the role of countries and international organisations is a very important aspect, in the case of Libya, due to its own intrinsic lack of cohesion, it is of paramount importance.

A new key piece on the world chessboard!

In the reconfiguration of power on the planet, the stakes are very diverse and in very different aspects, as are the issues that affect the lives, realities

³⁸ Aljazeera. *The Black Decade still weighs heavily on Algeria*, 3 November 2015. Disponible en <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/3/the-black-decade-still-weighs-heavily-on-algeria>

³⁹ RODRÍGUEZ, Ana. *Tunisia makes a move in the Libyan powder keg by reaffirming its support for the GNA*, ⁴¹ Atalayar, 30 July 2020. Disponible en <https://atalayar.com/content/t%C3%BAnez-mueve-ficha-en-el-polvor%C3%ADn-libio-reafirmando-su-apoyo-al-gna>

⁴⁰ Reuters. *Libyan rivals agree to further military talks, UN says*, 30 September 2020. Disponible en <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/libyan-rivals-agree-to-further-military-talks-u-n-says-idUSKBN26L2I5>

and beliefs of individuals and peoples; and, in this complex game, in certain spaces disputes are being fought that transform apparently unimportant territories into regional or global key players.

The Islamist trump card

The struggle over Islamism is played out between three powerful blocs, in the vast space that encompasses the Arab world, the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf: Iran and Turkey, each as the champion of one of these different blocs, and on the other side Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates⁴¹. *Coincidentally or not, the latter nations are among Haftar's supporters in Libya and Israel and the UAE have recently signed a peace agreement, while Turkey, aligned with the GNA, as part of its neo-Ottomanism is trying to create a sort of new umma (community of Islamic believers) under its leadership, including the Arab world⁴², not being an Arab country, and to displace Saudi Arabia and Egypt in this role.*

In 2017 the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt imposed a blockade on Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism and having links to the Muslim Brotherhood⁴³, which is considered by Egypt to be a terrorist organisation and was expelled from the country.

Turkey has requested funding from Qatar for its military interventions⁴⁴, in addition to the fact that some of the mercenaries employed by the Turks, especially those sent from Syria, are known for their religious extremism⁴⁵; in fact, and although the data are difficult to verify, it is indicated that Turkey has sent from Syria to Libya, in addition to some 18,000 mercenaries in

⁴¹ SPYER, Jonathan. 'The end of the age of insurgency', Foreign Policy, 2 October 2020. Disponible en https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/02/the-end-of-the-age-of-insurgency/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=25840&utm_term=Editors%20Picks%20OC&?tpcc=25840

⁴² BEKDIL, Burak. 'Erdogan and his Arab 'brothers'', Middle East Forum, 8 October 2020. Disponible en https://www.meforum.org/61634/erdogan-and-his-arab-brothers?utm_source=Middle+East+Forum&utm_campaign=49952c1218-MEF_Bekdil_2020_10_09_09_17&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_086cfd423c-49952c1218-33746477&goal=0_086cfd423c-49952c1218-33746477&mc_cid=49952c1218&mc_eid=7193a66140

⁴³ Aljazeera. 'ThreeyearQatarblockadecouldbeoverinweeks';9September2020.Availableat<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/09/09/three-year-qatar-blockade-could-be-over-in-weeks-us/>

⁴⁴ PÉREZ, Carlota. 'Erdogan requests Qatari funding for his military interventions', 8 October 2020. Disponible en <https://atalayar.com/content/erdogan-solicita-financiacion%3%B3n-qatar%3%AD-parasus-intervenciones-militares>

⁴⁵ FRANZTMAN, Seth. 'Is Pompeo changing tack on Turkey', Middle East Forum, 5 October 2020. Disponible en https://www.meforum.org/61623/is-pompeo-changing-tack-on-turkey?utm_source=Middle+East+Forum&utm_campaign=0cad789471-MEF_Frantzman_2020_10_07_09_25&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_086cfd423c-0cad789471-33746477&goal=0_086cfd423c-0cad789471-33746477&mc_cid=0cad789471&mc_eid=7193a66140

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different phases, some 10,000 jihadists – of whom some 2,500 are Tunisian nationals⁴⁶ – instrumentalising radicalism for its own benefit. And Cairo is calling for non-Arab interference in the Libyan conflict, particularly Turkey, and feels a powerful pressure and threat on one of its flanks, as well as its leadership⁴⁶ in the region.

In this complex game of checks and balances, it is even claimed that the signing of a peace agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates could prolong the war in Libya⁴⁷. And if Islamism provides some parameters for interpreting the rationale for foreign nations' alliances in Libya, other more material aspects also shed light on the matter.

The energy trump card

The Eastern Mediterranean, thanks to the discovery of large hydrocarbon reserves in its subsoil, is receiving a high degree of attention from all countries, not only in the surrounding area, but regionally and globally. The extraction of these hydrocarbons could provide substantial benefits to the countries in whose subsoil – at the bottom of the waters of their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) – these reserves are found; moreover, the construction of a new gas pipeline, *Eastmed*⁴⁸, would allow the geopolitics of energy in this region and throughout Eurasia to be modified by providing new energy access to Europe, in principle without passing through Turkey and not necessarily transporting Russian gas, which is not to the liking of either Ankara or Moscow – even though they are on different sides in Libya – for obvious economic and geopolitical reasons.

For this reason, the dispute over control of the arrival of hydrocarbons to Europe from the southern flank plays one of its trump cards in the Libyan conflict; not only because of its enormous hydrocarbon reserves, not only because of the existence of a gas pipeline in service that reaches Italy, the *Greenstream*⁴⁹, but also because of the simultaneous extension of its Exclusive Economic Zone to Turkey, with which it reached an agreement in December 2019 – extensions made unilaterally and, consequently, not in accordance with

⁴⁶ 'Egypt's leadership feels markedly threatened by Turkey', 11 August 2020. Available at <https://www.dw.com/en/egypts-leadership-feels-markedly-threatened-by-turkey/a-54533478>

⁴⁷ PACK, Jason. 'The Israel-UAE deal won't bring peace, but it will prolong the war in Libya', Foreign Policy, 21 August 2020. Disponible en https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/21/the-israel-uae-deal-wont-bring-peace-but-it-will-prolong-the-war-in-libya/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=24444&utm_term=Editors%20Picks%20OC&?tpcc=24444

⁴⁸ NSENERGY. 'Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline Project'. Available at <https://www.nsenenergybusiness.com/projects/eastern-mediterranean-pipeline-project/>

⁴⁹ BELLOTTO, Alberto, and VITA, Lorenzo. 'Che cos'è il gasdotto Greenstream', Insideover, 26 December 2016. Disponible en <https://it.insideover.com/schede/politica/cosa-e-greenstream.html>

*the law by including areas of other coastal states*⁵³ – which would provide an enormous capacity for control, or veto, of the planned Eastmed gas pipeline, both by Turkey and, to a lesser extent, by a Libya fully allied with Ankara.

On the other hand, Libya reached production of 1.2 million barrels per day in 2019, although during 2020, and above all as a result of the blockade imposed by Haftar, production has fallen to around 80,000 barrels per day, so that an increase in the flow of Libyan oil to the market could lead the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which is very active in its attempt to stabilise the fall in oil prices due to the decrease in consumption due, among other issues, to the pandemic, resorting, among other means, to a reduction in supply, to apply the necessary pressure⁵⁰ to prevent a Libya at full pumping capacity from destabilising prices to some extent.

Given the current and potential meshing of oil and gas pipelines, in a reorganising planet, if energy geopolitics has always played a major role, it is now a key element in this reconfiguration⁵¹. To a varying degree of causality, it is necessary not to lose sight of this question in the genesis of the events that have been triggered in Belarus in August 2020⁵², the country through which the *Druzhba*⁵³ pipeline runs, which, coming from Russia, branches off in this country to reach Central and Eastern Europe, or the drums of war that have begun to sound in the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020, a territory in dispute since the fall of the Soviet Union between Armenia and Azerbaijan, allies of Russia and Turkey respectively, in the Caucasus, and territory near which runs a network of oil and gas pipelines that allow, in addition to other routes, the transit of gas to Europe through Turkey.

The fact that almost all of the nations supporting each of the parties in Libya are major hydrocarbon-producing nations or transit countries – with the economic and geopolitical advantages that this entails – is another factor in explaining the alliances and the support given to them, beyond other discourses and, obviously, alongside other issues and elements of the global power game.

⁵⁰ BLOOMBERG. 'Haftar is prepared to allow Libya to oil restart, US embassy says', 12 September 2020. Disponible en https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-12/haftar-prepared-to-allow-libya-oil-restart-u-s-embassy-says?cmpid=socialflow-twitter-business&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=socialflow-organic&utm_content=business&utm_source=twitter#_blank

⁵¹ In this regard, it is interesting to consult the Cuadernos de Estrategia collection of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies entitled 'Energy and Geostrategy', the seventh issue of which will be published in 2020. Available at https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/e/n/energia_y_geoestrategia_2020

⁵² LA RAZÓN. '¿Qué está pasando en Bielorrusia?'. 10 August 2020. Available at <https://www.larazon.es/internacional/20200810/lncpdee5ozedhibvr6pml6bxfm.html>

⁵³ INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF OIL TRANSPORTERS. *Druzhba pipeline*. Available at <https://www.iaot.eu/en/oil-transport/druzhba-pipeline>

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The network of arteries that supply a significant part of the planet's energy, the oil and gas pipelines, is also a major object and subject of this global struggle. And since demand remains, each supplier will try to secure «its» supply, either by laying new lines, or by circumventing competitors' lines, or simply, and usually using third parties or delegated forces, by cutting rival lines. Realpolitik, in its harshest version, in its purest form.

And these, among other issues, are the reasons why Libya is increasingly becoming a strategic competition piece⁵⁴ on the global chessboard.

And what does the 'international community' think of this?

International community?

The United Nations has had an active mission in Libya for years, the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), authorised by Security Council Resolution 2009⁵⁵ of 16 September 2011, a non-executive mission of an eminently political nature, whose purpose is to assist the Libyan authorities in restoring order and the rule of law, among other things.

There was already a total arms embargo, to and from Libya, decreed by the UN in February 2011 (Resolution 1970), a provision that would be extended with Resolution 2292, which since June 2016 authorises Member States to inspect vessels on the high seas suspected of violating the arms embargo; however, and despite the new truce declared in August 2020, it is noted that a report issued by a panel of experts, a report that has not seen the light of day due to the blockade by Russia and China in the Security Council, states that the embargo is totally ineffective⁵⁶, as both parties to the conflict continue to receive weapons⁵⁷. And this despite calls by UN Secretary General António Guterres for the embargo to be respected, because 'what is at stake'⁵⁸ is the future of the country, as well as expressing that violations of the embargo are a scandal and cast doubt on the veracity of those who are committed to the peace process. The result is somewhat unsuccessful.

⁵⁴ MEGERESI, Tarek. 'Geostrategic dimensions of Libya's civil war', 18 May 2020. Available at <https://africacenter.org/publication/geostrategic-dimensions-libya-civil-war/>

⁵⁵ UNITEDNATIONS, Security Council, Resolution 2009 (2011), Document S/RES/2009(2011), 16 September 2011. Available at [https://www.undocs.org/es/S/RES/2009%20\(2011\)](https://www.undocs.org/es/S/RES/2009%20(2011))

⁵⁶ 'Russia, China block release of UN report criticising Russia', 28 September 2020. Disponible en https://apnews.com/article/libya-china-archive-united-nations-russia-383b41a57355670312265c05672153e5#_blank

⁵⁷ THE GUARDIAN. 'Turkey and UAE openly flouting UN arms embargo to fuel war in Libya', 7 October 2020. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/07/turkey-and-uae-openly-flouting-un-arms-embargo-to-fuel-war-in-libya>

⁵⁸ AP NEWS. 'UN chief urges Libya ceasefire, warns its future at stake', 5 October 2020. Disponible en <https://apnews.com/article/africa-libya-summits-north-africa-berlin-726b0a3a38ab940eae6207e03eda2aad>

Although the European Union has been active in trying to put an end to the conflict in Libya, as well as in financing activities to try to stabilise the country, including the deployment of international missions, its possibilities for action are limited by the different positions of its member states, whose interests and policies do not fully coincide, which has led to a lack of cohesion and therefore prevented the design of a common policy⁵⁹ and a lack of leadership in dealing with this crisis.

The differing positions of France and Italy, the interest of Greece – together with Cyprus and Israel – in the development of hydrocarbon reserves discovered in the eastern Mediterranean and the laying of the *EastMed* pipeline, which would allow hydrocarbon flows to be connected via a new route to the European Union through the south, are generating differences of opinion within the Union. And this lack of leadership in managing the conflict in Libya, so close to its shores, has prevented third countries and powers from putting a stop to the action and intervention of third countries and powers which, given the management and diplomatic vacuum created in the area, have acted in their own interests and exploited the divergences between European countries.

On the other hand, Turkey is trying to capitalise on the possibility of an agreement in Libya, given its position of extreme influence over the GNA, to gain an advantageous position vis-à-vis the European Union⁶⁰ in the search for new agreements that are more beneficial to it, both in terms of trade and in terms of avoiding sanctions for the activities that its oil exploration vessels – and its warships – are carrying out in the area that it has unilaterally and illegally declared an Exclusive Economic Zone in the eastern Mediterranean.

Ankara sees Libya as a key to its interests in the Mediterranean, employing a policy of *fait accompli* to achieve a position and status that means it must be involved in the resolution of any dispute in the region; it also exacerbates differences between France and Italy⁶¹, thus exerting a high degree of pressure on the EU.

Some progress has nevertheless been made. *On 22 September 2019, seven countries (United States, United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, Germany and Turkey) issued a communiqué stating that they exclusively support the Tripoli-based NOC (National Oil Corporation, the Libyan state-owned*

⁵⁹ MEGERESI, Tarek, and KUZNETSOV, Vasily. 'The policies of european states and Russia on Libya', FES, July 2020. Disponible en <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/moskau/16455.pdf>

⁶⁰ THE GUARDIAN. 'Turkey and Russia's deepening roles in Libya complicate peace efforts', 5 October 2020. Disponible en <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/05/turkey-and-russia-deepening-roles-in-libya-complicate-peace-efforts>

⁶¹ WASILEWSKI, Karol. 'Turkey's involvement in Libya', The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Bulletin no. 14 (1444), 30 January 2020. Disponible en https://www.pism.pl/publications/Turkeys_Involvement_in_Libya

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company) as the sole and legitimate authority on fuel. Significantly, both the United Arab Emirates – recalling that the LNA attempted to sell oil using Dubai-based companies – and France, both of which have supported Haftar, have participated in the manifesto⁶². All of this is taking place against the backdrop of a complex global energy landscape, in which the price of a barrel of oil, linked to consumption, extraction capacity and alternative energy technologies, from 'green' to 'fracking' is constantly used as a geopolitical weapon to impact on the economies of rival countries. And in the face of the growing protagonism of Russia and Turkey, the Union reached an agreement in Berlin on 19 January 2020 which, among other issues, would end up leading to the activation of a maritime operation (IRINI)⁶³ to reinforce the existing arms embargo decreed by the United Nations, albeit, as previously stated, with relative success.

But complexity and tension is rising in the Mediterranean and Turkey is threatening Greece with war⁶⁴ if Athens expands its waters... just as Turkey and Libya have done. And Greece and Turkey are NATO members, which puts the organisation in a situation of extreme tension and intense political and diplomatic activity to prevent the outbreak of a regional conflagration.

The international community seems to understand that extremely dangerous limits have been reached and is trying to de-escalate the conflict at full speed. In fact, for the first time, the EU imposes sanctions on companies for violating the arms embargo, one Turkish, one Kazakh and one Jordanian⁶⁵.

Libya – the conflict and its circumstances – divides the European Union, divides NATO⁶⁶, shows the high degree of inoperability of the United Nations... although it should not be forgotten that international organisations are only what the nations that form them want them to be. And Libya also shows how a 'tribal conflict' can turn into a regional conflict.

⁶² THE ECONOMIST. 'National Oil Corporation gets international backing', 25 September 2019. Available at <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1628476146&Country=Libya&topic=Economy&subtopic=Forecast&subsubtopic=External+sector>

⁶³ ⁶⁷ EUROPEAN COUNCIL. 'EU launches Operation IRINI to enforce arms embargo on Libya', 31 March 2020. Available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/press/press-releases/2020/03/31/eu-launches-operation-irini-to-enforce-libya-arms-embargo/>

⁶⁴ ⁶⁸ EUROPA PRESS. 'Turquía amenaza con la guerra a Grecia si amplía sus aguas territoriales', 29 August 2020. Available at <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-turquia-amenaza-guerra-grecia-si-amplia-aguas-territoriales-20200829133328.html>

⁶⁵ ARABNEWS. 'EU sanctions three firms for breaking Libya arms embargo', 21 September 2020. Available at <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1737786/world>

⁶⁶ BAROUD, Ramzy. 'As Washington retreats, Eastern Mediterranean conflict further marginalises NATO', Middle East Monitor, 7 September 2020. Available at https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200907-as-washington-retreats-eastern-mediterranean-conflict-further-marginalises-nato/?_cldee=aWVlZUBvYy5tZGUuZXM%3d&recipientid=contact-cb22263faf9de911a97d000d3a233b72-6fae16fadd52405f8d68fc15b0f4bf84&esid=1303872c-a1f2-ea11-a815-000d3aab18bd

Conclusions and foresight

We may know how conflicts begin (for the reasons why they begin are not always obvious, at least in the early stages), but what we certainly cannot know is how they will end.

If, in addition, the initial contested or disputed terrain is made up of a mosaic of competing loyalties, interests, parties and factions, it is not necessary to apply the old adage 'divide and rule'. They divide themselves.

In this scenario, it is very easy to get a faction to ask for support, to get someone with power to back your localist position... although in the end you may be selling your soul to the devil, you may generate a situation of conflict at a much higher level than intended, in which the initial reasons of the factions that asked for help from the powerful no longer count, as everyone is subsumed in the maelstrom of a conflict of a much larger scale and entity.

The degree of tension is such that the appearance of new areas of conflict in Eurasia, as well as the possibility of direct confrontations between theoretical allies, has set off alarm bells at the international level and, for this reason, in addition to the measures to be adopted in each of these areas, it has perhaps been decided, as in any fire, to try to extinguish, in the first instance, the source of the fire – in this case Libya – as an initial step to continue de-escalating, through agreements and negotiations, tensions and friction in other points and spheres. The aim is to defuse the 'Libyan fuse' in a highly unstable 'enlarged' Mediterranean.

Perhaps that is why, because of this potential decision to no longer be able to postpone the search for a solution – or at least the end of the armed phase – of the Libyan conflict, the truce that began in August 2020 is being maintained in mid-October; perhaps that is why a change of figures in Libya, Al Sarraj and Haftar, may be being considered, and perhaps also why an attempt is being made to share power and oil that satisfies, at least to some degree, and at least for a time, the Libyan parties, and thus also to bring the conflict of the external actors back to the channels of diplomacy.

When war becomes 'the war of others', one is no longer in control of one's own destiny, because of the powerful forces at play, against which only the union of all the locals can act as a retaining wall.

Libya as a concept may be alien to many Libyans, because of its own very recent genesis and the very specific reality of the country. But as long as this concept is not unique and generalised, as long as lack of cohesion is the norm, there will always be conflicts and there will always be those who, with promises of help, become the new figure imposing their will.

And so, in this way, it is possible to move from a quasi-tribal-local conflict to a regional-global one, while the initial actors, who in these cases always lose, lament, asking 'but how did it come to this?', how are we involved in 'the war of the others'?

Perhaps it is possible to learn from someone else. Perhaps.

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Chronology

CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT	
DATE	EVENTS
1953	Libya is born as an independent state. King Idris I head of the new state.
1969	Coup d'état in Libya. Gaddafi president.
1977	<i>Qadhafi establishes the Jamahiriya as a model of government.</i>
2011	Arab Spring.
2011, February	First Libyan civil war breaks out.
2011, 17 March	UNSC authorises use of force in Libya.
2011, 19 March	International coalition air strikes begin.
2011, 20 October	Gaddafi is assassinated. First Libyan civil war ends
2012, 7 July	Elections. GNC (General National Congress) <i>is born</i> .
2014	<i>Haftar leads LNA (Libyan National Army).</i> Second Libyan civil war begins.
2014, 25 July	<i>Elections for a new legislative body, the HoR (House of Representatives).</i>
2014, 5 November	HoR <i>elections</i> are declared unconstitutional.
2015, 17 December	The so-called Libyan National Accord is reached. GNC and HoR members sign an agreement and establish the GNA (Government of National Accord), with Al Sarraj as prime minister.
2017, 17 December	Haftar declares the agreement null and void.
2018, 28 May	Paris Peace Conference. Sarraj and Haftar agree on new elections. They were never held.
2019, 4 April	<i>LNA begins siege of Tripoli.</i>
2019, 22 September	<i>The international community recognises NOC, controlled by the GNA, as the only oil exporting company.</i>
2019, 27 November	GNA and Turkey reach agreement on extension of territorial waters and a military agreement.
2020, 2 January	Turkish parliament authorises sending forces to Libya.
2020, 12 January	GNA and LNA representatives meet in Moscow to try to end the conflict.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT	
DATE	EVENTS
2020, 19 January	Berlin Conference, the European Union increases its commitment to bring about an end to the conflict.
2020, end of January	LNA blockades oil terminals.
2020, 31 March	European Union launches naval operation IRINI.
2020, April	GNA forces break siege of Tripoli and rapidly expand the area under their control.
2020, 20 July	Egypt authorises sending troops to Libya. Egypt draws 'red lines' in Libya.
2020, 17 August	Turkey, Qatar and GNA agree to increase military cooperation.
2020, 21 August	GNA and HoR sign ceasefire, without Haftar present.

In the tables below, data for 2020 unless otherwise stated. Source CIA, *The World Factbook*.

Table of geopolitical indicators				
		Libya	Turkey	Egypt
Area (km ²)		1,759,540	783,562	1,001,450
GDP in billions of dollars		61.97 (2017 est.)	2,186 (2017 est.)	1,204 (2017 est.)
GDP structure	Agriculture	1.3%	6.8%	11.7%
	Industry	52.3%	32.3%	34.3%
	Services	46.4% (2017 est.)	60.7% (2017 est.)	54% (2017 est.)
GDP per capita (USD)		9,600 (2017 est.)	27,000 (2017 est.)	12,700 (2017 est.)
GDP growth rate		64% (2017 est.)	7.4% (2017 est.)	4.2% (2017 est.)
Exports (in billions of dollars)		18.38 (2017 est.)	166.2 (2017 est.)	23.3 (2017 est.)
Imports (in billions of dollars)		11.36 (2017 est.)	225.1 (2017 est.)	59.78 (2017 est.)
Population		6,890,535 (July 2020 est.) Note: Migrants represent slightly more than 12% of the local population, according to UN data (2017).	82,017,514 (July 2020 est.)	104,124,440 (July 2020 est.)

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Table of geopolitical indicators				
		Libya	Turkey	Egypt
Age structure	0-14	33.65%	23.41%	33.62%
	15-64	62.31%	68.24%	61.94%
	Over 65	4.04 % (2020 est.)	8.35% (2020 est.)	4.44% (2020 est.)
Population growth rate		1.94 % (2020 est.)	0.45 % (2020 est.)	2.28% (2020 est.)
Ethnic groups		Berbers and Arabs 97%, other 3% (Egyptians, Greeks, Indians, Italians, Maltese, Pakistanis, Tunisians, Turks)	Turks 70-75%, Kurds 19%, other minorities 7-12%. (2016 est.)	Egyptians 99.7% other 0.3% (2006 est.)
Religions		Muslims (official, almost all Sunni) 96.6%, Christians 2.7%, Buddhists 0.3%, Hindus <0.1%, Jews <0.1%, People's Religion <0.1%, unaffiliated 0.2%, others <0.1%. (2010 est.) Note: Non-Sunni Muslims include local Ibadhi, <1% of the population and foreign Muslims.	Muslims 99.8% (mostly Sunni), others 0.2% (mostly Christian and Jewish)	Muslims 90% (predominantly Sunni), Christians 10% (mostly Coptic Orthodox, and includes Apostolic Armenians, Catholics, Maronites, Orthodox and Anglicans) (2015 est.)
Languages		Arabic (official), Italian, English (widely understood in the cities), Berber	Turkish (official), Kurdish, other minority languages	Arabic (official) 52.9%, English and French widely understood by educated persons
Population literacy rate		91% (2015)	96.2% (2017)	71.2% (2017)
Population below the poverty line		Note: About one third of Libyans live below the poverty line.	21.9% (2015 est.)	27.8% (2016 est.)
Military expenditure % of GDP		No data	1.89% (2019 est.)	1.2% (2019)

Chapter Eight

The rebellion of the choir and the normalisation of protest in Ibero-America

Andrés González Martín

Resumen

En la segunda década del siglo XXI las movilizaciones de protestas se han extendido por todas las regiones del mundo. No es fácil encontrar otro momento histórico en el que la calle haya tenido tanta influencia y en tantos sitios. Iberoamérica se ha convertido en el espejo de un mundo sacudido por el malestar. La «rebelión del coro» iberoamericano nace del desasosiego cotidiano de la precariedad ignorada. En la vida ordinaria arrastra una rebeldía latente, que cuando emerge desborda los cauces políticos de forma desarticulada.

La normalización de la protesta, como constante que agita continuamente la convivencia en Iberoamérica, se ha convertido en una manifestación de sospecha, no solo de desconfianza, y también de impotencia para inducir un cambio. Sospecha e impotencia frente a una estructura de poder que no ofrece soluciones a problemas reales ordinarios, que resultan ajenos al resto de quienes los padecen. Penurias cotidianas diferentes que afectan cada una solo a una parte, dejando indiferente al resto, que carga con las suyas propias.

Desde hace veintitrés años, cuando el «latinobarómetro» empezó a medir la opinión pública regional, nunca había habido una percepción de pérdida

y retroceso tan grande en Iberoamérica como ahora. Esta percepción se complica con otra añadida, Iberoamérica es la región con mayor nivel de desconfianza interpersonal del mundo. Las dos aprehensiones sociales predisponen, en tiempos difíciles, a una fragmentación y conflicto social prolongado difícil de superar. La concurrencia de factores puede terminar generando la tormenta perfecta.

Palabras clave

Iberoamérica, ola de protestas, revueltas sociales, nuevas tecnologías, medios de comunicación, redes sociales, fragmentación, desigualdad.

Abstract

In the second decade of the 21st century, protest mobilisations have spread to all regions of the world. It is not easy to find another historical moment in which the street has had so much influence and in so many places. Ibero-America has become the mirror of a world shaken by unrest. The Ibero-American «rebellion of the choir» is born out of the daily restlessness of ignored precariousness. In ordinary life it drags a latent rebellion, which when it emerges overflows the political channels in a disjointed way.

The normalisation of protest, as a constant that continually agitates coexistence in Latin America, has become a manifestation of suspicion, not only of mistrust, but also of impotence to induce a change. Suspicion and impotence in the face of a power structure that does not offer solutions to ordinary real problems, which are alien to the rest of those who suffer them. Different daily hardships that affect each one only to one part, leaving the rest indifferent, who carry their own.

For twenty-three years, when the «Latinobarometer» began to measure regional public opinion, there has never been such a great perception of loss and setback in Latin America as now. This perception is complicated by another added, Ibero-America is the region with the highest level of interpersonal distrust in the world. The two social apprehensions predispose, in difficult times, to fragmentation and prolonged social conflict that is difficult to overcome. The concurrence of factors can end up generating the perfect storm.

Keywords

Ibero-America, wave of protests, social unrest, new technologies, media, social networks, fragmentation, inequality.

Introduction

During the 20th century, the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were marked by a wave of protests that had the capacity to shake the foundations of international, regional and local equilibrium. The demonstrations in the United States for civil rights and against the Vietnam War changed Americans' perception of themselves, setting in motion revolutionary mutations that took time to be accepted, possibly some of which have not yet been fully assimilated. Serious racial tensions and protest violence during 2020 are evidence of the internal fracture that still exists.

In France, 'May '68' caused a break in the continuity of European thinking, which was accompanied by a generational disengagement of young people, who had not lived through the world wars, from their parents and grandparents. The Islamic revolution in Iran set in motion mass mobilisations against Shah Reza Pahlavi and the United States. In the 1980s it was the mobilisations in Europe against the deployment of cruise missiles, in the West Bank and Gaza against the Israeli occupation, in China in Tiananmen Square and in Eastern Europe against the outdated satellite regimes of the Soviet Union.

The next two decades, the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, were quieter. The street riots languished. Of course, they did not disappear altogether, but in general they were of lesser significance. The second decade of the new century saw the emergence of a second wave of protests. Street riots have regained their former prominence and are returning as the natural continuation of politics by other means. In 2019, protest mobilisations have spread to all regions of the world. It is not easy to find another historical moment in which the street has had so much influence and in so many places.

The remarkable increase in large-scale popular mobilisations during the current decade has much to do with the digital revolution. New information and communication technologies allow for the expansion of political, social and economic freedom. In a short time, large networks of directly connected people can mobilise to join a protest, without the need to belong to any kind of hierarchical organisation. At the same time, in these mobilisations, new technologies become powerful, simple and accessible media for recording images and creating news.

Mobile phone cameras, combined with online sites such as YouTube, create new possibilities to expand the effects of an event and multiply its mobilising potential. Users are not just passive recipients of information, but can become journalists, commentators, propagandists and organisers. New technologies become powerful diffusers and amplifiers of emotions, with a revolutionary instrumental value in promoting and projecting discontent.

Collective action in Ibero-America has its own profile. In the last three decades of the 20th century and now during the 21st century, social protests in the region had consolidated a unique sphere of community action with a

broader framework than the exclusively political. Evidently, politics, like the skin of everything else, tried to embrace the energy that brings together the mobilisations, trying to structure them and incorporate them into a previous discourse as another element, which gives novelty, credibility, sensitivity, emotions and new protagonists.

The dynamics of collective action are sometimes promoted by political dynamics, but not necessarily in Ibero-America. On many occasions, the social flux in the region responds to deep-seated causes, which are not articulated by the political proposals and debates of the time. The disconnect as a new development between institutional channels, political parties, trade unions and other constituted elements of participation with community action, unlike in the rest of the world, is not surprising because it is not new. The relevance of the 'multicoloured, multiform and heterogeneous' social movements of protest in Ibero-America predates that which would later develop in the rest of the world¹. The result is a boom in the available literature, which deals with social mobilisations in the region since the late 1970s².

Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the associations of relatives of disappeared detainees, los comités de vaso de leche in Peru, the farm occupations, the Landless Workers' Movement, the soup kitchens, the women's movements, the environmental groups, the actions of indigenous groups, in Argentina the piqueteros, in Chile the pingüinos, in Colombia the cocaleros, in El Salvador the maras, in Venezuela the guarimbas, the Zapatistas and barzones in Mexico, the review would not end in a single chapter. Some types of protest became popular in the countries of the region. The pot-banging, the roadblocks, the escraches, the fierce protests and the marches for dignity began to be a Latin American habit that was later transferred to the rest of the world. Moreover, for decades now, many Latin American social movements have incorporated identity claims, calling for an alternative conception of citizenship.

In 1984, José Nun wrote a revisionist article on Marxist praxis in Latin America, entitled 'Rebellion of the Choir', in which he highlighted the relevance of everyday unrest, of disarticulated protest outside political channels³. The rebellious centrality of everyday life in Ibero-America spoke without being expected and escaped from its assigned place in the chorus, trying to occupy a role on the stage. The original weight of small and multiple groups of demands offers a wide repertoire of collective actions specific to the region, which the traditional Marxist class struggle had not been able to mobilise. The culture of the continent took it upon itself to destroy the

¹ CALDERÓN, Fernando (1995). *Movimientos sociales y política: la década de los ochenta en Latinoamérica*. Siglo XXI Editores, Mexico.

² http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1870-23332006000200163

³ NUN, José (1984). 'La rebelión del coro'. *Punto de vista*, issue 20: 'The left, crisis of a political culture'. Catálogos SRL, Buenos Aires.

Disponible en: <https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=3924>

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messianic myth of politics. The situation made it necessary to note the failure of the grandiloquent discourse of the working-class struggle and to adapt it to the social reality of the continent.

The left's critique of the application of classical praxis in Ibero-America implied a heterodox approach, which required a diversification of political protagonism capable of inserting oppressed but hitherto forgotten groups. The review is a recognition of the failure of democratic centralism as a method of revolutionary planning and leadership.

In 1950, Octavio Paz, reflecting on the Mexican subconscious, placed us before the limits of freedom and its exercise. «Our attitude to life is also history. I mean, historical facts are not the mere result of other facts, but of a singular will, capable of governing their fatality within certain limits»⁴. In Ibero-America as a whole, the limits of doom have been narrower than elsewhere, but the reactions have not been less active but different. The substantive reforms were not forthcoming, they were unaffordable, and the unrest emerged spontaneously, without much depth, through small imbalances, in a dispersed manner.

Protest is an old mechanism of participation in Ibero-America, for a long time the only one. Since independence, the history of most Latin American republics has been a history of often inaudible protests. There has been a morality of protest in the Ibero-American identity since the beginning of its history, closely linked to social mobilisations⁵. Over time, the repertoire of collective actions has grown⁶ and its resonance has shown that it can sometimes have broad results, if it is sustained over time, if it provokes a national or international media impact, if it challenges political or systemic stability, or if it is accompanied by a certain degree of violence capable of endowing its actions with a delegitimising symbolism. From the other side, protest to the system and the political order is a regular challenge that over time it has become accustomed to managing.

Background

In Tunisia, the desperate gesture of a young street vendor selling fruit and vegetables set off a protest movement in the country, 'The Jasmine Revolution'. The police unjustly confiscated Mohamed Bouazizi's stall, condemning him to desperate poverty. His decision to immolate himself led to his death. The immediate protest mobilisations set in motion a process of change, which in just ten days led to the ouster of President Ben Ali, who had been in office for twenty years.

⁴ PAZ, Octavio (2004). *'El laberinto de la soledad'*. Cátedra, Madrid.

⁵ https://scielo.conicyt.cl/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0718-65682010000300003

⁶ <https://nuso.org/articulo/america-latina-y-los-movimientos-sociales-el-presente-de-la-rebelion-del-coro/>

The Tunisian example set in motion the so-called 'Arab spring'. A strange spring that ended up provoking a military coup in Egypt, the unfinished wars in Syria and Libya, the destabilisation of the Arab world and the Middle East, the return of Russia as a great power in the region, tens of thousands of dead and millions of displaced people and refugees.

In 2011, Time magazine in the US identified the protester as its Person of the Year for the importance it attached to his role in the Arab world. In Europe, the British newspaper The Times chose the late young Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi⁷ as its Person of the Year. Today many people who refer to those protest movements identify them as 'the misnamed Arab Spring'. The tragic results are not in line with the initial delusions that were raised by many analysts, experts, reporters and public opinion in general.

Attention to developments in the Arab world quickly faded as the protests passed. The wars in Libya and Syria seemed to have enough images, data and events to fuel journalists' curiosity and newspaper headlines about the region's affairs. The result was sufficiently interesting and dynamic to waste time addressing in depth the motivations, implications and outcomes of the 2011 popular mobilisations.

In any case, Time magazine, with its Person of the Year in 2011, discovered something that has been consolidated throughout the decade: the renewed prominence of protests and mobilisations.

In 2013, Brazil was rocked by an avalanche of protests. The initiator of the explosive reaction was the increase in transport fares. A classic on the continent. From Venezuela's 'caracazo' in 1989, to the protests in Chile in October 2019, there have been many occasions when riots and protests started over a rise in transport or fuel prices. On this occasion, Brazil was preparing for the World Cup and the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, which meant a significant additional public spending effort with a readjustment of the distribution of budgets.

The protests spread to more than 100 cities across the country and were non-partisan in nature. They did not question President Dilma Rousseff, nor any other politician in particular. There were general complaints against the situation, and everyone had their reasons. The headline in the newspaper *Folha de Sao Paulo* explained it by saying: «Thousands take to the streets against everything». It was a social rather than a political phenomenon. A general sense of unease was expressed on the streets⁸.

A few years later, in Brazil, the 2015-2016 demonstrations were directed against President Dilma Rousseff and political corruption. Several sociological studies were then carried out on the profiles of the demonstrators and their

⁷ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/person-of-the-year-737jwl9vmd5>

⁸ <https://www.nuevatribuna.es/content/print/causas-de-las-masivas-manifestaciones-en-brasil/2013061913310393714>

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motivations. Demonstrations were held in more than 260 cities over a long period of time and brought millions of people onto the streets.

In Porto Alegre, surveys of the indignados pointed to the relevance of social networks in calling for the demonstration. The role of social media was crucial. 66.5 percent of the participants said that it was Facebook that provided them with the information about the call and another 24.8% were informed by other websites. This is certainly surprising. Online networks were the rallying cry⁹.

Another interesting fact is that almost 80% of the respondents indicated that the protests could not count on the participation of parties and politicians¹⁰. *Interestingly, the mobilisations did have a political objective, to provoke the removal of President Dilma Rousseff through impeachment, which would eventually be approved by Congress and the Senate in April 2016.*

The results of the surveys carried out at the demonstrations in Brasilia confirm the non-partisan nature of the protesters' reproaches. The Index Institute reported that 71 percent of those surveyed did not express any preference or sympathy for any political party. *Even the proposal to impeach the president was alien to the vast majority.* The mass demonstrations were mainly called by three virtual civil society groups with a presence in the social networks 'Vem pra Rua, Movimento Brasil Livre and Revoltados Online'¹¹. The results were the largest rallies in the country's history. In São Paulo alone, 1.4 million people gathered on Paulista Avenue on 12 March. Countrywide estimates range from 3 to 6.5 million¹².

⁹ <https://gauchazh.clicrbs.com.br/geral/noticia/2015/03/institutos-de-pesquisa-fazem-levantamentos-sobre-o-perfil-dos-manifestantes-em-porto-alegre-4719348.html>

¹⁰ Political parties in Ibero-America are the least trusted institutions. In 2018, the 'Latinobarómetro' published in its annual report that approval of political parties had fallen to a worrying 13%. The trend was clearly downward. Within the overall picture, Brazil stands out for its particularly low level of trust, with only 6 % of Brazilians trusting the parties, making it the country with the lowest levels of trust on the continent. Available at: <https://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>

¹¹ The organisers of the protest are three minority groups, not linked to any political party, who have been surprised by the success of the protests, supported by the multiplying role of social networks. The first of these, 'Movimento Brasil Livre', is made up of half a dozen young, upper-middle class, liberal ideologues, who are calling for Rousseff's parliamentary impeachment. The second is 'Vem Pra Rua', the most moderate, identified with the business and financial world. In its manifesto it states that it was created «to give a voice to the Brazilian people, who are outraged and tired of not being respected by the government and politicians, who have degraded the state and stolen our money». The third 'Revoltados On Line' was born on the networks ten years earlier to protest against paedophilia.

Disponível em: https://elpais.com/internacional/2015/03/17/actualidad/1426620385_776859.html
https://www.elcomercio.com/app_public.php/actualidad/protestas-brasil-rousseff.html

¹² <https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,manifestacoes-em-todos-os-estados-superam-as-de-marco-do-ano-passado,10000021047>

However, the non-partisan character of the mobilisation cannot be understood as an apolitical choice. Perspectives that attempt to link protests exclusively to criticism of a government, a party, an institution, or to electoral effects, restrict the vision of politics and the political and ignore other possible outcomes, impacts and scenarios. Without a more open and far-sighted political sensibility, it is impossible to discover the effects of the protests. Many of the branches and consequences of these collective actions are not measured by the usual political mechanisms in terms of electoral or government attrition¹³. In Brazil, the street actions provoked important social, cultural and personal impacts, which we will often see replicated in many of the mobilisations that followed.

The rejection of political parties is linked to the frustration and indignation they provoke directly or through the discredit they have brought institutions into disrepute. Corruption was by far the main problem identified by protesters. More than three out of four respondents accused political parties of being primarily responsible for corruption¹⁴. The protests clearly revealed a new orientation, where citizen unrest went beyond any representative channel. The majority of the participants were middle class or identified with that position.

To look at Venezuela is to look at one of the countries in the region with the most protests per year. In 2014 alone, 9,286 protests were registered, a then record number in the country's history. Not only did the number of protests increase, but the number of people mobilising, the conflict around the protests and a justifiable unrest increased¹⁵.

¹³ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/es/2013-2016-polarizaci-n-y-protestas-en-brasil/>
From the social point of view, the reconfiguration of social groups and the generation of new socio-political frameworks should be highlighted. From the cultural point of view, changes in the logic of mobilisation and in the mechanisms of activist relations and interaction have been discovered. Associated with both of these is a more biographical, individual impact. This is a subjective impact of the mobilisations on the activists' life trajectory.

¹⁴ <http://opiniaopublica.ufmg.br/site/files/artigo/3-Dossie-Abril-2015-Mara-Telles1.pdf>
«A first 'novelty' to highlight is the non-institutional organisation of these groups, which were not led by 'traditional politicians'. Demonstrators went to the streets out of indignation at corruption, which they consider to be the country's main problem. In general, they are deeply disenchanted with the political parties and want the cassation, resignation or impeachment of the president Dilma».

¹⁵ In 2014 Venezuela had the highest inflation in the world, since then it has retained that position until today. Inflation is driving down the value of the Venezuelan currency, making imports more expensive and causing shortages. The result is a vicious feedback loop. The problems of price rises and shortages are compounded by high levels of crime and corruption. The government has stopped providing official homicide data since 2004. Different NGOs work only with estimates. In 2014, the Venezuelan Violence Observatory (OVV) estimated a murder rate of 82 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, making Venezuela the second country in the world in terms of homicide rate, behind only Honduras.

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In Venezuela during the 2014 spring demonstrations, the news was not the number of people gathered at the different gatherings across the country; the news was the number of people killed, injured and detained in the protest. That year, 43 people were killed and more than 878 injured in clashes, mostly as a result of repression by security forces and irregular Chavista collectives¹⁶. According to the report of the Attorney General's Office, 1,854 people were arrested, while Amnesty International puts the number at 3,351¹⁷.

A phenomenon that is appearing in Venezuela and deserves to be considered is the counter-march organised by the ruling party. During opposition demonstrations, pro-government organisations promoted rejection marches. The aim was an attempt to contest the opposition on the streets. Counterdemonstrations are not new, but they are rarely promoted by the government itself. The danger of civil strife exists.

Even more serious is the activity of the *colectivos*, paramilitary forces supporting the Chavista regime that were organised to support Hugo Chávez's accession to power and subsequently to maintain control of the streets. The *colectivos* are the result of the defeat of violent far-left organisations in Venezuela in the 1980s. The former commanding cadres of the insurgent organisations took refuge in universities and cultural organisations. The university left, particularly young students, began to understand the need for a new, less hierarchical and more horizontal structure. The different groups in the university began to adopt an assembly organisation, which focused on popular demands and left party protagonism behind.

The *colectivos* try to bring together different everyday, obscure and latent protests to give them prominence. The horizontality and diversity of niches enabled the more radical Venezuelan left to go beyond complaint and sustain small-scale rebellions with an orchestrated tuning on the fly, where the least favoured could feel like protagonists of the movement for change, without needing to understand it. «There are hundreds of *colectivos*, with a wide variety of activities, all with their strengths and limitations, different strategies and perspectives. Many proudly claim to be 'collective', yet they don't know where they were born and I'm afraid they don't ask themselves, beyond themselves»¹⁸.

¹⁶ *Infobae* in this article lists the names and circumstances of all the deceased.

¹⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AMR5312392015SPANISH.pdf>
Amnesty International's report details cases of deaths of individuals involving security force personnel or pro-government armed groups acting with the acquiescence of the security forces, as well as cases of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees and cases of arbitrary detention. Over the past year, harassment and intimidation of victims, their families and legal representatives has also been documented, as well as attacks against human rights defenders who denounce these serious acts.

¹⁸ <https://www.aporrea.org/ideologia/a197566.html>

The colectivos are popular organisations of different cultural, sporting, political, social or paramilitary nature. The Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (OVCS) identifies these popular armed groups as the regime's main instrument against opposition demonstrations, acting with absolute impunity and sometimes collaborating with police forces to repress protests¹⁹. In the same vein, both the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the UN Committee against Torture expressed particular concern about the 437 attacks by armed paramilitary groups on demonstrators during the protests. Attacks aggravated by the complicity of the forces of law and order and by the absolute impunity of the aggressors²⁰. The problem of the colectivos and the comunas is particularly serious because they constitute a parallel state controlled by chavismo.

Meanwhile, in the face of aggression, the barricades, colloquially known as guarimbas, became a defence and protest mechanism for the opposition. Small groups of people, spread out in their own neighbourhoods under the cover of nearby shelters, erected barricades and set them on fire to cut off traffic in large areas of the cities. The aim was to block the entry of the colectivos and police forces into middle-class neighbourhoods.

Later, in the 2017 protests, known as the 'Venezuelan spring', the guarimberos leapt from barricades in the barrios to mass mobilisations. The guarimbas organised themselves to defend the marches, forming small vanguard groups protected by shields, helmets, masks and bandanas to hide the identity of their members. In Chile during the uprisings of 2019 and 2020 we have seen the same phenomenon, which there adopted the name 'frontline'.

The guarimbas are autonomous groups that mobilise independently of the opposition parties. «Some of them may feel an affinity for political parties, but they are not affiliated or part of any party group. Social networks were used as a communication and information support for the calls and coordination of the guarimbas»²¹. Groups such as Anonymous²² Venezuela were in charge of disseminating daily orders and information to the guarimba groups, as well as attacking government and institutional networks with great effectiveness. President Nicolás Maduro, faced with the intensity of the response of the

¹⁹ In Caracas alone there are 71 paramilitary collectives that have become a real revolutionary guard of Chavismo. Available at: <http://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/oc/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Informe-Manifestantes-en-la-mira-de-paramilitares.pdf>

²⁰ <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/docs/anual/2014/docs-es/anual2014-cap4venezuela.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2017/05/13/quienes-son-los-guarimberos-la-vanguardia-callejera-de-las-manifestaciones-contra-el-chavismo/>

²² The Anonymous group defines itself as an international movement of cyber-activists, made up of an undetermined number of people who are called Anonymous because they do not reveal their identity. They are anonymous. There are no defined leaders and all members are equal. They do not have a centralised headquarters.

guarimbas, called for the intervention of the *colectivos* to deactivate their actions²³.

In 2014, Thomas L. Friedman wrote an article published in the *New York Times*, entitled 'The people of the Square'. The author recognised that mobilisations in the public space had become another element of control of power, especially of the government. The lobbying power of this increasingly active political actor could alter both traditional politics and geopolitics. Squares and streets were occupied by networked people, often without intermediary organisations to structure their demands. The lack of interlocutors with sufficient representation generated a problem of political debate and negotiation, making it difficult to channel demands institutionally²⁴. But in any case, the reality was that the impacts of the shocks on the streets were becoming greater and greater, it was becoming clear that they were. The new technologies, with their expansion, had reached a large part of the population throughout the world, becoming an effective support for establishing new, more extensive and rapidly mobilised relationship mechanisms.

The novelty identified in the middle of the current decade was of concern. On the one hand, some thought that the protests, by going beyond the usual channels of political participation, could represent a challenge to the established order. However, others argued that the new situation reduced the chances of achieving effective change with such dispersed mobilisations. Moisés Naím expressed the uselessness of the roar of the powerful political engine of the street because its rotation is not connected to any wheel that can move it in the right direction to achieve effective change²⁵. Without the depressing day-to-day work of organisations, protest movements cannot harness the political energy they generate to promote real reforms.

The Guardian, five years after the start of the misnamed 'Arab Spring', published an article entitled 'The Arab Spring - why did things go so badly wrong?'²⁶. The author uncovers some lessons learned from the events of 2011. Particularly revealing is his critique of the traditional perception that recognises civil resistance, by its nature, as morally superior to the complex exercise of running the government administration and sustaining the usual political channels in operation. Governing is extraordinarily complex and protesting less so. A *posteriori* analysis of what happened allows us to go

²³ «I call on all the people to make the order of Comandante Chávez be valid in their communities: a little candle that is lit, a little candle that we put out with the organised people to guarantee peace for the country». Available at: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20140311/54402957109/que-son-las-guarimbas.html>

²⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/opinion/sunday/friedman-the-square-people-part-2.html>

²⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/04/why-street-protests-dont-work/360264/>

²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/15/arab-spring-badly-wrong-five-years-on-people-power>

even further. *The Guardian*, a newspaper that has for many decades held a left-leaning editorial line, recognises, after the unforeseen and painful consequences of the 2011 Arab uprisings, that protests without a sustainable government plan for the country are part of the problem, not the solution.

In the third wave of democratisation in the 1980s, Samuel Huntington argued that democratic regimes that have been instituted by mass popular actors rarely endure. The argument of authority carries weight but, in any case, it is clear that success in principle is not guaranteed, even less so in this second wave of protests. Today, it is even more complicated than in the 1980s to promote democratic change with street mobilisation mechanisms because of their lesser structuring, greater heterogeneity and the absence of prominent leaders as in the past.

We might add that in increasingly fragmented societies, individuals can mobilise for an accumulation of heterogeneous and variable motives for no other fundamental reason than accumulated unease. The protesters' substantive positions are vague, open-ended and generally critical of the situation. In more than a few cases, anti-establishment elements can be incorporated. The protests are paradoxically not supported by ideological and political scaffolding. They are the result of demands for dignity, inclusion, recognition and respect. Protesters can be recognised as 'rebels without a cause' but angry at their situation and aware of their ability to attract attention through their riots²⁷.

The academic world soon began to study the second wave of protests of the current decade. In 2013, the Initiative for Policy Dialogue and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung published a comprehensive and well-documented report that uncovered a changing trend. Not only were there more protest demonstrations, but there had also been a marked increase in the number of people and profiles mobilising on the streets. The change was particularly significant in the more developed countries and in Ibero-America²⁸.

In 2015, a report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace again emphasised that the trend observed in 2013 continued to strengthen. Protests were growing in number and had increasing consequences in the countries where they took place. Unlike in 2011, where the phenomenon was concentrated in the Arab world, by 2015 the protests had spread around the world.

Large demonstrations lasting for months did not only take place in democratic countries. The protesters were increasingly determined to face the consequences of sustaining the defiance and action of the security forces. By 2015, a sense was already emerging that something important was afoot

²⁷ <http://archive.battleofideas.org.uk/documents/RebelsWeb.pdf>

²⁸ <https://es.slideshare.net/fanetin/world-protests-20062013final>. Data from this report show that the number of protests in seven years had increased fourfold.

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in global politics and that the protests were a reflection of the changes. It seemed clear then that citizens were increasingly demanding more from their governments and were ready to mobilise to achieve their demands²⁹. This perception was not yet general, but researchers had discovered that the street had become a new arena of power capable of delegitimising any or all institutions – in democratic states or not – with a discourse of contestation structured by the grammar of defiance, not infrequently violent³⁰.

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace analysis had more evidence. Of course, it presented the debate of the operability and consequence of the mobilisations. It rightly touched on a previously identified but insufficiently addressed dimension, the heterogeneity of the protests. The acknowledged fact of the global spread of mobilisations does not mean that their causes are global. The protests have local roots, so the temptation, which many fall into, to draw sweeping general conclusions about what is happening can lead to a distorted view. The rise of global protests was recognised in 2015 as an important trend in national and international politics, but caution was advised to be cautious in determining the precise nature and impact of the phenomenon in each case.

Protest mobilisations are inevitably linked to conflict, which the protagonists in collective actions understand cannot be resolved without pressure. The outcome of the protests cannot be predicted, but one effect that must be reckoned with is a certain degree of social fracture, which will depend on the relevance of the change being pushed outside the institutional channel. Evidently, when changes bend the pulse of the position taken by the institutions, there is an added discredit. Not only has the system acted unjustly, but they lack the authority and legitimate power to defend their decisions. Mobilisations, whether they fail or succeed, set in motion polarisation mechanisms that do not facilitate conventional political solutions.

Current situation

In today's world, any call for protest using networks can mobilise crowds. In 2009, Danish sociologist Anders Colding-Jorgensen, a professor at the University of Copenhagen, launched an experiment to study social networks and their social impact. Using Facebook, he created a protest group against the demolition of the stork fountain in the city. He even published the planned timetable for the demolition. Within a week, the group had more than 10,000 people signed up to oppose the demolition. The stork statue was never

²⁹ https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_257_Youngs-Carothers-Global_Protests_final.pdf

³⁰ http://www.ieee.es/publicaciones-new/documentos-de-analisis/2020/DIEEA02_2020ANDGOM_Joker.html

intended to be demolished, but in only two weeks 27,000 people, through a virtual group, protested against a decision that nobody took³¹.

Fragmentation, disaffection and disenchantment are breaking out all over the place or are waiting underground for their moment to do so, without the need for a major seismic movement. The start can be triggered by anything, an increase in the price of public transport or fuel or tobacco tax or motorway charges. The detonator does not have to have high explosive power. Increasingly, there is no rational relationship between the initial cause and the power of the awakening of disapprovals.

Today's citizens feel increasingly unable to assess the policy decisions of governments with their accelerating complexity. The result is a politics in which citizens are unable to exercise their political role effectively and responsibly, leading to frustration on the one hand and, on the other, to a trivialisation of political debates that are less about content and more about images and feelings. Over time, the frustration and banality transforms into a dark, indignant resentment, fuelled by corruption, inequality and the desertion of elites as they abdicate their role.

Meanwhile, the politics of spectacle, image campaigns and seductive politicians generate rising expectations that have little to do with a full assessment of reality. The burden of frustration generated by the non-fulfilment of fictitious expectations feeds the tendency of the man in the street to disengage from political parties³². Surprisingly, an apparent contradiction emerges: the advance of the welfare state is associated with growing individual malaise.

The individualisation of discomfort plays a central role for citizens who decide to demonstrate in order to share a feeling and an experience with others. Protest is also seen as an occasion for 'people-to-people' encounters, where shared feelings are more important than motivations. Paradoxically, in societies with an increasing fragmentation and dissolution of the weight of the social dimension, where isolation is increasingly a reality that accompanies a solitary crowd, movements favour other ways of relating to others. The new protest activists seek to create spaces of experience where power relations and domination do not exist. Of course, there is a more or less large sector in each situation related to the old motivations of exercising counter-power in the street, which aims to wear down and question the

³¹ <http://copenhagen.lpsphoto.us/en/copenhagen-storkfontain>

³² 'Latinobarómetro 2018'. «Trust in political parties reaches a regional average of 13% in 2018. Political parties find themselves in a particularly negative moment similar to the years preceding the Asian crisis at the turn of the millennium. Disenchantment with politics has led to party fragmentation, a crisis of representation and the election of populist leaders. These data show the crisis in the region's political systems, where no one is a champion». Available at: <https://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>

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decisions of the institutions or the institutions themselves, but this sector is becoming less and less nuclear.

Mobilisations in Latin America driven by the left can be as unstructured as those of the right. However, revolutionary or reformist movements on the left have better instrumentalised utopia and imagination. The illusion of the construction of a true 'Communal State' or a more open, inclusive and participatory society can with collective action become a necessary utopian prefiguration to integrate the multiple and fragmented pieces of grievance and malaise. Utopia, not as an imaginary dream but as a critical action of the inadequacies of the situation and a reflection of the will to overcome it, has an anthropological value that is essential to overcome inertia, paralysis and weariness.

Mobilisations in defence of liberal democracy are also based on a utopian vision that in many regions, especially in Latin America, is in crisis. As on other occasions, not a few have identified the protests as a wave of disruptive, basically pro-democratic changes that are a consequence of the problems of non-democratic governments. This is not the case at the moment. Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua, being repressive and anti-democratic regimes, are not facing large street mobilisations right now.

The momentum of Venezuela's 2014 and 2017 protests has been completely exhausted by the complete collapse of its economy and the impotence of the opposition to oust Maduro. In Nicaragua, the movements of 2018 are a long way off. Cuba remains an unapproachable stronghold of the Communist Party that seems to repress and manage unrest better than anyone else. Uncertainty is the sign of the times, but it may be paradoxical that the most authoritarian, degraded and impoverished systems end up being the least affected by the protests.

Venezuela is a uniquely important case in the continent and its Bolivarian revolution has inspired other countries. The strength of chavismo in the face of the avalanche of protests and mobilisations in the streets is worth analysing. Many may criticise the opposition to the regime for its weaknesses, weaknesses and disunity at decisive moments, and they are certainly right, but this is not a sufficient argument to understand the success of chavismo's resilience in retaining power in the face of the avalanche of failures and grievances.

In 2017, street mobilisations surpassed the record of 2014 with a total of 9,787 protests. The calls were massive, with greater participation than ever before, longer and more sustained over time, they were extended to all the states of the Republic and to rural areas, the participation of the popular classes increased notably, and their international repercussion was greater. In the first seven years of the current decade, the OVCS³³ has documented

³³ Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict.

47,072 street actions across the country, equivalent to an average of 6,700 conflicts per year. The most important data, however, are the victims. The OAS denounced that the repression had killed 130 Venezuelans and injured 16,000 people in the demonstrations, and also denounced the existence of 645 political prisoners³⁴. The OAS report on the crisis in Venezuela puts the record straight. The regime has responded to nationwide protests with repression and terror.

Since the massive demonstrations of 2014, the Maduro government has reinforced the repressive system by associating it with the doctrine of national security. In response to what the regime sees as a national security problem, the Zamora Civic-Military Plan was approved³⁵. Plan Zamora institutionalises the joint action of military forces, militia forces and armed civilians in public order control functions or in any other area of interest, consolidating the repressive action of military forces, police, state intelligence services, popular militias, paramilitary collectives and shock groups. Between April and July 2017, violent actions by paramilitary collectives were recorded in at least 523 protests. Most of the colectivos' interventions resulted in gunshot wounds and in some cases deaths. As the social crisis in Venezuela has worsened, the activity of the armed collectives has increased, and they sometimes act in conjunction with police or military forces. OVCS points to the possibility that some collectives are using police uniforms³⁶.

Today in 2020 nothing is working in Venezuela; everything is in ruins. The population is trying to survive in the midst of misery. Five million Venezuelans have fled the country. In the last three years, the country's multitude of crises have been accentuated. No Ibero-American country, and few in the world, has seen a greater deterioration of its reality in all areas in the last five years. Venezuela has been reaping an accumulated avalanche of bad news for years.

Hyperinflation reaches an unaffordable magnitude³⁷. The health system, the education system, public safety and all the services that the state is supposed to provide have collapsed. Practically 90% of the population lives in poverty. The minimum wage is just under \$1 a month, the lowest in Latin America, below Cuba or Haiti. Around 8 million Venezuelans have to make do with a salary of 0.92 dollars a month³⁸, which would be supplemented by the

³⁴ In its annual report, the OVCS counts 160 killings in demonstrations in the same period by state officials or armed civilians.

³⁵ Defined as «a joint strategic plan to respond to possible adverse events or foreign intervention that threatens the security of the country».

³⁶ <https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/tendencias-de-la-conflictividad/conflictividad-social-en-venezuela-en-2017>

³⁷ Inflation in the first eight months of 2020 stands at 1,079.67%, according to parliamentary data. The Central Bank stopped publishing official figures.

³⁸ The minimum daily wage for Venezuelans is \$0.03, 98% below the UN minimum poverty line. In Venezuela, at least 8 million people live below the poverty line, not counting the

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food voucher to bring it down to 2 dollars. This monthly income is not enough to buy a carton of eggs³⁹. Since Maduro came to power Venezuela has lost two thirds of its GDP⁴⁰.

Oil production has continued to decline. Venezuela now produces only 12% of the oil it produced before Hugo Chávez came to power⁴¹. In May 2019, one egg in Venezuela cost the same as 93 million litres of petrol. However, with the lowest fuel prices in the world and the largest crude oil reserves, filling a tank is a near impossible task.

In addition to the serious humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, there is also the crisis of political legitimacy of Nicolás Maduro as president of Venezuela. Maduro, in violation of the Constitution, controls the judiciary, the legislature and the National Electoral Council (CNE), which on several occasions has manipulated the dates and conditions of elections and then adulterated the results⁴².

The Lima Group, the European Union, the United States, Canada, Brazil, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea and a total of 65 states did not recognise the results of the May 2018 presidential elections because of documented serious fraud and irregularities. Consequently, according to the Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela, the president of the National Assembly recognised the vacancy of the office of president and assumed his constitutional function as president in charge. There cannot be two presidents in one state. In the same way, a State cannot have two National Assemblies, i.e., two conflicting legislative powers, as has been the

people in the family who depend on the salary received by people on the minimum wage or the minimum pension.

³⁹ <https://www.dw.com/es/salario-m%C3%ADnimo-en-venezuela-092-d%C3%B3lares/a-55127544>

⁴⁰ ⁴⁰ https://cincodias.elpais.com/cincodias/2020/10/01/economia/1601562600_919713.html

⁴¹ In the summer months of 2020 it did not reach 400,000 barrels of oil per day. It is possible that in less than a year PDVSA will no longer be able to pump oil. Venezuela's oil production remained at a historically low level, at 339,000 barrels per day, falling back to 1934 production levels.

Disponible en: <https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2020/08/13-la-produccion-de-petroleo-en-venezuela-continua-estancada-en-niveles-de-1934/>

⁴² Government control of the TSJ's actions has been a valuable asset in nullifying the actions of the opposition and the legislature. The current composition of the TSJ is marked by the unusual methods used to appoint its thirty-two magistrates. The current composition of the TSJ is marked by the unusual methods used to appoint its thirty-two magistrates. The appointment of the new magistrates to the different chambers of the Supreme Court of Justice has been considered a violation of constitutional and legal norms, not only by the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) but also by the state attorney general and by the Chavista opposition to Maduro.

⁴² A large part of the international community has not recognised the ANC as a body with democratic authority and legitimacy, most notably the European Union, the Organisation of American States, the Socialist International, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Spain.

case since 2017. In Venezuela we see that everything is possible but only within a framework of serious conflict.

While the Venezuelan economy completely collapsed since Nicolás Maduro came to power, Bolivia's economy grew during Evo Morales' governments at an average of 4.8% annually, being a model of left-wing government capable of sustaining growth, economic stability and poverty reduction. Evo Morales' political licences, while serious, are insignificant compared to the ongoing and systemic constitutional violations of the Maduro regime.

Evo Morales not only governed the country for fourteen years, he re-founded it. He has not been just another president in Bolivia's history. Being the country's first indigenous president has given him added authority due to his symbolic and almost mythical value. Imitating Hugo Chávez, during his first term, Morales pushed for the approval of a new constitution, which would change the country's name. The Plurinational State of Bolivia was thus born, and its new name is intended to reflect the diversity of the Bolivian community.

The new constitution established, like that of the United States, a maximum of two presidential terms, but Evo Morales did not respect this limitation. Evo Morales' second term, which ended in January 2015, was to be his last. However, in April 2013, the Supreme Court ruled that the approval of the Constitution was a resetting of the counter, so the president's first term did not count. President Morales' decision to run for a fourth term was more difficult to resolve. In order to unblock the situation, he decided to launch a constitutional reform to enable his candidacy. The change required a victory in the referendum of 21 February 2016, but the proposal that would have allowed him to stand for presidential re-election was defeated.

At that time, having lost the referendum, it was the Plurinational Constitutional Tribunal that decided to enable Evo Morales to run for a fourth re-election. Then came the elections of 20 October 2019 accompanied by proven irregularities and manipulation of data. On election night when 83% of the votes had been counted, it was clear that a second round would be necessary. At that point, the system stopped working and the data flow was suspended. Once normality had returned, there had been an unexpected reversal of the vote that gave Evo Morales his fourth term as president outright⁴³.

⁴³ This should not surprise or shock anyone too much because it is not the first time this method has been used in the region. A well-known example, among many that could be drawn upon, is the 1988 Mexican presidential election, which also saw a breakdown of the system. The scandal is still vivid in the memory of Mexicans. When Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the National Democratic Front was slightly ahead in the polls, the computer system stopped working. Once the data count was restored, it surprisingly put the PRI candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, ahead, whom the Federal Electoral Commission awarded the victory with more than half of the votes. There were protests, of course, but not enough to alter the PRI's fifty-year supremacy.

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In Bolivia, the climate of discontent was widespread, sparking a wave of protests that led to clashes between supporters and opponents of President Morales. The scandal, the pressure from the streets, the violent civilian clashes and the doubts of the military and security forces forced the pro-government sector to accept an investigation into the elections by the OAS.

The audit was devastating for the government. The OAS identified in a detailed report an overwhelming accumulation of irregularities in the elections⁴⁴. The OAS report was made public in the early hours of Sunday the 10th, the same night Evo Morales presented his resignation. The events took place in such an accelerated manner that they surprised and astonished Bolivians. In the morning, mayors and governors, all members of the Movement Towards Socialism – Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples (MAS-IPSP), resigned from their posts. The president of the Chamber of Deputies, Víctor Borda, and the Minister of Mining, César Navarro, resigned from their posts at midday. In less than three hours, Vice-President Álvaro García Linera, Senate President Adriana Salvatierra, Senate First Vice-President Rubén Medinaceli, Health Minister Gabriela Montaña, and a large number of high-ranking and militant MAS officials followed suit. The rest of the ministers resigned between Sunday night and Monday. The president had to leave the capital that same Sunday and remain unaccounted for security reasons.

Many citizens watched in disbelief the fall of a president who led with strength and relative success for almost fourteen years. Especially when his popularity remained high. The OAS never questioned Evo Morales' victory in the elections. The irregularities and manipulations he denounced were made at the end of the recount to avoid a second round in the presidential election⁴⁵. Evo Morales' resignation sparked an outburst of joy in Bolivia's nine departmental capitals, where mass demonstrations took place to

⁴⁴ General elections in the Plurinational State of Bolivia, 20 October 2019, OAS final report. «The manipulations and irregularities pointed out do not allow us to be certain about the margin of victory of the Morales candidate over the Mesa candidate. On the contrary, from the overwhelming evidence found, what can be affirmed is that there have been a series of fraudulent operations aimed at altering the will expressed at the ballot box.

On election night, the election court deliberately interrupted the transmission of results. All the technical team's analyses show that the shutdown of the TREP system was neither an accident nor a decision based on technical grounds. It was simply an arbitrary decision, the purpose of which included manipulation of the IT infrastructure.

When the system resumed operation the following day, a hidden server appeared on the scene, undeclared and uncontrolled neither by the auditing company nor by the technical staff of the electoral management body. It was used to process the remaining TREP information corresponding to more than 1,400 electoral acts. This second server did not appear in any report until the OAS audit uncovered it through expert studies.»

Available at: [https://www.oas.org/es/sap/deco/informe-bolivia-2019/0.1%20Informe%20Final%20-%20Análisis%20de%20Integridad%20Electoral%20Bolivia%202019%20\(OSG\).pdf](https://www.oas.org/es/sap/deco/informe-bolivia-2019/0.1%20Informe%20Final%20-%20Análisis%20de%20Integridad%20Electoral%20Bolivia%202019%20(OSG).pdf)

⁴⁵ https://www.clarin.com/mundo/caida-evo-morales-asombrosamente-rapida_0_QahV7TUS.html

celebrate. An outsider might have thought that the Bolivian national football team had won the World Cup⁴⁶.

We can ask ourselves why in a relatively stable and prosperous Bolivia a president is overthrown in such a short time, while in Venezuela, much more convulsed, completely ruined, with its productive fabric destroyed, with an unimaginable humanitarian crisis, with more political violence, with skyrocketing homicide rates and with a more corrupt and authoritarian political regime, Maduro continues to exercise the de facto presidency. The most important reason for Evo Morales' downfall was the lack of support from the armed forces and the police.

The strike by the police, who locked themselves in their barracks refusing to repress opposition demonstrations against electoral fraud, was the first step on 8 November. In La Paz, the presidential guard, which had clashed with demonstrators protesting against Evo Morales, decided to abandon their posts to join the protest. The armed forces stated that they would not repress the people by acting against the rallies. On 10 November, when the OAS audit of the electoral process became known, the Commander General of the Armed Forces, General Williams Kaliman, and the Commander of the Police, General Yuri Calderón, suggested that the president resign to avoid further violence⁴⁷.

In Venezuela, President Juan Guaidó repeatedly encouraged the armed forces to disregard the orders of an illegitimate president like Maduro. However, the military refused to comply with the request. The Venezuelan armed forces have received continuous political indoctrination since Chávez came to power. Promotions and postings have been linked from the outset to loyalty to the commander-in-chief and the Bolivarian movement. Moreover, the regime's counterintelligence, trained by Cuban instructors, has acted as an effective firewall against any dissident movement within the military for many years. Chávez and to an even greater extent Maduro have given special attention, privileges, power and immunity to the armed forces, which as an institution has come to assimilate that its future is tied to Chavismo.

In Latin America, the armed forces are the second most trusted institution after the Church. It is no coincidence that Venezuela is precisely the country in the region with the lowest support for its military, far below the average value. The Bolivian Armed Forces, on the contrary, have been able to maintain a sufficient degree of institutional autonomy to understand that above orders are the laws.

Some analysts were convinced that Venezuela's economic collapse would eventually lead to political change, but they were wrong. Chile and Bolivia

⁴⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-50369434>

⁴⁷ <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20191110/471503335397/militares-y-policias-piden-a-evo-morales-que-dimita-para-pacificar-el-pais.html>

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could be seen as the opposite case. However, both have been shaken by protest movements with significant political effects.

Chile has been experiencing mass protests and acts of extreme violence for six months since 18 October 2019. Protests and violence only ceased with the arrival of the COVID pandemic. In the light of what has happened, it seems that those who think that development favours the emergence of a middle class with unfulfilled expectations are right. In Venezuela, the day-to-day struggle for survival absorbs people's energies and all other issues take a back seat. The destruction is so complete that there is not even the strength to protest⁴⁸.

The results of Bolivia's elections in October 2020 are not as surprising as one might expect after the fall of Evo Morales. Evo Morales' candidacy to renew a fourth term as president, ignoring the 2016 referendum and the political constitution, and fourteen years of authoritarian rule have had to do with the attrition of a leader. MAS, Evo Morales' party, with a new leadership and a more moderate profile, has been able to achieve resounding success. Luis Arce does not arouse the suspicion of his predecessor and the rejection of Evo, who promised to return to Bolivia immediately after the MAS victory. The party is looking for the right moment for him to return. Meanwhile, Evo has decided to fly to Caracas to celebrate his party's victory with Maduro away from Bolivia⁴⁹.

On this occasion, as on previous occasions and with increasing frequency, the identity of a massive aggregation of dissenting individuals is devoid of common projects and needs to be built on rejection. The Bolivian opposition has missed the opportunity to build a discourse of unity capable of stimulating voters. The opportunity has been missed. In Venezuela, in harsher circumstances too, we could say something similar. Opposition unity against chavismo is always in question and under suspicion. Juan Guaidó had a window of opportunity, but everything seems to indicate that it has closed.

The anti is the essential element of the new affiliations, thus forging small, disjointed communities able to meet and collaborate only when conflict is activated. A conflict against a conception of the other, which makes any negotiation difficult, insofar as it has to do not only with facts or circumstances, but with a self-affirmation of one's own will to reject. The result is a closed clash in a loop, no matter how much one tries to appeal to dialogue. Evo Morales had to leave so that MAS could win the elections quietly and without mortgages. The rejection it generated was too strong.

In Chile, hopes are pinned on the constituent process that would allow the nation to endow itself with a new, more inclusive social contract. However, it

⁴⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-50382468>

⁴⁹ <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2020/10/24/5f93b99cfdddf7d8b459f.html>

is not clear that the drafting of a new constitution would end the protests; it might even aggravate them. The disconnection of the street with the parties is high. Institutional confidence has fallen. Protest has an emotional component of rejection and discomfort that is not dissolved by promises. The constituent process could only be closed after the exit endorsement scheduled for the first half of 2022. Over the next two years many will be competing to use the streets to make their voices heard by constituents.

In the meantime, Chile will remain trapped in the 'middle-income country trap'. It is not a country that can compete with the low wages of poor countries, but neither can it compete with the value-added generation of more developed countries. A new constitution cannot change the economic structure of a country, its innovation potential, the technological development of its companies, the creation of human capital, the profitability of investments and the increase in jobs. While discussions are underway on how to start writing a new constitution on a blank piece of paper, expectations could, with even more reason than before, be frustrated by the stagnation of expected social and economic gains with political change.

Role of external actors. 1659

The international press has a special role to play in amplifying or filtering the mobilisations. At the same time, it attempts to provide public opinion with the keys that make sense of the underlying malaise. News related to mass and prolonged street protests, associated with police response actions and violence, are especially attractive to the media because of the fascination and impact of the images obtained and how easy it can be to construct a story.

They are also an interesting opportunity for experts competing for the media spotlight. Movements of great intensity, which surprise governments, intelligence apparatuses, law enforcement agencies and society itself, which are difficult to understand due to their complex spontaneity, which overwhelm the response capacities of established systems, are quickly analysed and apparently understood from the outside with an apparent clear appreciation of the events.

Abroad, opinion-makers tend to consider that everything that happens in unfamiliar countries can be over-understood, and are inclined to guess from their own point of view⁵⁰. Protesters who protest are automatically turned

⁵⁰ «Analysts and observers often view protests through the prism of their own specialist field. Democracy enthusiasts, for example, are quick to label large anti-government protests as pro-democracy events. Corruption specialists are equally prone to see anger with corruption as the fundamental driver. Economists will seize on economic explanations for protests that political scientists are more apt to interpret as driven primarily by political

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into heroes, without any consideration of their motivations, actions and consequences.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos rightly points out⁵¹, «Conventional paradigms, with Eurocentric roots, transfer to the analysis of collective phenomena certain presuppositions about nature and individual human agency considered as universal. The narrow conceptions of rationality of these paradigms do not allow for an adequate appreciation of the different temporal and organisational logics, the role of spirituality or the complex relationships between citizenship and subjectivity, and between public space and everyday life»⁵².

The academic world generally follows the same line as the media. It tends to see street protests as a way of reacting to a repressive system. The profile of the protester is only briefly analysed. The real possibilities for action are not sufficiently assessed, nor are developments and trends in the country. By definition, any protest is a liberation movement that is associated with a legitimate aspiration for democracy and the development of democracy. It would be heresy to introduce nuances because they do not fit the monolithic archetype of people who rebel in the street.

Of course, behind this approach there is a prior ideological underpinning that establishes a narrow and general framework for the diversity of actions and mobilisations in different corners of the world. Simplification of the analysis is a mistake but does not necessarily have to be understood as innocent. There are more than a few who want to capture the momentum of the mobilisations in order to capture them and, by appropriating them, impose their own political agenda, which has little to do with the grassroots of the protest or its fragmentation⁵³.

Analysts and observers often view protests through the prism of their own field of expertise. Western political activists immediately label large anti-

factors». Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_257_Youngs-Carothers-Global_Protests_final.pdf

⁵¹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a prominent Professor of Sociology at the University of Coimbra, closely linked to Brazil and the World Social Forum, committed to Marxism and its continuous discovery. His writings are devoted to developing a sociology of emergencies, in which diverse experiences are valued in order to decolonise knowledge.

⁵² PLEYERS, Geoffry (2018). 'Movimientos sociales en el siglo XXI: *perspectivas y herramientas analíticas*'. CLACSO, Buenos Aires.

⁵³ «The alt-right activists since 2010 have launched a battle for a better world in a particular historical context and faced forces that were largely underestimated at the beginning of the decade. Seven years after the start of a global wave of pro-democracy social movements, the political and social landscape is far from the democratic hopes that mobilised millions of citizens. Not only did the progressive movements fail to overthrow the powers they opposed, but we are facing a strengthening of repression, authoritarianism and conservatism.»

PLEYERS, Geoffry (2018). 'Movimientos sociales en el siglo XXI: *perspectivas y herramientas analíticas*'. CLACSO, Buenos Aires.

government protests as pro-democracy events. Governance and public policy specialists also, without missing a beat, identify corruption as the epicentre of the protest. Economists will use arguments related to stagnant growth, lack of investment, budget deficits, the cost of borrowing, misguided fiscal and monetary policies, in short, their own technical arguments polarised around the data, graphs and accounts of the country's economy. Political scientists will look for answers in constitutional maladjustment or insufficient governance. NGO activists will insist on human rights violations and so on.

Western analyses of the protests replicate the phenomenon of the specialist's partial approach to a complex, intertwined reality. The result has led to confusion and serious errors of judgement, which have permeated public opinion. If we could turn back the clock, most Western journalists and analysts would completely change their interpretation of what was happening in 2011 in the Arab world and then in 2013/2014 in Ukraine⁵⁴. In both cases, the mobilisations ended up generating violence, death and destruction. The end result is a scenario that is much less conducive to implementing the changes advocated by the protesters.

From our world, we often fail to consider the complexity of each other's trade-offs, the plurality of protests, the accompanying polarisation that often drags more moderate groups off the stage, the threats posed by power vacuum or chaos, and the regional and global effects that may be associated with them. It is rare to take a cautious step back to look at the big picture of protests and survey their diversity, complexity and dangers.

The words and opinions of analysts and the media do not create reality but to a large extent the perception of events. Especially when they are able to tune in to the political correctness and culture of the recipients. «The media recognise that there is a mediatised reality, which is the one that readers perceive as real and, in opposition, the one they ignore if it is not covered and explained by the media»⁵⁵. No one seems to question that the unpublished does not exist. In this way, the success of simplification is not infrequently imposed by distorting the complexity of the facts. «The one great weakness of journalism as a picture of our modern existence is that it must be a picture composed entirely of exceptions. Therefore, the complex picture they give of life is necessarily fallacious; they can only represent what is unusual. As democratic as they are, they only care about the minority»⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ In Ukraine, the uprisings led to a civil war that resulted in more than 10,000 deaths, the loss of the province of Crimea to the Russian federation and the deep deterioration of Western countries' relations with Russia. The end result is that Ukraine faces a conflict that has been frozen for many years and the world faces an unresolvable tension between the West and Russia.

⁵⁵ <https://www.yorokobu.es/camaras-de-eco-y-percepcion/>

⁵⁶ CHESTERTON, G. K. (2009). *The Ball and the Cross*. Valdemar Editorial, Madrid.

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Criticism of the media is not new, and its dynamics are familiar. Political, social, economic and cultural actors know the rules and know that in order to have a presence it is necessary to act in unusual ways. Protest can become almost an end in itself because of its capacity for political and media disruption.

New technologies are only tools and therefore will not necessarily be used to deepen the exercise of freedom. Its use also blurs the boundaries between informational pluralism and informational fragmentation, between diversity of approach and uniformity of subliminal redundancy, between tolerance and intolerance. It is increasingly difficult to detect, even in the freest of environments, truthful information from 'fake news', which is easily created to confuse, manipulate, misinform or discredit. The multiplication of channels and voices has empowered many more actors, including anonymous actors and individuals who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to be heard.

Conclusion. 1214

The normalisation of protest, as a constant that continually shakes coexistence in Ibero-America, has become a manifestation of suspicion, not only of mistrust, but also of powerlessness to induce change. Suspicion and impotence in the face of an institutional order, a rule of law, a political system, leaders and a power-sharing model that offers no solutions to real problems that are alien to the rest of those who suffer from them. Different daily hardships, each affecting only one side, leaving the rest indifferent, who bear their own.

At the same time, there is a feeling of helplessness and abandonment, which for a long time was contained by the practice of resignation and patience as social virtues. The new archetypes of citizenship do not fit well with the virtues of yesteryear and defy the barriers of another time. The expansion of protest has overflowed all channels of representation and ideological projects.

In Ibero-America, more and earlier than anywhere else, everyday life began to rebel long ago without making too much noise on many occasions, but it has become a habit that is growing in intensity. Citizenship learning is the result of ongoing and consolidated action over decades.

Twenty-three years ago, when the 'Latinobarómetro' began to measure regional public opinion, there has never been such a perception of loss and regression in Ibero-America as there is now. This perception is compounded by the fact that Ibero-America is the region with the highest level of interpersonal mistrust in the world. Both social apprehensions predispose, in difficult times, to fragmentation and prolonged social conflict that is difficult to overcome. The concurrence of factors can end up generating the perfect storm.

Huntington argued that political instability arises when institutions fail to keep pace with social mobilisation. The problem is a consequence of paralysis. In Ibero-America, the growing middle and underprivileged classes perceive that elites are over-controlling the levers of change to sustain their privileges at the expense of the common good. The result is the blocking of the system's capacity for change, also in democratic states, and the frustration of those who feel that all maladjustments are paid for by only a few. Elites and political parties freeze a structure and superstructure that fundamentally benefits a minority in good times and in bad times forces the rest to pay the price.

Deadlock and paralysis reflect the complacency of the powerful and their lack of identification with popular demands. The result is a feedback loop of interpersonal and institutional mistrust, which will continue to weaken community ties and partnership capacity to implement projects that subordinate individual or particular interests in favour of broader national interests that reinforce shared common values.

Postmodern thinking fosters the development of people with a strong individualistic and self-referential identity. Progress is interpreted as self-affirmation of the individual. In these circumstances, social bonds can only be formed on the basis of rejection and reproach. The reaffirmation of the self is a mobilising factor that acts as a lever for mobilisation. The activism of non-conformists is related to the discovery of their own identity and is reconfigured through protest. The situation offers an opportunity for political instrumentalisation.

Individualism as self-affirmation to the exclusion of creative engagement has not eliminated critique, but has made critique a central element of self-affirmation. Criticism is the fruit of disaffection, not of a project. Criticism becomes superficial, it does not get to the heart of the problem, what really happens is that criticism is replaced by protest. The critique of one-dimensional man has no teeth to chew, no stomach to digest and feed the social body. It is just a cry of rage from an attitude that is basically based on defending what is mine. Spontaneous action has value for ideologues because it is a different form of struggle against power.

The protests are not exclusively about confronting poverty, inequality, social marginalisation or repression, but about combating the fear of being discarded by the new throwaway culture. The fear of being discarded provokes a vital anguish, a consequence of the conviction that no state, society or group can assist the individual with guarantees. The threat of exclusion is terrifying.

Protest and violence are «a desperate search by the invisible for their own mechanisms of representation»⁵⁷. It is a magic potion that gives prominence and form to those who feel isolated, whether they are isolated or not.

⁵⁷ Available at: https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/12/27/ideas/1577471767_306511.html

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Disenchantment predates the reasons for the protests and is the consequence of a breakdown in the personal and social bonds of a lonely crowd. It is the disenchantment of the solitary crowd that allows us to understand the transversal and leadership-elusive character of the mobilisations that find their cause and identity in the protest itself.

This decade's new wave of protests reveals that protests are effective in overthrowing leaders, but not in building new institutions or new political processes or devising positive solutions to problems. The hero of the protest is the person who protests. As in the past, there are no prominent political figures or intellectuals to serve as reference points.

The novelty and incredible opportunities provided by today's social networks and communication and information systems cannot be linked only to the promotion of individual rights and public freedoms. The proliferation of voices has not improved the quality of public debate, but rather has favoured a disorderly dispersion, which has facilitated the emergence of isolated bubbles of opinion within societies themselves. New technologies have created 'echo chambers' that unite like-minded people by separating them from the rest in a 'filtered bubble'⁵⁸. The result is a self-imposed segregation of the environment, creating spaces where only the echo of our own words and ideas resounds, favouring social fragmentation and polarisation.

On the other hand, the dispersion and freedom offered by the new means of communication create a problem of articulation of the movements. A striking difference between the first and second wave of protests is that social networks have replaced the depressing day-to-day work of organisations, where team bonding, political leadership, and the command and action structures necessary for orderly decision-making and strategising were forged. The spontaneity of movements can make them much more effective in calling for action, spreading propaganda, recruiting volunteers, rallying large numbers of people, controlling small action groups, but the problem comes the day after, when action must be transformed into political debate and negotiation. «The use of the same repertoire of action does not necessarily imply that we are dealing with the same movement, but with a cultural and historical grammar available and interpreted by society and social groups»⁵⁹.

⁵⁸ https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Cesar_Rodriguez27/publication/338517284_Los_usuarios_en_su_laberinto_burbujas_de_filtros_camaras_de_eco_y_mediacion_algoritmica_en_la_opinion_publica_en_linea/links/5e18c261299bf10bc3a33d6c/Los-usuarios-en-su-laberinto-burbujas-de-filtros-camaras-de-eco-y-mediacion-algoritmica-en-la-opinion-publica-en-linea.pdf?origin=publication_detail

⁵⁹ BRINGEL, M. Breno, and Domingues, José Mauricio (2018). *Brasil cambios de era: crisis, protestas y ciclos políticos*. Los Libros de la Catarata, Madrid.

CHRONOLOGY OF PROTEST MOBILISATIONS IN IBEROAMERICA 2019	
Date	Protest mobilisations
January 2019	Venezuela: Juan Guaidó proclaimed president in charge, demonstrations of support repressed by the Bolivarian National Guard. The demonstrations resulted in at least 16 deaths.
	Venezuela: counterdemonstrations against the National Assembly's designation of Juan Guaidó as president in charge.
February-October 2019	Haiti: protests against incumbent President Jovenel Moïse and his Prime Minister Jean-Henry Cean, resulting in at least 46 deaths.
May 2019	Venezuela: demonstration in support of Nicolás Maduro following a civic-military uprising.
June 2019	Honduras: Protests against the government over the possible privatisation of teaching and education that began in April are becoming more radical. The government uses the army and police to repress the protests, resulting in at least two deaths.
July 2019	Puerto Rico: Puerto Ricans took to the streets for almost two weeks to demand the resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló.
Mexico 2019	Mexico: Feminist protests in Mexico against attacks on women.
September 2019	Peru: Demonstrations to demand the dissolution of Congress over corruption cases.
	Peru: Demonstrations against the President's decision to dissolve Congress.
October 2019	Ecuador: Protests over the doubling of fuel prices as part of a package of cuts and deficit reduction measures, to the liking of the IMF. Result 8 dead.
October 2019-March 2020	Chile: Protests against the increase of the Santiago de Chile metro fare by 30 pesos. They start on 18 October and run until March 2020. Mobilisations were halted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Result 34 dead.
October 2019	Bolivia: Protests over irregularities and manipulation of the presidential election results. At least 7 dead.

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CHRONOLOGY OF PROTEST MOBILISATIONS IN IBEROAMERICA 2019	
Date	Protest mobilisations
November 2019	Colombia: protests during the National Strike. At least five dead.
The COVID-19 pandemic paralysed protest mobilisations for much of 2020.	
September 2020	Colombia: protests during the National Strike.
October 2020	Chile: Demonstrations to mark the first anniversary of the mass protests. Disorder, police charges, arson.

Composition of the working group

<i>Chairman</i>	Francisco José Dacoba Cerviño <i>Army Brigadier General</i> <i>Director of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies</i>
<i>Coordinator and Member</i>	José Ignacio Castro Torres <i>Army Colonel</i> <i>Analyst at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies</i>
<i>Members</i>	Federico Aznar Fernández-Montesinos <i>Navy Commander</i> <i>Analyst at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies</i>
	María del Mar Hidalgo García <i>Analyst at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies</i>
	Felipe Sánchez Tapia <i>Army Colonel</i> <i>Analyst at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies</i>
	Juan Alberto Mora Tebas <i>Army Colonel</i> <i>Associate Analyst at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies</i>
	José Pardo de Santayana Gómez de Olea <i>Army Colonel</i> <i>Analyst at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies</i>
	Pedro Sánchez Herráez <i>Army Colonel</i> <i>PhD in Peace and International Security</i> <i>Analyst at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies</i>
	Andrés González Martín <i>Army Lieutenant Colonel</i> <i>Analyst at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies</i>



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