WHAT IF ... NOT?

The cost of assumptions

Edited by
Florence Gaub

With contributions from

Marie Brethous, Viola Fee Dreikhausen,
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INTRODUCTION

by
FLORENCE GAUB

Assumptions that turned out to be wrong can be very entertaining. The committee that called Christopher Columbus's plans to sail west 'impossible and vain and worthy of rejection' [1] assumed that its knowledge of geography was complete; H.M. Warner of Warner Brothers assumed that nobody wanted to hear actors talk; and record company manager Don Rowe turned down the Beatles because he assumed that 'groups of guitarists are on the way out.' The larger the gap between an exposed assumption and reality, the more cause for mirth.

There are two problems with this: firstly, we all suffer from hindsight bias when judging these errors – a cognitive fallacy according to which humans always overestimate how predictable things were after the fact. But, more importantly, we constantly make assumptions about the future and are therefore equally at risk of committing strategic blunders. That is because a massive 98 % of our reasoning rests on automatic, effortless and unconscious thinking – what Daniel Kahneman has called 'System 1'. This is useful because it helps us navigate the world without suffering from cognitive overload – but it comes at a price because assumptions are problematic for two reasons [2].

Firstly, they can be wrong. An assumption is, after all, a belief that is not based on evidence, facts or proof. The very origin of the word is indicative of this: coming from the Latin word
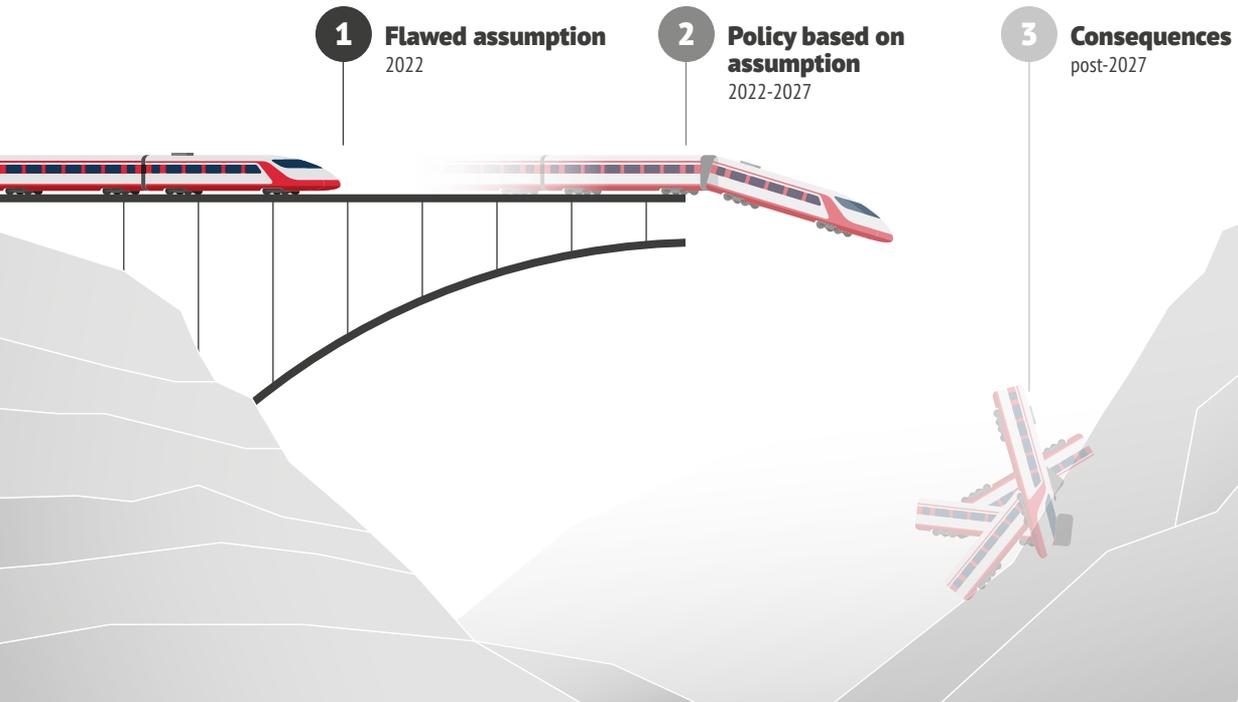
assumere, meaning to take up or appropriate, it denotes an act of taking on, and with it, taking for granted. But just like beliefs, convictions, presumptions or even trust, assumptions are more feelings than fact. This means that the actual evidence underpinning them might be incomplete or absent altogether. Which brings us to the second problem: we are not even aware that we adhere to potentially erroneous ideas. This is because assumptions are by nature non-examined. Together, these two aspects turn assumptions into the blind spots of the future, those areas where dangers, surprise and unpreparedness lurk. In decision-making terms, assumptions can be fragile stilts on which we build our bridges into the future only to find them crashing under our feet at some point.

We do have a protection mechanism in place, however: 2 % of our reasoning is a deliberate and conscious, effortful, controlled process of which we are fully aware. This type of reasoning, dubbed 'System 2' by Kahneman, is activated when we encounter events that are surprising or different from what we normally expect. It also takes over when matters become particularly difficult, and problems cannot be solved on auto-pilot. In foresight, we rely primarily on this System 2: we attempt explicitly to think about the world as it is not, and to go through the challenging process of untangling causality. Of course, we do not get rid of assumptions altogether: firstly, because it is not possible to switch System 1

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[1]   The Library of Congress Legislative Reference Service, 'Erroneous predictions and negative comments concerning exploration, territorial expansion, scientific and technological development', May 1969, Washington D.C.

[2]   Kahneman, D., *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Penguin Books, London, 2011.

What if...not?

1 **Flawed assumption**
2022

2 **Policy based on assumption**
2022-2027

3 **Consequences**
post-2027

off. Secondly, assumptions can be used to 'fill' some unknown elements of the future, akin to placeholders, until we have a better idea of what lies in store. The point here is to do this in a conscious manner, what is called in foresight lingo the 'assumptions check'. This is a process whereby we (1) articulate the beliefs that underpin a certain process; (2) test it against reality; and (3) formulate an indicator that will notify us when it is time to review our assumption, not dissimilar to a water level alarm. For instance, an assumption could be that summers in Normandy are always cool. A reality check will show that this means 17 °C. Our indicator could be that temperatures rise two summers in a row to over 20 °C. This implies, of course, that assumptions are not just articulated and tested, but also monitored regularly.

Assumptions can be skewed by many biases: from over-optimism to pessimism, from availability bias (over-estimating something because we have more knowledge about it) to confirmation bias (whereby we can eliminate knowledge because it does not suit our world view). They rarely come alone but weaved into a larger whole. Here we focus on assumptions that suffer primarily from a normalcy bias, i.e. they take it for granted that the future will be a lot like yesterday and today. In this case, history is mistaken for the future. One can see this bias in action particularly when historical references are used to frame an ongoing situation: the evacuation of Kabul in August 2021 was likened to the evacuation of Saigon in 1975, the Arab Spring was compared to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and September 11 to Pearl Harbour [3]. (It is worth noting that we tend to refer to those historical events that we have experienced ourselves, limiting the

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[3]   Neustadt, R.E. and May, E.R., *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*, Free Press, London, 1988.

potential utility of history.) This bias makes sense for System 1, as its task is to create a world of norms and regularity. But the future is not a replication of the past, and history never repeats itself despite the saying. Instead, recurrences are the result of *causalities*: the relationship between cause and effect that created the past as much as it will create the future. Over-estimating the degree of repetition that will shape the future means inevitably creating vulnerabilities for oneself.

In this last edition of the 'What if …?' *Chaillot Paper* series, we focus our attention on these unchecked assumptions. We thereby push the 'What if …?' logic into a new direction: while the 2017 and 2019 editions focused on the impact of surprising and disruptive events, the 2020 volume zeroed in on desirable future results of policy action, and 2021 explored the cost of not acting in a certain policy field. In 2022, we will look at the absence of a development – only this time, this will not be policy inaction, but more broadly the absence of a development we expected because we rested it on assumptions. The scenarios therefore serve as assumptions checks: they articulate assumptions that underpin European policies, test them against reality – and perhaps most importantly, show their cost should they turn out to be untrue. The structure can be summarised as 'What if … X does not happen as we thought it would?'. Together, these scenarios help not only focus the spotlight on assumptions worth reviewing, but also show the dangerous cost of having them. Ultimately, they thereby contribute to more prepared and future-oriented policies.

My thanks go, as always, to the past and present research team of the EUISS. Without their willingness to experiment with a different and unusual type of thinking, this series would never have been possible. I also want to thank the editorial team, especially Christian Dietrich and Gearoid Cronin, for their creative and team-spirited support to this innovative format.

POLICIES WE EXPECT TO WORK, BUT WHAT IF THEY DO NOT?

WHAT IF … THE EU'S MEDITERRANEAN POLICIES DO NOT WORK?

by
DANIEL FIOTT

2027

'Thank you. This is Miranda Marluppi from Euro Diretta. At the start of the decade the Commission used its "EU Beach Clean-Up" initiative to sell us idyllic pictures of the Mediterranean Sea, but today — in 2027 — the "Med is Dead". What is the EU doing to save the Mediterranean Sea?'. There was no satisfactory answer to this question. Not least because the assumption that EU policies such as the European Green Deal would help reduce overfishing, pollution and emissions in the Mediterranean had been wrong. Instead, from 2022 waves of protest by fishermen and coastal communities broke out across the Mediterranean. Port blockades and the dumping of dead fish on the streets of Brussels' European district became the norm.

'We are doing everything we can to manage the marine environment in the Mediterranean Sea. We are deeply concerned about the ongoing environmental effects of the 2026 oil spill, the persistent skirmishes between fishing fleets and the higher levels of irregular migration to Europe. However, we are on track to manage the marine economy, work with non-EU partners and mitigate the effects of climate change', proclaimed the Commission spokesperson. These words were of little comfort to the almost 2 million people that had been employed in the blue economy in the EU's Mediterranean Member States [1]. Combined with other climate-related stresses, the 'dead fish' phenomenon had also taken its toll on tourism in the Mediterranean.

There was strong disagreement between policymakers as to what was negatively affecting fish stocks. 'I am certain it is linked to the marine oil spill that occurred after the Bouri offshore rig disaster near Libya', said one official during a crisis meeting. 'I know that pollution and over-fishing have long been problems in the Mediterranean, but how can we ignore the fact that over 128 million litres of oil were released into the sea over a 70-day period after the Bouri disaster? An oil spill the size of Poland? It's our very own Deep Horizon!', he continued. 'Exactly', agreed another official, 'had it not been for the Bouri oil disaster our Green Deal would have changed

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[1] UN Environment Programme, 'The blue economy in the Mediterranean' (https://www.unep.org/unepmap/resources/factsheets/blue-economy).

things for the better. After all, we still invested in new Green Harbours and green-powered EU fishing fleets'.

'And now these fuel efficient vessels can catch oil soaked fish or invasive species such as the poisonous toadfish for people to eat!', interjected another official. 'We should face facts. The Bouri oil spill was, undeniably, a tragic disaster but we failed to address climate change and overfishing in the Mediterranean for years. We expected our Green Deal to help rejuvenate fish stocks but now people are out of jobs and up in arms and even our navies are being deployed to protect what fishing vessels remain at sea. Drones we once used to monitor vessel plume emissions are now being used to monitor pirates!'.

2022-2027

2027 was the tipping point for the Mediterranean. As part of its Green Deal, the Commission made clear that 6 %-9 % of maritime transport fuel should be made up of renewable and low-carbon fuels by 2030 and that this mix should increase to 86 %-88 % by 2050 [2]. Yet decarbonising the maritime sector and reducing fleet and port emissions did not go far enough in addressing overfishing in time. One of the wrong assumptions was to focus on renewable energy targets without more robust action on fishing practices. As Europe re-emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021-2022, there was a substantial initial

uptick in tourism and demand for fish in the Mediterranean region.

Of course, it is true that the EU did acknowledge the issue of overfishing in January 2021 by setting fishing quotas [3], which were set in line with the measures adopted by the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) [4]. However, the EU had already failed to meet its own past Biodiversity Strategy, which aimed to achieve sustainable marine ecosystems in the EU by 2020 [5]. It updated the Strategy as part of the European Green Deal in July 2021 with a new time horizon of 2030, but there were doubts as to whether these objectives could be met this time with fishing companies in the Mediterranean focused on recovering the losses they had incurred during the pandemic.

The other wrongful assumption concerned the speed at which the Mediterranean Sea was changing. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) had made clear in its assessment reports in the early 2020s, temperatures were accelerating at a faster rate than expected during the 2010s [6]. Worryingly, the Mediterranean region warmed faster than the global average from 2022 to 2027. This was evident from the ferocity of wildfires and droughts. However, the Mediterranean Sea became saltier too, leading to the accelerated destruction of marine ecosystems as well as the growth of parasites and invasive species. The warmer and saltier seas destroyed algal forests, sponges and biomass, which are essential for the reproduction and nurturing of species

[2] European Commission, 'Proposal for a Regulation on the use of renewable and low-carbon fuels in maritime transport and amending Directive 2009/16/EC', COM(2021) 562 final, 14 July 2021 (https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/fueleu_maritime_-_green_european_maritime_space.pdf).

[3] Council of the EU, 'Regulation for fixing for 2021 the fishing opportunities for certain fish stocks and groups of fish stocks applicable in the Mediterranean and Black Seas', Regulation 2021/90, 28 January 2021 (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0090&from=EN).

[4] The GFCM is a regional organisation for the management of fisheries which has 23 contracting parties including Albania, Algeria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Egypt, EU, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey. In 2018 and 2019, the GFCM agreed to measures to protect vulnerable marine ecosystems and improve the sustainability of trawler fishing.

[5] European Environment Agency, 'Indicator Assessment: Status of marine fish and shellfish stocks in European seas', 12 July 2021 (https://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/indicators/status-of-marine-fish-stocks-5/assessment).

[6] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 'Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis - Summary for Policymakers', 7 August 2021 (https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM.pdf).

Hotbed Med
Sea surface temperature, cumulative trend, 1993-2019

Increase in °C

0.4	0.8	1.2	1.6	
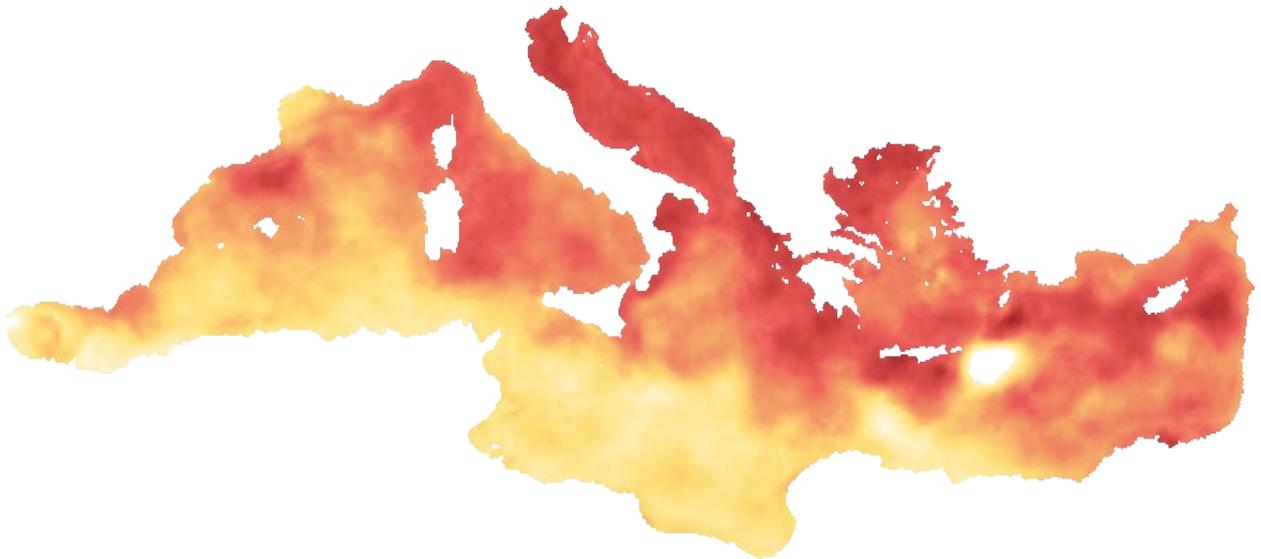
Data: EU Copernicus Marine Service, 'Mediterranean Sea Cumulative Trend Map of Sea Surface Temperature'

such as dolphin fish, red mullet, bluefin tuna and a range of molluscs and crustaceans.

The rapid depletion of fish stocks in the Mediterranean Sea had negative effects on industry and security in the region. Warmer waters gave rise to jellyfish blooms which damaged marine-based infrastructures and tourism. What is more, commercial fishing fleets sailed from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Western part of the sea because oxygen levels, and thus fish stocks, were relatively higher there. This led to security tensions as more and more fleets focused fishing activities in one part of the sea. Maritime ramming and instances of gunfire were on the rise over the 2022-2027 period. Such attacks were perpetrated by pirates, who were not present in the Mediterranean before 2022. There were claims that pirate groups were being backed by states.

What is more, from 2010-2025 the total population of the Mediterranean basin increased by 13.5 % to 529 million people [7]. Depleted fishing stocks and demographic expansion resulted in pockets of civil unrest in coastal towns and cities. This was not helped by the major oil spill that occurred in the Bouri oilfield near Libya and Tunisia in 2026. Although small-scale fisheries had accounted for almost half of total EU fisheries employment in 2017 [8], ten years later this had shrunk to 17 %. In 2017, 360 million tourists [9] visited the Mediterranean region but by 2027 this had dropped to 180 million as tourists preferred to visit the more hospitable climate and waters

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[7]   International Union for Conservation of Nature, 'The Mediterranean Red List of Species' (https://www.iucnredlist.org/regions/mediterranean).

[8]   European Commission, 'Small-scale fisheries' (https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/fisheries/rules/small-scale-fisheries_en).

[9]   'The blue economy in the Mediterranean', op.cit.

of northern Europe. The Mediterranean's economic model had been drastically affected by climate change.

POST-2027

Conflict over fishing stocks in the Mediterranean continued after 2027, and this was best exemplified by instances of armed stand-offs between EU naval vessels and unregistered fishing vessels from beyond the EU. During one particularly tense situation in 2028, an EU registered fishing vessel was sunk by a non-EU naval force in international waters. Countries such as Algeria and Libya signed naval cooperation agreements with China in a bid to enhance their naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea. Irregular migration also increased as young North Africans joined sub-Saharan Africans in the perilous journey across the Mediterranean. As a result, the EU deployed more naval vessels to the region and Frontex enhanced its border guard functions. The EU also increased its maritime surveillance operations through the European Maritime Safety Agency's Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS).

The collapse of the fishing and tourism industries in North Africa, plus water and employment shortages, saw year-on-year increases in Mediterranean migration after 2025 and right-wing, anti-immigrant, parties gained in popularity in southern Europe. Additionally, the higher risk from heat-related mortality, mosquito-borne diseases (e.g. the West Nile virus), skin cancer, forest fires, jellyfish blooms and electricity shortages during the summer months, plus the coastal flooding and torrential rain that occurred during cooler periods, continued to dent the Mediterranean economy. To meet this challenge, the EU was forced to step up its efforts in disease control and humanitarian relief. After 2027, the Union maintained Humanitarian Air Bridges to

Timeline

1 Flawed assumption

The Mediterranean Sea will not rapidly become hotter and saltier due to global warming

EU policies like the European Green Deal will help reduce overfishing and pollution

The blue economy will grow to pre-Covid-19 levels in the Mediterranean region

2 Policy based on assumption

The EU focuses on renewable energy targets but does not take robust action on fishing practices

Decarbonisation strategies for the maritime sector fail to reduce overfishing

Investment in new marine technologies and production processes

3 Consequences

Overfishing in the Mediterranean Sea is rife, leading to loss of marine life and livelihoods

The Mediterranean region is plagued by armed conflict, piracy, humanitarian crises and disease

New skills and technologies are developed to protect marine life and ensure food production

Algeria, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia to supply medical equipment and drinking water.

The EU also had to address the drastic economic situation in the region. Although fish stocks could not be recovered, artisanal fishermen were encouraged to catch edible invasive species such as rabbitfish and the Union deployed specialised netting to protect corals, sponges and shorelines. The EU also invested in policies focused on re-skilling former fishing communities into the renewable energy sector. Furthermore, after years of investment under Horizon Europe 'underwater

farms' [10] started to emerge across the EU's Mediterranean coastline. Such farms grew fruit and vegetables under water as a way to recover the agricultural losses experienced on land because of persistent droughts and water shortages.

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[10]   For example, see the 'Nemo's Garden' project: Katanich, D. and Orlandi, G., 'World's first underwater farm reopens growing lettuce and strawberries', Euronews, 6 July 2021 (https://www.euronews.com/green/2021/07/06/world-s-first-underwater-farm-reopens-growing-lettuce-and-strawberries).

CHAPTER 2

WHAT IF … CLIMATE NEUTRALITY IS NOT ENOUGH?

by
YANA POPKOSTOVA

2027

It should have been a morning of triumph. As of 1 September 2027, the EU had achieved its Green Deal gambit – three years prior to the 2030 milestone, greenhouse gas emissions had been reduced by 63 % [1]. Yet, in preparation for her State of the Union address, Commission President Magdalena Wilsow – a prodigiously well-read Bulgarian-Danish citizen, with a career encompassing environmental activism, management consulting and humanitarian missions – was not in celebratory mood. The latest op-ed by her former advisor filled her with foreboding. 'Eschewing the moral imperative to protect nature is a fundamental definer of the Anthropocene. The hubris of climate leadership has eclipsed the failure to ensure stewardship of the environment. Quo Vadis, Europa?' Her brow furrowed as, with a heavy heart, she anxiously tried to make sense of the latest intelligence briefing lying on her desk.

The EU was at a critical juncture. It had donned the mantle of climate leadership by enacting ambitious climate legislation. The European economy was on a stable trajectory of growth decoupled from emissions, European companies held 47 % of global clean technology patents [2], and the EU had managed to steer a spectacular net-zero transformation globally. Shrewd diplomatic manoeuvring had assured that the mighty new International Climate Agency and World Climate Bank were based in Paris and Prague respectively.

The EU's remarkable success in tackling decarbonisation had nevertheless obscured mounting evidence of ecosystem collapse across the globe. Focusing exclusively on emissions had eclipsed issues related to environmental stewardship; paradoxically, commendable reductions in absolute CO_2 tonnage had been accompanied in parallel by ecosystem plundering and resource predation, leading to widespread biosphere degradation and catalysing threats to the EU's carefully manicured sustainability vision, and to humanity in general.

Yet, this moment was not a 'black swan', a term popularised a few years previously denoting a sudden, unforeseen situation which

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[1] The EU's Fit-for-55 package had set a target of 55 %.

[2] European companies held patents for 28 % of low-carbon energy inventions in the 2010-19 period. See EPO & IEA, *Patents and the energy transition*, April 2021.

Ecosystems breakdown

Climate change is a relatively small factor in the unravelling of critical ecosystems across the African continent

Living Planet Index: Biodiversity loss and species extinction
1970 = 1, 1970-2016
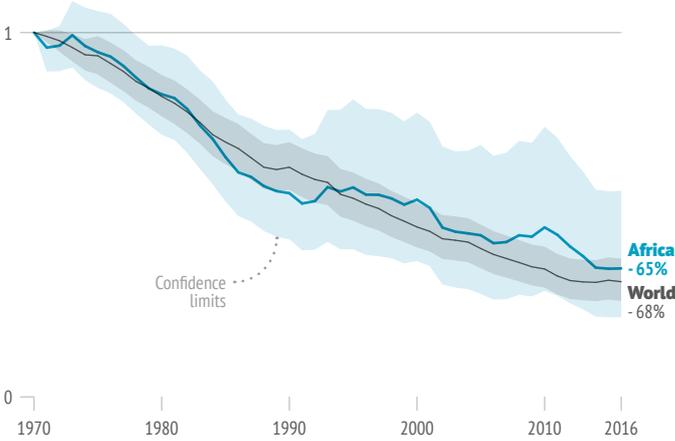
Threats to African biodiversity
% of total

Species overexploitation 35.5	Pollution 2.8
	Climate change 4.1
Changes in land and sea use, including habitat loss and degradation 45.9	Invasive species, disease 11.6

Africa
- 65%
World
- 68%

Confidence limits

Data: WWF, *Living Planet Report 2020 – Bending the curve of biodiversity loss*, 2020

causes massive disruption [3]. The ecosystem failures and environmental destruction they entailed had been widely depicted and reported, yet routinely ignored.

'Is it irreversible?' The President pondered solemnly, her mind filled with harrowing images of environmental disaster on a catastrophic scale creating widespread human misery at the EU's doorstep. 'Have we snatched an ecosystem defeat from the jaws of carbon victory?', she wondered. She glanced at the picture of her cherubic 8-year-old daughter, beaming with a stick of candy floss in her hand, exuding the gullible trust in a better future that only children possess. The age of innocence seemed to be over, and the EU was ill-prepared for the environmental crisis with which it was now confronted.

2022-2027

The overriding obsession of the decade had been decarbonisation. The pursuit of carbon neutrality had become the cornerstone of policymaking, while governments sought to juggle the imperative of sustaining high-consumption lifestyles with reducing national carbon footprints. The Covid-19 crisis and ensuing stimulus packages had reinforced this trend.

Alas, the notion that cutting CO_2 emissions is just one, albeit indispensable, dimension of preventing environmental breakdown was routinely snubbed in global climate conferences from Paris to Glasgow and Sharm el-Sheikh. The preaching about carbon budgets and fixation on emissions targets disguised the sombre reality that planetary thresholds were being transgressed, stifling nature's ability to regenerate. The focus was on chastising high carbon emitters, each metric ton of CO_2 eliminated providing a fleeting sensation

[3]   Taleb, N., *The Black Swan: The impact of the highly improbable*, Random House, New York, 2010.

of achievement; reports of precipitous biodiversity decline went unheeded [4].

In the EU common foreign and security policy (CFSP) communities, the mantra of climate neutrality rehabilitated the rigid definition of climate change as a 'threat multiplier' [5]. A series of CFSP documents culminating in the 2020 Climate Change and Defence Roadmap adhered to the dictum of radical decarbonisation and the articulation of climate change as an intrinsically exogenous risk against which the Union must shield itself.

In consecutive climate summits, the EU had tacitly upheld the notion that systematic reductions in emissions would mitigate climate-related instability. Climate diplomacy facilitated by trade, finance and development aid instruments promoted clean energy transitions and conditioned market access on compliance with the Paris Agreement goals, but neglected issues related to the preservation of ecosystems. The primacy of carbon was accentuated with the inclusion of a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism in the EU regulatory arsenal in 2024. Simultaneously, the twin digitalisation and decarbonisation transitions, albeit less polluting, entailed extensive mining activities for rare earth elements and metals [6]. Located in often fragile contexts, aggressive mining compounded existing vulnerabilities. Yet, successive critical raw materials lists, and the European Raw Materials and Batteries Alliances, prioritised the EU's green industrial renaissance, rather than assessing and alleviating the impact such invasive extraction had on transboundary biospheres, thereby relegating critical ecosystems

to a minor position on the geopolitical chessboard of green tech preeminence.

Similarly, EU common security and defence policy missions focused on reducing the military's carbon bootprint and increasing resilience to extreme weather events, rather than on bolstering ecosystem services and ecological integrity. Thematic expertise on earth systems was chronically anaemic and dispersed across defence, humanitarian and peacebuilding silos. Poor understanding of local dynamics and ecosystem interlinkages had at times worsened environmental or security conditions. EU deployments, even in the very regions at the forefront of ecosystem collapse – the Sahel and the Horn of Africa – had failed to operationalise a holistic environmental security approach, and at times had liaised with the very groups that weaponised and/or degraded environmental assets [7].

The myopic approach to environmental security led to a series of 'ecological meltdowns'. For instance, climate imbalances compounded ecosystem degradation in the Sahel contributing to rampant desertification, intensifying clashes between pastoral and agricultural communities. Illicit economies emerging in response to resource scarcity empowered armed groups, and made resource access conditional on ethnic or religious affiliation, which in turn further degraded ecosystems in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Aral Sea [8]. Questionable infrastructure projects such as the Grand Renaissance Dam resulted in ecological disintegration and biblical famines in the Nile riparian states. Competition over mineral and hydrocarbon deposits led to rapid deterioration of the Arctic

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[4]   None of the 2020 Aichi Biodiversity Targets were met. See: Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), *The Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services,* 2019.

[5]   This notion was reiterated numerous times, starting with the landmark paper by Javier Solana published in 2008, in successive pronouncements by HR/VPs, as well as in consecutive Global Strategies, Council Conclusions and Integrated Approach documents.

[6]   Popkostova, Y., 'Europe's place in the resource race: sovereignty in critical minerals as the key vector in achieving EU's low-carbon transition efforts', in Rzadkowdksa, A.E. (ed.), *Europe - Energy - Climate: The quest for the green energy transition in the EU,* European Solar Network Press, 2021.

[7]   European External Action Service (EEAS), 'Military and civilian missions and operations', 2019.

[8]   Abdalla, M., 'Understanding natural resource conflict dynamics: The case of Tuareg in North Africa and the Sahel', ISS, August 2009.

ecosystem, a scenario vaguely envisioned by the 2021 Arctic Policy, but which the EU had not yet taken action to address [9].

In 2027, clean technologies prevailed; renewable energy sources and electric vehicles were ubiquitous, heralding the end of the high-carbon era. Unfortunately, the corollary was the grim decline of nature and the stark disparities between the 'Green haves' and the 'Green have-nots'. The low-carbon EU was surrounded by countries with broken ecosystems, demonstrating that emissions conditionality had not alleviated ecosystem degradation, undermining the EU's credentials as a principled actor and exposing the shortsightedness of its policies.

POST-2027

The destruction of critical ecosystems had had calamitous consequences. Soils were polluted; corals had become extinct in large swathes of the oceans, and the earth was undergoing its sixth mass extinction with 75 % of wildlife vanished in 2027 [10]. The level of carbon in the atmosphere was low, yet the planet seemed to be imploding. In the year that followed complete ecosystem collapse in parts of Africa and Southeast Asia, it became apparent that the narrow approach to climate security had given rise to existential civilisational challenges. The age of the Anthropocene has thereby created a cycle of Anthropocene annihilation.

In 2027, in what was now a race against time, the EU began to take action to prevent a total collapse. The notion of 'ecosystem steward-ship' was mainstreamed across EU policies, and the Union instigated reforms to overcome institutional deficits in order to holistically tackle ecosystem degradation.

In 2029, the Commission released a flagship Environmental Security Package, building on the European Green Deal that had been unveiled 10 years before. As part of the package the European Bauhaus initiative was extended into external policies: fusing traditional methods of nature preservation with modern technology to halt the cycle of ecosystem breakdown and biodiversity destruction. The EU pioneered European Ecosystem Incubators that drew on the expertise of practitioners from seemingly disconnected fields such as landscaping, engineering, anthropology and ancestral studies, security planning, military operations, and meteorology to generate, together with indigenous communities, imaginative solutions for restoring vanished ecosystem services. The terms 'environmental resuscitation', and 'nature mindfulness' were increasingly used in official declarations and strategic documents, replacing the previous emphasis on 'emission reductions' and 'climate neutrality'.

The most consequential institutional innovation was the establishment in 2030 of the post of an Environmental Security Czar, mandated to break down the institutional silos and ensure that environmental security percolated across foreign and security policies. The incumbent was responsible for operationalising ecosystem protection from the early warning to the stabilisation and peacebuilding stage, and directed a Strategic Ecosystems Restoration unit that prioritised locations for cutting-edge regeneration projects.

The newfound sense of urgency led to the launch in 2030 of an EU-China-US Ecosystems Regeneration Council. High-level summits between the EU and Africa, Latin America and Asia focused on accelerating restoration of degraded ecosystems. The EU incorporated ecosystem stewardship conditionality in all its

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[9]   The EU Arctic Policy released on 13 October 2021 included for the first time a chapter on security policy.

[10]   Extrapolation from 2021 data, when a decline of 68 % since 1970 was observed, Almond, R.E.A., Grooten, M. and Petersen, T. (eds), 'Living Planet Report 2020 – Bending the curve of biodiversity loss', WWF, 2020.

agreements and started exploring transformational approaches to growth **(11)**.

Regrettably, in certain parts of Asia and Africa, ecological disintegration was proving irreversible. To avoid the spectre of desperate refugees massed at the EU's borders, the EU activated its diplomatic machinery to negotiate a Global Solidarity Agreement in 2030 to grant special status to and relocate people fleeing environmental catastrophe. In the same year, an EU-shepherded Global Water Agreement committed to finance focused research on hydrological cycles and transboundary water management. The EU organised the first Conference of the Parties (COP) on Environmental Integrity in 2031.

'The social contract of the future goes beyond Rousseau's dictum and makes nature the dominant party – breaching it will not render the contract void, it will lead to the demise of the trespassing party. We are this party, and over the past few years almost half a billion people have died because of our recklessness. The European Union pledges to give absolute priority to rebalancing our relationship with nature, humbly but with resolve. This is our steadfast promise to the world'.

The plenary applauded the President's speech.

Her former advisor titled his next op-ed: 'The clarion call that came too late.'

Timeline

1 **Flawed assumption**

Decarbonisation is the most effective way to prevent environmental degradation

2 **Policy based on assumption**

The pursuit of carbon neutrality becomes the cornerstone of policymaking

EU climate diplomacy promotes clean energy transitions and emissions conditionality as solutions to climate-induced instability

Mining for critical minerals increases, exacerbating fragilities on the ground

3 **Consequences**

The EU takes urgent action to prevent total ecological collapse: the notion of 'ecosystem stewardship' is mainstreamed, an EU Environmental Security Czar is appointed and the EU organises the first COP on Environmental Integrity in 2031

For some parts of Africa and Asia, it is too late, and ecological disintegration proves irreversible

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(11) For transformational economics, see P. Dasgupta, *The Economics of Biodiversity: the Dasgupta Review*, HM Treasury, London, 2021.

WHAT IF … MILITARY INTERVENTIONS ARE NOT BOUND TO END LIKE IN AFGHANISTAN?

by
VIOLA FEE DREIKHAUSEN

2027

Peer Stilberg's eyes were bloodshot. With the reports on Libya that he had been poring over since the early hours of that morning clutched firmly in one hand, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy strode briskly down the corridor towards the conference hall in which the crisis summit of EU foreign ministers was due to commence. As Stilberg drew level with a row of large monitors displaying real-time news from around the globe, the EU's chief diplomat slowed his pace. An image of the Chinese-led stabilisation force beginning the last stage of its four-phased withdrawal from South Sudan had caught his eye. The news sequence switched quickly between images of the Chinese head of mission shaking hands with the United Nations Secretary-General, waving members of the South Sudan Governing Council (SSGC), and a battalion of Chinese troops making their way to Juba international airport. Below the

images, a red-on-white banner flashed the words 'Final contingent of the international stabilisation force withdraws from South Sudan – UN Secretary-General hails peaceful transition following the Chinese-led intervention mission.'

As the news sequence cut abruptly to an image of the war-ravaged streets of Benghazi, Stilberg came to a complete halt. While the HR/VP was keenly aware of the potential dangers of drawing direct comparisons across time and context, he felt certain that the swarm of journalists and commentators already assembled outside the conference hall would be less cautious [1]. After all, there was a certain irony in the fact the EU was holding a crisis summit on the imminent risk of Libya's third post-intervention civil war on precisely the same day that the UN was congratulating the Chinese on the success of their post-intervention stabilisation mission in South Sudan. As he watched the news report cut to a close-up image of a wounded child in

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[1] Foong Khong, Y., *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1992.

Intervention and its violent aftermath

Tracing the empirical premise of a misplaced assumption

US-led military
intervention begins   **US declares end**
to 'major combat'

Afghanistan

400 monthly number of events of organised violence

International Security Assistance
Force (ISAF) is established

200

0

1999   2001   2003   2005   2007   2009   2011   2013   2015   2017   2019   2021

US-led military   **Final US troop**
intervention begins   **withdrawal**

Iraq

90

President Bush announces
'mission accomplished'

60

30

0

2001   2003   2005   2007   2009   2011   2013   2015   2017   2019   2021

NATO-led military   **NATO-led**
intervention begins   **intervention ends**

Libya

Second Libyan
Civil War breaks out

40

30

20

10

0

2009   2011   2013   2015   2017   2019   2021

Data: UCDP, Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED), Global version, 21-1-2021

the Libyan city of Misrata scrambling to seek cover behind a pile of rubble, the High Representative decided to drop the polite wording of his opening address.

This was no time to mince his words, Stilberg resolved as he resumed his advance towards the conference hall, mentally rehearsing the speech he was about to make. 'The imminent threat of yet another civil war in Libya is a scathing reflection of our inaction,' he would commence. 'For too long our policies towards Libya have been guided by a fear of commitment. In our determination not to be become bogged down in yet another post-intervention quagmire, we have underestimated what the absence of a concerted international response would mean. Libya has entered the sixteenth year of instability and civil strife. As the Chinese-led intervention in South Sudan now irrevocably reveals, our collective disengagement has cost us more than the establishment of Libya as a terrorist safe haven and transit route for illicit migration. It has cost us our standing as a credible global partner in matters of international peace and security.

2022-2027

Peer Stilberg was convinced that the EU's reticence could be traced to an entrenched, if largely unspoken, assumption prevalent among European decision-makers that military interventions in armed conflicts, however well-intentioned, would ultimately spawn protracted periods of instability and recurrent violence. After all, examples of such an outcome had seemed to proliferate in the early 2020s. Perhaps most dramatically, the events following the international withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 seemed to vindicate this view. While the EU and its allies had dedicated two decades to the promotion of peace, democracy and good governance in Afghanistan

following the US-led intervention in 2001, these efforts had gone up in smoke with the international withdrawal of troops in August 2021. Moreover, Afghanistan's 'forever war' was by no means a stand-alone example. The widely criticised US invasion of Iraq in 2003 had seen the removal of Saddam Hussein only to be followed by decades of insurgency and the incursion of terrorist organisations. While several European states had championed the humanitarian intervention in Libya in 2011, in 2027 the North African state was on the brink of its third civil war. Given this tendency for armed interventions in internal conflicts to result in decades of post-intervention violence, Colin Powell's famed adage 'you break it, you own it' had morphed into a warning against the international use of force [2].

The EU had not been alone in this progressively more circumspect foreign policy approach in the wake of 2021. Starting with the Taliban's swift return to power, the administrations of both President Joe Biden and his successor, Kamala Harris, had stressed that the United States would not commit to military engagements – however compelling their cause – without a clearly defined end goal and a precise, week-by-week strategy on how this would be achieved. While, according to many commentators, these criteria addressed the fundamentals of what the United States had got wrong in Afghanistan [3], the shadow of strategic failure that the Afghanistan war continued to cast meant that a concerted US foreign policy response for anything other than a direct and clearly identified threat to its territorial integrity or political independence had become virtually inconceivable.

Given this US retreat from international engagement, China's expansion of its strategic role as a key security provider on the African continent had garnered scant international attention in the early 2020s. The fact that China had dispatched more than double the combined total personnel of all other permanent

[2]   Woodward, B., *Plan of Attack*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2012, p.150.

[3]   Whitlock, C., 'The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War', *Washington Post*, 9 December 2019.

members of the United Nations Security Council to UN Peace Operations back in 2020 had barely made the news [4]. Similarly, while China had been the second largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget since 2016 (two-thirds of which went to UN missions in Africa), the fact that it had dramatically augmented its contribution from 15 % of the cost in 2020 to nearly 22 % in 2025 had not made headlines. It was only after three distinct agreements had formalised China's status as the continent's principal trading partner, and Beijing demanded that a minimum one in four of its nominees be appointed to leadership roles within UN missions, that China's ostensible generosity attracted real scrutiny [5]. This incipient international concern was heightened when Beijing announced the opening of its second overseas military base at Entebbe, Uganda, in the spring of 2026.

Notwithstanding these developments, when fighting in South Sudan began to escalate dangerously in 2024 and China followed the incumbent government's call for support by tabling a UN Security Council resolution that would authorise the international use of force in order to halt the spiralling violence, the resolution was passed with no abstentions. Following a week-long air campaign aimed at eliminating the terrorist organisations that had infiltrated South Sudan since 2022, China deployed a 80 000 troop-strong stabilisation force.

Unlike many of its Western counterparts, Beijing had thereby avoided defining stabilisation as the panacea cure for overcoming the challenge of state fragility. As evinced in Afghanistan, the conception of stabilisation as the remedy for state fragility, a path leading to effective, peaceful and stable statehood, had often gone hand-in-hand with the aspiration to undertake a wholesale restructuring of the

target state. More fundamentally though, this conceptualisation had suffered from the fact that it effectively described stabilisation as a boundless enterprise, rendering it near impossible to pursue strategically [6].

While continuing to act under the auspices of 'stabilisation', Beijing had not attempted to impose an ubiquitous condition of stable statehood in South Sudan. Instead, the mission had focused on the narrow objective of defusing an impending crisis. In keeping with this comparatively limited mandate, the Chinese-led operation had not sought to provide an all-encompassing antidote to state fragility but had engaged in the self-interested endeavour of putting an end to an emergency situation of extreme political volatility. Thus, while stabilisation had been construed as the means, the liberal paradise of political stability and democratic statehood had not been the mission's goal.

Additionally, the operation's narrow objective had been combined with unapologetic eagerness on the part of Beijing to flex its military muscles. It was an open secret that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had long viewed peace operations as both an opportunity for its military personnel to gain valuable operational experience and a means to test its latest military equipment. In this context, the Chinese leadership had devised a four-staged plan whereby a contingent of 25 000 Chinese troops remained in South Sudan to ensure peace during the three-year window during which a relapse into conflict was deemed most likely. In contrast to Libya, where Western policymakers' sensitivity to local demands had seen the deployment of a comparatively light post-intervention presence in 2011, China's unabashed deployment of a force ration of 6.8 per thousand members of the local

[4] All personnel data is based on: United Nations Peacekeeping, 'Troop and police contributions' (https://peacekeeping. un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors).

[5] Lanteigne, M., 'The role of UN peacekeeping in China's expanding strategic interests', Special Report, United States Institute of Peace, Washington D.C., 18 September 2018.

[6] Rotmann, P., 'Toward a realistic and responsible idea of stabilisation', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, Vol. 5, No 1, 15 June 2016), pp. 1–14.

population had borne out Beijing's stabilisation objectives [7].

POST-2027

As the EU foreign ministers gathered before the international press at the close of the crisis summit, a mood of cautious optimism prevailed. 'Today, we have confronted the shortcomings of our collective response to the Libyan crisis,' Peer Stilberg declared. 'We have acknowledged that our determination to avoid becoming caught up in a "forever war" of the kind seen in Afghanistan has come with a price-tag. Today, Libya is the principal route of illicit migration to Europe and a safe haven for terrorist groups'. The High Representative paused briefly. 'But the true costs of our inaction are much higher. As we Europeans have turned away from the responsibilities of upholding international peace and security, other actors have stepped in to fill the void, often without regard for the wishes and aspirations of the populations in question. In view of these developments, a sea change in our collective approach to violent conflict, its onset and protraction is in order. Towards this end, we have decided to launch a major policy initiative. We have called for the establishment of a specialised European Stabilisation Force under the auspices of our common security and defence policy. By placing the challenges and opportunities of post-conflict stabilisation at the heart of this new unit, it is our objective to render stabilisation a centrepiece, rather than an afterthought, of our response to conflict, its prevention, and resolution. While this is but a first step, we are dedicated to ensuring that a clear strategy regarding the aftermath of our engagements will forthwith guide both how and when we resort to the use of force. As we conclude this summit, we stand ready to resume and reassert our standing as a reliable global partner in matters of international peace and security'.

Timeline

1   Flawed assumption

International military interventions in intrastate conflicts will inevitably spawn protracted periods of post-conflict violence and instability

2   Policy based on assumption

Policymakers categorically eschew armed interventions in intrastate conflicts even when there are compelling reasons to intervene

3   Consequences

The EU establishes a specialised Stabilisation Force, making stabilisation a cornerstone of its conflict response, prevention and resolution strategies

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(7)   Quinlivan, J., 'Force Requirements in Stability Operations', *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters*, Vol. 25, No 1, 1995; Chivvis, C.S. and Martini, J., 'Libya after Qaddafi: Lessons and implications for the future', Research Report, RAND Corporation, 2014.

CHAPTER 4

WHAT IF … DETERRENCE IN CYBERSPACE DOES NOT WORK?

by
PATRYK PAWLAK

2027

'We need to be in there in 10 minutes, Dani', Paul said anxiously, looking at his watch. The United Nations Headquarters (UNHQ) was just across the street from the US Permanent Mission but at that moment the rest of the world had never felt more distant. The tension in the UN Security Council room was so palpable, you could slice it with a knife. But Daniela knew that even an axe would not cut through the atmosphere of disapproval and condemnation emanating from the officials gathered in the room. 'The provisional agenda for this meeting is threats to international peace and security caused by cyberattacks. The agenda is adopted', announced the President of the UNSC.
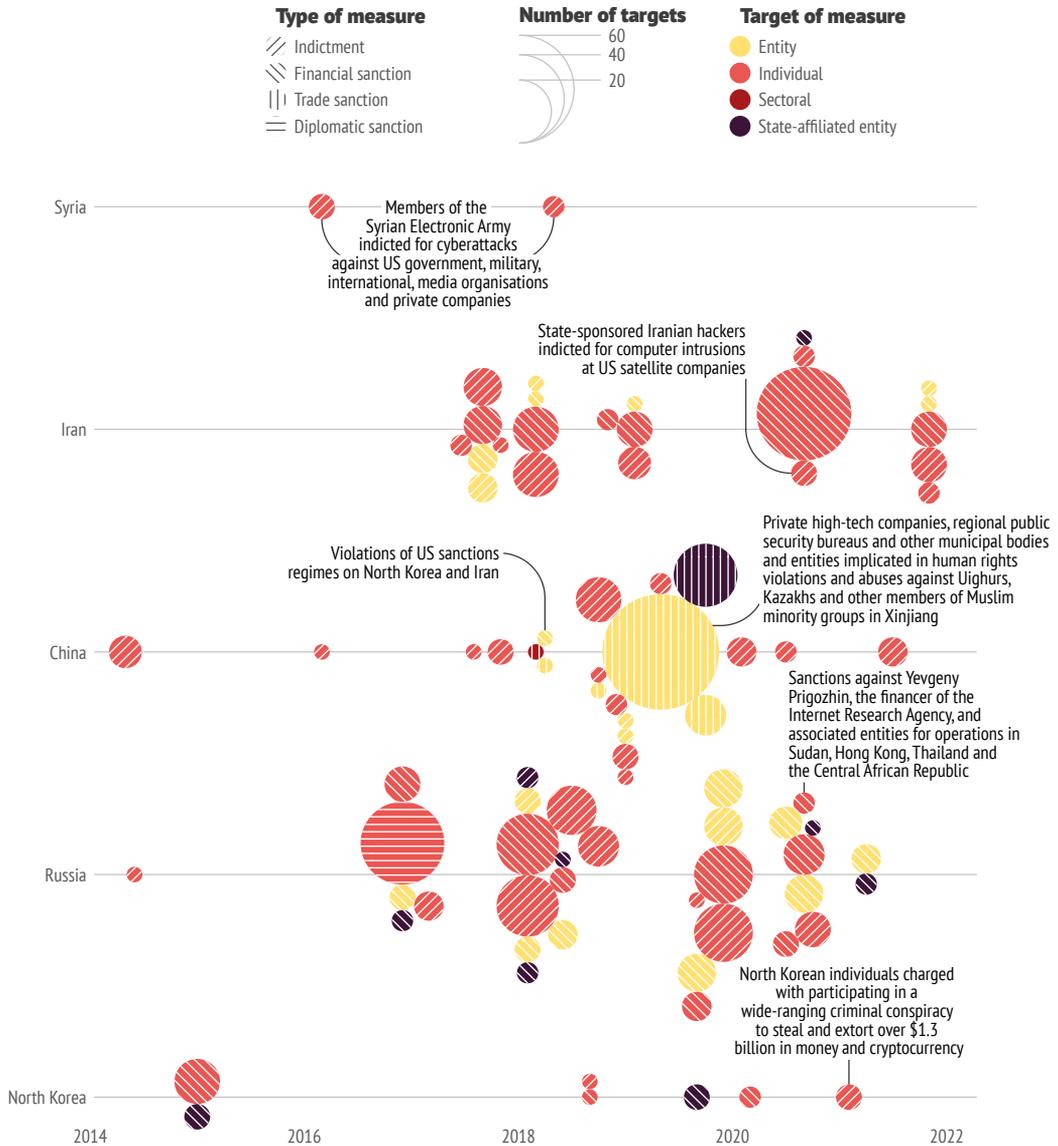
Daniela took a deep breath and started. 'Mr President, Mr Secretary General, distinguished colleagues, I would like to begin by expressing my thanks for the special effort that each of you made to be here today. For almost three decades, the United States has promoted a framework for responsible state behaviour in cyberspace. We have consistently and tirelessly stressed the risks to international peace and stability deriving from the malicious cyber operations carried out by rogue states and their proxies. We have argued that by strengthening our alliances and building our cyber defences we will deter those malicious actors.' She paused, painfully conscious of the consequences that her next words would have. 'But we were wrong', she continued. 'The attacks did not cease. Quite the opposite. They have increased in complexity and intensity, posing a threat to our nation's economy and security. Operation *Hunger Games* against our food sector was something we could not tolerate. In response to this attack, the US President therefore authorised a cyber operation in self-defence against what we believed to be legitimate targets in Venezuela. Unfortunately, we now know that we were misled through a sophisticated operation conducted by a domestic terrorist organisation. Our operation resulted in injuries to 120 people and extensive destruction of Venezuela's oil infrastructure. We cannot turn back the clock, but I am here today to clearly state the commitment of the US government to re-evaluate its policy and give priority to cyber disarmament in peace'.

The following day in an interview on *Hard Talk* Daniela Dias described this speech as 'the most significant moment' since taking the helm at the US Department of State in 2025.

Responses to malicious cyber operations

Examples of measures adopted by the US up to January 2022

Type of measure
- Indictment
- Financial sanction
- Trade sanction
- Diplomatic sanction

Number of targets
60
40
20

Target of measure
- Entity
- Individual
- Sectoral
- State-affiliated entity

Syria — Members of the
Syrian Electronic Army
indicted for cyberattacks
against US government, military,
international, media organisations
and private companies

State-sponsored Iranian hackers
indicted for computer intrusions
at US satellite companies

Iran

Private high-tech companies, regional public
security bureaus and other municipal bodies
and entities implicated in human rights
violations and abuses against Uighurs,
Kazakhs and other members of Muslim
minority groups in Xinjiang

Violations of US sanctions
regimes on North Korea and Iran

China

Sanctions against Yevgeny
Prigozhin, the financer of the
Internet Research Agency, and
associated entities for operations in
Sudan, Hong Kong, Thailand and
the Central African Republic

Russia

North Korean individuals charged
with participating in a
wide-ranging criminal conspiracy
to steal and extort over $1.3
billion in money and cryptocurrency

North Korea

2014　　　　2016　　　　2018　　　　2020　　　　2022

Data: US Department of Justice; US Department of the Treasury;
US Department of Commerce; White House; Government of the Netherlands

2022-2027

For the EU members of the Security Council – Austria, France, Germany, Latvia and Portugal – these assurances came a little too late. The US decision to conduct a cyber operation in Venezuela had undermined the EU's diplomatic efforts to end the domestic conflict that had ravaged the country since December

2020. More importantly, the US decision had divided Europe once again, with 19 Member States refusing to support the operation. The French Minister of Foreign Affairs Dominique Timon minced no words in her interview with *The New York Times*: 'Europe needs to wake up and lead. World peace cannot be safeguarded if we continue to make the same mistakes and blindly follow the United States'.

CHAPTER 4 | What if … deterrence in cyberspace does not work?

25

That evening on the flight back to Paris, Dominique could not stop thinking that she should have pushed harder against the whole operation when the issue was discussed at the Foreign Affairs Council in 2026. Maybe a stronger united voice would have dissuaded the United States from going ahead? She could not stop replaying different scenarios in her mind. Deep down, however, she knew that nothing would change the mind of her colleagues who had made an almost evangelical commitment to cyber deterrence already in 2023 – the year when the EU significantly strengthened its cyber posture.

The Foreign Affairs Council of June 2023 adopted the Council Conclusions endorsing the Joint Communication on a comprehensive approach to deterring cyber operations aimed at undermining the EU's interests and values. The document recalled the commitment in the 2020 EU Cybersecurity Strategy to define the Union's cyber deterrence posture and was heavily grounded in the narrative propagated by the United States about the need to impose consequences for the violation of cyber norms. This decision came as surprise to many experts who previously stressed that 'the EU should avoid the temptation to mimic other traditional security actors' [1] and instead commit to a 'stronger, multi-layered resilience in and for Europe' that would be 'protective rather than threatening, persuasive rather than dissuasive, defensive rather than deterring and active rather than opportunist' [2].

The differences among Member States regarding the EU's role in cyberspace became evident after the EU Cyber Crisis Linking Exercise on Solidarity (EU CyCLES) in February 2022. The discussions among the foreign affairs ministers exposed the existence of three camps: 'hawks' favouring development of tools to make malicious actors accountable, 'doves' keen on strengthening the EU's role in preventing conflicts in cyberspace, and 'owls'

supporting a new strategy of making states accountable for their lack of action rather than specific actions. In a non-paper on cyber compellence presented in May 2022, the French government stressed the need to 'approach other countries on the basis of the presumption of innocence in order to promote a positive and action-oriented engagement instead of placing relations on a conflictual footing from the start'. The paper further explained that 'the work conducted in the framework of the United Nations offers multiple opportunities for states to demonstrate their commitment to peaceful use of cyberspace. While attribution of certain actions may be sometimes difficult or contested, the attribution of inaction by governments does not involve the same drawback. Presenting the paper in the Council, Dominique's predecessor at the Quai d'Orsay had stressed: 'We do not want to just clamp down on bad behaviour, we want to promote good behaviour'. The window of opportunity to explore this approach closed abruptly in early 2022 following a series of attacks against critical infrastructure in Ukraine that a coalition of like-minded countries attributed to Russia. The non-paper promoting a doctrine of 'cyber compellence' ended up in a drawer. Instead, a more aggressive sanctions policy and investment in cyber defence projects was pursued.

The turn towards a more aggressive cyber posture in the EU provided an opportunity for a diplomatic offensive by China and Russia who felt emboldened by their near-success in getting approval for the so-called 'New IP' – a proxy for a more state-centric governance of cyberspace - at the World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly earlier that year. The focus on cyber deterrence had created additional momentum for criticism of the 'Western militarisation of cyberspace' in the UN Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) and undermined the discussion about the need for implementation of a framework of responsible

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[1]   Maria Mälksoo, 'Ritual reverence to deterrence in cyberspace', *Directions*, 15 February 2021 (https://directionsblog.eu/ritual-reverence-to-deterrence-in-cyberspace/).

[2]   Mika Kerttunen, 'Deterrence: a naked emperor', *Directions*, 13 September 2020 (https://directionsblog.eu/deterrence-a-naked-emperor/).

state behaviour in cyberspace which many be‐
gan to perceive as an ultimatum delivered by
the West to the rest of the world. A high de‐
gree of political polarisation in the OEWG led
to the failure to adopt a consensus report and
made the fragmentation of the global internet
more real than ever before.

The growing intensity and complexity of cy‐
berattacks below the threshold of armed con‐
flict made preventing 'death by a thousand
cuts' a national priority for the EU, the United
States, and other like‐minded countries who
since 2023 had strengthened their cooperation
by regular exercises, points of contact for in‐
formation sharing, and coordinated strategic
communication. The possibility of using Ar‐
ticle 51 of the UN Charter as a legal basis for
launching an attack in self‐defence was the
subject of contentious debate among inter‐
national lawyers. Operation *Hunger Games* in
November 2025, which compromised US food
supply chains resulting in food shortages, a
hike in prices and social unrest was the straw
that broke the camel's back. In May 2026, the
US Cyber Command launched an operation
against targets in Venezuela to which US In‐
telligence and other allied countries attributed
the operation. In assuming responsibility for
the attack, despite the risks that this entailed,
Washington had a clear objective in mind: to
demonstrate the United States' capabilities to
deter any future attackers. The cyberattack
which had such devastating consequences had
split the international community, includ‐
ing the EU. The attack was also criticised by
the United Nations which set up a dedicated
investigation unit to examine the legality of
cyber operations in cases where civilians are
killed or civilian infrastructure destroyed.
Bahrain, China, Colombia, Mauritius, Paki‐
stan, Panama and Russia – all members of the
UNSC – called for a meeting arguing that 'war
through cyber means is at risk of being nor‐
malised as a necessary companion to peace,
and not its opposite'.

'Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Charles
de Gaulle airport', the flight attendant an‐
nounced. On the way to her car, Dominique
spotted the front page of *Le Monde* with her
picture. 'Can Europe Lead in Cyberspace?',

Timeline

1 Flawed assumption

Cyber deterrence works

Effects of offensive cyberattacks
can be anticipated

Attribution tells us with certainty
who the perpetrators are

2 Policy based on assumption

Increased spending on cyber defence

Strengthening like-minded coalitions

Setting up of the UN investigation
unit to examine the legality of
cyber operations in cases where
civilians are killed or civilian
infrastructure destroyed

3 Consequences

Cyber compellence becomes
a dominant doctrine

Adoption of the 'UN Agenda for
Positive Peace in Cyberspace'

Establishment of the International
Agency for Attribution and
Disarmament

asked the headline 'Yes, she can', Dominique
thought to herself.

POST-2027

That week in New York gave Dominique a lot
to think about. This was not how she had im‐
agined that the year would start. Her call with
her Lithuanian counterpart was in two hours;
then she was scheduled to speak with the High
Representative and the UN Secretary General.
Her plan for the EU to propose a UN Agenda
for Positive Peace in Cyberspace had to work.
Her pitch for a new approach to cyber stability
was ready: we need to focus global efforts on
strengthening resilience and at the same time
use cyber compellence to push states to com‐
ply with the framework of responsible state
behaviour. We need to show our resolve to deal

with states who do not meet their international obligations. And we need governments to demonstrate what they are doing rather than what they have not done to comply with existing international law and norms.

For this plan to work, she needed to get other states on board too and the only way to do that was to change how they perceived the EU's role in cyberspace. The cyber deterrence approach had clearly failed: not only had it not discouraged attacks and limited their scope, but it had also polarised the international community. The calls for accountability in cyberspace had to apply to all countries equally, with no exceptions. She was not entirely convinced about the idea proposed by her aides to establish an International Agency for Attribution and Disarmament (IAAD) but she thought that this might be a solution to win the support of the broader international community. 'How do we disarm in cyberspace?', she kept asking. 'We cannot count the number of computers in every country but what if we put in place a global mechanism that obliges states to report vulnerabilities in their systems and networks, in order to prevent the development of cyber weapons?'.

On these cold evenings in November 2029, Dominique often dwelled on those days. Two framed front pages of *Le Monde* that she had received from her family caught her eye: the famous 'Can Europe Lead in Cyberspace?' and 'Yes, she can'. Her Nobel Peace Prize Lecture was only two weeks away.
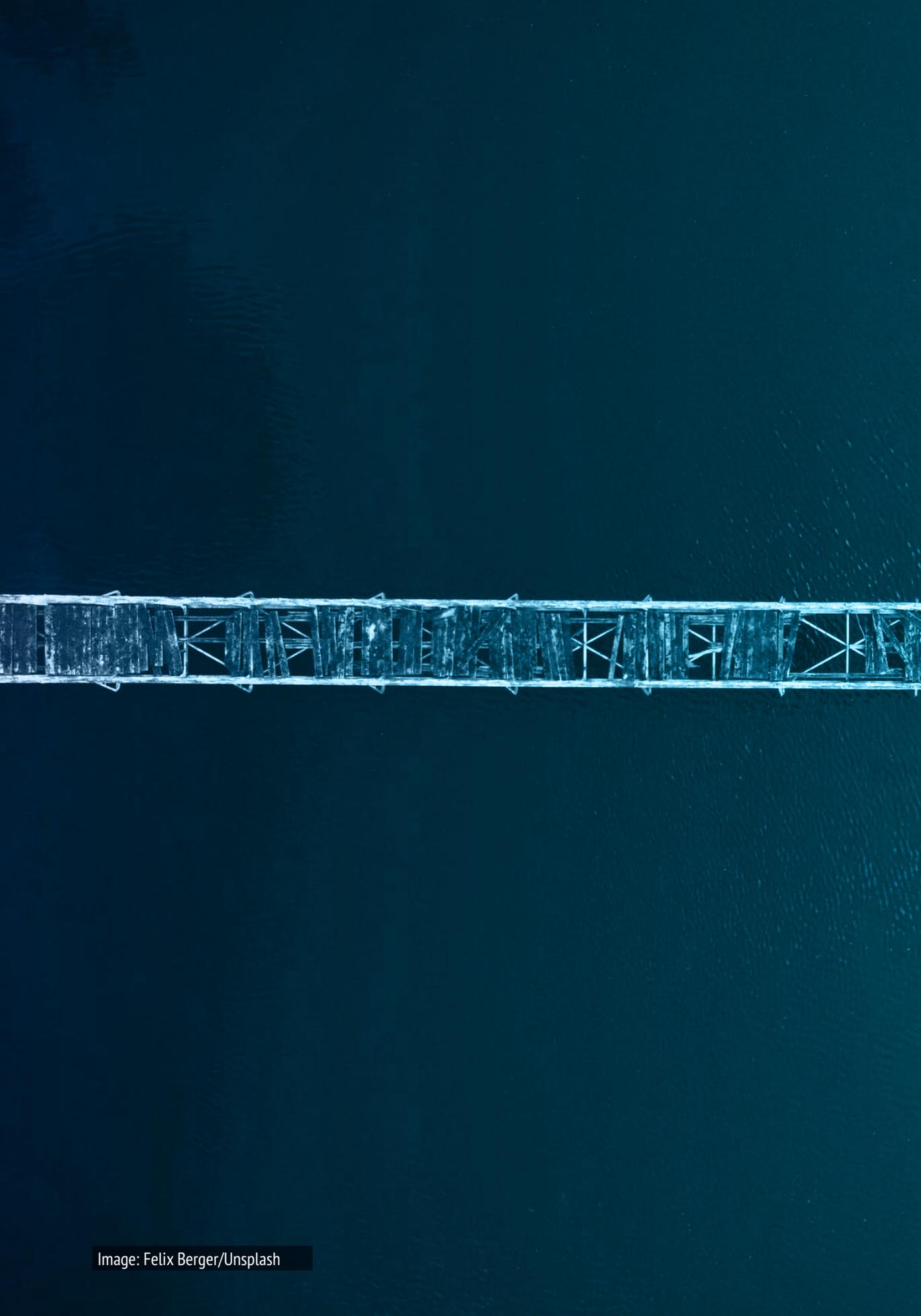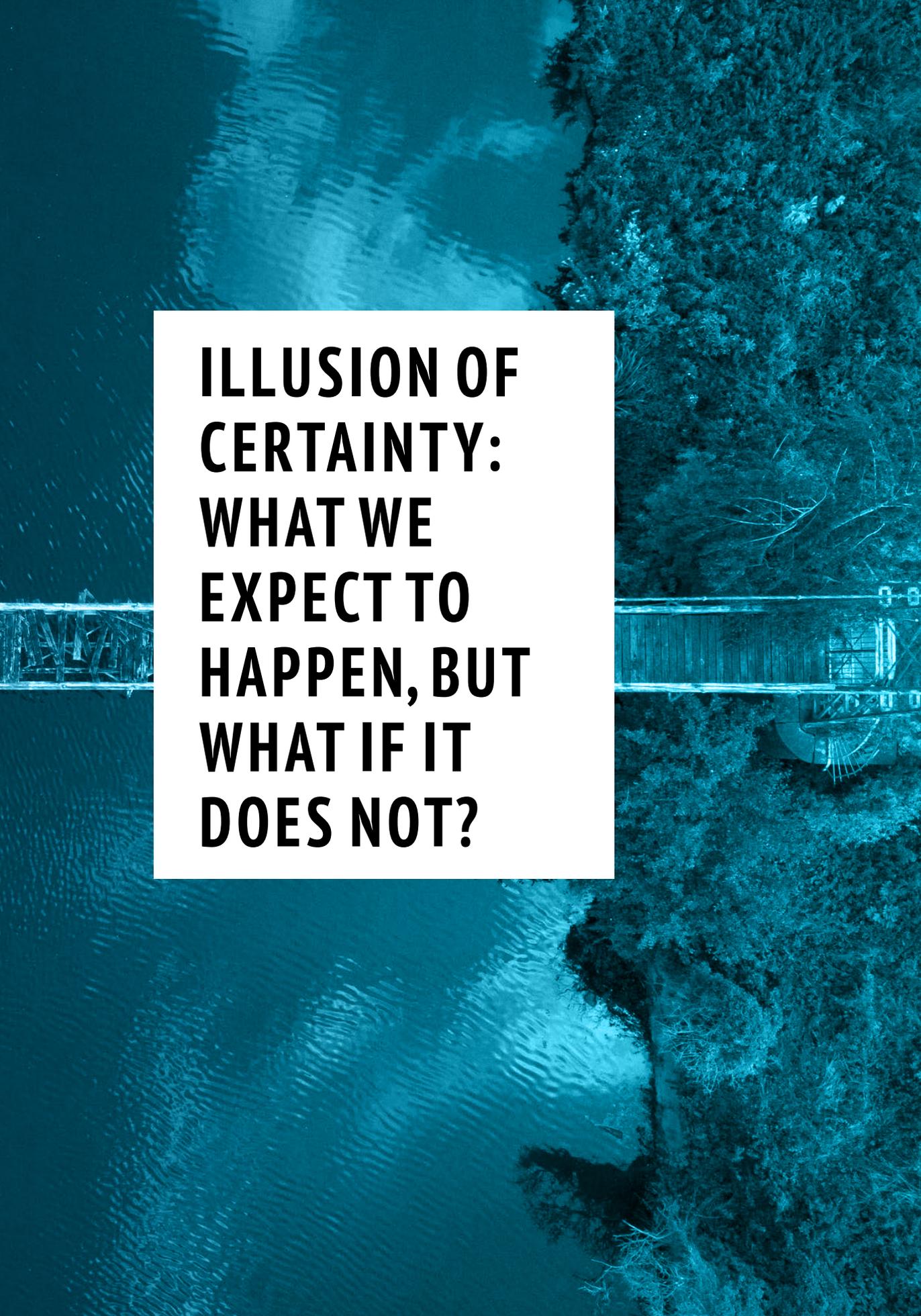
ILLUSION OF CERTAINTY: WHAT WE EXPECT TO HAPPEN, BUT WHAT IF IT DOES NOT?

WHAT IF ... THE US CANNOT GUARANTEE THE EU'S SECURITY?

by
MARIE BRETHOUS

2027

28 August, EU Military Committee (EUMC) Crisis Room, Brussels

'The tensions between the US and China have escalated, Madam. China has recently deployed a wide array of precision missiles and other systems that can "strike targets throughout the South China Sea and, in the case of the DF-26, reach the US territory of Guam which is the location of major Air Force and Navy bases [1]"', explained General Philippe Moineau, Chairperson of the EUMC. He was usually able to keep his cool while briefing the HR/VP, even crack the occasional joke, but today he felt the tension in the room. 'Three weeks ago, the Pentagon decided to focus on strengthening US military capabilities in the South China Sea. Looking at the sum of its currently deployed assets in the region, the US does not have nearly enough manpower and capabilities to face this crisis.' HR/VP Athena Müller could sense the aggravated tone in the

General's voice. *If even he loses his cool, this can't be good*, she thought.

'Madam, it looks like the Americans are considering re-positioning a sizeable part of their troops and capabilities from Europe towards the Asia-Pacific, including some of the anti-ballistic missile defence systems in Romania and Poland. If this occurs, we could be put in an unprecedented situation. We would not be equipped to deter a Russian attack, should Moscow capitalise on this. Without the Americans, I don't need to tell you that we are totally unprepared for such a scenario'.

25 October, EUMC Crisis Room, Brussels

While waiting for the 27 EU Chiefs of Defence and HR/VP Müller to take a seat, General Moineau thought back to the briefing he had given two months ago. In just a little over 60 days, a series of cataclysmic events had changed the *status quo* between Russia and Europe. At the beginning of September, a significant amount of US capabilities had been redirected to the Pacific. It was not long until Russia had

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[1] Townshend, A., Thomas-Noon, B. and Steward, M., 'Averting Crisis: American strategy, military spending, and collective defence in the Indo-Pacific', The United States Study Centre, August 2019 (https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/averting-crisis-american-strategy-military-spending-and-collective-defence-in-the-indo-pacific#american-primacy-and-the-crisis-of-strategic-insolvency).

increased its military presence at the borders of the Baltic region. Six weeks ago, Latvia had begun to experience power outages and disruptions of its computer networks. This coincided with pro-Russian separatist riots that started spreading through the country, especially in the pro-Russian city of Daugavpils [2]. This morning, the local pro-Russian government had declared the city's independence, encouraging Russian forces to enter the territory and annex it.

This is Crimea 2.0, he thought. *We cannot let this happen! For the first time in over 70 years, we are truly on our own. Limited US and NATO support, no EU army.* He briefly closed his eyes before he readjusted his glasses and started the meeting. 'HR Müller, ladies and gentlemen, prepare for this to be a long night'.

2022-2027

The European Union found itself in a situation in which it was vulnerable to Russian threats, without the security net provided by the United States because it had failed to check the following assumption: that the United States was able to sustain two theatres of war at the same time, in Asia and Europe.

The EU had assumed that the United States, with its strong military base in Europe and role as NATO's leading power, would continue to play a preponderant role in European defence.

This rested on the rationale that, since the beginning of the Cold War, the United States and NATO had played an integral role in guaranteeing European security. Shared threat perception, joint military exercises and a commitment to securing Eastern Europe had

proven that the EU could rely on the US and NATO to deter threats in the region. However, since most Russian threats were 'below the threshold of article 5' [3], NATO's role was limited. Bilateral US military support was still essential. So long as Washington was willing and able to contribute its troops and manpower to deterring threats in Europe, it was assumed that the United States, with NATO, remained the cornerstone of EU defence.

Consequently, while pursuing its strategic autonomy, it was assumed that the EU would not be able to muster enough political consensus to create a fully operational European Defence Union (EDU). Previous efforts had failed to put the EU on the map as a defence actor, which made it hard to conceive a European defence effort without the United States. The dependence on US defence meant that, while the EU's level of ambition further increased, any tangible progress translating to a fully functioning set of European military forces, which could intervene in the event of an attack, seemed unachievable in the medium term [4]. Hence, the EU was unprepared for a scenario where it would have to be a first responder and assure its own defence at its borders.

The foundation for these assumptions had gradually shifted between 2022-2027. There were three main reasons for this.

First, the United States, which prioritised maintaining its 'pre-eminent global position by upholding favourable balances of power in Europe [and] the Indo-Pacific' had 'dangerously overstretched its defence resources' [5]. Because of an unpredictable defence budget in the last decade, the US was unable to plan long-term and had to focus simultaneously on multiple potential theatres of war. Between 2022 and 2027, China gradually increased its presence in the South China Sea.

[2]   Radin, A., 'Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and potential responses', RAND Corporation, 2017 (https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1577.html).

[3]   Le Gleut, R. and Conway-Mouret, H., 'European Defence: The Challenge of Strategic Autonomy', French Senate, 3 July 2019 (http://www.senat.fr/rap/r18-626-2/r18-626-2_mono.html#toc10).

[4]   Ibid.

[5]   'Averting Crisis: US Defence Spending, Deterrence and The Indo-Pacific', op.cit.

The continuous period of tensions between China and the United States created an 'over-stretched and under-resourced'[6] military.
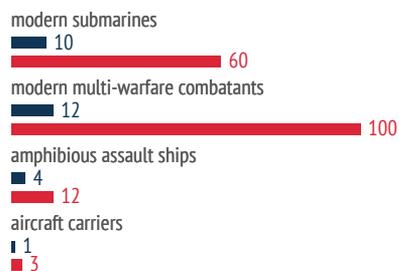
Chinese and US military capabilites by domain/type
Prediction for 2025

Air
modern fighters
▬ 150 **United States**
▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬ 1 800 **China**

maritime patrol aircraft
▌10
▌30

manned bombers
▏0
▬▬ 225

Maritime
modern submarines
▬ 10
▬▬▬ 60

modern multi-warfare combatants
▬ 12
▬▬▬▬▬ 100

amphibious assault ships
▪ 4
▬ 12

aircraft carriers
▏1
▪ 3

Missiles
THAAD batteries (missile defence)
▏2
Ballistic missiles (all ranges)
▬▬▬▬▬▬▬ 1 800

Data: USNI, 'US Indo-Pacific Command wants $4.68B for new Pacific deterrence initiative', 2021

Second, this military overstretch left the US armed forces ill-prepared for a potential confrontation with China, making it imperative to focus most US military capabilities in the region. Since China geared up to provoke a response from the United States, it had become its biggest threat, even before Russia. In September 2027, at the height of tensions with China, the US made the decision to shift its strategic priority and military capabilities towards China and away from Russia, at the expense of Europe.

Third, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU's prioritisation of social and economic recovery meant that it was less focused on adapting to the new geopolitical context and developing EU defence capacities. Shortly after the United States withdrew the bulk of its capabilities from Europe, Russia increased its military presence and use of hybrid threats in the Baltics to cause instability in the region. As the US increasingly pulled away from Europe towards the Asia-Pacific, Moscow calculated that, in the event of the use of conventional military force, a weakened Europe, constrained NATO and an overstretched US would not risk a war with Russia and its potential use of nuclear weapons to defend its territory, putting the EU in a vulnerable position.

The EU not only failed to challenge the assumptions mentioned above but also failed to consider an alternative course of action. Given the geopolitical, financial and strategic context the EU faced between 2022 and 2027, it should have focused on a number of steps.

First, the EU should have invested in its defence budget post Covid-19, especially in the field of EU military mobility. The proposed funding stood at €950 million in 2027, rather than the €5.9 billion originally proposed in 2020[7]. Since a successful, quick deployment of EU forces and capabilities was essential in this scenario, increased funding to maintain military mobility structures was of paramount importance.
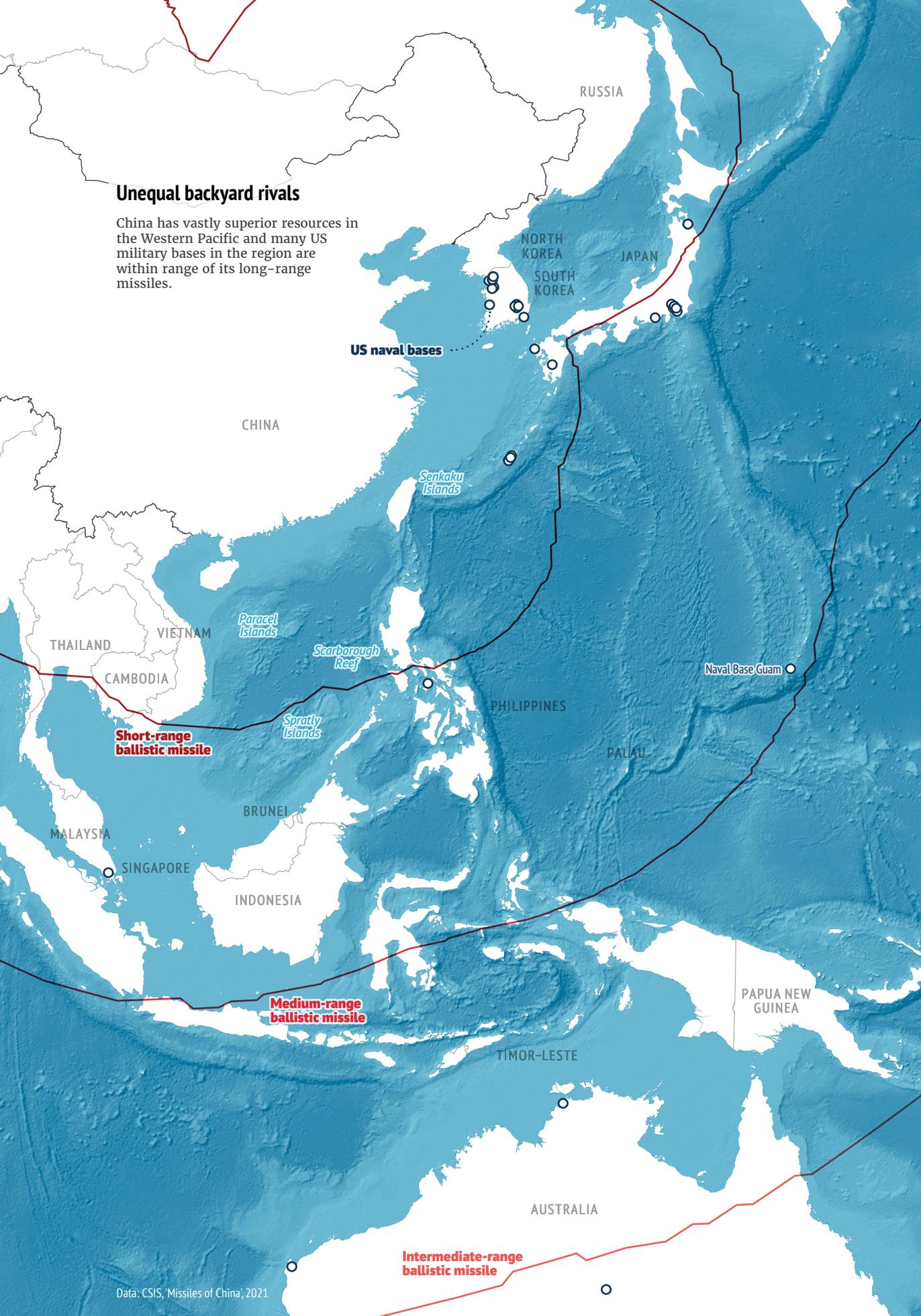
Second, the EU should have capitalised on the renewed transatlantic commitments post-Trump, and advanced its strategic ambitions to focus on different first responder scenarios with the US and NATO. Had the EU gradually integrated its member states' capabilities and resources to secure European defence autonomy, while the United States scaled down its military presence in Europe,

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[6]   Klare, M. T., 'The US military Is preparing for a new war', *The Nation*, 5 June 2019 (https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/us-military-is-preparing-for-new-wars-china-russia/).

[7]   DG EXPO, POLDEP, 'How the COVID-19 crisis has affected security and defence-related aspects of the EU', European Parliament, January 2021 (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653623/EXPO_IDA(2021)653623_EN.pdf).

Unequal backyard rivals

China has vastly superior resources in the Western Pacific and many US military bases in the region are within range of its long-range missiles.

RUSSIA

NORTH KOREA

SOUTH KOREA

JAPAN

US naval bases

CHINA

Senkaku Islands

Paracel Islands

Scarborough Reef

Short-range ballistic missile

Spratly Islands

PHILIPPINES

Naval Base Guam

PALAU

THAILAND

VIETNAM

CAMBODIA

BRUNEI

MALAYSIA

SINGAPORE

INDONESIA

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Medium-range ballistic missile

TIMOR-LESTE

AUSTRALIA

Intermediate-range ballistic missile

then the EU would have been able to drive forward its defence ambitions and close capability gaps, while the United States addressed different security interests and priorities.

In this scenario, the cost for the EU was two-fold: it suffered not only politically and strategically because of the possibility of a Russian attack, but it also failed to establish itself as a credible defence actor in its own neighbourhood. Strengthening EU defence capabilities should have been a priority for the EU.

In retrospect, neither side of the Atlantic sufficiently anticipated changing dynamics, or took the necessary precautions to prioritise a mutually beneficial security partnership, able to adapt to economic and strategic changes and deter an increasingly diverse set of threats.

POST-2027

After the Russian attack, the EU attempted to contain the crisis in Latvia. However, the Union had limited resources and restricted mobility, given that it had not advanced far down the path of security integration; the EU's Nordic Battlegroups needed approximately 10 days to be deployed, and a NATO response was unlikely since the Latvian government was split regarding the entry of Russian forces in the country, deadlocking any decision to ask for NATO troop deployment. Russia had the strategic and the geographic upper hand, as its Western Military District forces [8] were numerically superior to EU forces and could deploy additional troops in a matter of days. In the short run, the EU focused on mobilising its Nordic Battlegroups to the region, increasing its force by 2 500 soldiers, and building on France's initiative to mobilise its nuclear arsenal [9] to re-establish the *status quo* in the Baltics.

Timeline

1 Flawed assumption

The US will continue to play a preponderant role in European defence and is able to sustain two theatres of war at the same time, in Asia and Europe

2 Policy based on assumption

EU focuses its policies on economic and social recovery in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Cuts are made to the defence budget

3 Consequences

EU is vulnerable to Russian threats

EU does not have a solid defence base and is unable to establish itself as a defence actor in its neighbourhood

In the medium run, Europe used the momentum from the attack to significantly increase its defence budget and propose the creation of a fully-fledged EDU. This proposal included a European nuclear deterrence programme, sizeable forces deployable on land, air and sea, making full use of the Member States' national armed forces totalling roughly 2 million soldiers, and closing any remaining capability gaps. The European Council adopted a mandate for an Intergovernmental Conference in January 2028, which concluded its work in May. The European Defence Treaty was signed on 24 June 2028 and was ratified by all Member States.

In the medium to long run, the EU focused on fully developing its military capabilities by investing in a strong European Defence

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[8]   Brauss, H. and Rácz, A., 'Russia's Strategic Interests and Actions in the Baltic Region', DGAP Report, No.1., January 2021 (https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/russias-strategic-interests-and-actions-baltic-region#2.2)

[9]   Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, 'Fact Sheet: France's Nuclear Inventory', 27 March 2020 (https://armscontrolcenter.org/fact-sheet-frances-nuclear-arsenal/).

Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) and Single Defence Market, to create economic growth and technological advances designed to put the EU on the map as a key defence actor. In parallel, the EU improved and strengthened its strategic partnership with the United States and NATO, to better prepare for different scenarios and avoid another situation like that which had occurred in 2027. The focus was on achieving closer European defence integration to reduce military overstretch and create a more agile response system, adaptable to a wider array of threats.

WHAT IF ... AFRICA DOES NOT INTEGRATE?

by
GIOVANNI FALEG

2027

Wednesday morning in Brussels. Jeanne looked at the raindrops on the car window as it drove towards Zaventem Airport. She held a black Moleskine notebook in her right hand, her index finger bookmarking a page dated 14 March 2027, with a few written notes of the pre-mission briefing with the HR/VP's cabinet. It was Jeanne's third year as the Managing Director for Africa in the European External Action Service (EEAS). Jeanne always joked that Africa started to disintegrate the very day she took office three years earlier, on 16 July 2024, which coincided with the collapse of the Ethiopian state following the 'Ten Days of Addis Ababa', during which a coalition of rebel forces overthrew the federal government. Six months later, Mogadishu fell into the hands of al-Shabaab, who declared the creation of the Somalian Caliphate. The Horn of Africa's descent into political chaos had prompted the African Union (AU) to take an unprecedented decision and move its headquarters to Kigali, Rwanda.

'You know', Jeanne turned to her colleague Richard, 'I don't really know what we are flying to Kigali for: the inauguration of the new African Union building, or the requiem for the dream of African integration'. 'Well', Richard replied, 'geopolitics evolve, buildings remain, becoming history...' Jeanne looked back at the window, those raindrops scattered by the wind as the car sped up towards the airport. History ... she remembered her MA dissertation at the School of Oriental and African Studies on the role of African pressure groups in the creation of Africa's Regional Economic Communities. The work of the historian is to resurrect the past from dusty archives, produce lessons for the present. Two little drops merged, making her think of her days at the European Union Institute for Security Studies, working on strategic foresight.

'In my previous life as an analyst', Jeanne told Richard, 'I wrote a report on the future of the AfCFTA [1]. It imagined a scenario in 2030 in which Africa's trade integration triggered a positive transformation, bringing peace and prosperity'. 'Yes, I've read that'. 'Well, I think I failed as an analyst as much as I failed as a policymaker'. 'Don't say that!' 'I surely did. In half an hour, we are supposed to meet with Liberian delegates travelling from Monrovia to Kigali via Brussels. After South African Airways went bankrupt and the ban on Ethiopian Airlines, Africa's aviation market downgraded

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[1] AfCTA = African Continental Free Trade Area. For the real report, see: Giovanni Faleg (ed.), 'African Futures 2030: free trade, peace and prosperity', *Chaillot Paper* No 164, EUISS, February 2021.

to the old, post-colonial flight routes: no direct connections between major African cities, you could only travel via Paris, Brussels, Lisbon'.

Jeanne opened her notebook and flipped through the pages. A gloomy bulletin on Africa's failed dream: from the 5-year humanitarian outlook, highlighting over 250 million Africans facing food insecurity and 39 million forcibly displaced in 2026 (compared to 100 million and 29 million respectively in 2021)[2] to recent major political and economic setbacks, such as the implications of South Africa's debt default in 2024, and the recent 10-month blockade of the railway line linking Nairobi to Naivasha. Some curious anecdotes, including notes of a conversation with an old Ghanian friend who described the day of the closure of the AfCFTA Secretariat in 2026. One page contained only a number: 25. The percentage of youth not in employment, education or training as of January 2027, which marked an almost 4 % increase in 6 years (20.8 % in 2021[3]): this is, Jeanne thought, how the dream of an integrated Africa dies: with another lost generation. 'OK, but it's not your, or our fault, it's more complicated than that', contended Richard. 'It is, in part: our expectations were wrong, and so were our actions as a result'.

2022-2027

'You know what the problem with the African Futures *Chaillot Paper* was? That despite the scenarios developed in the report, some of which were describing what could go wrong, nearly everyone in the "Brussels bubble" assumed that Africa would transform in a positive way. We took "integration" for granted, we started using the word "Africa" in our policy documents as if the continent was already integrating. EU communication privileged references to the AU and regional organisations over national and local dynamics: the past was about African countries, the future became about Africa'[4].
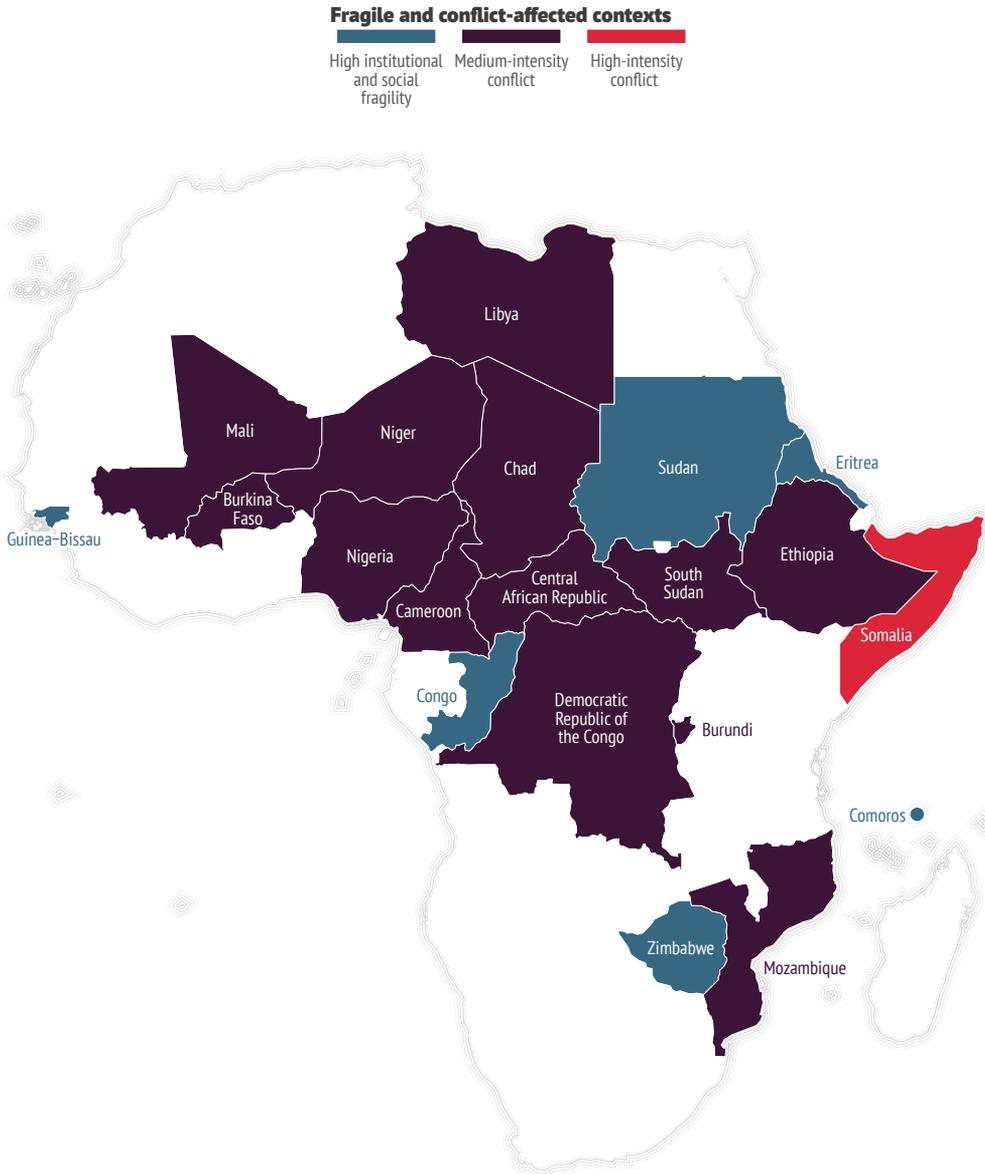
'Many were sceptical though.' 'Yes, but not officially. Off the record, many people knew that the AfCFTA was a chimera, that centrifugal forces were at play, that transitional regimes would have neither the will nor the capacity to implement market reforms. But have you read the official narrative of that time? AU–EU Summit declarations[5], the EU's comprehensive strategy with Africa[6], EU Member States' strategies[7]… all sugar-coated documents describing "Africa" as a land of opportunity, a continent open for business, as if a brighter future was necessarily ahead of us'[8].

'Were they wrong?' 'Not entirely. Africa did experience steady growth in the first two decades of the 2000s, and for a time in the mid-2010s it looked like democratic transitions could be successful. But just like

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[2]   Data: UNHCR and IOM, 2021. See also: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Record 29 million Africans are forcibly displaced', June 2020 (https://africacenter.org/spotlight/record-29-million-africans-forcibly-displaced/) and 'Food insecurity crisis mounting in Africa', February 2021 (https://africacenter.org/spotlight/food-insecurity-crisis-mounting-africa/)..

[3]   International Labour Organization, 'Global employment trends for youth 2020: Africa,' Briefing Note, 9 March 2020, p. 1.

[4]   Byiers, B., 'The EU and Africa: Should, would, could… but how?', ECDPM blog, 16 March 2020.

[5]   African Union–European Union Summit 2017, 'Investing in youth for accelerated inclusive growth and sustainable development', Joint Declaration, AU–EU/Decl.1(V), Abidjan, 30 November 2017.

[6]   European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa*, Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council, JOIN(2020) 4 final, 9 March 2020.

[7]   Faleg, G. and Palleschi, C., 'African Strategies: European and global approaches towards sub-Saharan Africa', *Chaillot Paper* No 158, EUISS, June 2020, pp. 14-16.

[8]   The Joint Communication of 2020 had stressed that the AfCFTA was the 'trigger to accelerate and drive broader social and human development, with new opportunities arising from the digital transformation and the demographic dividend'. See: *Towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa*, op.cit., p. 1.

Fragile!
State fragility index score, 2021

Fragile and conflict-affected contexts

| High institutional and social fragility | Medium-intensity conflict | High-intensity conflict |

Data: World Bank, 'Classification of fragile and conflict–affected situations', 2021

investors think that stock markets are always going up, we thought free trade and economic integration or democratisation would steadily move forward. Do you remember Abiy Ahmed winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019? At the time, he was seen as a peacemaker. And then, the military offensive in Tigray, a global humanitarian catastrophe. Do you also remember the Guinea case? The country had been remarkably resilient in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, with real GDP staying above 5 % despite lockdowns and disruptions. Its debt

was sustainable, with only moderate risk of distress [9]. Then the military coup, the junta, a failed transition, sky-rocketing inflation, high unemployment rates, mounting ethnic tensions, and in the end brutal crackdowns on civic demonstrations, human right violations. And what about the failed transitions that followed in Burkina Faso and Cameroon, on top of those in Chad and Mali?'

Jeanne and her colleagues had been taken off guard, and witnessed the slow demise of Africa's integration, powerless and yet guilty in the mistaken assumption that crises would be local or sub-regional at worst, but that continental integration would move forward. Statements from delegations outlining the difficult dialogue between the EU and undemocratic and unfriendly African governments multiplied month by month. In the Horn of Africa, as the AMISOM funding crisis was deepening and paving the way for new waves of offensives by al-Shabaab, the EU could not agree on a new approach to support security. In the Sahel, most of the EU's efforts remained aimed at countering terrorism, but neglected broader challenges affecting the West Africa region as it was transforming into a 'continental public bad'. Hybrid actors even succeeded in blaming European 'neo-colonialism' for West African crises, as the EU had become more vulnerable to foreign information manipulation and interference. Jeanne had observed a violent and fragmented new reality become normal.

POST-2027

It was Jeanne's last day in the office. Her colleagues had organised a farewell party in the EEAS courtyard. Jeanne was tidying up her desk, getting rid of tons of papers, forms, memos and notes. One document caught her eye. It was the report of her March 2027 mission to Kigali, three years earlier. It was titled

'The AU's post-mortem: why African integration failed, and how we could have avoided it'. She remembered the conversation with Richard on the way to the airport. The AU had in the end managed to survive the following three years. In a continent on the verge of social, political and economic disintegration, strong leadership eventually came to the aid of African unity. Egypt, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria and Rwanda, later joined by South Africa, created the C3 group, which stood for 'Coalition for continental cohesion', investing the political capital required to reinforce the AU's mechanisms and resources to deal with unprecedented crises. Negotiations on the AfCFTA had resumed in May 2029. Then AU Chairperson Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala had delivered a historic speech in February that year, calling on 'all Africans to unite and stand for their future together, or divide and perish'.

The EU had supported the process by devising a new partnership that could best address the multiple challenges of African realities. In some cases, this entailed allowing African ownership emerge and take its course; in other cases, it necessitated more targeted engagement in sectors generating positive spillovers for integration, such as addressing illicit outflows of tax revenue and royalties in the extractive sector, to reduce inequality; or reassessing the linkage between environmental degradation and population growth, especially in urban areas, to design sustainable reforms and deliver job creation. The EU also strengthened its strategic communication capacities to counter hostile narratives, such as those depicting free trade as a conspiracy driven by the EU to subjugate Africa.

Still, vast areas of the continent remained fragile. A decade of failed expectations could not be wiped out in a few months. Jeanne folded the mission report and put it in her pocket. As she entered the courtyard, she noticed a plaque bearing Jean Monnet's famous dictum 'Nothing is possible without men, but nothing

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[9] African Development Bank, 'Country Notes: Guinea', 2021, p. 52 (https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/2021/03/12/aeo-2021-country_notes-en.pdf).

lasts without institutions'. Overconfidence in institutions had created the wrong assumption that the architecture supporting Africa's integration would never crumble. But albeit fragile and vulnerable, those structures had remained Africa's anchor for a better future. It just took leadership to turn the ship away from stormy waters. Richard was among the first to greet Jeanne, handing her a copy of the African Futures *Chaillot Paper*. It was bookmarked at page 22, with a sentence highlighted in yellow: 'an informal coalition of AfCFTA champions emerged, which included the Heads of State of Ghana, Rwanda and South Africa, later joined by Chad, Kenya, Morocco and Nigeria'. And a handwritten note saying 'you only got Chad and Kenya wrong!'. Jeanne smiled, then began reading her farewell speech: 'foresight is not about predicting the future, it's about getting prepared for it …'

Timeline

1 Flawed assumption

African free trade and economic integration will trigger a positive transformation and foster peaceful transitions to democracy

Africa is a land of opportunity, embarked on a growth path towards a brighter future

African countries will be run by friendly, likeminded democratic governments

2 Policy based on assumption

Further EU cuts to AMISOM funding undermine ability to fight al-Shabaab

In the Sahel the EU's efforts remain focused on countering terrorism but neglect structural challenges affecting West Africa

3 Consequences

Lost generation: 25 % of African youth not in employment, education or training in 2027

Horn of Africa falls apart, collapse of Ethiopian state and creation of a Somalian Caliphate

'Coalition for continental cohesion' pledges to revive the AU to deal with unprecedented crises

CHAPTER 7

WHAT IF … THERE IS NO MUSLIM MASS MIGRATION TO EUROPE?

by
FLORENCE GAUB

2027

It was a beautiful sunny day when Marcel Brouillard walked to cast his vote in the presidential election. His Apple watch kept buzzing with notifications. An aircraft full of Afghan citizens without a visa had just landed at Orly airport, leaving them stranded at passport control. The flight had taken off from Moscow where the authorities claimed that their paperwork had been in order when they boarded the plane. 'Russian foul play, again', Marcel thought. This was no new tactic, he reflected as he queued at the polling station, but the practice of dumping migrants from Muslim countries in and around Europe had markedly increased over the previous years. At times, techniques included even hot air balloons and tunnels, and the timing was, as always, well chosen, this time to coincide with the French elections. As on previous occasions, politicians all over Europe seized the opportunity to voice their concern over 'floods' and 'hordes' of Muslims 'invading' the Union to live off welfare, commit crimes and reject European values. A Russian disinformation campaign cleverly fanned these fears further [1]. Reality was so very different: 75 % of European migrants were not from Muslim-majority countries and a mere 0.6 % of Europe's population consisted of refugees from such countries; migrants contributed to, rather than lived off, the welfare state; and their crime levels were only moderately higher than those of European citizens [2]. But the debate, much like conspiracy theories, was dominated by emotions rather than facts.

More and more, citizens across the EU were seduced by this rhetoric, voting politicians into office that promised to keep their culture,

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(1) European Parliament, 'The impact of disinformation campaigns about migrants and minority groups in the EU', June 2021 (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/INGE/DV/2021/07-12/IDADisinformation_migrant_minorities_EN.pdf).

(2) Marianne Tønnessen, 'Declined total fertility rate among immigrants and the role of newly arrived women in Norway', *European Journal of Population*, Vol.36, pp. 547–573, 2020; BBC News, 'Reality check: Are migrants driving crime in Germany?', 13 September 2018 (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45419466); *Nature*, 'Migrants and refugees are good for economies', 20 June 2018, (https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-05507-0).

People in many Western countries greatly overestimate the size of their current and future Muslim population

Responses to the question: 'Out of every hundred people in your country, how many do you think are Muslim (in 2016) and will be Muslim in 2020?'

Data: *The Guardian*, 'Europeans greatly overestimate size of Muslim population, poll shows', 2016

daughters and jobs safe. And now, it looked like France, too, was going to do the same. After a brief lull five years earlier, Marine Le Pen had made a spectacular comeback and in her contest with fellow contender Anne Hidalgo had never looked as close to winning the second round of the presidential elections. This would not cause as much uproar as previously, Marcel reflected: there were now five EU member states run by similar politicians, all rejecting NATO, European integration and in favour of stronger ties with Russia and China. Marcel stepped back onto the Paris street with a knot in his stomach. He thought about all the other upcoming elections in Europe: Greece in a few weeks, Spain later that year, and Italy the year after. He wondered whether it was time to leave and move elsewhere

– following the nearly 3 million people that left Europe every year [3].

2022-2027

The situation of 2027 was not unavoidable: in fact, avoiding it had been the priority of many policymakers in the EU and its member states. In the thinking of many, mass migration to Europe appeared nearly inevitable in the future, and steps had to be taken to prevent it from happening, precisely to counter parties that ran on an anti-immigration ticket (in itself a flawed assumption). The New Pact on Migration and Asylum was to futureproof

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(3)   Eurostat, 'Migration and migrant population statistics' (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index. php?title=Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics).

the Union against this by reducing arrivals of asylum seekers, and increasing their forced return [4].

There were not just a few flawed assumptions in this reasoning. Firstly, it was assumed that extended neighbourhood demographics – projected to double by 2050 – would inevitably lead to migration as states would not be able to provide jobs. And this migration would logically be to Europe as this is where the economy was the strongest in the wider region. Surveys claiming that half of young Arabs wanted to emigrate – presumably to Europe – strengthened these convictions further [5]. Secondly, not just population growth would push emigration, climate change would, too. Some (very dubious) studies claimed that climate change would displace up to one billion migrants by 2050 and here, too, decision-makers felt the geographic proximity and relative safety of Europe (which would be affected less by climate change than its extended neighbourhood) would mean it would become the quasi-automatic destination for migration [6].

But both assumptions were flawed. This should have been obvious because migration foresight was notoriously unreliable, precisely because the main driver, human motivation, was difficult to project over an extended period of time [7]. Surveys measuring the intention to migrate, for instance, are not only inaccurate predictors for actual migration, they are quickly superseded: within the course of a year, the number of young Arabs wishing to emigrate had fallen by a third – and of these, most wanted to emigrate to Canada or the United States [8]. While it is true that employment opportunities elsewhere generally spurred on migration, this tended to occur *within* regions, not continents. Just 18 % of global Muslim migrants for instance ended up in Europe – with most young Arabs aiming for Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates. In fact, as the world economy diversified and grew, Europe had become one pole among many dealing with emigration and immigration, brain drain, and repatriation rather than being the epicentre it felt itself to be [9]. Secondly, and in contrast to the alarmist messaging on the subject, there was *no* evidence that climate change would push people to migrate *to other continents* – in fact, the only evidence that existed was that climate change would trap individuals within states and thereby *reduce* emigration [10].

There were several costs associated with these two assumptions. The first was that it led to policies that made migration deterrence rather than management their cornerstone, focusing on harmonising access to and movement within the Schengen area. Whereas migration deterrence focused on keeping migrants out, migration management would have leveraged labour migration, recognising the fact that the bulk of European migration – and migration potential – was inside the EU. Harmonising policies on labour migration within the EU could have involved skills recognition between member states, pension portability, and policies to align national labour market institutions – thereby giving European business access to brains and investment, all needed to sustain Europe's policies on innovation and

(4) European Parliament, 'The European Commission's legislative proposals in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum', July 2021 (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL_STU(2021)697130).

(5) Arab News, 'More than half of young Arabs want to emigrate', 24 June 2019 (https://www.arabnews.com/node/1515101/middle-east).

(6) Foresight, 'Environmental migrants: Up to 1 billion by 2050', 22 May 2019, (https://www.climateforesight.eu/migrations-inequalities/environmental-migrants-up-to-1-billion-by-2050/).

(7) IOM, 'The future of migration to Europe: a systematic review of the literature on migration, scenarios and forecasts', 2020, p. 42 (https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/the-future-of-migration-to-europe.pdf).

(8) Arab Youth Survey, 'Emigration' (https://arabyouthsurvey.com/en/findings/).

(9) Parkes, R., 'Migration, borders, and the EU's capacity to act', DGAP Report, November 2021, p.6.

(10) Tertrais, B., 'Climate refugees: Do not hype up the problem', Institut Montaigne, 15 October 2021 (https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/climate-refugees-do-not-hype-problem).

growth [11]. The European Commission had recognised this when it had stated that 'Europe is losing the global race for talent', but fears of migration were stronger than fears of lost opportunities [12].

The focus on migration deterrence also meant that the EU did not assist in the establishment of regional labour markets in traditional sending countries, thereby inadvertently increasing migration to Europe. It also damaged its relations with friendly states in the region, such as Morocco. Lastly, it ignored increasing emigration flows out of Europe, failing to establish policies to facilitate return of emigrants to European soil. Its already challenged labour market, shrinking every year, struggled more and more to find the necessary employees to keep European economies competitive. Every year, more than 5 % of productivity was lost due to the skills mismatch [13].

Most importantly, although these policies managed to keep migrant numbers in check, they failed to weaken movements capitalising on anti-migration rhetoric. There were a few reasons for this: in part, the focus on Schengen (rather than the labour market) as the migration space was met with resistance by several member states (often already thriving on an anti-EU agenda). In the light of this, actors intent on stirring up dissent in Europe, such as Russia, continued to fan the flames by weaponising migrants and orchestrating sustained disinformation campaigns. But in part, this was because these policies acquiesced to, rather than challenged, the notion that migration was bad for Europe, playing into the xenophobic and anti-Muslim narratives that came with it. This was even more deplorable as majorities of Europeans did not consider migration the most important policy issue. In

some states, such as Italy, Poland, Romania and Spain, voters were even more concerned by emigration rather than immigration [14].

Timeline

1 Flawed assumption

There will be mass migration to Europe, mostly from the Arab world and Africa

Migration has negative consequences for European societies, and gives rise to populism

2 Policy based on assumption

Migration deterrence policies in order to reduce migration generally

3 Consequences

European labour markets suffer shortages

Europe is held hostage by states using migrants as leverage

Rise in populism

POST-2027

The surprise victory of Anne Hidalgo in the French presidential elections proved to be a turning point for Europe, also in migration matters. It took a few more migrant incidents provoked by Russia and others before the Foreign Affairs Council concluded that fear of migration had made the EU vulnerable to

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(11)　'Migration, borders, and the EU's capacity to act', op.cit., p.7

(12)　European Commission, 'Skills and Talent' (https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/new-pact-migration-and-asylum/skills-and-talent_en).

(13)　European Economic and Social Committee, 'Without migrants, Europe's economic and social model is in danger, says the EESC', 11 December 2018 (https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/without-migrants-europes-economic-and-social-model-danger-says-eesc#downloads).

(14)　ECFR, 'A majority of Europe's voters do not consider migration to be the most important issue, according to major new poll', 1 April 2019 (https://ecfr.eu/article/european_voters_do_not_consider_migration_most_important_election/).

blackmail, and undermined its overall policy objectives. Not only was migration not fully managed, autocratic governments were strengthened, smugglers were emboldened, and internal EU rhetoric on migration had poisoned the atmosphere. It was time for a fresh, future-oriented start. Foresight helped save the day: a study showed that by 2060, for every elderly person in Europe there would be just two people of working age as opposed to four in 2027 [15]. Either pension ages had to be increased (a measure which met substantial resistance) or pensions cut – or, migration could be managed rather than deterred, using trade, aid and diplomacy to support the emergence of new migration hubs in the neighbourhood. A more committed foreign policy contributing to crisis stabilisation by way of peacekeeping, trade, development, and diplomacy helped reduce the flow of refugees. Lastly, a new policy facilitating the return of European emigrants meant that Marcel Brouillard, too, came back from Japan in 2035 to launch a technology start-up.

[15]   Ibid.

SURPRISE! WHAT WE DO NOT EXPECT TO HAPPEN, BUT WHAT IF IT DOES?

WHAT IF ... THE UK GOES FROM BREXIT TO BRENTRY?

by
GUSTAV LINDSTROM

2027

It was June 2027 and the British prime minister was nearing the end of his highly anticipated speech to parliament:

> *'We want to come back and believe our collective future is stronger together. It is therefore my aim, following extensive political negotiations and in line with popular support for a return towards the EU, to submit an application on behalf of the UK government to rejoin the EU. The road ahead will not be easy and it will require goodwill from both the UK and the EU. The destination, however, will be worth it for all of us and for future generations. I look forward to your support as we navigate this path and thank you for your attention.'*

The speech raised few eyebrows. It was consistent with the general direction taken by the United Kingdom since the May 2024 elections – seen as a *de facto* referendum for seeking closer relations with the EU. Nonetheless, those listening had to pinch themselves in the arm to grasp the reality of the moment. The United Kingdom would shortly submit what would be its fourth application to join the EU ('Brentry' as opposed to Brexit). More to the point, it was a mere 11 years since the 2016 Brexit referendum that had led to the split from the EU and years of tense relations between the two sides. Was rejoining the EU possible – especially as the expectation and assumption on both sides until recently had been that the United Kingdom would remain a 'third state' for the long haul?

There was high anticipation when the formal application letter signed by the prime minister reached Brussels. The rotating Lithuanian EU Presidency acknowledged its receipt on behalf of the Council of the EU in a ceremony closely followed by the international media. During the press conference, a reporter broke the ice by pointing out that even 'divorcees sometimes choose to remarry the same person' – citing a 6 % figure that took many by surprise [1]. After the collective laughter subsided in the room, she posed the question on everybody's mind: would this new attempt at EU membership go anywhere, especially given the divisive nature of relations since 2020? Few if any had imagined this development materialising so quickly. Indeed, very little seemed to be in place to prepare the ground.

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[1]   Asa, R., 'Same marriage, Round 2', *Chicago Tribune*, 23 October 2012 (https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-xpm-2012-10-23-sc-fam-1023-divorce-reunite-20121023-story.html).

2022-2027

Following the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU in 2020, relations between the two sides remained contentious. This was expected but the persistent nature of the discord was not. Following the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, both sides also still had to contend with a host of thorny issues. Among those receiving particular scrutiny – excluding key sticking points such as the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland– were:

> Fishing quotas – while an agreement on fisheries was finalised in 2021, it did not set catch limits for non-quota stocks. This covered a wide range of species such as sardine, European seabass, red mullet and squid [2]. As a result, both EU Member State and UK ships could continue to fish in each other's waters until the new joint fisheries committees could work out the details. These arrangements proved difficult to finalise due to the lack of historical fishing data. The friction over fishing rights would anger UK fishermen in particular who perceived themselves to be on the losing end of these arrangements. Coupled with the bureaucratic hurdles that were introduced earlier that stymied the UK-EU fishing trade, the lack of progress in this dossier served to reinforce the perception that the costs of Brexit were piling up and had not been properly foreseen in 2020.

> The status of the legal services industry in the United Kingdom – with Brexit, the country had to leave the 2007 Lugano Convention. As an international treaty establishing the jurisdiction of national courts, it plays a key role concerningthe legal recognition and enforcement of judgments in cross-border court cases. While the United Kingdom re-applied to rejoin the convention in April 2020, it could not move forward as EU Member States did not give their assent for UK membership. One reason behind the EU's position was that the convention should only be open to third states that could participate in the Single Market and achieve close regulatory EU alignment [3]. From 2022 onwards, the monetary, non-monetary, and reputational costs of non-adhesion grew for the United Kingdom. Prior to Brexit, legal services had contributed close to £60 billion to the British economy (2018) and engaged over 350 000 individuals in the country [4]. These figures would fall as confidence in and reliance on UK courts diminished and the EU bloc maintained its blocking stance – further tarnishing EU-UK relations while exposing additional Brexit drawbacks.

> Settlement statuses and citizen's rights – During the Brexit process, the United Kingdom and EU went to great lengths to secure their citizens' respective rights. In the United Kingdom, a Settlement Scheme served to facilitate continued residence for EU citizens. In the EU, about half the Member States gave outright recognition to UK citizens while the other half established registration procedures. Notwithstanding these efforts, there were frequent complaints about the systems. A habitual UK complaint concerned the sporadic misapplications of the Withdrawal Agreement towards UK nationals, for example with respect to access to health care benefits [5]. While the expectation had been that these

(2)   Oliver, T.,'UK-EU deal leaves difficult issues until 2022', *Fishing News*, 22 June 2021 (https://fishingnews.co.uk/news/uk-eu-deal-leaves-difficult-issues-until-2022/); McBride, O., 'Great Government Giveaway of UK non-quota stocks to EU fishing fleet', *The Fishing Daily*, 23 March 2021 (https://thefishingdaily.com/featured-news/great-government-giveaway-of-uk-non-quota-stocks-to-eu-fishing-fleet/).

(3)   Reilly, T., 'The Lugano Convention and the UK', Covington & Burling LLP Global Policy Watch, 11 May 2021 (https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=5f340c34-4c60-4b4a-92e4-380deaabe87e).

(4)   McGee, L., 'The explosive Brexit spat that no one is talking about could slam the UK economy', CNN, 28 July 2021 (https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/28/business/lugano-convention-uk-europe-dispute-intl-cmd/index.html).

(5)   For examples of such cases, see the Joint Statement of the Citizens' Rights Specialised Committee meeting held on 17 June 2021 (https://www.gov.uk/government/news/citizens-rights-specialised-committee-meeting-17june-2021-joint-statement).

'faults' would gradually disappear, the complexity of the arrangements – coupled with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic – led to frequent misunderstandings and frustration. On the EU side, 2022-2023 was a turning point when EU citizens who had failed to apply for pre-settlement or settlement status (for those already in the United Kingdom for over 5 years) prior to the 30 June 2021 deadline were unable to secure new jobs, change living arrangements, or access certain benefits. With over 100 000 EU citizens in this category, their future was now uncertain, in spite of extended UK deadlines and multiple attempts by the authorities to ensure proper registration [6]. The effects amplified in 2025 and beyond as EU citizens who only had pre-settlement status had to re-apply for settled status within 5 years.

These and other challenges gradually changed opinions on the Brexit legacy. The vision and the reality were growing further apart. There was a perception that the costs were literally outpacing the benefits. While the effects of Covid-19 had initially blurred the ability to gauge the economic effects of Brexit, a clearer picture emerged through the trade lens. Between the first quarters of 2018 and 2021, UK trade with the EU dropped by 23.1 % while trade with non-EU countries merely decreased by 0. 8% [7]. Bureaucratic obstacles and substantial increases in paperwork would sustain this trend. In addition, around 50 % of UK businesses surveyed from December 2020 onwards reported the end of the transition period as their main importing or exporting challenge [8].

A second development changing the UK's Brexit calculation was the evolving sentiment in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Both had

Regrets?

% of people who think Brexit was the right or wrong decision, Jul-Sep 2021
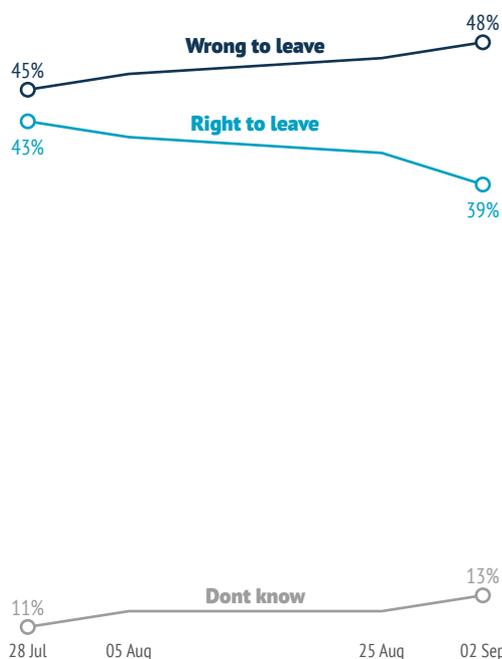
Data: Statista, 2021

voted to remain in the EU in 2016 and this position was reinforced over time, especially as the costs of Brexit became more tangible and visible to people. This in turn revitalised already existing debates on possible Scottish independence and Irish unification. While Scotland had held a referendum on independence in 2014, in which the majority had voted to remain (55 %), Brexit was increasingly viewed as a game changer that could possibly lead to a different result should another referendum take place. In Northern Ireland, calls for a possible referendum increased from 2020 onwards [9], gaining steam following the

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[6]   Casciani, D., 'EU settlement deadline: Who's registered and who's at risk?', BBC News, 29 June 2021 (https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-57656608).

[7]   UK Office for National Statistics, 'The impacts of EU exit and the coronavirus on UK trade in goods', 25 May 2021 (https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/internationaltrade/articles/theimpactsofeuexitandthecoronavirusonuktradeingoods/2021-05-25).

[8]   Ibid.

[9]   O'Connor, R., 'Sinn Féin calls for referendum on Irish unity by 2025', *The Irish Post*, 21 January 2020 (https://www.irishpost.com/news/sinn-fein-calls-referendum-irish-unity-2025-177635).

outcome of the Northern Ireland Assembly elections in May 2022.

The perceived risk of a UK breakup grew in political circles post-Brexit. It also nurtured discreet political calculations on whether a move to rejoin the EU would serve to avoid or minimise such prospects. The reasoning was that an United Kingdom on an EU path, regardless of the eventual outcome, might relegate independence and unification efforts to the back burner. The consistency of opinion poll results provided additional political firepower for a *rapprochement* with the EU from 2023 onwards. These suggested that a majority of those polled in the United Kingdom were in favour of rejoining the EU. This was particularly noticeable among those under 50 years of age where the level of support was between 60-65 %. This should not have been a surprise, especially when revisiting the 2016 Brexit results. The age categories spanning 18-24 and 25-34 then had an average of 68 % supporting remaining in the EU [10]. In 2027, these individuals were ten years older and made up the majority of professional and political cadres.

On the EU side, a similar development took place. There was a recognition that in an increasingly geopolitical world, Europe would have a stronger voice with the United Kingdom as an EU Member State. In particular, its membership would strengthen the EU's economic, financial and military weight on the world stage. From a different perspective, there were also indications that EU citizens would be open to welcome the UK back. A preview was visible already in 2021, when a survey covering France, Germany and Spain suggested that fewer than 20 % of the respondents in each of the surveyed countries opposed the United Kingdom re-joining the EU [11].

Timeline

1 Flawed assumption

The UK will not consider rejoining the EU in the future

2 Policy based on assumption

EU-UK relations are trademarked by contentious policy negotiations across multiple domain areas

There is limited appetite to seek out win-win policy options

3 Consequences

There are few initiatives seeking to promote closer relations between the UK and the EU

Neither the UK nor the EU are pre-positioned to address this low probability, yet high-impact event

POST-2027

Few if any had foreseen a UK application to rejoin the EU in 2027. As a low probability event, it simply did not enter people's calculations – despite multiple signals pointing in that direction.

Given this lack of anticipation, few initiatives existed that specifically existed to promote closer relations between the United Kingdom and the EU.

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[10] Statistica, 'Which way did you vote in the Brexit referendum?', 2016 (https://www.statista.com/statistics/520954/brexit-votes-by-age/).

[11] Tiday, A., 'Brexit 5 years on: 'We would have you back,' says Europe, in new poll', Euronews, 23 June 2021 (https://www.euronews.com/2021/06/23/brexit-5-years-on-we-would-have-you-back-says-europe-in-new-poll).

To rectify this situation, there was a need to catch up and each side took three general corrective actions in response. For the United Kingdom, these were to:

1. Develop a comprehensive strategy towards the EU, including the identification of priorities across major policy areas that simultaneously promote greater alignment with existing EU policies and legislation;

2. Explore the potential for joining the EU Single Market and Customs Union as a stepping stone towards possible future membership;

3. Set a framework for the forthcoming EU–UK negotiations contingent on a positive signal on the EU side. A priority being to prioritise among possible UK opt-out options, recognising that the United Kingdom would be unlikely to secure the same opt-outs and rebate as before.

For the EU institutions and Member States, these were to:

1. Construct a sensible timetable for possible UK adhesion. A key issue here was to reconcile the United Kingdom's trajectory with that of six other candidate countries to manage expectations;

2. Explore options for increased cooperation with the United Kingdom on areas of common concern – such as counter-terrorism and police cooperation;

3. Gauge EU internal positioning on likely sticking points in advance of possible negotiations – such as expectations for the UK to join (or not join) the euro and Schengen area.

CHAPTER 9

WHAT IF … THE CHINA-RUSSIA RAPPROCHEMENT IS NO LONGER JUST A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE?

by
ALICE EKMAN

2027

In May 2027, China and Russia co-organised the third annual 'Summit for Sovereignty', sub-titled 'Acting together against colour revolutions and Western interference'. More than 60 head of states gathered for this 3-day multilateral forum powered by virtual reality technology and allowing participants to join either physically in Beijing or remotely, with their animated avatar specially designed for the occasion. At the opening of the futuristic-looking forum, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin both called to join forces against the United States and other 'Western hostile forces', portrayed as trouble-makers responsible for orchestrating 'colour revolutions' and regime change. A joint communiqué was issued at the close of the summit stating that signatory countries would strongly oppose any form of Western interference by jointly promoting various actions including coalition-building at the United Nations (UN) and other international organisations, mutual surveillance and intelligence sharing on the activities of 'suspicious' foreign institutions (such as human rights NGOs or universities). In addition, the forum concluded with the discreet launch of a comprehensive training programme offered by Beijing and Moscow to other like-minded governments, in priority those represented at the summit. 'Smart city surveillance systems and technologies', 'Effective counter-terrorism and counter-separatism measures', 'Managing social networks for political stability' were listed among the training sessions provided for the year 2028.

Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin had joined forces to engage in an ideological competition with democracies that they saw as vital to their political survival. The two countries pledged to work together to promote globally a form of governance based on their own political systems.

2022-2027

Sino-Russian *rapprochement* accelerated in the context of prolonged Sino-US tensions. For both leaders, the building of a Sino-Russian axis appeared to be a natural strategic move to counter the coalition-building efforts engaged in by Washington and its allies since 2021. Both countries perceived the consolidation of the Indo-Pacific strategy and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) security arrangements negatively, and shared a similarly jaundiced view of the Summit for Democracy.

Following the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China in autumn 2022, China-Russia cooperation consolidated at a rapid pace in four strategic areas.

First, in the defence sector, after Russia successfully helped China develop a ballistic missile early-warning system, both countries jointly developed other defence equipment, including helicopters and submarines. Certainly, the relationship remained asymmetric in economic terms: while China consolidated its status as the second-largest economy in the world and by 2027 was getting closer to overtaking the United States, Russia's economy still lacked dynamism, as revenues from the export of natural resources shrank, while foreign investors were withdrawing from Russia because of the deteriorating business environment. But this asymmetry was not so obvious in military terms: Beijing still had a lot to learn from Moscow in this domain. With much less war experience than Russia, China was particularly keen to continue conducting joint military exercises on a regular basis in 2022-2027 in various sub-regions (the Mediterranean, Baltic, South China Seas, Indian Ocean, Central Asia and Siberia).

Second, both countries had reinforced their cooperation rapidly in the space sector.

They expanded cooperation between their satellite systems beyond civilian use: the BeiDou-Glonass network started to provide competitive defence applications. They also began the joint construction of a permanent lunar research base, following the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the China National Space Administration and Russian Space Agency in 2021 [1], and invited other countries to join this project.

Third, both countries expanded their cooperation in a number of technological areas: communication technology (including 5G and 6G networks, submarine cables), artificial intelligence, blockchain and cryptocurrency, videosurveillance equipment (including facial recognition cameras, sensors) with the common objective of limiting their dependency on American or European components.

Fourth, both countries had been actively coordinating their efforts to restructure international institutions, promote norms and standards and form a coalition with the aim to shape a post-Western global governance system [2]. They had striven within Interpol and the UN Human Rights Council, for instance, to change the internal procedures, concepts and purpose of the institutions in line with their interests.
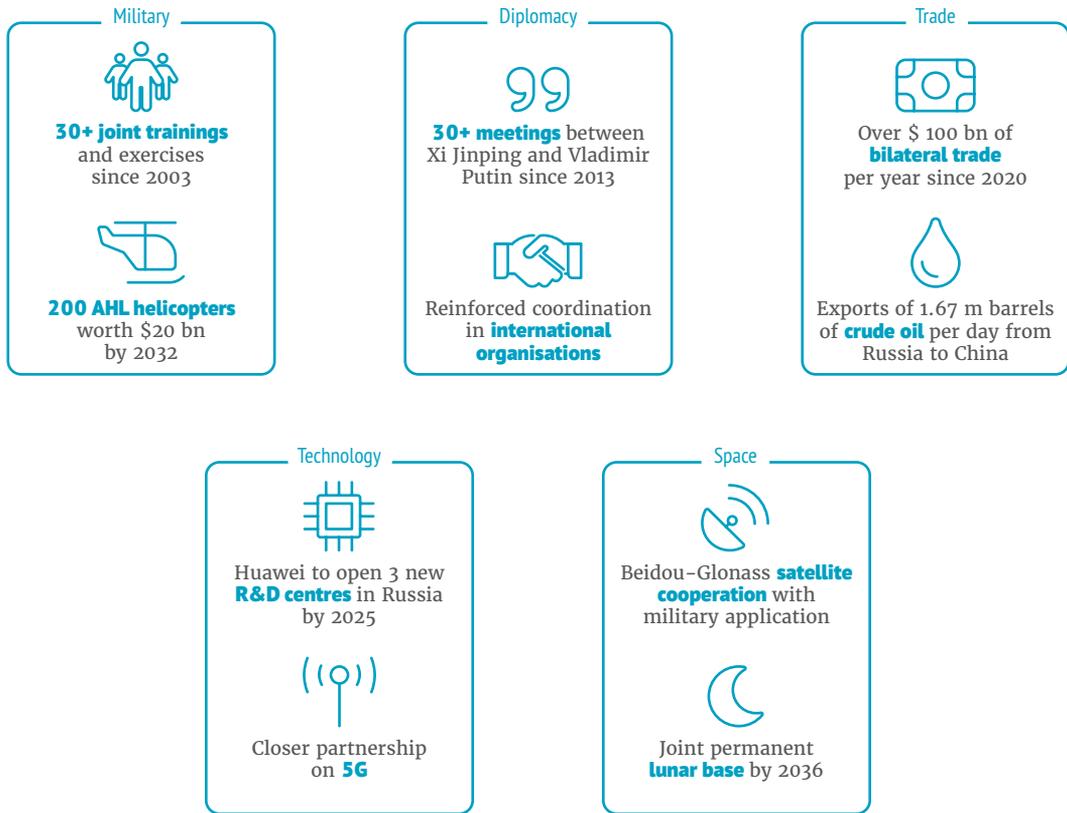
Cooperation on these fronts had been strongly promoted by the leaders on both sides, who had established close personal ties during the previous decade and who both remained in power in 2027: following Xi's extension of his presidential term in 2022 (until the 21st Party congress in 2027, with a likely extension until 2032), Vladimir Putin was also able to run again for election in 2024, and potentially stay *de facto* in power until 2036 if he so wished, thanks to the constitutional amendments adopted in 2021.

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(1) AP News, 'China, Russia agree to build lunar research station', 10 March 2021 (https://apnews.com/article/china-russia-build-lunar-research-station-45b749fb68ef65fd31e50d7e038050fe).

(2) Ekman, A., Saari, S. and Secrieru, S., 'Stand by me! The Sino-Russian normative partnership in action', *Brief* No 18, EUISS, 6 August 2020 (https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/stand-me-sino-russian-normative-partnership-action).

China and Russia
A diversified rapprochement

Military	Diplomacy	Trade
30+ joint trainings and exercises since 2003	**30+ meetings** between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin since 2013	Over $ 100 bn of **bilateral trade** per year since 2020
200 AHL helicopters worth $20 bn by 2032	Reinforced coordination in **international organisations**	Exports of 1.67 m barrels of **crude oil** per day from Russia to China

Technology	Space
Huawei to open 3 new **R&D centres** in Russia by 2025	Beidou-Glonass **satellite cooperation** with military application
Closer partnership on **5G**	Joint permanent **lunar base** by 2036

Overall, both countries managed to reduce their dependency on the United States in a timespan of less than 5 years with regard to key strategic infrastructures and standards (China more significantly than Russia): they managed to build an alternative to the US-led order in finance – taking advantage of the relative decline of the hegemony of the US dollar in part of the world, at a time when China was massively investing in the use of a central bank digital currency. Both countries also reinforced investments in space, nuclear energy, telecommunications and technology in broader terms. By 2027, China had for instance successfully produced its own high-end semiconductors.

The wrongful assumption that the China-Russia *rapprochement* would remain a marriage of convenience [3] – i.e. a mere pragmatic and temporary move by Russia in the face of sanctions – remained omnipresent in policy and analytical circles for years following the Crimea crisis in 2014. This was often due to points of friction between the two countries being overestimated: it was frequently assumed that China and Russia would become fierce competitors in Central Asia, especially following the launch of China's 'Belt & Road

(3)   Pezard, S. and Smith, T., 'Friends if we must: Russia and China in the Arctic', War on the Rocks, 6 May 2016 (https://warontherocks.com/2016/05/friends-if-we-must-russia-and-chinas-relations-in-the-arctic/); Wysoczanska, K., 'Marriage of convenience: China and Russia's gas deal', *The Asia Dialogue*, 25 June 2014 (https://theasiadialogue.com/2014/06/25/marriage-of-convenience-china-and-russias-gas-deal/).

Initiative' (BRI) in autumn 2013. Although some competition existed and still exists, and China's activism continued to steadily undermine Russia's influence in the region, both countries continued cooperating in the region – on counter-terrorism for instance [4]. And China had been very careful in its communication with Russia, trying its best to reassure Russia that BRI would not undermine Russia's 'Eurasian Economic Union' and Russia's economic presence in the region.

Another point of friction frequently mentioned was the inflow of Chinese migrants to Siberia, which it was surmised would lead to tensions between the two populations and ultimately the two governments. Not only was the issue exaggerated in demographic terms, but it was also sometimes oversimplified: Chinese presence in Siberia also became a source of economic dynamism welcomed by part of the local population and did not systematically lead to the local tensions often forecasted.

The third point of friction often mentioned was related to the Arctic: China's growing ambition and activism in the region would clash with Russia's interests. This assumption happened to be closer to reality: Moscow had long been concerned about China's role in the Artic, and in particular China's involvement with the Northern Sea Route [5]. But both countries also had shared interests in the region: China's participation in the Yamal Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) projects since 2013 had proven crucial to its claim to have an economic presence in the Arctic [6], both countries held regular dialogues (such as the China–Russia Dialogue on Arctic Affairs since 2015, among other gatherings) and in 2017, they agreed to build an 'Ice Silk Road' to strengthen their

regional cooperation [7]. Although the Arctic may be considered as the most sensitive area of competition/cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, it did not in itself challenge the trend towards a bilateral *rapprochement*.

Although these points of friction were well identified, they were often exaggerated due to a 'wishful thinking bias' in Washington or Brussels, where many hoped that the Sino-Russian relationship would not consolidate, and therefore prioritised this scenario in their prospective analyses.

POST-2027

By 2027, Moscow's military alignment with Beijing was evident. Both countries were supporting each other's positions – and in some cases military operations – when it came to defending core national interests, according to a geographical division of labour where China took the lead in Southeast and East Asia (notably Taiwan), and Russia in its eastern neighbourhood and the Middle East. In some countries, such as Afghanistan, both countries rapidly reinforced cooperation to take advantage of the changing domestic and political context.

Most importantly, both countries had managed to build a coalition of countries around their positions. At the UN and other international forums, the cleavage between two coalitions – one led by the United States and its partners, one led by China and Russia – was becoming more apparent, and the Sino-Russian

(4)   For instance in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Stronski, P. and Ng, N., 'Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 February 2018 (https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/28/cooperation-and-competition-russia-and-china-in-central-asia-russian-far-east-and-arctic-pub-75673).

(5)   Gobe, P., 'China helping Russia on Northern Sea Route now but ready to push Moscow aside later', The Jamestown Foundation, 6 May 2021 (https://jamestown.org/program/china-helping-russia-on-northern-sea-route-now-but-ready-to-push-moscow-aside-later/).

(6)   Wishnick, E., 'Will Russia put China's Arctic ambitions on ice?', *The Diplomat*, 5 June 2021 (https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/will-russia-put-chinas-arctic-ambitions-on-ice/).

(7)   Xinhua, 'China, Russia agree to jointly build "Ice Silk Road"', 4 July 2017 (http://www.xinhuanet.com//english/2017-07/04/c_136417241.htm).

Timeline

1 **Flawed assumption**

The Sino-Russian rapprochement will be a temporary phenomenon driven by pragmatic considerations

China and Russia are likely to become fierce competitors in Central Asia, and will also clash in the Arctic

2 **Policy based on assumption**

Efforts by European countries to compete with the Sino-Russian coalition at the UN and other multilateral forums are undertaken late in the day, and are often unsuccessful

3 **Consequences**

China and Russia develop strong military and technological alignment

They build up a coalition of authoritarian countries wedded to their positions

The EU, the US and partner states join forces to offset Sino-Russian military and technological overtures to third countries, and counter disinformation campaigns at home.

duo was becoming more efficient at blocking resolutions.

Certainly, not all countries were drawn to the Sino-Russian agenda. The primary targets of Sino-Russian coalition building efforts were the countries of the developing and emerging world. By 2030, a significant number of authoritarian governments (more than 70 in total) in Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Latin America were welcoming advice from Beijing and Moscow on how to shore up their grip on power. As well as being eager to be schooled in 'best practices' (launching disinformation campaigns, anticipating and controlling protest movements, etc.), many governments were particularly attracted by the sophistication of Chinese technologies, whether for civilian or military uses, as well as by their affordable cost.

Attempts by some European countries to restore ties with Moscow in an attempt to curb Sino-Russian *rapprochement* – often spurred by ambiguous signals sent by Russia to European leaders – had completely failed. Efforts to compete with the Sino-Russian coalition at the multilateral level were partly successful, through the coordinated lobbying of various diplomacies, including EU member states, the United States, Canada, Australia and Japan, but not deployed early enough to constrain the overall dynamic.

After a new, more realistic analysis of the Sino-Russian *rapprochement* and its global impact, EU Member States, the United States and partners decided to step up coordinated diplomatic activism at the UN. They also decided to join forces to counter Sino-Russian disinformation campaigns more effectively. Most of all, they reinforced the interoperability of their technological capabilities and mutual recognition of technical standards in order to provide more comprehensive and attractive telecommunications networks to third countries. This process did not lead to one type of network being replaced by another, but just to the development of two types of competitive and incompatible networks in parallel, in a context of prolonged Sino-American tech rivalry.

WHAT IF ... THE WESTERN BALKANS TURN AWAY FROM THE EU?

by
NAĎA KOVALČÍKOVÁ

2027

It was a regular Monday afternoon in Belgrade. Maša, a university student, was returning home humming the 'March of the Volunteers', the national anthem of the People's Republic of China. She could not remember how she had learned it, but she recalled her high school classmates, children of Chinese engineers working on 5G networks, singing it every morning in front of the school. Looking at the ubiquitous brightly coloured posters that adorned the billboards, showing three national leaders representing Serbia, Russia and China, she read aloud the one word displayed in three languages: Добродошли!, добро пожаловать!, 欢迎 [Welcome!]. 'What happened to our European dreams?', an old man sitting on a bench, a former journalist, asked her suddenly. Maša, her face covered by a protective mask made in China, turned and briefly looked at him confusedly without replying, then went on her way. The man continued reading the daily newspaper despite being sceptical of the information it contained due to recent changes in the ownership of the media outlet in which Russian investors had now acquired a controlling stake. For once more,

the paper lambasted the EU's failures and lack of commitment to the Western Balkans, and hailed a brighter future for the countries of the region with their Sino-Russian comrades. 'I should have started an independent newspaper when it was still possible', he sighed.

When Maša arrived home, her parents were listening to a report on the radio about deteriorating relations with Montenegro and North Macedonia. The two NATO, though still not EU, Member States were threatening to suspend practical cooperation with Serbia due to increasing regional discords, and Serbia's continued failure to align with NATO strategic priorities and EU restrictive measures related to Russia's and China's oppressive and divisive behaviour at home and abroad. Tensions with the northern territory of Kosovo* had also continued to destabilise the region since the licence plate dispute in the autumn of 2021. While it initially seemed that the de-escalation efforts by the EU and NATO and a revived dialogue between the Serbian and Kosovo* leaders would normalise the border situation and help stabilise matters, another pandemic hit the world. Moreover, China and Russia had made major inroads into the Western Balkans economically, technologically,

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*　This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244(1999) and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

and politically, causing further unexpected complications. The assumption that 'all Western Balkans countries had an EU accession perspective' [1] had begun to falter.

2022-2027

Just before the end of 2021, there was a political agreement on the new Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance adopted in September 2021, and two Western Balkans Summits (in July and October 2021) were held to demonstrate the EU's continued commitment to the region's European future. Yet, the appeal of EU accession started to wane in 2022 with signs of weakening commitment to the EU path. Russia and China managed to exploit signs of disillusionment with the EU. Even though Albania and Montenegro maintained full alignment with EU foreign, security and defence policy, and North Macedonia's alignment reached 96 % in 2021 [2], Serbia's alignment rate with statements made by the High Representative on behalf of the EU and Council Decisions was just slightly above half, 61 % in 2021 (largely unchanged from 2020). Serbia continued to deviate from EU foreign policy positions, such as not aligning with the EU Declarations on Hong Kong and with sanctions against Russia [3]. Moreover, a negative trend became discernible in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After a period of growing alignment with restrictive measures imposed against China, the Russian Federation, Syria and Venezuela since 2019, the country's rate of alignment sharply declined from 70 % to 43 % from 2020 to 2021 [4], and this trend continued. Later in
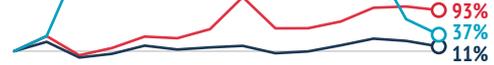
Trade with the EU, China and Russia

Change in total bilateral trade (imports + exports) of Western Balkan countries relative to 2007 baseline. 2007-2020, %-point change
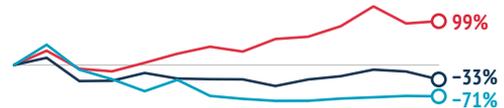
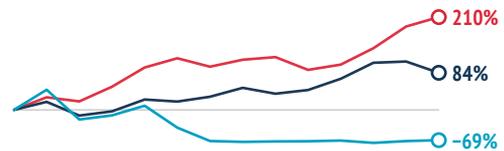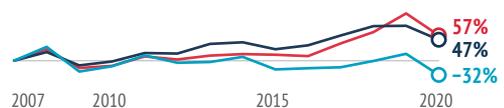Partner —○— China   —○— European Union   —○— Russia

Albania

94%
63%
−22%

Bosnia and Herzegovina

93%
37%
11%

Montenegro

99%
−33%
−71%

North Macedonia

210%
84%
−69%

Serbia

57%
47%
−32%

2007   2010   2015   2020

Data: IMF, 2021
No comparable data available for Kosovo*.

[1] European Commission, 'Western Balkans enlargement: common destination', 9 October 2017 (https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/western-balkans-enlargement_en.pdf).

[2] Although the country continued not to align on restrictive measures against Russia related to the situation in Ukraine.

[3] European Commission, 'Serbia 2021 Report', 19 October 2021 (https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/serbia-report-2021_en).

[4] Council of the European Union, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina 2021 Report', 20 October 2021 (https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13000-2021-INIT/en/pdf).

Foreign policy and security alignment with the EU

Western Balkan countries' alignment with EU common foreign and security policy
0 = not aligned, 100 = fully aligned

Prominent reasons for non-alignment with HR/VP declarations/EU
Council Decisions include restrictive measures introduced by the EU
following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and activities in
eastern Ukraine, and other EU restrictive measures targeting the
Russian Federation, China, Venezuela, Myanmar, Iran and Syria.

Bosnia and Herzegovina
67
43

Serbia
52
61

North Macedonia
83
96

Albania
100
100

Montenegro
100
100
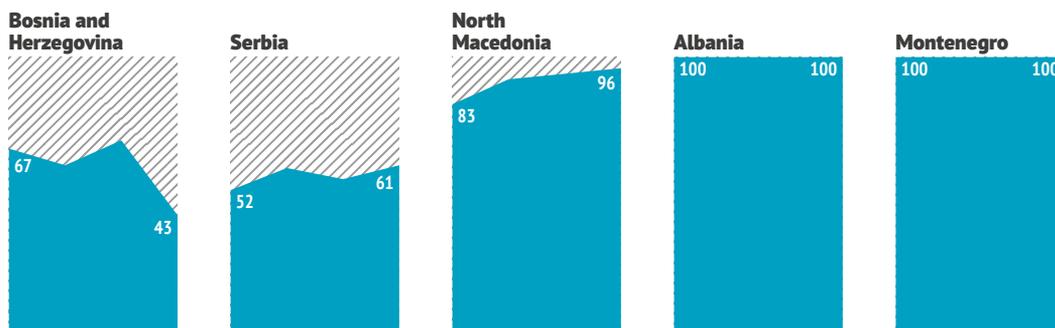
Data: Council of the European Union, 2018–2021
No data available for Kosovo*.

2022, bilateral relations in the region deteriorated when investigative journalists confirmed allegations of external influence during Serbia's parliamentary elections held in 2020, leading to a rise in nationalistic rhetoric driving wedges between Serbia, Kosovo* and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also between those countries and the EU.

The use of disruptive tactics in the Western Balkans through information manipulation and other means also became a serious concern in the Euro-Atlantic space [5]. One of the Kremlin-sponsored media outlets, Sputnik Srbija, amplified divisive narratives [6] exploiting ethnic and historical faultlines. While its messages reached wide audiences across the region, the hearts and minds of the citizens of the Western Balkans had been won over also by the strategically communicated technical assistance provided by China and Russia during the coronavirus crisis. Yet, China delivered only a portion of what was promised. For instance, by 2020, China had delivered only about €6.6 million out of €56 million pledged to Serbia since 2009 [7]. The EU, which actually delivered more aid to Serbia and other Western Balkan countries, failed to sufficiently publicise and promote its technical assistance and supporting activities and investments. This led to an information vacuum which was skilfully filled by Russia and China, both experienced in exploiting ambiguity, 'pro-Western' versus 'pro-Eastern' conflict narratives, and the socio-economic and political fragility of the region [8]. Moreover, civil society in the Western Balkans perceived that the EU did not sufficiently communicate, or engage Western

[5] EUvsDisinfo, 'New study maps roots causes of disinformation in the Western Balkans and ways to address them' 5 January 2021 (https://euvsdisinfo.eu/new-study-maps-root-causes-of-disinformation-in-the-western-balkans-and-ways-to-address-them/?highlight=balkan).

[6] Atlantic Council of Montenegro, 'Russia's narratives toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija', NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, April 2020 (https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russias-narratives-toward-the-western-balkans-analysis-of-sputnik-srbija/56).

[7] Kowalski, B., 'China's mask diplomacy in Europe: seeking foreign gratitude and domestic stability', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 8 April 2021 (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/18681026211007147).

[8] Hajdu, D., Klingová, K. and Sawiris, M., 'The GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index: Evaluating susceptibility to foreign malign influence in 8 Central European & Western Balkan countries', Country Reports, GLOBSEC, 15 November 2021 (https://www.globsec.org/publications/the-globsec-vulnerability-index-evaluating-susceptibility-to-foreign-malign-influence-in-8-central-european-western-balkan-countries/).

Balkans citizens adequately in deliberative processes and initiatives, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe [9], which led to a growing sense of discouragement that the EU did not seriously count on their input to build a common European future. Societal tensions intensified in the region at various levels. Kosovo* was not granted visa-free travel to the EU after fulfilling all visa liberalisation benchmarks, and the enlargement process for North Macedonia which had been put on ice in 2021 had stagnated since. Furthermore, China's 'vaccine diplomacy', for example with Serbia being the first European country to receive Chinese vaccines against Covid-19, further undermined the EU's image and strengthened China's credibility and influence in the region.

POST-2027

The world was in turmoil, with countries scrambling to address the spread of new variants of coronavirus. Russia and China pursued their strategic charm offensive in the Western Balkans, while stoking internal divisions between the countries of the region and in relation to the EU and NATO. They expanded their influence through investments in the regional health sector which had been hit by the 20th wave of the pandemic, built new highways, railways, power plants and bridges, funded new university programmes and established networks of cultural institutes. The Kremlin had deployed disinformation throughout the region through growing media capture. China had asserted its model of techno-autocratic governance through Chinese companies' involvement in the rollout of the next generation 5G networks throughout the Western Balkans. Serbia, a signatory to a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), enabled closer regional economic cooperation with other Western Balkans countries through the agreement. China announced plans to open its first humanitarian centre in the Western Balkans, similar to the Russian centre formally opened in the city of Niš in 2014, raising the EU's concerns about its potential dual use (civilian and military) [10]. Moreover, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina had continued to develop cooperation with China within the Digital Silk Road (DSR), a crucial component of China's 'Belt and Road Initiative', ignoring the privacy and security concerns of the EU and NATO partners in the hope of lucrative returns.

By 2027, the EU and NATO, alerted by the rising Sino-Russian presence and countries' lagging alignment with EU foreign policy positions, also noted growing disenchantment in the region *vis-à-vis* the European accession perspective. However, on the night of the Chinese New Year's Eve, 26 January 2028, an unprecedented event occurred with the breach of the private data of 2 million Western Balkans citizens dependent on Chinese 5G networks. The Western Balkans were not prepared for such a large-scale cyber intrusion. The EU recognised a window of opportunity to restore its credibility in the region and mitigate potentially harmful repercussions on some of its own systems. Even though by now the EU had facilitated the Western Balkans' deeper involvement in foreign, security and defence projects with flexible formats, it was its cyber defence readiness and rapid technical assistance [11] that allowed a swift and coordinated EU-NATO cyber defensive operation to be successful. This was also enhanced through implementation of tailored measures agreed in the third, and then more specifically in the fourth EU-NATO Joint-Declaration in 2025, addressing foreign authoritarian interference

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[9] Remarks made during a conference entitled '8th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum', Skopje, North Macedonia, 30 September 2021 (https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/8th-western-balkans-civil-society-forum/webstream).

[10] China also built on its experience with a military base in Tajikistan (where Russia and India had also already built military bases).

[11] Through one of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) cyber projects.

Timeline

1 Flawed assumption

Attitudes towards EU accession will remain positive in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans will fully align with the EU's foreign and security policy irrespective of Russia's and China's influence in the region

2 Policy based on assumption

The EU does not revise its approach to the accession of the Western Balkans countries

3 Consequences

Russia and China expand their influence in the Western Balkans

EU and NATO take measures to address Russia's and China's growing hybrid presence in the region

The countries of the Western Balkans become actively engaged in the EU's security and defence projects and in the Global Gateway strategy

investments in societal digital and media literacy, independent journalism, cybersecurity, as well as critical infrastructure. With the new European Strategy, the Global Gateway [12], the EU engaged the Western Balkans in all five investment priorities: digital, climate and energy, transport, education and research, and health. The EU integrated the youth, academia and civil society of the Western Balkans into EU policy initiatives from their early planning phases. These actions spoke louder than the messaging of Russian state-led newspapers, TV shows or social media posts. Views towards Russia and China became less favourable. The EU succeeded in projecting an image of Europe as a viable and democratic alternative that exerted strong appeal for the citizens of the Western Balkans. New slogans on blue and yellow billboards filled the streets: 'The EU is You.'

in the Western Balkans. Yet, EU officials in Brussels wondered how to mitigate further risks to the common European future given that Russia, China and other countries not subscribing to democratic values had already made extensive inroads in the region while the EU enlargement process stagnated.

The EU acknowledged an opportunity to pre-empt potential societal cleavages between 'the West' and the new EU members from the region, and in-between themselves, which had been exploited by malign actors in the past. The Union had progressively built a repertoire of affirmative narratives of unity reaching beyond national borders and across religious divides and countering the influence of autocratic regimes. The EU increased

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(12)   European Commission, 'The Global Gateway', Joint Communication JOIN(2021) 30 final, 1 December 2021 (https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/joint_communication_global_gateway.pdf).

WHAT IF … RUSSIAN GUNS IN TRANSNISTRIA ARE NO LONGER SILENT?

by
STANISLAV SECRIERU

2027

François, a seasoned war correspondent, was in a state of shock. He could not believe what he was seeing on TV in his small Parisian apartment. The Russian army had made a surprise incursion from the breakaway enclave of Transnistria into Moldovan-held territory on the right bank of the Nistru River. At the same time chaotic scenes were unfolding around government buildings in downtown Chisinau, the internet was down and cars full of fleeing civilians were heading to the border with Romania. Russian sources claimed that a night attack on a Russian peacekeeping post had triggered 'a limited operation to enforce peace'. They also reported that the leader of the *Our Home Moldova* party was marching with the protesters in Chisinau demanding the resignation of the government.

François vividly recalled his trip to Transnistria six years before. That year local team Sheriff Tiraspol had played in the groups of the Champions League and even managed to beat Real Madrid. Back then, football fans from Chisinau had poured *en masse* into Tiraspol stadium to see European football stars in action; few then imagined that a re-escalation of the conflict was possible. The only ominous note during his stay was sounded by Valery, a middle-aged local resident, who had given François directions to the popular restaurant *Kumaniok*. 'Unless we do what Russia wants, there will be a war here!' he had warned before disappearing into the night. François was stunned to hear a Russian speaker living in a Russian protectorate not praising Russia but voicing fear of its intentions. Equally astonishing was the use of the term 'war' to describe the future of the enclave where a truce had held for almost four decades.

He had dismissed Valery's words as hyperbole; now he realised that they had been prophetic. Previously François had concurred with Western diplomats that the chances of the conflict reigniting were minimal. Transnistria's case was regarded as sort of 'Cyprus of the East' where diplomatic efforts were not so much aimed at averting a new war as finding a peaceful resolution. But here he was, booking a ticket from Paris to Iasi, as Chisinau airport had been paralysed that morning by a massive cyberattack. Once in Iasi, François planned to drive to Moldova. He wanted to find out not only what was happening on the ground but also to understand why he had not seen this turn of events coming.

2022-2027

Russia's incursion from Transnistria into Moldovan-controlled territory had proved long-standing assumptions to be wrong.

The first assumption deemed the chances of reescalation to be low. It was based on three rationales. Moldova, with the smallest defence budget in Europe over the last decade [1], had neither the military muscle nor political will to reclaim the breakaway region by force. At the same time, shadowy elites in Tiraspol clustered around the local Sheriff business empire were content with the *status quo*, which allowed them to preserve limited autonomy and pursue personal enrichment. As far as Russia was concerned, it did not have a direct border with Transnistria, which made military resupply more complicated than in Donbas. It was believed that existing Russian forces in Transnistria might be useful for conducting sabotage operations in neighbouring Ukraine, but they were not numerous (around 2 000) or strong enough to open a new front in southern Ukraine or to lead a large-scale assault deeper into Moldova. Unless Russia carved out a land bridge through Odesa to get direct access to Transnistria or Chisinau launched an attack on the breakaway region, it was assumed that Moscow would not violate the military *status quo*.

The second assumption deemed the chances for deeper and wider cooperation between the two sides to be high. This optimism stemmed from the post-1992 war dynamics: the memories of war were distant, while the socio-economic links between both sides were closer than in any other conflict area in the region. As a result, Western efforts were channelled predominantly towards reinforcing existing ties between Chisinau and Tiraspol. This approach was codified in a policy of 'small steps', whereby contentious political issues were put aside and parties encouraged to focus

on solving everyday problems, which would improve people's lives and generate appetite for more cooperation.

These two assumptions kindled hope in some corners of Europe regarding the future of EU-Russia relations. Because of the perceived relative easiness with which it could be settled, the Transnistrian conflict was regarded as a future test case for Russia's willingness to work together with Europe to solve regional conflicts. It was felt that if cooperation was successful, then overall relations would be placed on a slightly more positive footing.
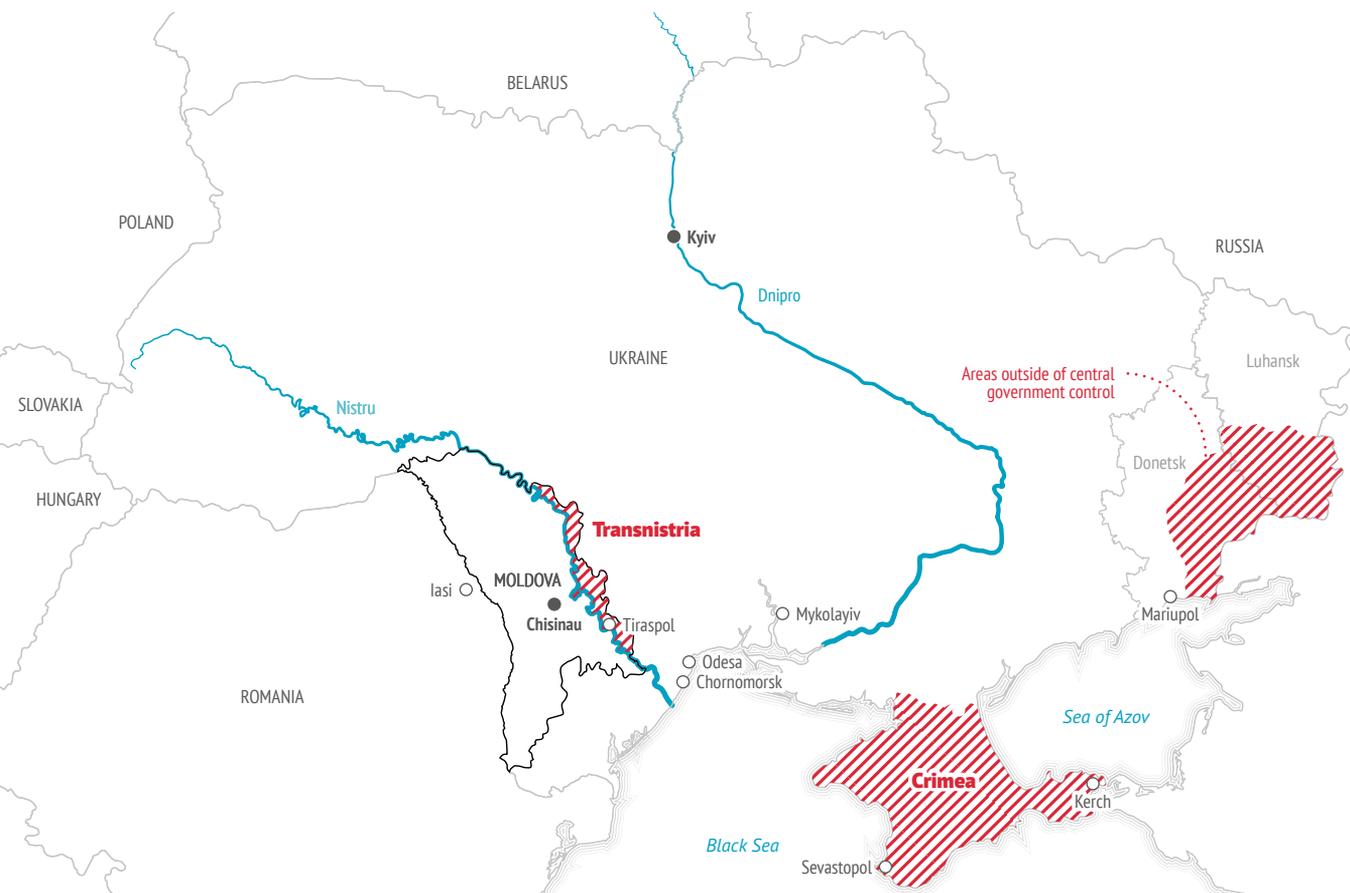
The underpinnings behind these assumptions had been changing gradually for quite a while. Since 2022 the speed of change had been increasing; Russia was the key driver of change. The confluence of three interrelated factors led Moscow to challenge the *status quo.*

The first of these was Russian military contingency planning and preparation for war with Ukraine. After a substantial military build-up along the Russian-Ukrainian border, the Russian military next considered pursuing similar actions in Belarus and the breakaway Moldovan region of Transnistria, two immediate neighbours who shared long chunks of land border with Ukraine. These had to create the premises for at least a plausible possibility of a multi-theatre attack, a strategy often favoured by Russian military commanders. Thus instead of being the final destination of a Russian military push along Ukraine's Black Sea coast, as was previously assumed, Transnistria was to become one of the launching pads for an attack, if and when Russia decided to launch an offensive.

The second factor was Russia's evolving military posture *vis-à-vis* NATO. Since the 2010s Russia had been investing in the re-militarisation of its Western District. This build-up was intended to signal to its former satellite states that NATO membership did not

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[1]   SIPRI, 'Military expenditure by country as percentage of gross domestic product (1988–2020)', 2021 (https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988%E2%80%932020%20as%20a%20share%20of%20GDP%20%28pdf%29.pdf).

Moldova and its regional setting

make them safer but instead rendered them more vulnerable. In the 2020s Russia stayed the course, intending to bolster its forward military presence in the protectorates on its western flank: Belarus and Transnistria. In the case of the latter, Russia was keen to modernise and strengthen its monitoring and projection capabilities only 150 km away from Romania, the host of NATO's missile shield and the alliance's Multinational Divisional Headquarters Southeast.

The third factor concerned the use of Transnistria as a lever to influence Moldova's domestic politics. In the past Russia had threatened to permanently amputate the breakaway region from the country. Despite threats and numerous military exercises in the region, the Kremlin did not seek to re-escalate the conflict. However, when in the 2020s the political tide began to turn under a reformist government in Chisinau, Russia became anxious that Moldova might slip away from its control. After failing to derail Moldova's European trajectory via energy blackmail and covert destabilisation, Moscow ultimately decided to resort to conventional military force.

Europe's failure to test its assumptions and at least to consider and plan for Russia pursuing an alternative course of action in Moldova resulted in generous but somewhat one-sided assistance, ill-judged decisions, and left the EU exposed to unexpected geopolitical developments.

Europe enthusiastically threw its weight behind Moldova's pro-reformist government: supporting economic recovery and improving the country's energy security. However, the EU was more cautious about responding to calls from Chisinau to help the government beef up its national security institutions and their capabilities. Funds from the European Peace Facility went to third order soft security issues rather than towards closing gaps in domains critical for Moldova's national security. Thus, the EU's assistance helped to spur reforms and economic development, but did not address Moldova's acute hard security vulnerabilities, which Russia did not hesitate to exploit.

Europe also reduced its footprint on the border between Ukraine and Moldova, including the Transnistrian segment. Although the EU extended EUBAM's mandate, it cut its budget, which led to closure of field offices and a suboptimal presence of the EU in the vicinity of the conflict area. In this way, Europe undermined its capacity to maintain comprehensive situational awareness and to react pre-emptively at the first signs of attempts to raise tensions. By reducing its foothold, the EU unintentionally sent the wrong signal to Moscow too; the smaller the international presence, the greater Russia's room for manoeuvre in the region.

Europe insisted on confidence-building measures between the conflict parties as Russia orchestrated the replacement of local elites in Transnistria with security operatives from Moscow. Following this, Tiraspol's policy towards Moldova hardened: it sought to reduce links with the right bank and increased the number of checkpoints along the *de facto* border. While the EU called for closer engagement between Chisinau and Tiraspol as a way to preserve past achievements, the new separatist leadership was getting ready to receive military reinforcements from Russia.

Last but not least, Europe had not anticipated that Russia might overcome Ukraine's

outdated air defence systems with modern means of electronic warfare and thus open an air corridor to Transnistria. As a result, Russian heavy transport planes got access to Tiraspol airport, and flew in more troops and military equipment. Europe's piecemeal assistance to Ukraine's security sector left Russia with opportunities to consolidate its regional military posture.

In retrospect, Europe had not fully grasped the extent of the changes initiated by Russia in the region since 2014 and had been slow to question its old assumptions about what was (im)possible.

POST-2027

A mix of military force and active measures undertaken by Russia was about to undo, in one stroke, many of the hard-won reform achievements in Moldova. Moreover, re-escalation imperilled Moldova's sovereignty and exposed Ukraine and the EU to greater security risks. Moldovan officials denounced the attack on peacekeepers as a provocation; they tried to stabilise the situation in Chisinau and appealed to Europe to intervene to halt Russia's aggression. Ukraine reinforced its defences in its south and along the Black Sea coast. Russia moved its fleet closer to the southern coast of Ukraine to deter a possible counter-move by Kyiv in Transnistria. Another 'perfect storm' was brewing in the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

Europe strove to contain the crisis; but because it acted *post-factum,* its actions entailed a higher political and economic cost. In the short term, it scrambled to stop Russian advances deeper into Moldova and to avert a clash between Russia and Ukraine. EU leaders agreed to deploy CERT [2] teams to help restore airport operations in Chisinau and to send in a rapid intervention force on territory controlled

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[2]   Computer Emergency Response Teams.

Timeline

1 Flawed assumption

Russia is unlikely to challenge the *status quo* by military means

Prospects for increased sectoral cooperation between Chisinau and Tiraspol are favourable

2 Policy based on assumption

EU scales up financial support for Moldova, but is cautious on assistance for national defence

EUBAM budget cut, number of field offices reduced

EU supports confidence-building measures between Chisinau and Tiraspol but fails to prepare for contingencies

3 Consequences

After Russia's military incursion, EU steps in to stabilise the situation in Moldova

Change of emphasis from settling to freezing the conflict in Transnistria

EU expands EUBAM, upgrades its mandate and bolsters Moldova's capacity for self-defence

and Transnistria. To enhance Moldova's defence capabilities, the EU prepared to finance a capacity-building programme for the security sector, and in partnership with NATO worked to assist Ukraine in safeguarding its air and maritime security.

by the Moldovan authorities. Europe also imposed a new set of sanctions against Russia and provided assistance to Romania to deal with an influx of refugees. EU member states dispatched a navy squadron to Ukraine's ports on the Black Sea.

In the mid to long term, Russia's escalation tactics were a game changer for the EU's posture towards the Transnistrian conflict: the main challenge now was how to effectively freeze it rather than actually settle it. As calm had been restored in Chisinau and Russia wound down its military operation in response to a mix of diplomatic, military and economic pressure, the EU made its next moves. It upgraded the mandate of the EUBAM mission, which in addition to monitoring the border between Moldova and Ukraine would now monitor the administrative line between Moldova

This *Chaillot Paper* focuses on untested and unverified assumptions about the future, and how these impact on foresight. Such assumptions are often formulated in the absence of concrete evidence to support them and, rather like blind spots, can distort our perceptions and lead policymakers to commit strategic blunders.

Many such assumptions suffer from an inbuilt bias: they take it for granted that the future will be a lot like yesterday and today. But the future is not a replication of the past, and history rarely repeats itself.

The scenarios presented in this volume all hinge on the absence of a development that was expected to materialise because it was based on assumptions. The scenarios therefore serve as assumptions checks: they articulate assumptions that underpin European policies, test them against reality – and perhaps most importantly, show their cost should they turn out to be untrue. Together, these scenarios help not only focus the spotlight on assumptions worth reviewing, but also highlight the dangers of relying too heavily on them.

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