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2020- A Pivotal Year for the Future of Europe:

Implications for Regional Stability in the European Neighbourhood and the European Security and Defence Cooperation in a Stronger Trans-Atlantic Framework

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2020 will be remembered as a pivotal year for the future of Europe for at least three key reasons:

- 1) **The COVID-19 global pandemics resulted in the acceleration of the ongoing geopolitical transition to a new multipolar international order.**
- 2) **This year would most likely flag the end of “Trump-ism”/ “Twitter diplomacy” in US foreign and security policy, in the wake of the recent victory of Joe Biden at the latest US presidential elections.**
- 3) **Ineffective OSCE-based conflict management in Nagorno-Karabakh was replaced by *de facto* Russia-Turkey balance of power, drawing another alarm signal regarding the uncertain future of the Wider Black Sea security.**

1) The COVID-19 Pandemics

For the European Union (EU), the Coronavirus crisis has been first and foremost an existential matter. In the words of Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy: *“We find ourselves living through an existential moment in time for the EU – because how we respond will affect the cohesion of our societies, the stability of our national political systems, and the future of European integration.”*(ecfr.eu)

At the E.U. level, one possible future might be built around the emerging concept of “strategic autonomy” being expanded beyond the military sphere, to possibly include: reducing dependency and extending regulatory powers in the field of new technologies; preserving control of strategic activities; protecting critical infrastructure; showing leadership where the lack of global governance is destroying multilateralism (i.e. joining issue-specific middle-powers alliances). (ecfr.eu)

Another E.U. strategic priority would envisage the **restoring of global governance** which is viewed in the EU-zone on two dimensions:

1. **The internal dimension concerns the limits of European solidarity and the looming deepening of the North-South divide.** In an interview with the Financial Times, president Macron warned that the failure to support the

Southern members might help populists to win elections in Italy, Spain, and France.

2. **The external dimension envisages E.U.'s role in managing the growing US-China rivalry in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis.** However, while the ability of the E.U. members and institutions to broker political or economic compromises between Washington and Beijing would be quite limited, the global role of the E.U. and its interests in various regions around the world might be at stake due to the fall-outs from unmanaged US-China confrontation.

Nevertheless, the E.U.'s vulnerability to the U.S.- China rivalry would be higher in the European neighbourhoods, where the current flashpoints also involved third party regional players, such as Russia, Iran, Israel, Turkey, or the Gulf monarchies. This would make the geopolitical context of restoring the external dimension of the global governance more complex, while it might offer the E.U. with more opportunities to mitigate its vulnerability to the US-China rivalry. The main challenge for the E.U. will consist in how to play out those options in its favour without endangering the long-standing Trans-Atlantic relationship.

2) **The prospective end of “Trump-ism in US foreign and security policy”**

US president Donald Trump's international practice has apparently been built upon a number of tenets (so-called “Trumpism in US foreign and security policy) with a direct disruptive impact on European power and influence at the global and regional levels:

- o the US global leadership promoted by his predecessors was not cost-effective for America;
- o the system of alliances and partnerships just burdened the American budget and failed to provide the same strategic, economic, and geopolitical output they used to throughout the second half of the 20th century;
- o multilateralism and international organizations and agreements uselessly constrained American power, and implicitly its freedom to exert it at the global and regional levels;
- o issue-oriented ad-hoc, temporary arrangements were more profitable in meeting US national interests;
- o there were a number of states, including allies and partners, such as Germany, Canada, Mexico, Japan, Australia, but also adversaries, like China and Russia, who took unfair advantage of American benign hegemony in the post-Cold War era, and they should be powerfully pushed back.

In the aftermath of Joe Biden's victory in the latest US presidential elections all those tenets of Trumpism are expected to be reversed or largely altered. However, experts are warning that the **Biden administration would neither be able to do away with all of the unwanted fall-out left behind by president Trump's external performance over the past four years, nor would it be able to resume the tenets of former Barack Obama's foreign and security policy.** However, what he would most likely be willing to do is: *“to salvage our [US] reputation, rebuild confidence in our*

leadership, and mobilize our country and our allies to rapidly meet new challenges.” (J. Biden in <https://foreignaffairs.com>).

3) The replacement of ineffective OSCE-based conflict management in Nagorno-Karabakh by de facto Russia-Turkey balance of power.

As we concluded in the Foreword of the recent EGF Nagorno-Karabakh Research Digest: *“in September 2020, the NK peace process was dangerously deadlocked, and its current state of play could result in a return to large scale warfighting. Not only the credibility and the effectiveness of the Co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group were increasingly questioned by the Azerbaijanis, but the basic framework of the solution to the conflict [also known as the Madrid/Basic Principles, which were the bedrock of conflict resolution so far] promoted by them over the last 13 years was deemed as the main cause of the current deadlock in negotiations by the Armenians”* (<http://gpf-europe.com>).

The 2020 six-weeks war over Nagorno-Karabakh, whereby the OSCE multilateralism has been replaced by de facto Russian-Turkish conflict management, could have major geopolitical implications for the South Caucasus. While several joint calls by the presidents of the U.S., Russia, and France (as OSCE Minsk Group Co-chairs) on Armenia and Azerbaijan to cease the fighting have been completely ignored by all belligerents, the key driver of the current geopolitical upheaval in the South Caucasus has been president R.T. Erdogan of Turkey. In the wake of the new outbreak of war, his public calls for a full Armenian withdrawal from Azerbaijani territory, while asking Azerbaijan to take the matters in their hands, and condemning what he said were nearly three decades of failure by major powers to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute have dramatically shifted the pattern of the Azerbaijani foreign and security policy and the Armenian narrative on the conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan.

Eventually, presidents V. Putin of Russia and R.T. Erdogan of Turkey would have agreed during a private phone conversation on the content of a joint statement that has been signed on November 10th 2020 by Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian leaders providing for a ceasefire and a set of guidelines for a peace deal. The statement also included the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh, the return to Azerbaijan of a couple of districts (Lachin and Kelbajar) still under Armenian control, the return of all IDP's and refugees to their homes, unblocking all economic and transport links, and the establishing of two symmetrical safety corridors allowing the free flow of goods and people between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, respectively.

Consequently, it appeared that peace in Nagorno-Karabakh was rather hanging on the broader balance of power between Russia and Turkey than on the ineffective multilateralism practised for the last 28 years by the OSCE Minsk Group. As such, the South Caucasus region is increasingly moving away from the European Eastern Neighbourhood, while risking being dragged into the wider Middle Eastern cauldron. What are the consequences for Georgia and its European and Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations?

What did those changes mean for the prospects of regional stability in the European Neighbourhoods, and of the European security and defence cooperation in a stronger Trans-Atlantic framework?

Over the past years, the global and European contexts have changed beyond recognition:

✓ The return to Great Powers' competition has increasingly placed the US and Europe on opposite positions. On the one hand, Washington is seeing revisionist China and Russia as the most important challengers of US power and influence in the world. On the other hand, some Western Europeans are seeing room for a Bismarck-inspired strategy for the EU as a Great Power that maintains good relations with all the other Great Powers.

✓ BREXIT, and Russia's and Turkey's return to regional power status have seriously questioned the viability of the E.U. integration project both internally and its role-model in spreading democracy, stability and prosperity to the European Neighbourhoods.

✓ In an EGF study of April 2013, authors have noted the rise of "old powers", Russia and Turkey, in the Wider Black Sea, while arguing that prominent "external actors", such as the US and the EU, were seeing their roles increasingly reduced to mere monitors of the situation. Since then, Russia and Turkey have expanded their regional reach from the Wider Black Sea towards the Middle East and Northern Africa having set military strongholds in Syria, and more recently growing their political and military involvement in Libya. They have done so at the expense of the E.U. and the European states who had just been helplessly watching president Trump's bilateral deals with presidents Erdogan and Putin in Syria.

✓ President Trump's destructive approach to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) aimed to control the ability to use nuclear power by Iran, the most brilliant achievement of EU diplomacy over the last decade, has been another blow to EU's political influence.

These numerous setbacks have highlighted and reinforced the political and military weaknesses of the EU leading into its serious narrowing influence in areas from Central Asia to Eastern Europe, and from the Middle East to Northern Africa. They have left the EU struggling with geopolitical risks and threats, such as:

✓ growing irrelevance in conflict management and resolution in places like Ukraine/Crimea, South Caucasus, Syria, Libya, Yemen;

✓ decreasing power and influence to spread and protect the European values and interests in place like Belarus, Moldova, the Western Balkans, as well as in the MENA region, in spite of having spent many billions of Euros on its external assistance programs;

✓ while being targeted by huge waves of Asian and African immigrants,

✓ and being widely exposed to terrorist, cyber, and hybrid threats.

✓ European energy security has also been exposed to serious risks due to great powers' (US, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey) rivalries and geopolitical games and the fragility of governance and of statehood in some energy source and transit countries.

Conclusions

Given the ill-preparedness of the EU to cope with an era of Great Powers' competition many European politicians, including French president Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, have argued in favour of the "European strategic autonomy".

In a post-Trumpian European security context, the E.U. will still need to transform the European security and defence cooperation into a defensive tool fully consistent with, and adjustable to, NATO's defensive postures towards both its Eastern and Southern flanks.

In June 2016, the EU Global Strategy suggested that Europeans must be able to protect Europe, respond to external crises, and assist in developing partners' security and defence capacities. It also referred to European security and defence efforts which should enable the EU to act autonomously, while also contributing to, and undertaking actions in, cooperation with NATO. Concrete actions to achieve these goals included:

- launching a coordinated annual review on defence (CARD) to enhance defence cooperation between member states
- establishing a permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) to strengthen defence cooperation among those member states willing to go further in this cooperation
- setting up a military planning and conduct capability (MPCC) to improve crisis management structures
- strengthening the EU's rapid response toolbox, including the EU battlegroups and civilian capabilities

Europe must therefore undertake the heavy-lifting for ensuring its own security by developing the capability of the European security and defence cooperation to gradually share NATO's whole range of tasks and missions. This is an ongoing process that it is likely to spread over the following years pending the political will of the EU governments to further develop the European defence and security cooperation, the perceived levels and typology of threats against European security, and the necessary re-balancing of burden sharing within NATO.

In the words of Rosa Balfour in "Europe's High Expectations for a U.S. President Joe Biden": *"Lazy Trans-Atlanticism in Europe has been an impediment to taking on more global responsibilities. Foreign and security policy circles and the think tank community in Europe have long enjoyed discussing the EU's international role. When the abstract debate turns to politics, it gets stuck over whether more Europe means less Trans-Atlanticism—or vice versa. There is, of course, no either-or; just a need for a more meaningful dialogue. And in these past four years, the EU has still done too little to match its ambition for "strategic autonomy" compatibly with the partnership with NATO."* (<https://carnegieeurope.eu>)

This would also include the EU's need to play a leading role in finding and implementing viable solutions to the protracted conflicts in the European Neighbourhoods (like, for example, Germany has facilitated in Libya).

On the one hand, the relevant knowledge of EU institutions about the protracted conflicts in Ukraine, the South Caucasus and in Transnistria should be enhanced, and a more creative thinking on the use of available instruments should be developed. On the other hand, the European External Action Service should be more involved in building up common positions of EU member states against the resolution of protracted conflicts.

One may hardly talk of a genuine CFSP in the Eastern Neighbourhood in the absence of a more assertive role of the EU in solving protracted conflicts in its neighbourhood. Cooperation with other interested actors, such as the US, Russia, and Turkey is critical. The EU can tackle these conflicts more effectively, both in the post-conflict, and in the peace building phases.

As D. Sammut has recently put it in "The EU must get involved in the Karabakh situation - visibly, comprehensively and urgently": *"The path for peaceful diplomacy - at all levels and in all its forms, from the formal negotiating process at the track 1 level, to track 2 initiatives involving the wider society - should follow four stages. It must reconnect, reassess, reconfigure and reconstruct. [...] In all this the European Union needs to be centre stage, not relegated to the status of observer. The South Caucasus is a region of strategic importance to the EU and doing nothing will be tantamount to abandoning the region to other, perhaps not so benign players. Every space that the EU does not fill, others will."* (<https://commonsense.eu>)