Center for Security Studies

STRATEGIC TRENDS 2021

Key Developments in Global Affairs

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Acknowledgments

Strategic Trends is an annual publication of the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich. It offers concise analyses of major developments in world affairs, with a focus on international security. Providing incisive interpretations of key trends, rather than a comprehensive survey of pertinent events, *Strategic Trends* is targeted at a broad audience, ranging from policymakers to academics, the media, and the general public.

Strategic Trends 2021 is the 12th issue in the series. The entire publication series is available for download at the website of the Center for Security Studies (www.css.ethz.ch/publikationen/strategic-trends.html).

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We hope you will enjoy reading *Strategic Trends 2021*. Should you have any feedback, please do not hesitate to contact us at brian.carlson@sipo.gess.ethz.ch and oliver.thraenert@sipo.gess.ethz.ch.

With warm regards from Zurich,

Brian G. Carlson
Team Head, Global Security

Oliver Thränert
Head of Think Tank

New Power Configurations and Regional Security

As 2021 unfolds, major trends in world politics are leading to rapid changes in the international order. These trends have been under way for some time now, but the coronavirus pandemic has accelerated them. Great-power competition is resurgent, and dangerous crises threaten to erupt in regions around the world, perhaps simultaneously. As the preparation of this volume was entering its final stages, US President Joe Biden's administration faced both a Chinese pressure campaign against Taiwan and a Russian buildup of forces along Ukraine's eastern border. Such developments reflect new power configurations and their effects on regional security, which are the theme of this volume.

Several trends are leading to the emerging power configurations. One of the main trends, with direct implications for all of the others, is growing uncertainty about US leadership in the world. Former US President Donald Trump's "America First" approach was a source of concern for US allies around the world, many of which were likely relieved to see Biden's election as president. Many US allies welcome Biden's diplomatic outreach to allies and his support for multilateralism. However, acute US domestic concerns, including pandemic recovery and political polarization, could constrain US ability to exert international leadership. Moreover, some observers question whether Biden's vision of international leadership is realistic. In particular, they doubt whether the United States has the capacity to engage in great-power competition with both China and Russia simultaneously, especially in conjunction with harsh criticism of these countries' domestic governance and human rights records.

China and Russia both appear to calculate that they have gained additional room to challenge the United States and its allies and partners in their own regions. The pursuit of regional spheres of influence by both countries is a growing source of great-power competition with the United States. China is pursuing an

increasingly assertive foreign policy under President Xi Jinping's leadership, emboldened by its rise to global power but perhaps also motivated by some anxiety about declining economic growth rates, ongoing domestic problems, and growing international wariness about its ambitions. The coronavirus pandemic, from which China recovered quickly while countries around the world continued to suffer its ravages, appeared to give China an opportunity to act with increasing assertiveness along its periphery. China pressed its claims on issues such as the East China Sea, the South China Sea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and its border with India. China's growing ambitions, coupled with rising uncertainty about US leadership, place stress upon US allies in Asia, including Japan and South Korea.

Meanwhile, Russia's determination to assert its interests along its western periphery creates continued security challenges in Europe. Like China, Russia may perceive a window of opportunity to act, given that the Biden administration has not settled in yet and European countries are struggling with the aftermath of the pandemic. China and Russia pose individual challenges to the West, and their increasingly close relationship adds an additional concern for Western policymakers.

Concerns about the future of US leadership are a major issue for European policymakers. Such concerns led French President Emmanuel Macron, who warned of NATO's "brain death," to call for European strategic autonomy. His proposal has failed to gain traction thus far, but the question of how much Europe can rely on the United States for its security, especially in light of growing US concerns about China, is an issue that will not go away soon. European leaders must also address the consequences of Britain's departure from the EU, a development that will force significant adjustments not only in domestic policy, but also in foreign and defense policies.

In the Middle East, too, questions about US leadership loom over regional developments. The US desire to scale back its involvement in the region has opened space for other actors to become involved. Russia, through its intervention in the Syrian civil war in support of the Assad regime, has reasserted its role as an important external power in the Middle East. Turkey has also flexed its muscles in the region, intervening in both the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, while also asserting its interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and supporting Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. In the course of these interventions, Turkey has engaged in careful diplomatic outreach to Russia in order to manage

the two countries' competing interests. Meanwhile, China is also becoming increasingly active in the Middle East. Its engagement has focused on energy and infrastructure investment, especially within the framework of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its security presence in the region remains limited, but this could change over time.

These strategic trends, as well as the new power configurations that they are producing and the resulting effects on security in important regions, are the subject of the chapters in this volume. In the first chapter, **Brian G. Carlson** explores the impact of the China-Russia relationship on transatlantic security. He argues that the main impact comes from the simultaneous pressure that Russia and China are applying on the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia, respectively. As China's rise continues, US defense policy will increasingly focus on Asia, heightening the urgency for Europe to bear an increased share of the burden for its own security.

In the second chapter, **Julian Kamasa** assesses the potential for security cooperation among France, Germany, and Britain in the E3 and other formats following Brexit. He argues that such trilateral cooperation could prove useful in addressing a range of security issues, especially when the EU is slow to act.

In the third chapter, **Niklas Masuhr** analyzes Turkey's recent military interventions, arguing that they are the result of domestic political changes, the evolution of Turkey's foreign policy thinking, and advances in the country's military capabilities, especially drones. He notes the limited success of these interventions and their reliance on Russia's acquiescence in them.

In the fourth chapter, **Lisa Watanabe** describes how the US retreat from the Middle East has allowed other powers, especially Russia and China, to strengthen their involvement in the region. This trend contributes to regional instability, she argues, and could increase the EU's difficulty in achieving its regional objectives.

In the fifth and final chapter, **Linda Maduz** analyzes the responses by Japan and South Korea to China's rise and to concerns about continued US engagement in Asia. The growing US-China rivalry poses challenges for both countries, but both of these middle powers have some room to affect regional outcomes through their own initiatives.

CHAPTER 1

China-Russia Relations and Transatlantic Security

Brian G. Carlson

The China-Russia relationship is an increasingly important factor in transatlantic security. Russia and China pose security challenges to the Euro-Atlantic region in distinct and mostly uncoordinated ways, but their partnership allows both countries to pursue spheres of influence close to home. The United States and its allies will therefore face growing security challenges in both the Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions. The rise of China will force the United States to devote increased attention and military assets to Asia, underscoring the need for a strengthened European pillar in NATO.

Russian President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping during the BRICS Summit in Brasilia, Brazil, November 13, 2019. *Sputnik / Ramil Sitdikov / Kremlin via REUTERS*

Relations between China and Russia have grown increasingly close in recent years, a trend that will have important implications for transatlantic security. The China-Russia relationship features growing cooperation in both diplomatic and security affairs. The two countries often align their diplomacy, jointly rejecting international criticism of their domestic governance, standing in opposition to conceptions of an international order based on liberal political values, and forging common positions on a variety of international issues, including in the UN Security Council. The strengthening of political and diplomatic relations, in turn, has enabled China and Russia to increase their bilateral defense cooperation. This includes Russian sales of advanced weapons to China and joint military and naval exercises of increasing frequency, intensity, and geographical scope, including joint naval exercises within the past few years in the Mediterranean and Baltic seas.

As China and Russia draw closer together, the impact on transatlantic security stems not primarily from the two countries' direct military cooperation or contemplation of joint military operations in the Euro-Atlantic region, but rather from the broader effects of their rapprochement. The China-Russia "strategic partnership" creates a geopolitical environment that complicates US grand strategy, with important consequences for Europe and the transatlantic partnership. Comity between China and Russia ensures that both countries enjoy a secure strategic rear, freeing each of them from the fear that the other would abandon it and join its adversaries, especially in a crisis.

The reassurance that both countries gain from this understanding affords both of them some additional room for maneuver in their own regions, where they are establishing spheres of influence.[1] They pursue this goal through the tactic of "probing," which entails limited, calculated provocations designed to test the commitment of the United States to its allies and partners.[2] China and Russia frequently disavow any intention to form a political-military alliance. In many cases, parallel rather than coordinated actions by the two countries impinge on Western interests. Coordinated China-Russia efforts in Europe remain limited, but the two countries act individually in ways that pose challenges to regional security.

Both China and Russia are strengthening their military capabilities, applying pressure on the United States and its allies in the Asia-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions, respectively. This places increased strain on the

United States, stretching its resources and complicating the task of fulfilling its security commitments. According to several recent studies, the United States would face severe challenges in winning a war against either country under certain scenarios, including a war against Russia over the Baltics or a war against China over Taiwan. The ultimate risk would be simultaneous or sequential moves by the two countries in their respective regions that could thrust the United States into great-power war on two fronts. China's growing power will force the United States to devote increased attention, resources, and military assets to the Asia-Pacific or broader Indo-Pacific region. Meanwhile, in the absence of a rapprochement between Russia and the West, which appears unlikely in the near term, security challenges in Europe will also remain pressing.

Under these geopolitical circumstances, the United States is likely to face a period of sustained great-power competition. US President Joe Biden's administration appears to favor a dual-track approach of seeking cooperation with both China and Russia on issues of common interest while also attempting to counter threats and resist aggression. In order to pursue this strategy successfully, the United States must rely heavily on its network of alliances, including the transatlantic partnership. Europe could make a valuable contribution to this effort by increasing defense spending and assuming a greater share of the burden for European security within the framework of NATO.

China-Russia Relations and the West

The West has been an important factor in the strengthening of China-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War. The convergence of national identities between China and Russia, based largely on opposition to US power and to conceptions of a liberal international order, which both countries viewed as Western-centric, was an important driver of the relationship.[3] Both China and Russia resented the preponderance of power that the United States enjoyed, criticized US "hegemonism," and actively encouraged the formation of a multipolar world to replace the unipolar order that emerged after the end of the Cold War. They denounced criticism of their human rights records by Western leaders, whom they accused of interfering in their domestic affairs with the goal of promoting political change. As tensions grew in their respective relations with the West, China and Russia drew closer to each other. They viewed their bilateral relationship as a means of gaining increased leverage in disputes with the West.

These trends became especially pronounced in the past decade. At a time when several of China's neighbors were becoming increasingly wary of its growing power and seeking increased support from the United States, Russia defied the expectations of many analysts by drawing ever closer to China, despite the growing power imbalance in China's favor and the potential vulnerability of Russia's eastern regions. Russia set aside long-term concerns about China's rise, calculating that its main challenges for the foreseeable future lay in its troubled relations with the West, especially following the onset of the Ukraine crisis. In particular, President Vladimir Putin viewed the West as a potential threat to his domestic governance. For Russia, China's rise had the possible benefit of diverting US attention to Asia. For China, which embarked on an increasingly assertive course in foreign policy under President Xi Jinping's leadership, Russia's disputes with the West also served as potential distractions for the United States. Both China and Russia recognized that the network of US alliances, including the transatlantic partnership, gave the United States a crucial advantage. They accordingly sought to disrupt these alliances. In Europe, Russia began these efforts at an early stage, but China has become increasingly active on this front in recent years.

Relations with the West are not the only driver of the China-Russia relationship, however. Some aspects, including energy ties, are largely a function of the bilateral relationship itself.[4] More broadly, Russia has important reasons to maintain strong relations with China regardless of the state of its relations with the West. Historical memory of the Sino-Soviet split during the Cold War serves as a reminder for Russia of the price that it could pay for estrangement from China. At that time, the Soviet Union was the stronger of the two countries. Now, with the balance of power in the bilateral relationship tilting rapidly in China's favor, the risks for Russia would be even greater. Given the vulnerability of Russia's underpopulated, underdeveloped regions of Siberia and the Russian Far East, Russia can ill afford a rupture of its relationship with China. For its part, China views Russia as not only a partner in resisting the West, but also as a provider of energy and advanced weapons as well as a friendly neighbor, an important consideration at a time when China faces tensions with several other countries along its periphery.

Despite the increasingly close relationship between China and Russia, their partnership has exerted only a limited direct impact on the West. To date, their cooperative efforts have failed to

yield significant leverage over the West in terms of halting or reversing particular foreign policy decisions by the United States or Europe.[5] The setbacks that the United States and Europe have suffered in recent years are largely the result of domestic political, social, and economic factors in Western societies themselves.[6] China and Russia largely failed to take advantage of transatlantic tensions during Donald Trump's presidency, instead alienating many European countries through their human rights abuses at home and their increasingly assertive behavior abroad, including their efforts to gain influence in European countries.[7]

In Russia's case, the poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in August 2020 exacerbated tensions with the West. After falling ill on a domestic flight in Russia, Navalny was flown to Germany for treatment, where his diagnosis showed poisoning with Novichok, a nerve agent originally developed by the Soviet Union. Following his recovery, Navalny returned to Russia in January to resume his challenge to the government. The Russian authorities immediately imprisoned him, but his supporters held large anti-government protests in several Russian cities. Both the United States and the EU imposed sanctions on Russia in response. The attack on Navalny also prompted calls for Germany to cancel Nord Stream 2, a pipeline that is set to deliver natural gas from Russia to Germany through the Baltic Sea. The German government resisted these calls, however, and by early 2021 the project was nearing completion despite the threat of US sanctions against participating German companies.

As for China, the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic led to a deterioration of relations with the West. In both the United States and Europe, the pandemic caused high death tolls and extensive economic damage. The US-China relationship, which already exhibited signs of an impending superpower rivalry, grew worse amid the pandemic, as US officials and the public blamed China for covering up and failing to contain the outbreak. When the pandemic first reached Europe, China saw an opportunity to increase its influence in several European countries by providing medical supplies and other assistance. Some of the Chinese equipment turned out to be defective, however. This failure, combined with China's heavy-handed efforts to shift blame for the outbreak and to claim credit for its response, turned public opinion in many European countries against China and raised concerns about the consequences of growing dependence on an increasingly powerful authoritarian country. This tendency had

its limits, however, as the European Union concluded negotiations with China on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) in December 2020, despite the incoming Biden administration's expressed desire to consult with the EU first.

The pandemic also created challenges for the China-Russia relationship. Russia closed its border with China in the early days of the pandemic, but China later turned the tables by closing the border itself following a sharp rise in cases in Russia, a decision that left many Chinese citizens temporarily stranded on the other side. The two countries handled these and other pandemic-related challenges relatively smoothly, but other issues caused tension in 2020. When the Russian Embassy in China commemorated the 160th anniversary of the founding of Vladivostok, the city in the Russian Far East, Chinese Internet users responded angrily, noting that the city, formerly called Haishenwai, was part of the Qing dynasty's Manchurian territory prior to Russia's imperial conquest of the region. The China-Russia border is settled as a matter of law, but indications that segments of Chinese public opinion reject the status quo could become a concern for Russia over the long term. Russian prosecutors charged a Russian scientist specializing in Arctic research with allegedly passing classified information to China. The standoff between Chinese and Indian forces in the two countries' Himalayan border region, which resulted in a skirmish that killed 20 Indian soldiers and an undeclared number of Chinese troops, created an awkward situation for Russia, which attempts to maintain friendly relations with both countries.[8]

Despite these tensions, the China-Russia relationship appeared to remain strong. In October, Putin responded to a question about the possibility of an alliance with China by saying, "It is possible to imagine anything. … We have not set that goal for ourselves. But, in principle, we are not going to rule it out, either."[9] This appeared to suggest greater openness to the possibility than Putin had expressed previously. Russian leaders also rebuffed India's efforts to encourage Russia's participation in the Indo-Pacific regional concept. In December, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov criticized India's participation in the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy, accusing the United States and its allies of attempting to draw India into "anti-Chinese games." That same month, for the second time since July 2019, Chinese and Russian strategic bombers conducted a joint air patrol in Northeast Asia, prompting Japan and South Korea to

scramble fighter jets in response. The joint air patrols were part of a pattern of increasingly close China-Russia defense cooperation in recent years.

Cooperation between China and Russia is a growing concern for both the United States and Europe. On both sides of the Atlantic, however, relations with China and Russia are primarily determined by interactions with the two countries individually. China and Russia act in parallel in ways that have an impact on Western societies and on transatlantic security. The United States is increasingly preoccupied with potential security threats from both China and Russia, but geography dictates that Europe has its own distinct perspective. Viewed individually, both Russia and China pose security challenges to Europe, but the nature of these challenges differs significantly. Recent strategy documents by the EU and national governments in Europe tend to distinguish between Russia, which they present as a revisionist power with aggressive aims, and China, which they portray as increasingly influential on the world stage and assertive in Asia, but not a direct military threat to Europe.[10]

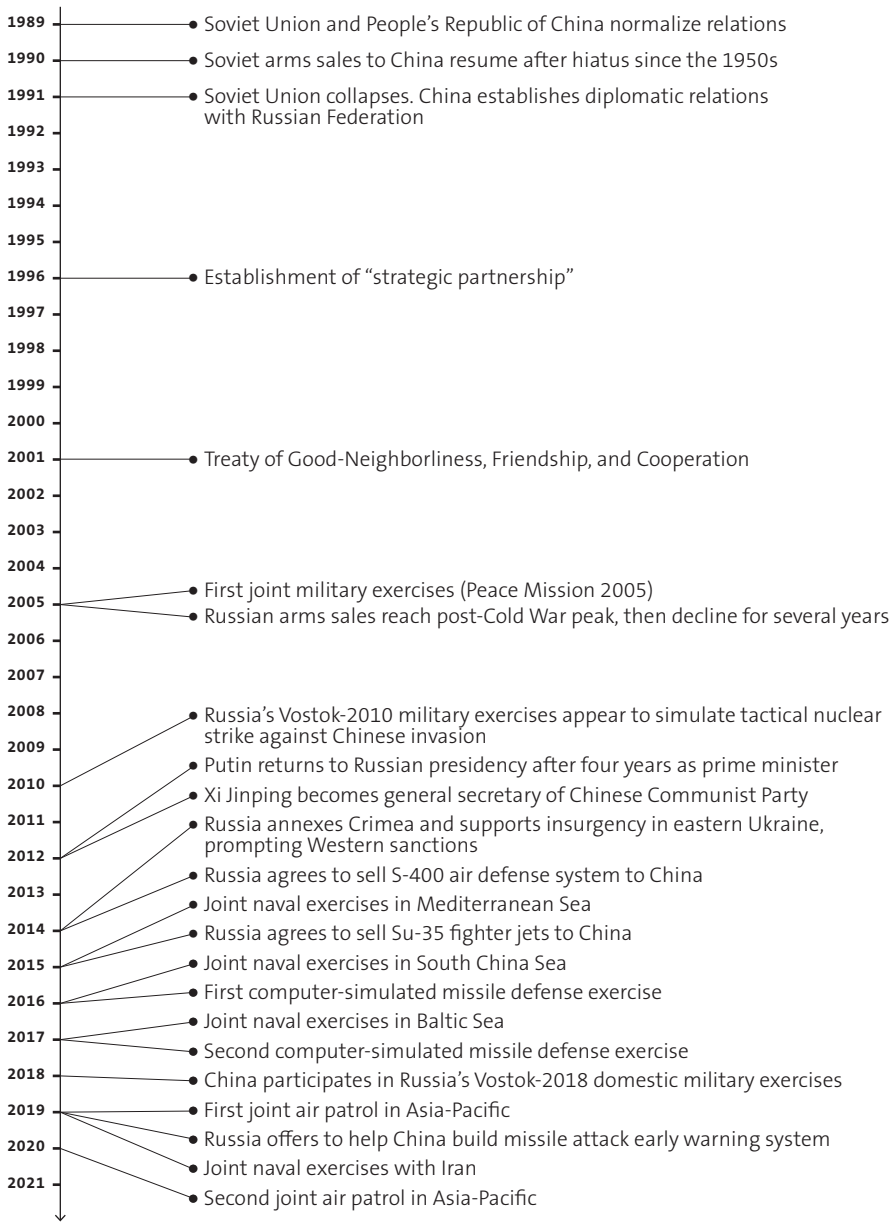
Russia's Challenge to Transatlantic Security

Russia remains the primary security concern for NATO and the broader transatlantic partnership. The security relationship between Russia and the West has been increasingly tense since Russia's annexation of Crimea and the rise of a Russian-supported insurgency in eastern Ukraine. Since then, Western countries have pursued a dual-track approach to Russia, seeking dialogue and a political solution in Ukraine through the Minsk process while at the same time imposing sanctions and seeking to bolster NATO's deterrent, especially along its eastern flank. Russia has pursued military modernization, introduced new weapons systems, and conducted large-scale military exercises in its western regions. The Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, which was negotiated at the conclusion of the Cold War, remains moribund. Russia suspended its participation in the treaty in 2007 and withdrew altogether in March 2015, one year after the annexation of Crimea. Russia also frequently conducts provocations such as bomber and fighter patrols that make incursions into the airspace of NATO member states and other Western countries. In 2020, the United States withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty, alleging Russian violations.[11]

The nuclear dimension of security relations between Russia and the West remains crucial, with growing

China-Russia Relations and Defense Cooperation

Since 1989



implications for China. The United States and Russia agreed to a five-year extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in the early days of Biden's presidency, just days before the treaty was set to expire, but many questions remain about the future of arms control. In the view of many analysts, Russia adheres to a "theory of victory" according to which it could use the threat of nuclear escalation or the actual first use of nuclear weapons in order to "de-escalate" a conflict on favorable terms.[12] Russia has taken several steps in the apparent pursuit of this capability. In addition to modernizing all three legs of its nuclear triad, it has developed new intercontinental-range systems such as a hypersonic glide vehicle, a nuclear-armed, nuclear-powered cruise missile, and a nuclear-armed, nuclear-powered, undersea autonomous torpedo. Russia has also established superiority in non-strategic, dual-capable systems that can be armed with either nuclear or conventional weapons, including the SSC-8/9M729, a ground-launched cruise missile that violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.[13] The Trump administration refrained from extending New START, insisting that the two sides first reach a political framework agreement calling for a new treaty that would verifiably cover all nuclear warheads, establish updated verification measures, and include China. Russia raised its own demands, insisting that a new treaty should address missile defense and other issues.

Russia also countered US demands that a new treaty include China, arguing that China should make its own sovereign decision on this matter. China has consistently refused to participate in international arms control for as long as its arsenal remains significantly smaller than those of the two nuclear superpowers. Although Russian officials would welcome China's eventual participation, they are reluctant to apply pressure on China for fear that this would merely alienate an important partner while failing to bring it to the negotiating table. They also argue that any arms control negotiations that include China should also include Britain and France.

Russia's position has shifted as its relationship with China has grown closer. Only a few years ago, Russian officials suggested that China should join future arms control agreements and complained that only Russia and the United States were bound by the restrictions of the INF Treaty. Russian defense planners harbor largely unspoken concerns about China's growing conventional military capabilities, including conventionally equipped missiles of intermediate or shorter

range.[14] The ability to defend Russia's eastern regions against a potential Chinese attack depends on nuclear deterrence or, failing this, on the early use of tactical nuclear weapons against an invading Chinese army. Concerns about China appear to have been an initial reason for Russia's violation of the INF Treaty, though the recent improvement in bilateral relations has eased Russia's immediate concerns about a potential security threat from China.

The United States withdrew from the INF Treaty in August 2019 on the grounds that Russia was unwilling to return to full compliance with its provisions, which would have meant accepting that the SSC-8/9M729 was in violation of the treaty. The United States could now choose to deploy missiles of the previously forbidden range in Europe. These would most likely be conventional systems, considering that NATO's member countries would have difficulty agreeing on the deployment of nuclear missiles in Europe. The demise of the INF Treaty could also allow the United States to deploy intermediate-range missiles in Asia, most likely equipped with conventional warheads, as a means of countering the growing military power of China, which was not a signatory to the treaty and possesses a large arsenal of missiles in this category.[15]

Beyond traditional security issues, Russia also poses security concerns for Europe and the transatlantic partners in newer, non-traditional ways. Russia's use of "little green men" during its seizure and annexation of Crimea, as well as its unofficial support for insurgents in eastern Ukraine, raised concerns about possible future instances of such hybrid or gray-zone interventions that fall below the level of open, direct military engagement. Russia has poisoned critics of the Putin regime on the territory of Western countries, as in the fatal polonium attack on Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006 and the Novichok attack on Sergei Skrypal in Salisbury, England, in 2018, which Skrypal and his daughter survived but which killed a bystander. The poisoning of Navalny occurred on Russian soil, but it generated outrage in the West. The Novichok attacks call into question Russia's compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention and are also examples of Russian information warfare, as the Russian government denied that the Novichok was of Russian origin and suggested that Western governments might have been the perpetrators. Germany also accused the Russian government of ordering the killing of a former Chechen rebel commander who was shot dead in Berlin in 2019. Russian cyber threats are a growing concern, as shown by

the 2020 SolarWinds attack and other cases. Russia also seeks to sow division in Western societies and to undermine EU and NATO cohesion through interference in domestic politics.

China's Challenge to Transatlantic Security

For Europe, China is not a direct military threat. China has upgraded its military capabilities in recent years, but these efforts are focused on its immediate neighborhood in the Asia-Pacific region. China has also pursued an increasingly assertive foreign policy, but this is a more immediate concern for US allies in Asia than for Europe. Many European countries are wary of becoming embroiled in the US-China rivalry and especially in any potential military conflicts in Asia. Moreover, many Central and Eastern European countries want NATO to remain focused on Russia. China has gained increased prominence in European policy debates, but mostly on issues of trade, investment, technology, and human rights.

Nevertheless, China poses a variety of challenges to European security. As a result, China has risen on the transatlantic agenda. A report by the European Commission in 2019 called China a "systemic rival."[16] In late 2020, a report by the independent NATO Reflection Group called for the alliance to develop a coordinated policy approach toward China.[17] Like Russia, China engages in efforts to undermine Western liberal democracies. It seeks to coopt elites and to influence public opinion in European countries, including Switzerland.[18] These efforts pose a threat to the political sovereignty of individual European countries and the European Union as a whole. Growing economic dependence on China, especially in supply chains that are crucial for defense and intelligence, could create vulnerabilities for Europe. China's inroads in parts of Europe, especially in the Western Balkans, and along its periphery, including in the Arctic and in the Middle East and North Africa region, pose geopolitical challenges to Europe.[19] China's efforts to engage with European countries bilaterally or in sub-regional forums, including the 17+1 format that promotes China's business and investment relations with 17 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, threaten to divide Europe and prevent it from negotiating with China from a position of strength based on European unity and transatlantic cohesion.

China also poses a cybersecurity threat to Europe and the transatlantic partners, particularly through cyber-espionage. China has gained an advantage in crucial high-tech sectors,

including Artificial Intelligence (AI) and fifth-generation wireless technology (5G), with important economic and security ramifications for the West.[20] The Trump administration had some success in persuading European countries to limit or block Chinese telecommunication giant Huawei's involvement in 5G networks, arguing that such steps were necessary in order to protect Western intelligence-sharing against threats from Chinese surveillance and espionage.

These challenges require European countries to strengthen cyber defenses, diversify supply chains, expand intelligence-sharing, and take other measures to strengthen the resilience of their societies.[21] Although the security challenges that China poses to Europe are largely indirect, the growth of China's military capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region will have important secondary effects in Europe. This trend has already caused shifts in US defense policy, with inevitable implications for Europe and transatlantic security.

US Defense Strategy Shifts to Great-Power Competition

The combination of China's rise to global power and the revival of Russia's great-power ambitions led the United States to adjust its foreign and defense policies during Trump's presidency. The most recent *National Security Strategy of the United States,* issued in December 2017, named China and Russia as "revisionist powers" that "challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity."[22] The summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, unveiled in January 2018, identified the "central challenge to US prosperity and security as the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition*" by these revisionist powers.[23]

The new focus on great-power competition led to a change in defense strategy. For much of the post-Cold War era, the United States followed a two-war strategy. This approach sought to ensure that the United States could defeat two "rogue states" simultaneously, for example in the Middle East and on the Korean Peninsula. With the release of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, the United States shifted its focus toward securing the ability to defeat one great power in a war at any given time. The strategy does not provide for victory over two great powers simultaneously. Instead, it calls for the United States to maintain the capability, while defeating a single great power in one theater, to deter another great power in a different theater at the same time.[24]

In the period preceding the release of the 2018 National Defense Strategy,

a growing body of evidence suggested that the United States would have difficulty defeating even one great power at a time under certain circumstances. Studies by RAND for the US Department of Defense found that the task of defending Taiwan against a Chinese assault had grown increasingly difficult and that the United States and NATO might lose a war with Russia over the Baltics under present conditions.[25] Following the release of the new defense strategy, the congressionally mandated National Defense Strategy Commission reached similar conclusions, as did other studies.[26] David Ochmanek, a researcher at RAND, described the situation vividly in March 2019, when he said that in many recent war games pitting the United States and its allies against China or Russia, the US-led coalition "gets its ass handed to it."[27]

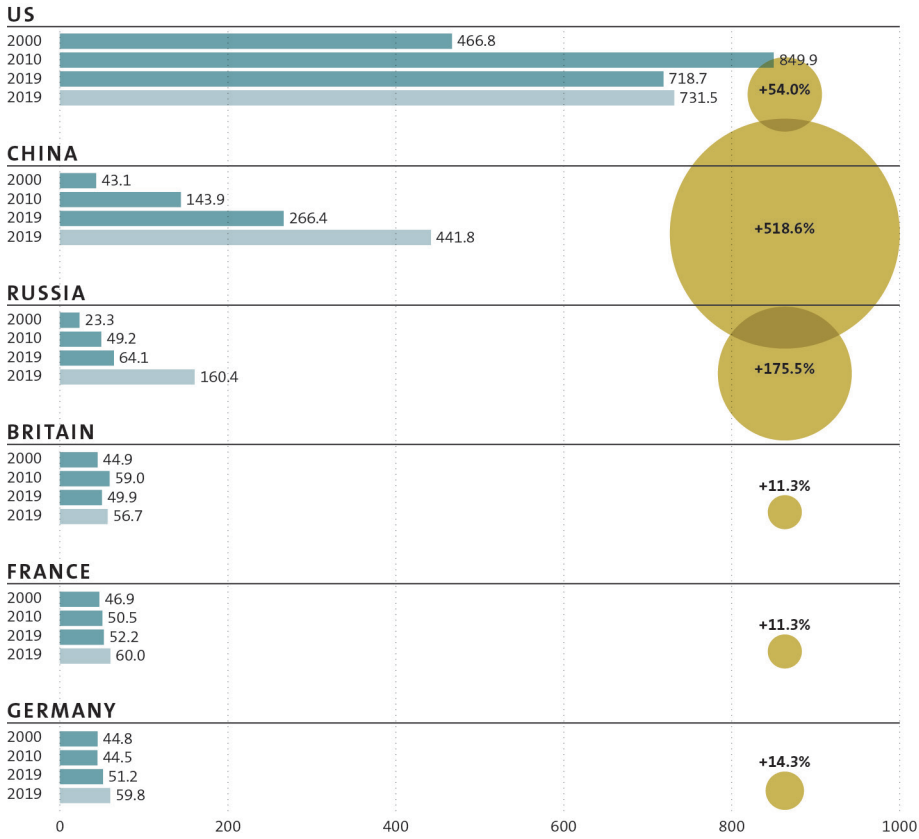
In such assessments, the main challenges for the United States lie in potential regional military contingencies. Although both China and Russia have increased their defense spending significantly during this century, the United States maintains an advantage over both countries in overall military power. US levels of defense spending are still significantly higher than those of either China or Russia, though the gap narrows when spending is measured in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP).[28] In regional contingencies, however, geography and recent improvements in military capabilities could give China or Russia an advantage.

China's improved anti-access/area denial capabilities complicate US objectives in the Asia-Pacific, including the defense of Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, or the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. In a war over Taiwan, for example, China could launch missile attacks at several US targets in the region, including air bases, aircraft carriers, and airplanes. China could also target US command and control by conducting cyberattacks and by attacking satellites and other space-based communications infrastructure. The risk is that China could quickly seize control of Taiwan while inflicting grave losses of personnel and equipment on the United States. Similar concerns apply to Europe, focusing on the possibility that Russian forces could rapidly overrun the Baltics and prove difficult to dislodge.[29] To be sure, such pessimistic assessments remain controversial.[30] However, a broad recognition exists that the task for the United States and its allies in such contingencies has grown more difficult than it would have been only a few years ago.

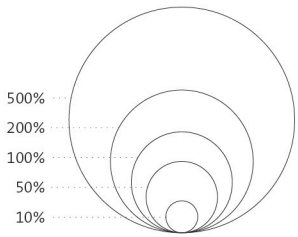
The United States thus faces daunting security challenges in dealing with

Military Spending

In USD (billions)



Military spending at constant 2018 prices and exchange rates
Military spending at purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rates
Percentage increase in military spending from 2000–2019 based on figures in constant 2018 prices and exchange rates



Sources: PPP calculations courtesy of Richard Connolly, Royal United Services Institute; IMF World Economic Outlook (October 2020); SIPRI

both China and Russia individually. The challenge would only grow if the two countries were to increase their bilateral defense cooperation significantly. Although China and Russia have refrained from taking the ultimate step of forming an alliance, their defense cooperation has nevertheless grown steadily in recent years, with important consequences for transatlantic security and US grand strategy.

China-Russia Defense Cooperation

Bilateral defense cooperation has been a crucial element of the China-Russia relationship during the post-Cold War era, and further advances have occurred in the past few years. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has been China's largest foreign arms supplier, making important contributions to China's military modernization. Russian arms sales to China fell sharply in the mid-2000s but rebounded by the early 2010s, culminating in the sales of advanced Russian weapons of a technological level that previously would have been off limits, most notably the S-400 air defense system and Su-35 fighter jets. The two countries have engaged in an impressive series of joint military and naval exercises. In September 2018, a Chinese contingent participated in Russia's large Vostok-2018 domestic exercise in the Russian Far East, the first time that Chinese forces had joined a domestic Russian exercise. In December 2019, China and Russia held joint naval exercises with Iran. The joint air patrols in 2019 and 2020 added a new dimension to bilateral defense cooperation.

China-Russia defense cooperation focuses on the sphere of conventional weapons, but the two countries have also cooperated on issues of broader strategic significance. They have consistently opposed the development of US missile defense systems. In recent years, however, they have also held their own joint missile defense exercises in the form of computer simulations. Russia offered to assist China with the development of a missile attack early warning system. China and Russia have also coordinated their positions on outer space and cyberspace. They have sought to restrict military activities in outer space, even while continuing to develop and test their own anti-satellite weapons, and they have promoted a view of Internet governance that emphasizes national sovereignty.

In the course of defense cooperation with China, however, Russia remains mindful of the need to maintain its capability to deter or defeat a potential Chinese invasion, unlikely as this prospect seems now. As mentioned above, Russia has an interest in ensuring nuclear deterrence in such a

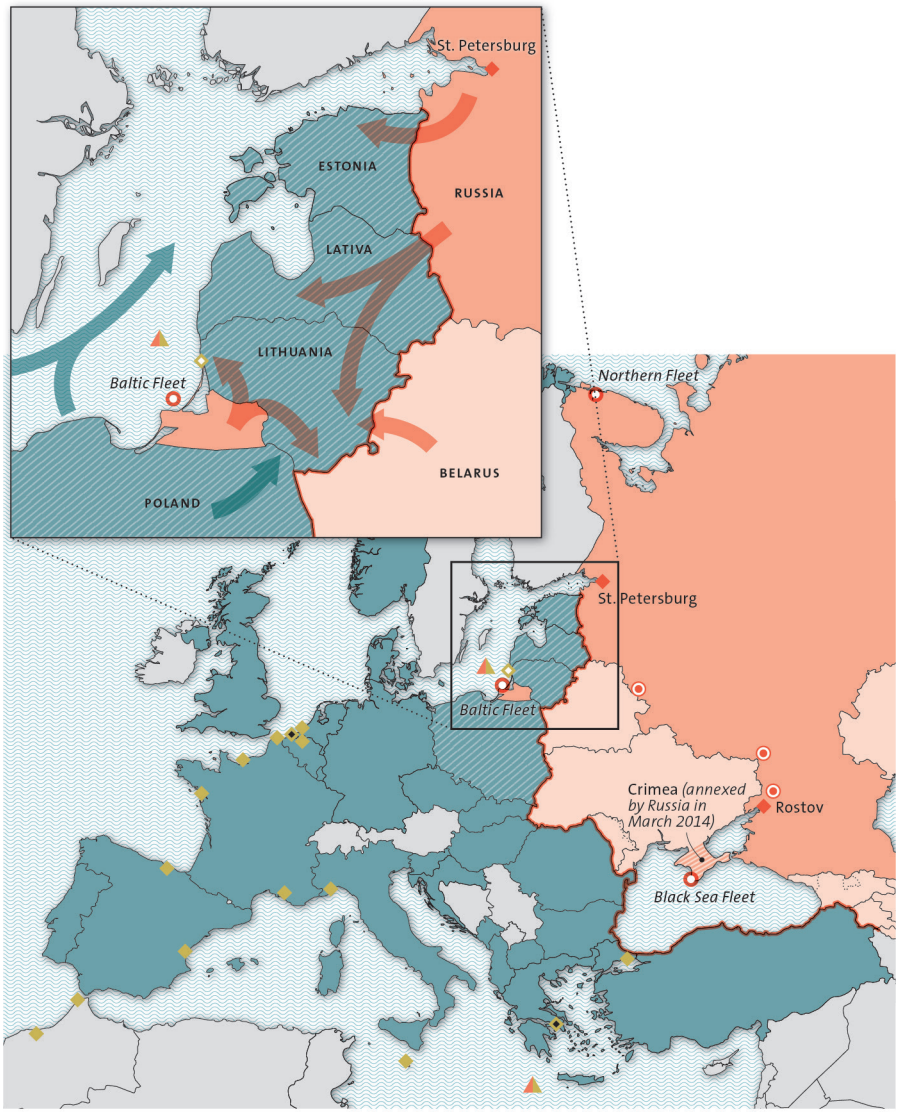
contingency and in securing China's eventual participation in international arms control. Russia's concerns in this area also dictate that its sales of advanced weapons enhance China's air, naval, and air defense capabilities for maritime contingencies against the United States and its allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region, rather than strengthening China's ground forces.

Despite their increasingly close diplomatic relationship and defense cooperation, China and Russia have declined to form a political-military alliance involving mutual security guarantees. The 2001 Treaty on Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation commits both countries to refrain from joining alliances directed against the other and calls for bilateral consultations in the event that either country faces a threat to its security. However, the treaty includes no obligation for either country to provide security assistance to the other, the crucial feature of any alliance. Both countries prefer to maintain diplomatic flexibility and avoid being drawn into each other's regional disputes.[31]

The Euro-Atlantic region is an unlikely theater for any sort of China-Russia joint military action. However, the two countries' navies have exercised together in the region, largely for purposes of signaling mutual political support. In 2015, China and Russia conducted joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea. During these exercises, Chinese ships also entered the Black Sea, though they stayed away from Crimea. The following year, the two countries held joint naval exercises in the South China Sea just weeks after the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled against China's sweeping claims to sovereignty over the sea. China appeared to use these exercises to signal its defiance of the court ruling, as well as Russia's support for such defiance. China repaid the favor in 2017, when the two countries conducted joint naval exercises in the Baltic Sea. China's participation in these exercises may have been intended not only as a signal of political support to Russia, but also as a response to British and French participation in freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.[32]

The transatlantic partners also face the challenge of potential China-Russia cooperation in hybrid warfare or gray-zone conflicts.[33] China's investments and attempts to build influence in Europe could allow it to assist Russia in the event of military conflict in the region. For example, China could attempt to use its newfound influence in some European countries to dissuade them from supporting NATO in a conflict with Russia. China could also

Russia, China, and European Security



- NATO's eastern border
- NATO member states
- Countries with NATO Enhanced Forward Presence
- Former Soviet republics
- Russian military district headquarters
- Russian fleet headquarters
- Sites where newly formed Russian divisions are stationed

Ports in which China has ...
- ... a controlling stake in a shipping terminal
- ... a minority stake in one or more shipping terminals
- ... an interest in dredging a deep-water port
- Sites of recent Russia-China joint naval exercises
- Possible Russian offensive
- Possible NATO counteroffensive

Sources: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; RAND; Foreign Policy Research Institute; Der Spiegel; MERICS; NPR; Clingendael Report; International Journal of Shipping and Transport Logistics

use its investments in European ports to help Russia by complicating NATO logistics.[34] China's expressed interest in dredging a deep-water port at Klaipeda, Lithuania, could have special significance in this respect, though Lithuania ruled out such a Chinese investment between 2020 and 2023 on national security grounds.[35] In general, however, China is unlikely to provide significant levels of direct security assistance to Russia in a military conflict in Europe.

Nevertheless, China-Russia defense cooperation has important implications for transatlantic security. Russian arms sales to China raise revenues that Russia uses for military research and development, contributing to the recent enhancement of Russia's own military might. Moreover, by diverting US attention and military resources to the Asia-Pacific region, China's growing military capabilities, including the contributions from advanced Russian weapons, complicate US efforts to provide security in Europe and potentially afford Russia some additional room for maneuver in the region.[36] Together, these factors place increasing strain on US grand strategy, with direct implications for Europe.

The Ultimate Fear:
A War on Two Fronts

In a nightmare scenario, the United States would simultaneously face the prospect of war against China in Asia and against Russia in Europe. The 2018 National Defense Strategy's focus on the ability to defeat a single great-power adversary while simultaneously deterring, but not necessarily defeating, another raises the question of how the United States would respond in such a situation.[37] Retired Gen. Ben Hodges, who served as US Army Commander in Europe from 2014 to 2017, starkly expressed this concern, as well as its implications for Europe, during the Warsaw Security Forum in October 2018. "The United States needs a very strong European pillar. I think in 15 years – it's not inevitable – but it is a very strong likelihood that we will be at war with China," he said. "The United States does not have the capacity to do everything it has to do in Europe and in the Pacific to deal with the Chinese threat."[38] In a subsequent interview, Hodges made clear that his message was directed at US allies in Europe. "I was trying to tell them, 'Hey look, we do not have the capacity in the United States to be able to deter Russia, to be the bulwark against possible Russian aggression, and deal with China.'"[39]

In a two-war scenario, the actions of China and Russia could be coordinated or merely opportunistic. If the two countries were to act in coordinated fashion, then this would represent a

de facto alliance. Such an arrangement seems unlikely because it would be susceptible to the familiar pitfalls of entrapment or abandonment. That is, both countries would be wary of being drawn into such a plan on the other's timetable or of receiving insufficient support from the other. Even if one side were merely to act opportunistically, seizing an opportunity arising from aggression by the other, the effect would be to detract from the ability of the United States to wage war effectively against either. This would deliver both sides some of the benefits of an alliance without entailing formal commitments. The mere prospect of such a scenario could give China or Russia increased leverage in a dispute with the United States and its allies. The possibility of a two-front war, even if unlikely, poses severe challenges for US grand strategy, for European strategic thinking, and for the future of the transatlantic partnership.

Implications for Transatlantic Security

The United States and its European allies could address such challenging geopolitical circumstances in various ways. Some analysts call for the United States to attempt a rapprochement with Russia in order to prevent it from becoming excessively close to China.[40] Among those who support such an approach are advocates of a US grand strategy of "offshore balancing." Under this strategy, recognizing that China represents the main challenge to US security and international leadership, the United States would withdraw its onshore military presence from Europe and the Middle East in order to concentrate its forces in the Asia-Pacific region. Europe would then assume responsibility for its own security.[41] A rapprochement with Russia would complement this effort by easing the path for a US withdrawal from European security affairs. In the long run, some analysts argue, the United States could even draw Russia into a balancing coalition against China.[42]

Transatlantic policymakers should look for ways to limit the extent of the China-Russia partnership by emphasizing areas in which the two countries' interests potentially diverge, including nuclear arms control and China's growing influence in Eurasia. In the near term, however, attempts at rapprochement with Russia are unlikely to succeed, and efforts to draw Russia into a balancing coalition against China are even less plausible. Both Russia and China place a high value on their partnership and would be unwilling to sacrifice it.[43] Russia could drift away from China over time, but this would most likely be a naturally occurring process resulting from an eventual Russian calculation

that China's growing power and ambitions had made it a greater threat than the West. China has a strong incentive to avoid such an outcome by continuing to cultivate its relationship with Russia. In the absence of a Western rapprochement with Russia, which might have been possible at the end of the Cold War but would be considerably more difficult now, the United States remains committed to resisting aggression by both China and Russia. This approach could require a form of containment of both countries, a course that would depend heavily on US cooperation with allies.[44]

Trump took a distinctive approach to these issues. With regard to transatlantic relations, his views unsettled many US allies in Europe. His repeated criticism of NATO member states for their low levels of defense spending caused some European countries to question US commitment to the alliance. "The times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said following the 2017 NATO and G7 summits, adding: "We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands." In 2020, Trump ordered the withdrawal of 12,000 US soldiers from Germany, some of whom were to be redeployed elsewhere in Europe. Biden reversed this decision early in his presidency.

Trump also entertained the possibility of playing the "Russia card" in relations with China, though his administration's approach was uneven. On the one hand, the administration's national security and defense strategies highlighted the emergence of strategic competition with both China and Russia, and in practice Trump maintained a firm line with Russia while engaging in increasingly open confrontation with China. On the other hand, Trump refrained from criticizing Putin and frequently expressed his desire to improve relations with Russia, partly in an effort to increase US leverage over China. Indeed, he accused past US presidents of pushing Russia into China's arms. Trump made little progress in these efforts, partly because of US domestic opposition, including concerns about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, and partly because of international factors, including the depth of the chasm between Russia and the West and the growing strength of the China-Russia relationship.

The Biden administration's foreign policy is likely to differ significantly. Biden has vowed to work closely with allies and appears prepared to confront both China and Russia on a range of issues while remaining open to engagement in areas of common interest. As a presidential candidate,

Biden called Russia an "opponent" and China a "serious competitor." During a speech at the State Department shortly after his inauguration, he called China "our most serious competitor" and declared that "American leadership must meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States and the determination of Russia to damage and disrupt our democracy." Biden later said that he anticipated "extreme competition" with China. He has argued that the United States should work with its allies in Europe and around the world in order to negotiate with China from a position of strength on such issues as trade, technology, and human rights, while also seeking cooperation with China on climate change and global public health.[45] Biden has been consistently critical of Russia and appears likely to take a tough line, as in his recent decision to deploy B1 bombers to Norway in order to strengthen the presence of US airpower in the Arctic region. In a signal of US commitment to defend the Baltics, the B1s later conducted joint air patrols with NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission. At the same time, Biden's decision to extend New START showed his willingness to engage pragmatically with Russia.

The Biden administration appears set to pursue a strategy of recommitting to NATO while seeking increased European support for US policy toward China.[46] Biden appealed to European allies for support during his speech to the Munich Security Conference in February 2021. "We must prepare together for long-term strategic competition with China," he declared, adding that the transatlantic partners should also resist Russia's cyberattacks and other "recklessness."

US allies in Europe welcome Biden's emphasis on the transatlantic partnership, but forging a common transatlantic approach to China and Russia is unlikely to be easy. Merkel said during this year's World Economic Forum that she opposed the formation of blocs, and she cautioned during the Munich Security Conference that "our interests will not always converge." This appeared to signal Germany's reluctance to embrace Biden's conception of a struggle pitting Western democracies against authoritarian China and Russia.[47] Merkel, who will leave office this year, was a driving force behind the conclusion of negotiations with China on the investment agreement during Germany's six-month rotation in the EU presidency. This agreement demonstrates that the growing dependence of German manufacturing industries, especially the auto sector, on the Chinese market will complicate efforts to build a

united transatlantic approach toward China. Germany's decision to proceed with Nord Stream 2 also reflects its desire to separate economic and strategic goals, an effort that increasingly places it at odds with the United States.

Recent debates on European strategic autonomy also complicate transatlantic discussions.[48] French President Emmanuel Macron, the most outspoken European leader calling for European strategic autonomy, reiterated his case during the Munich Security Conference. Macron, who has warned of NATO's "brain death," argues that Europe can no longer count on the United States to defend its NATO allies, partly because US focus will inevitably turn to China. In his view, therefore, European countries should build independent military forces in order to provide for their own defense and attain strategic autonomy. Only in this way, Macron argues, can Europe remain in control of its own destiny. In parallel with these efforts, Macron attempted diplomatic outreach to Russia, arguing that Europe would never enjoy security and stability until relations with Russia had improved. Lingering tensions could lead Russia into isolation or a stronger relationship with China, he argued.[49]

Macron's efforts to promote strategic autonomy have made little progress, with Britain and Germany particularly dismissive of the idea. Despite Merkel's earlier statement that European countries would have to take their fate into their own hands, German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer rejected what she called "illusions" of European strategic autonomy, arguing that Europe will remain dependent on the US security guarantee, especially the nuclear umbrella, for the foreseeable future. European critics of Macron's proposal also noted its high financial cost, continued European dependence on cooperation with US forces in military operations abroad, and the fear that European strategic autonomy could strengthen the arguments of those in the United States calling for disengagement from NATO. Nor have Macron's diplomatic overtures toward Russia made significant gains. They face opposition from Germany and from Central and Eastern European countries that trust only the United States to guarantee their security.

European concerns about US commitment to transatlantic security are understandable. The Biden administration is far more favorably disposed toward NATO than was Trump, but urgent domestic issues, including efforts to promote recovery from the pandemic and to address deep domestic political polarization, threaten

to keep US attention focused inward. Under these circumstances, prudence calls for Europe to strengthen its military capabilities within NATO, as difficult as this may be at a time when its energies and resources are focused on recovery from the pandemic, while leaving open the long-term possibility of attaining strategic autonomy.

The best approach, however, would be for the transatlantic partners to revitalize their cooperation. In view of the increasingly close China-Russia relationship, and in the absence to date of successful efforts to pry Russia away from China, the transatlantic partners will face a situation in which great-power adversaries pose security challenges in both the Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions. Under these circumstances, close transatlantic cooperation will be essential. Europe should address the specific challenges that it faces from China by bolstering its resilience and reducing vulnerabilities that could arise from excessive dependence on Chinese supply chains, markets, and investments. Britain and France both have security presences in the Asia-Pacific region, participate regularly in freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, and could play some role in US efforts to contain China militarily.

For the most part, however, NATO should remain focused on security in the Euro-Atlantic region. The new operational concept that the US Army developed in response to the 2018 National Defense Strategy, known as Multi-Domain Operations, recognizes the difficulty of reinforcing troops in a theater of war against a great-power competitor. Addressing this problem would require either a major increase in US troops stationed in Europe or an increased role for European countries themselves.[50] The first option is unlikely because the rise of China will force the United States to shift focus to a considerable degree toward Asia in the coming years, leaving fewer resources available for European security. This leaves the second option. The United States should remain committed to NATO and the provision of security in Europe, but European countries could make a vital contribution to the transatlantic partnership by increasing defense spending, assuming an increased share of the burden for European security within NATO, and thereby allowing the United States to devote the necessary attention and resources to Asia.

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CHAPTER 2

Franco-German-British Security Cooperation After Brexit

Julian Kamasa

The departure of the United Kingdom from the EU has considerable implications for the European security architecture. Although the UK continues to be part of NATO, it might not suffice to use NATO as a forum for comprehensive coordination, since it is primarily a military alliance. Therefore, new settings for the coordination of essential policies between London and its key European partners seem necessary. In the short and medium terms, a trilateral form of security cooperation among France, Germany, and the UK such as the E3 could bridge the gaps created by Brexit.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, French President Emmanuel Macron, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel attend the 2019 G7 summit in Biarritz, France. *Andrew Parsons / Pool via Reuters*

The United Kingdom has left the EU for good without any agreement on future structured cooperation in foreign and security policy. However, London can still be expected to cooperate with individual European states. On the one hand, the loss of formalized security cooperation between London and the EU should not be underestimated, since many channels of communication, coordination, and cooperation are now disrupted. On the other hand, the absence of the UK in security cooperation should not be overestimated either. EU foreign and security policy for the most part is still based on intergovernmental cooperation. The UK will continue to be surrounded by the same strategic environment regardless of its relationship with the EU. Brexit will not fundamentally transform core values of British foreign policy such as the promotion of liberal democracy, rule of law, human rights, free trade, or the increasingly essential topic of climate change. These values are largely shared with the majority of EU member states. Both the UK and EU member states have strong incentives to continue cooperation. London wants to know what is going on inside Brussels, and the EU simply cannot ignore the UK's diplomatic and military weight.

For the time being, the enduring similarities between UK and EU policies could mean that London will seek useful points of contact with selected EU member states and build on existing cooperation formats such as the E3 with France and Germany. This format dates back to 2003, when the foreign ministers of the three countries traveled to Tehran to sign the first agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran with the aim of bringing that country back into full compliance with its obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). However, E3 cooperation since then has included many other policy areas, essentially extending the scope of this format. The E3 has issued joint statements on many international issues, which most recently included political tensions in the Gulf region, terror networks in Iraq and Syria, the military coup in Myanmar, challenges posed by China, the global distribution of vaccines against the coronavirus, and the upcoming Climate Change Conference. Now that the UK has left the EU, the E3 format may become even more important. The choice of policy area in which it would be used may be rather hard to predict, since it would be unrealistic to assume that there is a structured agenda in such an informal setting. The areas in which the three European powers could be active are geographically and thematically diverse. However, cooperation in many policy areas could be constrained by a lack of coherence. The E3 need to

base their cooperation on a case-by-case basis, given that this loose form of cooperation is ultimately a function not only of a convergence of national interests, but also of external developments such as the efficiency of EU policymaking. This means that initial disagreement among EU member states on international issues allows a coherent E3 to deal with those issues on an ad-hoc basis. When the E3 can act swiftly and coherently, this format may be a useful tool to purposefully complement the rather lengthy policymaking process of the EU.

Post-Brexit Power Dynamics

The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) can no longer be used as fora for the coordination and exchange of information with the UK for the remaining 27 EU member states. The lack of a UK-EU security agreement means that new forms of cooperation may evolve. The UK should not suddenly be expected to be "less European." At the same time, British foreign and security policy is unlikely to mirror too closely that of the EU, as such intense collaboration could provoke criticism from Brexit hardliners. Conducting foreign and security policies independent from the EU was one of their main arguments for leaving the Union. However, this need not result in political alienation between the UK and the EU. The 2021 Integrated Review titled "Global Britain in a competitive age" implies that London will try to establish itself as a committed partner of individual EU member states, bilaterally or in "minilateral" formats, which may consist of several like-minded states cooperating on an ad-hoc basis on a specific policy issue.[1] Such minilateral formats already exist, and perhaps the best example is E3 cooperation. Since 2003, when the three countries began to focus on the Iranian nuclear program, it has expanded to cover many areas of international importance such as freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, conflicts in Syria and Yemen, and the implementation of the Paris Agreement to tackle climate change.[2] The issues dealt with by the E3 can be characterized as a mix of joint responses to current security challenges and entry into specific policy fields that have initially been neglected by the EU.[3] Given the UK's changing relationship with the EU, the E3 and similar structures may therefore gain in importance.

It is important to take into account that, within the Franco-German-British triangle, security relations between London and Berlin are comparatively weak and essentially the missing link in the effort to build more equal security

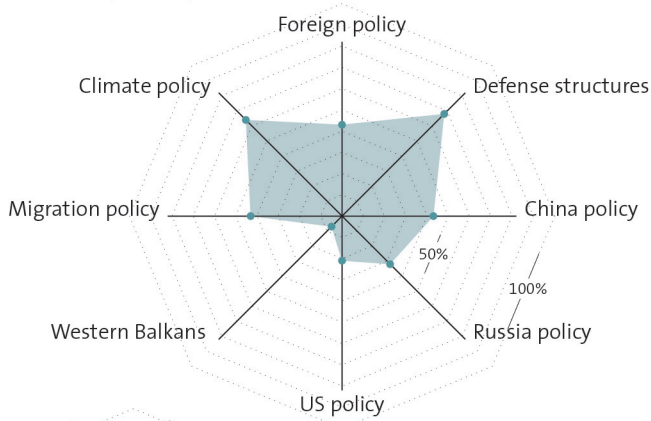
cooperation among the three states. France, comparatively, is in a comfortable position, as it has strong relations with both countries. In the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties, France and the UK agreed to reinforce their bilateral defense cooperation in a number of areas. This even included intensified collaboration in the most sensitive field of nuclear weapons, where Paris and London agreed on improving their nuclear stockpile stewardship programs in support of both countries' independent nuclear deterrent capabilities. They are the only European states with nuclear capabilities. Moreover, they are the only European states belonging to the five permanent members (P5) with veto power of the UN Security Council (UNSC). As a result, Paris and London are used to intense bilateral cooperation. Furthermore, the two states have similar strategic cultures, as expressed in globally oriented foreign and security policies based on their historical self-perception as former colonial powers. Paris' links to Berlin are different. The establishment of Franco-German friendship after the end of the Second World War constituted the basis for the founding of the European Union. Most recently, these ties have been reiterated through the Treaty of Aachen in January 2019, which among other items includes a comprehensive mutual defense clause.[4] Within the format of the Franco-German Security Council, the heads of state meet on a regular basis to discuss current challenges. However, given that Germany is not a nuclear power and does not belong to the P5, and against the backdrop of Germany's reluctance to use military force, France is likely to view its partnership with Germany in a very different light from that with the UK.

The scenario of stronger E3 cooperation will pose a new task for Paris and Berlin, namely, to bridge the gap between remaining committed EU member states and anchoring London in Europe. Neither France nor Germany are interested in creating the impression that E3 cooperation with the UK is more important than the EU's CFSP or CSDP. However, London is not obliged to cooperate with the two exclusively and is free to build significant partnerships with other EU member states as well. As the graphic on page 41 shows, the future of the Western Balkans for instance appears to matter comparatively more for the UK than it does for France and Germany. Hence, countries such as Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia could be the UK's partners of choice for minilateral cooperation on this specific policy issue. In the context of recent diplomatic tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, London might build on its historically strong ties with Cyprus and initiate some

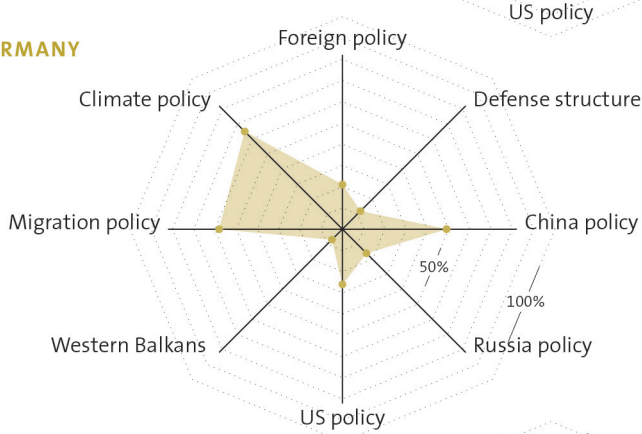
Selected Key Security Policy Areas for European Cooperation

Percentage of policy experts who consider each policy area to be a priority for their government to address on a European level in the period up to 2025

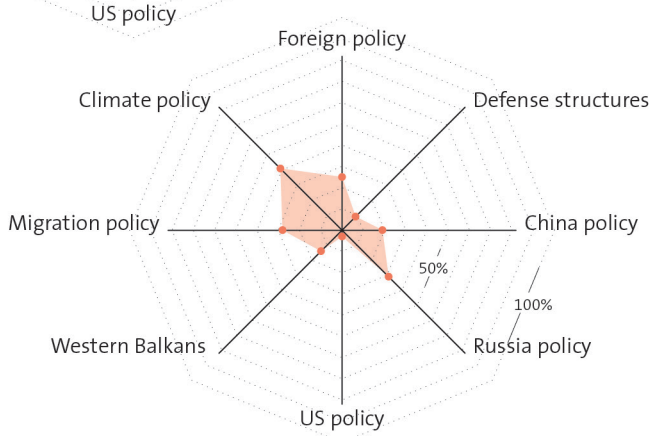
FRANCE



GERMANY



UK



Source: ECFR

sort of ad-hoc forum by including Greece and possibly France, which is already quite present in the region. Thus, Brexit may lead to a wide range of interesting new cooperation formats among European states.

Driving Forces for Trilateral Cooperation

The E3 format can capitalize on two decades of good experiences of cooperation. The question of how to prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons is the *raison d'être* of the E3 format, and remains "unfinished business." Against the backdrop of their long-standing collaboration on the Iranian file, the E3 knows there is mutual understanding and that it is possible to pursue shared interests on a complicated problem consistently. This confidence in the partnership is a crucial driving force when dealing with other issues, which would likewise demand a lot of patience and consistency.

Each one of the E3 members has a different motivation for cooperating trilaterally. For the UK, an important factor is Brexit. Despite its nuclear capabilities, a well-embedded strategic culture, veto power in the UN Security Council, and NATO membership, the decoupling from EU institutions will influence the UK's foreign, security, and defense policies. A poll of British policy experts found agreement that London should continue to cooperate closely with EU member states on global issues including climate change, policies towards China, rule of law, and foreign policy cooperation. Experts also agreed that the UK should continue cooperation on certain "European issues," such as policies towards Russia, the Western Balkans, and migration.[5] Paris and Berlin appear to be useful points of contact for London. The UK may be able to use those channels to help influence the EU's positions on points of interest important to the UK. This may prove particularly feasible in cases where the UK is acting faster than the EU. One prominent example is the issue of 5G telecommunications networks. European nations are fragmented in their responses to concerns about vulnerabilities created by 5G infrastructure, and a poor EU response may risk undermining the protective work London has already undertaken. Not only has London created cybersecurity centers with a state-of-the-art insight into the activities of so-called high-risk vendors since 2010, but it has also stopped the installation of equipment from such vendors by September 2021.[6]

In contrast to the UK, France perceives European defense and security as a core of its foreign, security, and defense policy. For instance, the

notion of *L'Europe de la défense* (a Europe which protects) is an essential component of the "2017 Strategic Review of Defence and Security" clearly prioritizing cooperation with European states.[7] Paris places strong emphasis on the EU's geopolitical role, which is reflected in the French-led debate about strategic autonomy as well as the European Intervention Initiative and the idea of a European pillar in NATO. Berlin has a different view on European strategic autonomy, with Germany's defense minister even calling it an "illusion."[8] This divergence is an important driving force for France to promote close security cooperation with Berlin and London. For France, the dynamics of the relationship with Germany are different when the UK is present and discussions occur outside of an EU setting. Whereas Paris may feel like a "lonely leader"[9] when pushing towards a more geopolitical EU, the dynamics are different in the Berlin-London-Paris triangle. Here, Germany does not enjoy the same influence as it does inside the EU structures and, with its different strategic culture and reticence to acknowledge its position in the world, may find that its positions are in the minority. Thus, for France, this informal triangle provides an opportunity to engage Germany in the area of security and defense with more leverage and, at the same time, ensure that the UK remains a close European ally. The latter is of crucial importance for France since the UK is a permanent member in the UNSC and a nuclear power.

Germany's strategic culture differs sharply from those of the UK and France. It is not a permanent member of the UN Security Council, nor does it possess nuclear weapons. Moreover, Germany often hesitates to make use of its military. In light of its history, some pockets of German society are averse to the deployment of its military. Hence, Germany's military, the *Bundeswehr,* is by many standards significantly under-equipped. In direct comparison to the UK and France, Germany lacks both diplomatic and military power. However, Germany has the fourth-largest economy in the world in terms of GDP and is a major trading power, particularly with China and the US. This imbalance between economic and diplomatic/military weight can be partly mitigated through E3 cooperation; Germany is able to participate in high-level debates where, in comparison to other fora such as the UN, it enjoys much greater influence. Unlike an elected, non-permanent seat in the UNSC, the E3 format also has low barriers to entry and no rotation mechanism. Just like France, Germany has a keen interest in trying to anchor the UK in Europe. Hence, trilateral cooperation seems beneficial for Berlin. Being part

of a security cooperation format with both the UK and France could potentially allow Germany to develop a more strategic mindset. A stronger German profile in security and defense policy would essentially meet external expectations that were set during the Munich Security Conference in 2014, when German leaders declared their intention to assume more responsibility in this area, which was called the "Munich Consensus."[10] Germany's March 2021 declaration that it would send a frigate to the Indo-Pacific by August 2021 can be interpreted as an important signal to like-minded states such as France and the UK, which are already present in this region, of Germany's readiness to assume greater responsibility.[11]

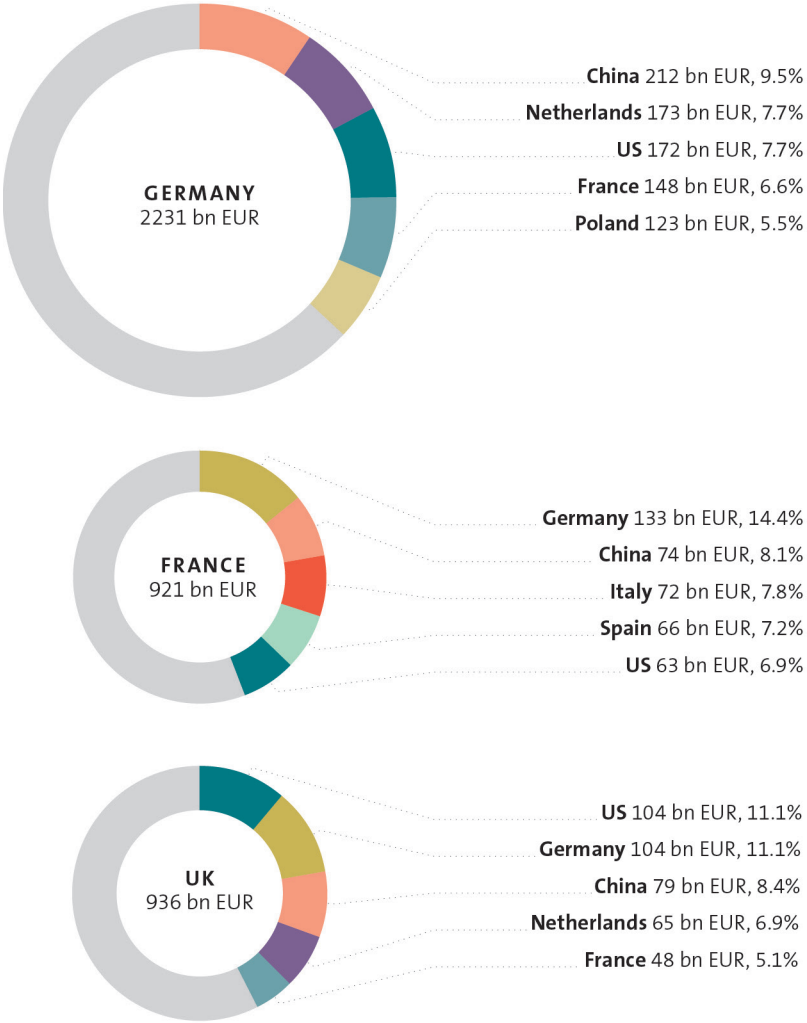
Potential Policy Areas of E3 Cooperation

It is obvious that the Iranian nuclear program will remain crucially important for the three states. The withdrawal of the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018 challenged the European states but resulted in their renewed cohesiveness rather than division. The main goal is still finding a solution with Tehran based on diplomacy. With US President Joe Biden, the hope is that both the US and Iran will return to full compliance with the JCPOA.[12] Furthermore, lessons from the experience could be applied to future negotiations concerning arms control, especially in the field of emerging technologies such as lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs). The question is, however, whether the three states can find a coherent stance in order to do so. For instance, Germany does not procure weaponized drones, whereas both the UK and France do. This issue creates divergences among the E3 when regulatory questions on an international level arise.[13] Although there is agreement on some aspects of the technology, notably an emphasis on human control, resistance by France and the UK to restrictions on the development and procurement of such systems may still prove a significant point of contention in their relationship with Germany.

Furthermore, there are regions or sub-regions of potential interest to France, Germany, and the UK that could be significant sites of future cooperation. A region closely linked to the complex topic of maritime security is the so-called "Indo-Pacific," which describes the geographical area encompassing the Indian and Pacific oceans. It is strategically important to France and the UK as a tool to project global power, specifically by ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea as guaranteed in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.[14] Germany recently issued guidelines on this region, which include the

Trade Partners 2020

Trade volume of goods with the five most important trading partners



Sources: Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis); Ministère de l'Economie et des Finances; HM Revenue and Customs

option of "various forms of maritime presence."[15] Engagement by European states would be a strong signal of support for the US, which is placing priority on this region as part of a comprehensive strategic shift. Thus, the preconditions for engagement by the E3 appear to be promising. A stronger European engagement in the Indo-Pacific would be welcomed by countries in the region, too.[16] The E3 could, therefore, try to raise awareness of this approach among other European states, and both France and Germany could take a leading role in a strengthened EU engagement in this region.

The difficulties of E3 cooperation in maritime security in practice were particularly visible following attacks by Iran on international oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz in July 2019. Both Germany and France were opposed to siding with the US in its "maximum pressure" approach following Washington's withdrawal from the JCPOA. London, on the other hand, had initially reached out to Berlin to seek a "European answer," but joined the US-led mission after Germany expressed its reluctance to act outside of the EU structures.[17] France has also emphasized the need for an EU mission, but it grew impatient with the lengthy EU decision-making procedures and instead established the European Maritime Surveillance Mission in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) with a coalition of willing states outside of the EU framework. When EMASoH became fully operational in February 2020, Germany offered political support, the Dutch navy provided a frigate, and Denmark and Belgium supported the military operation *Agénor* with personnel.[18] The fragmented responses from France, Germany, and the UK show that even though in principle all states sought to achieve a similar goal, namely safe passage at sea, their priorities were not sufficiently in alignment to act cooperatively.

Similarly, in the Sahel region, all states share the same ends, namely political stability and the prevention of increased terrorism in the region. However, the presence of a variety of actors in the region increases the E3's difficulty in acting coherently. As France started its own military operations *Serval* in 2013 and later *Barkhane* in 2014, both the UN and the EU were on the ground, too. Under the umbrella of the EU training mission in Mali (EUTM Mali), both Germany and the UK (as a non-EU member state) are contributors. In Germany, the extension of the deployment related to the EUTM Mali earned the support of a sizeable majority in parliament.[19] Both Berlin and London are, therefore, anything but passive, though they need to issue more than their political support

for the French-led military operation. Instead, operational contributors are smaller EU member states such as Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, and Portugal.[20] A meeting of the French, German, and British defense ministers in August 2020 revealed that stability in the Sahel region is of crucial importance, which could indicate deeper E3 cooperation and increased engagement moving forward.[21]

On an EU level, insufficient unity exists at present to forge common policies and strategies for dealing with major global powers such as Russia and China, though there is a growing consensus on China, as shown by the targeted sanctions against Chinese individuals and one entity for human rights abuses that were imposed in March 2021. Notably, this step appeared to have been a coordinated approach among the EU, the UK, the US, and Canada. Therefore, for states like France and Germany that are trying to limit Chinese influence on a EU level, the Franco-German-British triangle could prove extremely useful. However, there are diverging views on how to approach powers such as Russia and China even among these three nations. For the UK, China's policy towards its former colony Hong Kong is a far bigger priority than for France and Germany.[22] Berlin's comparatively soft political stance towards Beijing is largely a product of its economic ties with China. Essentially, Germany trades as much with China as France and the UK combined. However, recent events in Hong Kong have triggered surprisingly strong reactions from London to Berlin. Therefore, it is conceivable that proposals by the UK to address this issue could win the support of France and Germany. In this context, the role of the US matters, too. The Biden administration is already pursuing an approach of coalition-building, which may prove fruitful. For example, Germany faced a particularly vexing dilemma over its crucial car industry. In 2019, the German auto industry faced threats from both China, in the form of retaliation if Germany were to ban the Chinese 5G supplier Huawei, and also from the United States under Trump, which threatened to impose tariffs were Huawei not banned. The absence of politically motivated punitive tariffs by the US government towards European exports might thus create incentives for many European states to take a tougher stance on China.

This situation may be different with respect to Russia. In fact, all E3 countries have different kinds of relationships with Moscow that appear to be mutually incompatible. France did not achieve much with its unilateral approach of "renewed dialogue." Berlin, comparatively, is interested in maintaining

well-balanced relations with Moscow. Germany reacted relatively softly to the killing on German territory by Russian intelligence officers of a Georgian national who was a former rebel military commander in Chechnya. Furthermore, the German government, despite substantial domestic and foreign criticism, continues to support both Nord Stream pipeline projects. The UK, like Germany, strengthened economic ties for a long period while paying little heed to the potential geopolitical implications. Nevertheless, the UK was a leader in the process of imposing EU sanctions against Russia. The poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skrypal on British soil in 2018 and the comparatively strong reaction in Britain shows an altered approach from a similar incident in 2006. Overall, the divergence of approaches towards the Kremlin seems to be too big in order to develop a coherent trilateral Russia policy.[23] A scenario similar to the Skrypal attack on French territory could change the dynamics, however. On the other hand, the absence of further malicious Russian activities in Germany and the UK may tilt these countries' positions closer to the French one, opting for dialogue.

Obstacles to E3 Cooperation

The United Kingdom's foreign and security policy has never really been truly "European." Even while it was part of the EU, many perceived the UK as the main obstacle preventing closer cooperation among EU members in the field of foreign and security policy. Given that other EU members were also protective of their national sovereignty at times, this might be an exaggeration. However, it seems telling that in parallel to the Brexit negotiations, projects such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) or the European Defense Fund have become operational quite rapidly by EU standards. For the first time in the EU's history, defense has become part of the EU budget. Whether these intra-EU developments will have a push or pull effect on London remains to be seen. The Integrated Review, the biggest reassessment of British foreign, security, and defense policy since the end of the Cold War, has revealed the ambition to be a more globally oriented UK emphasizing cooperation in bilateral and ad-hoc formats with a group of like-minded states complementing the UK's membership in important institutions such as the UN, NATO, or the OSCE. The declared increase in defense spending is designed to underpin ambitions of a "Global Britain". How this spending will actually play out in practice remains to be seen. As indicated in the Integrated Review, Paris and Berlin may become key partners in many venues, since London's approach is shifting towards a more global orientation. How much focus can be put

on international matters, of course, will depend in many ways upon domestic stability. Growing dissatisfaction in Scotland and Northern Ireland about the actual consequences of Brexit could force London to focus inward at the expense of "Global Britain."

France also has a distinct interpretation of what European security should be. Even for many committed EU member states such as Germany, Paris' positions represent unrealistic ambitions. In addition, French leaders have a tendency to adopt "go-it-alone" approaches as soon as they determine that an issue is moving too slowly within an EU framework, or sometimes even from the very outset, in anticipation of slow EU procedures.[24] This approach of "talking European, acting French" is controversial. Eastern European EU member states, for instance, were displeased with the lack of consultation prior to Emmanuel Macron's renewal of dialogue with Russia. Should trilateral security cooperation with the UK and Germany intensify outside of the EU framework, France's credibility within the EU might suffer, especially in discussions of increased defense cooperation. How France will position itself within Europe may also depend on the outcome of the upcoming presidential elections, scheduled for April 2022. President Macron's opponent Marine Le Pen, from the right-wing party *Front National,* openly rejects Macron's policy on Europe. Although a Le Pen presidency seems rather unlikely, Macron's re-election should not be taken for granted, either. Measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus have given rise to widespread frustration and economic uncertainty among voters, which populist parties such as Front National could potentially exploit.

Germany's relatively strong commitment to foreign and security policymaking within the EU framework could be an obstacle to extended E3 cooperation. Due to its history and geography, Berlin has to be cautious of engaging in additional projects like the Nord Stream pipelines, which were heavily criticized in Poland and reinforced some states' fears of being sidelined in the EU. Germany could address such concerns by reviving the Weimar Triangle, together with France and Poland, in parallel with deeper E3 cooperation. This may alienate southern European states like Spain or Italy, however. Both Germany and France need to take this into account when considering intensified cooperation with the UK. Domestically, Germany is still working to define its role in a rapidly changing strategic environment.[25] Berlin has declared its intention to assume increased responsibility in international affairs.

To this end, the German government may have to re-define its economic priorities, as some of its current activities undermine the ambition of being a responsible power. This applies to the Nord Stream pipelines with Russia and a production facility that Volkswagen, the largest German car manufacturer, operates in Xinjiang, the province in northwest China where mass human rights abuses are taking place. The intensity of economic interdependence with autocratic regimes may become problematic, especially with regard to China. The key question in this context will be how to weigh normative and economic interests against one another when tradeoffs become necessary.

To some extent, an external obstacle to E3 cooperation could arise from the streamlining of EU foreign, security, and defense policymaking. The E3 has often been active on those occasions when decision-making in the EU was too lengthy. Thus, a truly effective EU could mean constrained windows of opportunity for the E3 to add value.

The E3 within Eroding Multilateralism

Given that the world is increasingly dominated by the competition between the US and China, many countries are struggling to find a suitable position on the global stage. This also applies to European states. As far as EU members are concerned, they align with the US and not with China. They have recently reinforced this by calling China a "systemic rival" and imposing targeted sanctions for human rights abuses.[26] In addition, EU member states are increasingly interested in establishing themselves as key players in the global system. However, the key question is how a coherent European Foreign and Security Policy can be put into practice. The departure of a powerful country like the UK from the EU may have far-reaching implications, but they do not necessarily have to be negative. Rather, Brexit could make it easier for the remaining EU members to make headway with their CFSP. At the same time, London and individual EU member states, particularly France and Germany, could increase their cooperation or establish a wide range of new cooperation formats.

For both France and Germany, it is clear that strategic long-term objectives requiring the EU's economic weight cannot be dealt with outside of the EU structures or at national levels. This principle of subsidiarity was made especially clear in the case of economic sanctions against Iran. The E3 became the E3+EU as soon as the economic leverage of the EU was required. Furthermore, in accordance with EU treaties, issues concerning

trade and economic policy are prerogatives of the EU Commission. On many other issues, including investment screenings, 5G, cybersecurity, and data protection, the EU likewise possesses the necessary means to act most effectively. Regardless of Brexit, the UK's interests may continue to converge with the EU's. Under such circumstances, the UK will autonomously apply EU measures such as economic sanctions, which was particularly pronounced in the case of recent EU sanctions against China. The economic leverage that the EU possesses as a large trading bloc is its biggest strength, but this is also its weakness. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen tellingly admitted in the context of the Covid-19 vaccination campaign that "alone a country can be a speedboat, while the EU is more like a tanker."[27]

This assessment applies to the area of European Foreign and Security Policy, too. A wide range of security challenges, often unforeseeable, that require rapid and immediate answers are likely to arise. Even a mid-sized speedboat such as the E3 format can fail to respond coherently, as events in the Strait of Hormuz have shown. Bringing 27 nation-states together in order to define a common position under significant time constraints is, however, an even more difficult task. So-called minilateral cooperation formats bear the potential to complement the EU without substituting it and vice versa. It is likely, for instance, that the French-led operation in the Strait of Hormuz may have paved the way for an EU mission in the mid- to long-term.

As a minilateral engagement, the E3 could thus complement the EU and contribute to what Brussels has yet failed to achieve: a coherent, effective, and rapid answer to global developments promoting European norms and values. A strong E3, on the one hand, runs the risk that other EU member states may feel excluded at times. On the other hand, from the UK's perspective, France and Germany are not the only useful partners in Europe. Depending on the issue in question, Sweden, Poland, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Austria may offer London what France and Germany do not. This could result in many new speedboat-like informal cooperation formats accompanying the tanker of the EU. This increased ad-hoc minilateralism should, however, complement and not substitute EU foreign and security policy. Such a division of responsibilities has the potential to maximize Europe's footprint in the world, not despite Brexit, but rather as a result of a new set of post-Brexit power configurations. The key will be a convergence of national interests, fortunate timing, and political will.

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CHAPTER 3

Turkey's New Outlook: Power Projection in the Middle East and Beyond

Niklas Masuhr

Turkey's military operations in 2020 and beyond lie at the intersection of a more activist and autonomous foreign policy, the continuous mutation of the country's guiding ideologies, increased autocracy at home, and an expeditionary military machine 25 years in the making. Trends and shifts in both the short and long terms, from changing government coalitions in Turkey to the Syrian civil war, help to explain the erstwhile Kemalist Republic's accelerated transformation, both internationally and domestically, as well as its likely strategic implications.

A Turkish soldier walks next to a Turkish military vehicle during a joint US-Turkey patrol, near Tel Abyad, Syria, September 8, 2019. *Rodi Said / Reuters*

Turkish military operations throughout 2020 came as a shock to many Western policymakers and commentators, both in terms of their political audacity and their aggressive nature. In particular, its armed forces' use of Unmanned Aerial (Combat) Vehicles (UAV/UCAV) made headlines far beyond the usual bubble of military technology watchers. Beyond the battlefields of Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's increasing assertiveness in foreign policy and heavy-handedness at home have long invited diplomatic frustration and pensive analyses in NATO countries. Indeed, the very trustworthiness and reliability of Ankara as a NATO member has been questioned.

Many facets of Turkey's recent behavior have simmered for years, even decades, and have only now reached full maturation. In domestic politics, the ruling AK Party's soft Islamism has merged with ethno-nationalist currents. In the military sphere, meanwhile, important force design decisions made decades ago ensure that Erdogan has the capacity to project power as he sees fit. These developments intersect with a destabilized international environment that permits, and perhaps even advantages, the overt use of military force that Turkey undertook in 2020.

While interventions in Libya, Syria, and in the Nagorno-Karabakh war rely on similar tools and operational preferences, the politico-strategic drivers behind them are anything but uniform. Turkey's military interventions in all three theaters notably featured the use of UCAVs, but its objectives in Syria, Libya, and the Southern Caucasus were quite different in each case. The Syrian civil war naturally has a direct impact on Turkey's own national security and determines its relations with regional and extra-regional powers, most notably the US and Russia. Importantly, the Syrian war also prompted renewed concerns in Turkey over the Kurdish conflict. Operations in Libya reflect both the ideological makeup of Turkey's current governing coalition and the country's policies to ensure energy security. Support for Azerbaijan against Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, meanwhile, was similarly driven by ideological support and energy security as well as Turkey's ambiguous relationship with Russia. While Moscow has acquiesced to direct Turkish and Turkish-supported military action in all three theaters, the results in each case likely would have played out much differently if Russia had not done so. This lenience appears to be driven mostly by Moscow's desire to further weaken the already strained bonds between Ankara and its NATO

allies in the West. Taken together, all three areas of operation showcase not only Turkey's current assertiveness, but also the multi-vectored drivers of this trend and how the country seeks to position itself in an increasingly uncertain security environment.

Kemalist Past and Recent Shifts

There is no straight line between the rise of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power and Turkey's current approach to international engagement. The developments that have led here can be viewed through the prism of civil-military relations and changes in the state-endorsed doctrine in three phases: pre-2002 military dominance, the AKP's struggle to roll back that dominance culminating in the failed coup attempt in July 2016, and, lastly, the reintegration of military elites by way of ideological realignments inside Turkey.

During the first phase, until the election of the conservative AKP in 2002, the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) served as the guardrails of Atatürk's Kemalist vision. Turkey joined NATO in 1952; inter-military links with the US were especially pronounced until and beyond the end of the Cold War. The corollary of anchoring Turkey to the West was that it withdrew from the wider Middle East.[1]

The fall of the Soviet Union, however, fundamentally changed Turkey's strategic environment. Within Turkish security policy circles, the two main internal opponents to Kemalism, separatism (meaning Kurdish resistance) and Islamism, replaced the Red Army at the top of the threat list. Against Islamist forces, the military set up monitoring mechanisms in order to collect intelligence, ban non-secular parties if necessary, and prevent the circumvention of the Kemalist canon – even in the face of Islamist movements gathering steam among the electorate. By the mid-1990s, an Islamist-influenced coalition government, headed by the Welfare Party, was in power. In 1997, the military intervened and overturned the government, eventually banning the Welfare Party. This, however, merely delayed the rise of some of its members, among them Erdogan himself, who successfully regrouped as the Justice and Development (AK) Party.

In 2002, the AKP swept national politics in a landslide victory at the general election. From the beginning, the Islamist party was hindered by the military, setting the tone for a conflictual relationship that culminated in the attempted coup on 15 July 2016. These two events serve as bookends for the second period under observation. During this period, the AKP and its allies wrested control of the state and

societal institutions from the TSK, even as instability rose throughout Turkey's neighborhood after the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011. In terms of the country's broader foreign policy and strategic outlook, the new government sought to capitalize on the pivotal position afforded to it by straddling Europe and Asia. Under the so-called Strategic Depth doctrine, Ahmet Davutoglu, a political scientist-turned-diplomat-turned-politician, formalized the idea that Turkey possessed a natural sphere of influence not only in terms of geography but also by virtue of historic linkages throughout the region as the heir to the Ottoman Empire. These ideas formed the basis for 'neo-Ottomanism', which would replace Kemalism as the state ideology. Part and parcel of this construct was the dictum of "zero problems" with Turkey's neighbors, as Davutoglu in his capacity as Turkey's foreign minister sought to position the country as a pivotal power drawing its political capital from diplomatic relations.

The AKP and its then-allies in the religious Gülen movement proved quite successful in rolling back military influence, mainly through a series of trials from 2007 onward that exhibited questionable adherence to the rule of law. Prosecutors alleged the existence of an ultra-nationalist network ("Ergenekon") and the existence of military contingency plans leading to a coup, referred to as "Sledgehammer."[2] While ultra-nationalist officers and civilian allies were certainly opposed to the AKP government and had proven their propensity for intervening in politics, the vast judicial proceedings also caught left-of-center journalists in its nets.[3]

Externally, a string of events after 2010 put the Erdogan government into "survival mode." The first external event and the ignition for much of what followed was the eruption of the Arab Spring. Erdogan at first sought to ride its wave by presenting himself as patron and partner to moderate Islamist forces, many of which were national organizations of the Muslim Brotherhood. This approach, however, meant that Turkey was overtly at loggerheads with more secular regimes. In Egypt, a military coup aborted the attempt to create an Islamic republic.[4] The shockwaves of the Arab Spring also reached Istanbul itself, and in 2013 the city was rocked by a series of liberal protests at Gezi Park directed against the ever increasing autocracy of the AKP. The response was a major crackdown on left-of-center opposition and a stifling of critical media and the judiciary. Across the border, the destabilization of Syria and Iraq and the expansion of the Islamic State (IS) resulted in a long-term zone of instability.

Perhaps the most significant catalyst for Erdogan's transformation of the country, however, was the 15 July 2016 coup attempt, undertaken by a coalition of disgruntled TSK officers. After the attempt was suppressed, loyalists carried out further purges of the military, judiciary, media, and opposition. In total, 130,000 public servants were dismissed, including teachers and academics, and almost 80,000 suspects were formally arrested on grounds of supposed links with Kurdish elements and the Gülen network, which had turned from ally to domestic enemy.[5] As one might expect, the purges within the military targeted those individuals encultured in NATO and US military contexts. Leaked US State Department cables revealed that even by the early 2000s, these "Atlanticists" were on the backfoot against "Eurasianists" who preferred the AKP's neo-Ottoman vision of Turkey as a pivotal, autonomous power.[6]

The failed coup also serves as the starting point for the third and current phase of civil-military relations. While the military was institutionally defanged, elements of the old guard's nationalism have been re-introduced and play an important role in foreign policy formulation. This shift meant that Davutoglu's neo-Ottomanism has been superseded by what some have called "Turkish Gaullism."[7] In essence, ethno-nationalist paradigms were imported into the state canon even before the coup attempt occurred. In 2018, the AKP entered into a coalition with the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which holds even more hostile views towards the Kurds, Armenia, and the Western world. Since then, the vision of Turkey as a major power in the Ottoman Empire's former borders has remained but has been complemented by the willingness to use military force in this perceived sphere of influence.[8] Two decades of TSK force development dovetail with these aspirations.

In 2016, Erdogan listed a number of regional defense precepts that benign media would dub the "Erdogan doctrine." Its main tenets, notably a policy of proactive incursions into neighboring countries to pre-empt attacks against Turkey, have roots that extend as far back as the 1990s. In fact, contemporary operations under this guise closely mirror those undertaken in the 1990s, though of course now enhanced by additional military capabilities.

During the military modernization campaign of the 1990s, Turkey's forces were not simply symmetrically modernized across the board. Rather, specific elements geared towards a particular way of war were upgraded. Namely, investments and acquisitions

were made to develop a robust reconnaissance-strike complex enabled by systems such as rocket artillery, UAVs, and airborne tankers. In essence, the ability to conduct strikes into enemy territory was emphasized, as were mobile and flexible mechanized formations. However, the Cold War highlighted the vulnerability to Western arms embargoes and convinced Turkish planners to build an autonomous arms industry capable of producing the necessary platforms, systems, and spare parts. These domestic developments intersected with external events, especially the dynamics of the Syrian civil war and its Kurdish dimension. Operations in Syria, Libya, and the Southern Caucasus illustrate how the third phase of civil-military relations shapes Turkey's power projection in the region.

Syria quite naturally presents the most important theater for Turkey's security policy. Operations in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh are results of the domestic political shift in 2016, but Ankara involved itself in its neighbor's civil war from the very beginning in 2011. One month after the coup, Turkish tanks entering Syria marked the Syrian dimension of Turkey's "new look" as a more aggressive actor. Turkish involvement in Syria was also a crucial driver of Ankara's alienation from Washington and its increasing, if ambiguous, alignment with Moscow.

Syria: Overthrowing Assad

Ankara's policies during the first five years of the conflict were publicly justified along moral lines based on Turkey as a champion of democratization, with Russia and Iran playing the roles of counter-revolutionary enforcers. In this narrative, the US and NATO were viewed as fickle at best and treacherous at worst.[9] The Assad regime's crackdown in the summer of 2011 forced Turkey to choose between support for the dictator and the credibility of the Turkish/AKP model of soft, bottom-up Islamism in the wider Arab world, a key tenet in Davutoglu's neo-Ottoman program.

In this period of enforcing regime change, Turkey permitted and supported the formation of organized Syrian opposition and the founding of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) on its territory in November 2011. Simultaneously to Qatar and Saudi Arabia (but without coordinating with either), Ankara also supported radical Islamist groups of credible combat effectiveness in the region such as al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra and precursor elements of IS.[10] Turkish action effectively strengthened the Islamic State group, mostly due to its preference for toppling Assad and preventing the emergence of a Kurdish-controlled quasi-state.

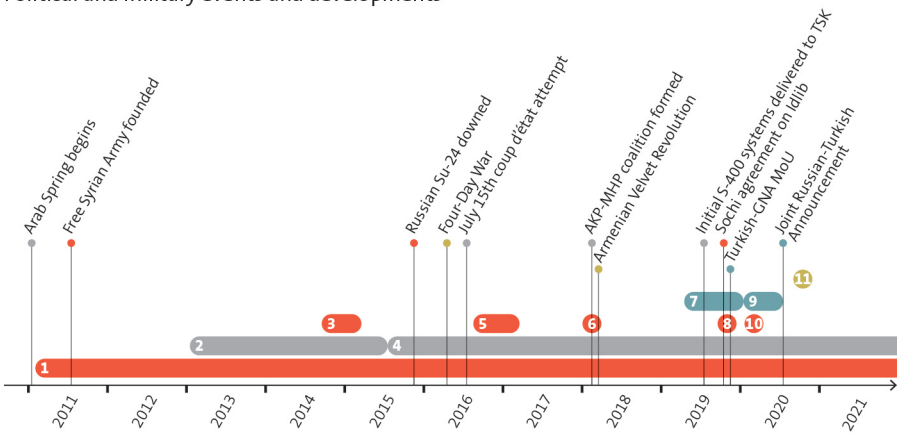
By 2015, it was clear this low-cost approach had failed: Assad was still in power, and stabilized thanks to a massive joint Iranian/Hezbollah proxy campaign and Moscow's intervention. However, Turkey's attempts at regime change from a presumably safe distance also failed because of the miscalculations inherent in the approach. Two events that would have precipitated regime collapse, namely en masse defections from the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) or a NATO air campaign, did not materialize, contrary to Turkey's expectations. In the latter case, the White House's infamous "Red Line" declarations surely contributed to Turkey's assumptions.[11] After threatening military action if Assad were to use chemical weapons, President Obama failed to follow through, thereby undercutting the US position on Syria and failing to deter subsequent use of chemical weapons by Assad.

In addition, events on the ground in Syria meant that Turkish attention shifted from Assad back to Kurdish influence as the major perceived threat even before the coup attempt occurred. As recently as 2013, Erdogan had attempted to negotiate directly with the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, to peacefully end or mitigate the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Both sides had, in fact, agreed to a ceasefire. The Syrian civil war and its dynamics, however, reignited tensions. With the exception of certain Iraqi special operations forces, Syrian Kurdish (YPG/YPJ[12]) units and the PKK had been virtually the only military units able to stem the tide of the IS onslaught into Syria and Iraq – significantly boosting their international reputation as a result. In 2014 and 2015, Kurdish-led forces had held out in the besieged city of Kobane, supported from the air by the counter-IS coalition, while Ankara refused to support the Kurdish holdout on its border. Turkey's refusal to assist the fighters, and a series of Islamic State bomb attacks that targeted members of the Kurdish opposition, reignited the PKK's insurgency inside Turkey after the flagging peace process broke down in 2015. Erdogan was quick to pivot from peacemaking efforts to warnings that the Kurds were the major threat facing Turkey – somewhat foreshadowing the return of the ethno-nationalist over the neo-Ottoman paradigm that would later be formalized.

In the chaos of the civil war, YPG and its allies carved out zones of effective control in northwestern Syria around Afrin City and controlled most of the country's rural northeast and east. The decision by the United States and its NATO allies to work with the YPG

Turkey's Security Environment since 2011

Political and military events and developments



1 **March 2011 – Ongoing :** Syrian civil war
2 **January 2013 – July 2015:** PKK peace process
3 **September 2014 – March 2015:** IS siege of Kobani
4 **July 2015 – Ongoing:** Renewed PKK insurgency
5 **August 2016 – March 2017:** Operation Euphrates Shield
6 **January 2018 – March 2018:** Operation Olive Branch
7 **April 2019 – January 2020:** LNA offensive on Tripoli
8 **October 2019:** Operation Peace Spring
9 **January 2020 – July 2020:** TSK/GNA counter-offensive
10 **February 2020 – March 2020:** Operation Spring Shield
11 **September 2020 – November 2020:** Nagorno-Karabakh war

Syria
Eastern Mediterranean and Libya
Nagorno-Karabakh

and its local allies as their preferred ground component in counter-IS operations was a source of consternation for Ankara. The prospect of a contiguous Syrian Kurdish quasi-state, straddling borders and receiving external support, constituted the worst possible result of the Syrian civil war in Turkey's eyes. Operation *Euphrates Shield* in August 2016 was Turkey's response, and would be followed up by three more major offensive campaigns by the spring of 2020, two of which were aimed at Kurds.

Syria: Adjustment of Ends and Means

Euphrates Shield is principally the operational result of an adjustment of aims and investment: Whereas

previously Ankara had pursued a low-cost, maximalist approach, now both sides of the equation were adjusted. The operation was, furthermore, tightly linked with the unsuccessful coup attempt that had occurred only one month earlier. For one, TSK leadership had opposed deploying ground forces into Syria for over a year[13] and, secondly, the offensive proved the Turkish military's continued readiness and operational ability in the wake of post-coup purges. It also serves as the inciting incident for the current expeditionary political and military configuration observed in Syria and later theaters.[14]

The operation's objective was to create a secure zone on Syrian soil and to prevent the SDF from connecting their northeastern territories to Syria's northwestern Afrin province and create a "corridor of terror," in Ankara's parlance. In order to launch the operation, the Turkish government established the parameters of engagement with Washington and Moscow – but proceeded to exceed the limits agreed with the US.[15] By ensuring Russian acquiescence, Turkey established itself as an additional state actor in the civil war, securing a stake in Syria's future and establishing a precedent for what has been called "cooperative competition" with Russia.[16] In addition, Turkey quietly withdrew support from groups defending the besieged city of Aleppo that would fall to the SAA in December – a tacit acceptance of spheres of influence.[17]

Russia's established military dominance in Syria and growing disenchantment with the Obama administration compelled Erdogan to seek rapprochement with Russia. Turkey increasingly viewed the US as an intrusive rival due to its support for the YPG/YPJ, whereas Turkey could work with Moscow once it had dropped the priority of toppling Assad. The tepid reaction of Turkey's Western allies to the coup attempt was in clear contrast to its swift condemnation by Russia. Even during the previous, "idealistic" period of Turkey's Syrian policies, the Obama administration's refusal to turn its airstrikes against Assad and its support for Kurdish elements on the ground had soured relations considerably. In 2015, various Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, and other armed groups had organized under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – even if YPG units formed the operational core and leadership.

Ankara's priority of containing the YPG's influence became even clearer in subsequent operations after 2016. While the TSK's armed occupation of the SDF-controlled majority Kurdish Afrin enclave in early 2018 was more

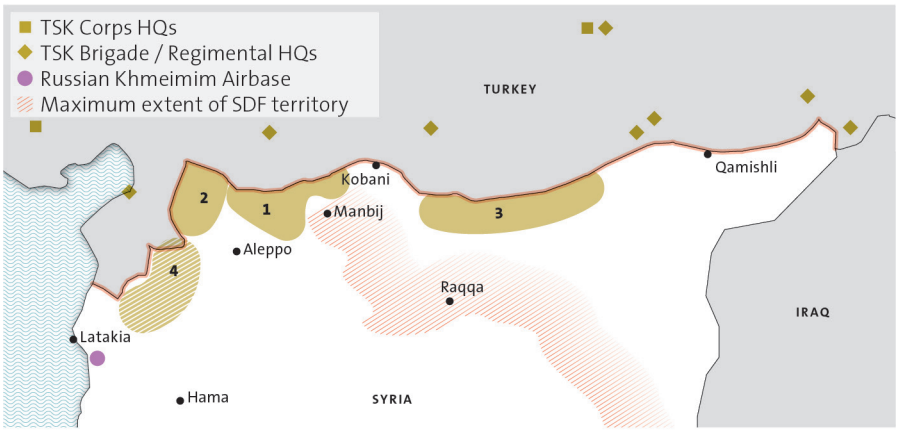
or less accepted by the US, its broad-front incursion into Kurdish territory in October 2019 showcased the degree to which Washington and Ankara had been on a collision course. These events also underlined Turkey's swing towards Russia in a variety of ways. When SDF forces retreated in front of the Turkish army and its proxies in 2019, they agreed on a compromise with Assad and his Russian backers. In effect, this meant that SAA troops entered SDF-held territories to deter further TSK advances. The US position in Syria, meanwhile, was concomitantly weakened due to its apparent inability to manage its relations with the SDF and Turkey. It also propelled Putin and Erdogan to sign an agreement in Sochi during the same month, agreeing to joint patrols along Syria's northern border and deconfliction measures to be undertaken in the western province of Idlib. This settlement with Russia to some degree neutralized or at least mitigated the perceived threat emanating from SDF's control of border crossings. In many ways, this turnaround is remarkable, as Russo-Turkish relations had been at a low as recently as 2015.

From its main airbase in Khmeimim, Latakia province, the Russian Air Force started to conduct bombing campaigns against the opposition in September 2015. However, in November a Turkish F-16 fighter shot down a Russian Su-24 attack aircraft, causing a major diplomatic crisis. Russia in response imposed a series of economic sanctions, targeted at Turkey's export, construction, and tourism sectors. However, the sanctions were not designed to be extensive, as Moscow sought to minimize negative repercussions for Russia, and consequently they did not inflict massive damage on the Turkish economy. For this reason, Moscow also did not threaten to reduce or cease deliveries of natural gas to Turkey, its second-largest foreign consumer, despite Ankara depending on Moscow for 56 per cent of its supply.[18] Ankara formally apologized for the downing of the Russian aircraft and endorsed the Russian-driven Astana process to discuss Syria's political future. As mentioned above, *Euphrates Shield* operationalized the new reality of Turkey's acceptance of the status quo – Assad remaining in power – and the new consultative if still competitive relationship with Russia regarding Syria. Two military developments showcased this shift particularly clearly: Turkey's acquisition of Russian S-400 air defense systems, ignoring significant US resistance to this action, and its 2020 aerial offensive against Assad's SAA in Idlib province.

By February 2020, Ankara had long abandoned the idea of toppling Assad, but the TSK conducted a series of

Turkish Military Operations in the Syrian Theater

Since 2016



1 **Euphrates Shield:** August 2016 – March 2017, mechanized incursion into northern Syria in reaction to IS cross-border attacks and to contain the SDF's sphere of influence.

2 **Olive Branch:** January – March 2018, armed occupation of Afrin province in northwestern Syria against SDF units.

3 **Peace Spring:** October – November 2019, mechanized incursion into SDF-held area along Turkish-Syrian border.

4 **Spring Shield:** February – March 2020, retaliatory UCAV and artillery strikes against SAA across Idlib province in western Syria.

Source: GlobalSecurity.org (Locations of Turkish HQs)

drone and artillery strikes against the SAA that month that crippled its forces in Idlib province on Syria's northwestern border with Turkey. Civilian refugees, along with Turkish-backed rebel groups and jihadist elements (organized within the Nusra-successor HTS) had been pressed into a shrinking perimeter slightly larger than Luxembourg and only three-quarters the size of Rhode Island. While the Turkish strikes (referred to as Operation *Spring Shield*) were intended to relieve pressure on this perimeter, they were also conducted in retaliation for a Russian air strike that killed 33 TSK soldiers. The fact that it was the SAA that was punished through UCAVs and precision artillery, and not Russian forces, reflects the nature of cooperative competition between Ankara and Moscow. With Assad being iced out of the Sochi format, the diplomatic vehicle that manages deconfliction in Idlib, Russia and Turkey have been able to send military signals to

each other over his head. Spring Shield was a manifestation of the current modus operandi between the two powers. These dynamics would be replicated later in Libya and to some extent in Nagorno-Karabakh.

While *Spring Shield* proved the potency of the TSK's modern reconnaissance-strike complex, it did not prove strategically decisive, as it failed to push the line of contact back significantly from the Turkish border.[19] Yet, as suggested above, the operation proved useful in demonstrating that Russia and Turkey were able to wage proxy warfare across a very limited space without coming to blows directly. To some extent, this is surely the result of Russia's militarily and politically entrenched position inside the country. *Euphrates Shield* in 2016 did buy Turkey a seat at the table regarding the future of Syria and provided Turkey with some degree of leverage over Russia. However, this influence appears to be confined to Syrian territory itself and, even more narrowly, the zone of contact between Turkish and Russian-backed forces. Russia sits much more comfortably and has the ability to increase pressure on Turkey at will through the expendable instrument of Assad's SAA. While rapprochement with Putin was a logical consequence of US support for the YPG and its opaque policies on intervention, Erdogan's relationship with Moscow appears similarly asymmetrical.

Securing the Libyan Bridgehead

While the application of military force inside Syria is not too surprising given the state's role in Turkey's security, the military campaign in Libya arose largely due to Turkish nationalists' vision of the country's regional posture and their resurgent influence within the security apparatus. While Ankara has sought to influence the political and military balance in Libya ever since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, it only overtly intervened in the civil war in late 2019. In November of that year, the Turkish government signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) codifying the Turkish interpretation of maritime claims with Libya's internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), based in the capital Tripoli. In exchange for recognition of Turkish maritime claims, Ankara promised to stabilize the GNA's precarious military situation in a separate MoU – and duly delivered. In doing so, the TSK joined a long list of external actors that are pursuing various degrees of overlapping and competing goals in the North African country.

The GNA has been locked in civil war with Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), a consortium of

militias and mercenaries that has coalesced around a core of former regime troops, since 2014.[20] The LNA has been supported materially and militarily by the UAE, as well as politically by Egypt and France, and is increasingly reliant on Russian private military companies, such as the now-infamous Wagner Group that has entrenched itself in the Libyan conflict. In terms of interests, the UAE are driven by their version of domino theory, fearing Muslim Brotherhood-style bottom-up Islamism creeping closer to the Gulf, whereas its local ally Russia has broader and more diffuse aims, including to accommodate Turkey somewhat in order to weaken NATO cohesion.[21]

Turkey's interest in Libya is not new, but the domestic political shift in Turkey has also manifested itself in the Libyan theater. In the years immediately after the overthrow of Gaddafi, Turkey had mostly been involved through its support for Islamist forces inside the country, in line with its priority of proselytizing the AKP's model throughout the region. This extended to support for ideologically aligned groups, reportedly including those responsible for the 2012 attacks on US diplomatic and intelligence facilities in Benghazi.[22] Secondary motivations for the intervention may have included countering and imposing costs upon regional rivals, in this case specifically the UAE and Egypt, as well as safeguarding economic interests inside the country, mostly bound up in the construction sector. The AKP's coalition with the nationalists in the MHP, however, has folded personnel and ideas from the formerly dominant Kemalist military brain trust into official government policy, and Libya happens to play a key role in the current government's aspirations. The ideological set of beliefs most responsible for the move into Libya is a 2006 pronouncement by then-Rear Admiral Cem Gürdeniz of Turkey's "Blue Homeland" *(Mavi Vatan),* which claims a wide exclusive zone of influence around Turkey's shores.[23] Erdogan's ideological pivot is exemplified by how Gürdeniz, purged and arrested in the Sledgehammer trials, has now become a major author of Turkey's regional posture. *Mavi Vatan* has become the maritime element of the ruling coalition's drive for global relevance through regional dominance and underpins the expansion of Turkey's naval power projection capabilities. Ankara's attachment to the GNA, and its internationally recognized status in particular, stems from its conflict with Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt over competing interpretations of exclusive economic zones in the Eastern Mediterranean and the gas drilling rights that come with them. While its

rivals have locked shields through the EastMed Gas Forum (EMGF), coordinating their efforts, the GNA is the only state actor recognizing Ankara's interpretation.

At first glance, the reasons for Turkey's confrontational stance, as well as its willingness to engage in a proxy war abroad, appear to be tied to interests over carbohydrate exploitation. After all, Turkey imported 72 per cent of its energy in 2018. It has also sought to substitute deliveries from its occasional cooperative regional rivals Russia and Iran with gas from its ally Azerbaijan. However, these priorities only go so far in explaining Ankara's willingness to engage in a militarized tug-of-war with Greece and France, which deployed naval forces in support of Athens in early 2020, in the Eastern Mediterranean. There have – as of early 2021 – not been significant finds of natural gas in the exclusive economic zones claimed by Turkey and agreed to by the Tripoli government. Ankara instead appears to be motivated by its new desire to establish itself as a major regional power and global actor, as well as its disenchantment with Europe and the US. With the latter's disengagement from the wider region, Turkey seeks to assert itself into pivotal positions and make itself indispensable. In other words, Turkey's principal problem with the EMGF lies not in claims over gas supplies, but rather in the idea that Turkey cannot accept exclusion from any spheres of influence, especially as the long-simmering conflict with Greece lies at the heart of the issue, both geographically and metaphorically.[24] Confronting Greece in particular over competing interpretations of national sovereignty of course also acts as a *cause célèbre,* especially among Erdogan's nationalist-Eurasianist allies in the military and MHP.

Libya thus presents both a political and military bridgehead for Turkish exploitation efforts necessary to break out of the perceived containment imposed by its neighbors. In broader regional strategic terms, this aim has been viewed as an element of the pivot that has been observed since 2016 regarding Syria, where Ankara moved away from attempting to export Turkey's soft Islamist model by toppling Assad. In geographic terms, this shift constitutes a reframing of Turkey's strategic areas of concern – a narrowing of priorities onto the Kurdish issue regarding Syria and the wider Middle East and an elevation of the Eastern Mediterranean. This also carries with it an emphasis on Turkey's growing navy, which has not only been used to support combat operations in Libya but has also escorted Turkish exploration vessels and intimidated European and Israeli ones.[25] It also has

been used to escort arms shipments into Libya in contravention of the UN arms embargo – which the EU's IRINI mission seeks to enforce. Most incendiary in this regard was a spring 2020 incident in which TSK frigates radar-locked a French naval vessel.[26]

While Ankara insists on the legitimacy of its intervention, Tripoli only acceded to the twin memoranda when the LNA was about to break into the capital, after Turkish diplomats had agitated for a maritime demarcation deal for over a year. As such, the GNA reluctantly put itself at Ankara's mercy and likely should be considered fully reliant militarily on Turkey's support. The Tripoli government had been under significant pressure from the LNA. Turkey's January 2020 deployment, based around UCAVs and Syrian National Army (SNA, formerly FSA) fighters used as a mercenary expeditionary force, was able to reverse the momentum – despite Haftar being supported operationally by UAE manned and unmanned aviation and Russian mercenaries.

While Turkey managed to stabilize the GNA's military position, its intervention can hardly be viewed as an unqualified success. Ankara and its allies' forces managed to counter-attack and drive the LNA back to Sirte, in the center of Libya's Mediterranean coast, where the front lines appear to have settled into a stalemate following a Russo-Turkish announcement in May 2020. From here, the assessment becomes less clear-cut. Turkey has raised the stakes by significantly contributing to a theater-wide arms race between the warring Libyan factions. In 2014, most external supplies consisted of infantry weapons, including shoulder-launched air defense systems (MANPADs) at the upper end, but since then the conflict has been fought by UCAVs, attack helicopters, modern anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), and mobile air defense systems such as Pantsir-S1.[27] In addition, around 10,000 foreign mercenaries have flocked to the country's battlefields, including the SNA and nominally private Russian forces. Most notable in this regard is surely Russia's Wagner Group, which has not only supplied advisors and specialist frontline forces, but also maintains and operates MiG-29 and Su-24 fighter and attack aircraft, in addition to having established a fixed command and control infrastructure. On the eastern side, Wagner contractors have reportedly built major fortifications and trenches along a 280-kilometer line between Sirte and al-Jufrah airbase in the desert – quite literally entrenching the current political and military status quo. On top of these military developments, the GNA dissolved in early 2021 to be

replaced by a Government of National Unity (GNU) that seeks to re-unify the country – even if, as of April 2021, it is unclear how the military and political divide of the country can be overcome if external actors have invested so heavily militarily.

At present, both Ankara and Moscow appear to have achieved favorable conditions, in particular at the expense of the LNA and UAE, as well as the Tripoli government, which is at the mercy of its protectors. That being said, it is unclear how exactly these dynamics translate into the GNU's stated task of forming a unified government and how Turkey and Russia might leverage their military positions for political advances inside the new government. Erdogan's government, meanwhile, continues its confrontational course with the EU and its NATO partners, whose responses have been complicated by both France and Italy, which support different sides of the Libyan Civil War. That being said, while Turkey has again showcased its willingness to accommodate Russia at the expense of the West and its local allies, its position in Libya is perhaps fairly vulnerable due to how intimately it is tied to the Tripoli government's legitimacy and Ankara's wider Mediterranean ambitions. Some suggest that Turkey is in the process of overextending its footprint beyond its political means.[28]

The success of the efforts that Ankara has undertaken in pursuit of securing a bridgehead in the Maghreb is very much dependent on broader processes still to be resolved. While the Libyan theater does not constitute a major drain on the TSK's resources, Turkey risks overextension in the political sphere by its bullish stance towards European NATO allies. In such a calculation, a strategic assessment of Libyan operations could only be seriously undertaken once the gas exploration feud with the EMGF has been settled one way or the other. Until then, Turkey has opened a flank that comes with vulnerabilities. For one, a permanent presence and commitment to the GNA and its successor elements on the ground permits Russia to potentially put pressure on Turkey, even for gains related to other theaters or political issues. While its local allies are dependent on Turkish support and protection, Ankara also depends on the semi-legal status conferred to its operation provided by the November 2019 MoUs. Perhaps most significantly, however, the Erdogan government's confrontational course towards Europeans, in particular France, might come back to haunt Ankara if the Eurasianists' promises fail to materialize. While Turkey has proven in Libya that it can "work with" Russia, just as it did in Syria and subsequently in Nagorno-Karabakh,

it has to be noted that Moscow's lenience is at least partially based on weakening ties between Turkey and the West. Whether this is a sustainable foundation for years to come remains to be seen.

Two States, One Military Doctrine

Turkey's energetic diplomatic and military support for Azerbaijan in the fall 2020 war over Nagorno-Karabakh to some extent mirrors the ideological shift of 2016. However, while the current configuration of Erdogan's leadership cadre has indeed proven decisive, the ground for Turkey's support in the war had been prepared for almost a decade. As recently as 2011, Turkey had pressured Baku not to re-open conflict over Azerbaijan's breakaway region, where tensions have simmered since 1994. In fact, Davutoglu had previously even sought to normalize relations with Armenia, only to have his efforts successfully torpedoed by Turkish nationalist circles, the Azerbaijani government's protests, and resistance amongst Armenians. As a result of this failed normalization experiment, links with Baku were strengthened and the military dimension of the Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance Treaty gradually reinforced.[29] Wider diplomatic efforts to defuse and ultimately resolve the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh are anchored within the OSCE's Minsk Group under French, Russian, and US leadership. However, frustrations at the lack of progress contributed to Baku's decision to attempt a military solution.[30]

At first glance, the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh might appear as a partial Russo-Turkish proxy war, as the former is allied with Armenia through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). At the same time, Turkey and Azerbaijan's warm relations and the slogan "two states, one nation" showcase Ankara's preferences clearly. But just as in Syria since 2016 and in Libya, the reality is more complex, and it can be argued that Moscow and Ankara are acting more in concert than against each other. Russian acquiescence to the Azerbaijani offensive likely results from its government's disdain for Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and his pro-Western leanings. In effect, Turkey and Azerbaijan acted as Russia's muscle in sending a message to the region, beyond Armenia, that Russian power could also manifest itself through acquiescence to external threats.[31] This line of thinking was indeed shown by Yevgeniy Prigozhin, oligarch and head of the conglomerate that the Wagner Group is attached to, who – speaking most likely as a proxy for Moscow – effectively described Pashinyan and his 2018 Velvet Revolution as a CIA project and

only drew a red line at Armenia's borders, purposefully excluding the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.[32]

Turkey's motives for the engagement were multifaceted, though more direct than in Libya. For one, oil-rich Azerbaijan serves as a major supplier of energy resources to Turkey, and SOCAR, Azerbaijan's state-owned petroleum and gas company, is the biggest single foreign investor in the Turkish economy. Second, increasing its footprint in the Caucasus would provide useful leverage over Russia in other, more relevant, theaters. Lastly, hostility towards Armenia is of great importance to the ultra-nationalist MHP and its main constituency. Baku itself, meanwhile, was likely driven by a wave of anti-Armenian sentiment in the wake of clashes that occurred in the summer of 2020 in conjunction with an economic slump.

As such, the Azerbaijani government, headed by its autocratic president Ilham Aliyev, likely identified a window of opportunity. Previously, most Western commentators had assumed that, as in the 1990s, superior Armenian forces would be able to hold their positions in mountainous terrain, enabling a successful counter-offensive.[33] Another assumption was that Armenia's air defense and territorial advantages would make an Azerbaijani assault prohibitively costly, both militarily and politically. The Four-Day War of 2016, in which both sides deployed heavy weapons in a limited capacity had shown, however, that an Armenian victory was not guaranteed. This experience encouraged Baku to go forward on 27 September 2020. This was a calculation that ultimately proved successful, when to the surprise of virtually all commentators, Azerbaijani forces achieved a clear battlefield victory in six weeks by threatening to move on to the regional capital of Stepanakert. Of greatest significance, however, were not only deliveries of Turkish UCAVs but also the degree to which the TSK had exported its expertise in utilizing a modern, drone-enabled reconnaissance-strike complex. The amount of operational input that Turkish officers had in Azerbaijan's campaign is not known publicly, but it was likely significant.[34]

Still, Russia's apparent unassailable position in the Southern Caucasus puts into question how much Turkey actually gained in the conflict. While Turkish nationalists regard the Azerbaijani campaign as a success and the oil-rich country is indebted to Turkey, it is questionable how much leverage over Moscow was actually gained. The ceasefire that ended open hostilities on 9 November was a trilateral agreement between Russia and the two former

Soviet Republics. Neither Turkey nor the OSCE's Minsk Group played a diplomatic role. Moscow thus demonstrated regional superiority by ending the war on its own terms – having been happy to acquiesce to the decimation of Armenian and Karabakh forces and the resultant loss of territory. As a result of the ceasefire, Russian peacekeepers have been deployed to guard the borders of what is left of Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh, with Azerbaijan reclaiming almost two-thirds of its area.

Moscow was able to quickly and decisively impose red lines and deploy airborne forces as peacekeepers. Reflecting back on Prigozhin's statements regarding Armenia, this to some extent mirrors the Idlib scenario in which Moscow sat back while its proxy suffered casualties, only to step in later. In another parallel, Turkey and Russia effectively conspired to ice out Western influences from the region, as neither the US, the EU, nor the Minsk Group played a significant role in ending the conflict. What is not known so far is to what extent Baku will have to pay for Turkish assistance in the war and how its relationship with Russia is affected by aligning so closely with Erdogan. Ultimately, it cannot be conclusively stated whether Ankara was driven more by the desire to protect its economic health and energy supplies by ingratiating itself with Aliyev or whether the government coalition feels it has to continually stoke the flames of aggressive ethno-nationalism for domestic and ideological reasons. Regardless, and while both complexes were certainly at play, the war's perceived success might create an unrealistic benchmark for the utility of military force – especially if Ankara was motivated primarily by ideological reasons.

Implications

As has become apparent, the political cocktail that created the current iteration of Turkey's foreign policy orientation did not magically appear in 2020, but has simmered at least since the AKP's accession to power in 2002 and in many ways precedes it. While Erdogan first sought to defang the military institutionally and roll back the secular old guard, this group has re-emerged somewhat as a force favoring an assertive, anti-Western ethno-nationalism. What is new, however, is a military force designed for the type of operations that the ruling coalition requires to pursue its goals, namely fairly rapid, low-cost power projection activities in both Turkey's neighborhood and beyond.

This gives Ankara the flexibility required to insert itself militarily into theaters of critical relevance to its rivals: Turkey has impinged upon the perceived backyards of the European

A New Robotic Way of War?

Perhaps the most publicized feature of Turkey's military campaigns were glossy aerial recordings taken mostly by Turkish-made ANKA-S and TB2 UCAVs that ravaged the Syrian Arab Army and Karabakh-Armenian forces, respectively. A second element that caught the international eye was the deployment of SNA fighters to Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh as an expeditionary force outside Syria, in the latter case reportedly at brigade strength. The creation of a largely strategically autonomous arms industry providing a modern reconnaissance-strike complex is certainly not without operational and even strategic value. In Turkey's case, the autonomy of its forces means it is virtually invulnerable to sanctions. However, beyond the notion that attrition on the battlefield failed to achieve politico-strategic success in any of the three theaters, Turkish military actions have not even been unequivocally successful on the tactical level.

- In **Syria**, the TSK's Operation *Spring Shield* crippled Assad's forces and destroyed large quantities of armored fighting vehicles, artillery pieces and, most significantly, Russian-made air defense systems, especially of the Pantsir-S1 variety. Similar drone feeds emerged from Libya that seemed to suggest Turkey had found a way to overcome the dreaded Russian air defense. However, it should be noted that the SAA's overall performance has not been of particularly high quality, whether directed against Turkish drone strikes or those strikes conducted by NATO forces or the Israeli Air Force during years prior – a result of inferior export versions and lack of training and ability on the part of SAA crews. Air defense and electronic warfare systems controlled by Russia's own military are likely much more capable, even against low-flying UCAVs and loitering munitions. As a case in point, electronic warfare systems at Russia's Gyumri base in Armenia reportedly brought down numerous TB2s when they had crossed the border and approached the base's perimeter.

- Meanwhile, Turkish drones reportedly achieved much less favorable attrition rates against the LNA's forces in **Libya**. This is compounded by the fact that currently the TB2 drone (as opposed to the heavier ANKA-S) can only be operated by line-of-sight guidance and is consequently dependent on ground stations and signal repeaters. As a result, their offensive value in particular would be much lower in a more expansive and fluid battlefield.

- The **Armenian and Karabakh** forces were certainly not designed to counter an enemy equipped with modern UCAVs and loitering munitions. Even so, while the impact of these systems should not be discounted, it has to be noted that Azerbaijani special operations forces still had to fight arduously through the mountains to take the vital town of Shushi on Stepanakert's only supply route to Armenia, effectively winning the war. As with *Spring Shield,* had Russia decided to step in and come to its nominal ally's rescue, the campaign would likely have ended in a much less favorable outcome for Turkey.

- Lastly, while the use of the **SNA** is a convenient way for Ankara to avoid sending non-special forces infantry into harm's way, it has to be noted that their use comes with strings attached. For one, their performance in each Turkish incursion into Syria has been less than satisfactory militarily. Secondly, they present a rather large problem in terms of political optics: The expeditionary use of mercenary forces that have been credibly accused of looting and war crimes in the past is likely not helpful to Turkey's regional image in the long run.

Union in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean and of Russia in the South Caucasus. The TSK has been an effective tool in gaining leverage in these areas and in securing Turkey's position as pivotal and perhaps even indispensable in the international sphere. As has been argued above, none of the 2020 operations have achieved far-reaching successes, mostly due to Moscow holding superior cards in each theater. Paradoxically, however, here also lies a problem in the anti-Western course charted by the nationalists and Eurasianists: The more Turkey distances itself from the US and Europe, the less Russia needs to accommodate Ankara. If Western-Turkish relations were to break down even further, it is unclear what would stop Russia from applying pressure across secondary theaters or even in Syria. In such a scenario, bridgeheads could quickly turn into exposed flanks.

This also means that the Biden administration's cold stance towards Erdogan – neither Secretary of State Antony Blinken nor President Biden bothered to reach out to their counterparts directly for weeks – and its likely selective engagement with the region are not necessarily good news for Erdogan's government. Already in December 2020, Erdogan moderated his tone vis-à-vis the US and Israel. Particularly in view of the normalization of relations between multiple Arab countries and Israel in the waning months of the Trump administration and the announced resumption of multilateral formats by the White House, Turkey likely cannot afford to continue on its present course of alienating neighbors.[35] The two most significant stumbling blocks to at least a more conciliatory relationship with the US are surely questions regarding US support for the YPG and Turkey's acquisition of S-400 systems. President Biden might also be more inclined to use economic sanctions against Turkey than his predecessor was.

These dynamics will, to some extent, increasingly burden Europe, particularly in light of the Eastern Mediterranean confrontation. While Greece, backed up by France, is willing to answer military pressures in kind, a unified European position is unlikely to emerge. NATO, as a result, will have to play a key role in keeping lines of communication open and to soften (or blunt) the edges of Ankara's anti-Western rhetoric and actions. In some ways, it already does so, as the Hellenic Armed Forces and the TSK run deconfliction measures regarding the Aegean struggle through NATO.[36] Beyond NATO, Europe appears ill-equipped to deal with a more muscular Turkey that is willing and able to resort to military force. Here the main

areas of contention are the Eastern Mediterranean and related issues: Libya, the political dispute over Turkey's occupation of Northern Cyprus, maritime demarcation zones, and migration in the Mediterranean region. Further on the horizon, the question of Syrian reconstruction arises, including the respective roles of Europe and Turkey.

Ankara's military posture has afforded it direct levers "on the ground" that European powers lack, especially in Syria and Libya. With the exception of France, whose president has dispatched naval assets into the Aegean to back up Greece, it is questionable to what extent other European powers are willing and able to push back actively and pursue regional interests. In this way, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh must be a cautionary tale to Europeans (and the US): Due to Turkish and Azerbaijani willingness to pursue military options, the Minsk Format has effectively been rendered obsolete – and with it, France's role in its mediation.

Presently, Ankara attempts to run an increasingly complex multi-vectored balancing game in its neighborhood by seeking to apply and release pressure across multiple theaters and forums. The sheer ability and (equally important) willingness to resort to military force swiftly can be considered a great advantage in an unstable region. However, the ideological tint in Turkey's foreign policy might become a liability down the road, despite the institutional marginalization of the TSK. At some stage, the heated rhetoric runs the risk of outrunning the TSK's military capabilities or what Erdogan and his advisors consider acceptable risk. In other words, operations such as those conducted in 2020 risk establishing precedents that military campaigns can be undertaken quickly and cheaply. However, while the resumption of hostilities with Armenia would certainly be popular with the MHP and its ideological allies, as would operations against Kurds or a further distancing from the West, the calculation would change quite dramatically once Moscow decides not to acquiesce.

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CHAPTER 4

Europe and Major-Power Shifts in the Middle East

Lisa Watanabe

As the US scales down its ambitions in the Middle East, Russia has returned to the region, and China's engagement too is on the rise. Such shifts in great-power engagement are generating increased regional instability, as well as enhancing the capacity of China and Russia to shape outcomes in the Middle East. These developments risk undermining Europe's ability to promote its interests and normative agenda.

Handover ceremony of Taji military base in Iraq from US-led coalition troops to Iraqi security forces, 23 August 2020. *Thaier Al-Sudani / Reuters*

Three broad geopolitical trends are unfolding concurrently in the Middle East that Europe must grapple with to further its interests in the region. First, the US has begun a long-term readjustment of its regional engagement, which leaves more room for both regional and major powers to exert their influence. Second, Russia has returned to the Middle East and is adeptly stepping in to fill gaps left by the US. Third, China is becoming an increasingly important economic actor in the region. Although Beijing would prefer to continue to build up its economic footprint and import energy while "free-riding" on US security provision, Chinese and US energy and economic interests in the region could conflict and lead to an escalated US-China rivalry in the Middle East. These three trends are leading to heightened regional volatility that increasingly empowers Russia and China to shape outcomes in ways that undermine the EU's ability to protect its interests and promote its own normative agenda. The EU thus risks being increasingly sidelined in the region. At the same time, minilateral coalitions of different constellations of EU and non-EU states will form a critical part of a European response to Middle East issues.

This chapter begins by exploring how the US is recalibrating its Middle Eastern engagement. It then looks at how Russia's return to the region, though initially prompted largely by economic interests, has evolved to the point where it can now be considered a major regional power broker. Moreover, Russia projects a significantly different image from that of the US, and one that resonates with leaders in the region. This is followed by a discussion of China's burgeoning economic presence in the region and its light, but growing, security footprint. Finally, the chapter considers what these three trends could mean for Europe and its bearing in the region.

The US Steps Back

From the 1980s until the early 2000s, the US possessed both the capacity and will to shape the regional order in the Middle East. This was the result of several overlapping factors. The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had raised fears in Washington that a hostile external force could pose a threat to its access to Persian Gulf oil, particularly since the Shah of Iran, Washington's key ally in the Gulf, had been overthrown that same year. President Jimmy Carter's response – the Carter Doctrine – was to declare that any attempt by an outside force to control Persian Gulf oil would be considered a threat to US vital interests and, if necessary, would be met with military force. Ensuring unfettered access to the Gulf's oil resources

has thus been a key driver of US engagement in the Middle East. Relatedly, concerns about navigation security and the stability and security of Washington's Gulf allies, notably the Arab Gulf states, also prompted US interest in the region. The security of Israel has also become a sacrosanct element of US policy in the Middle East. The importance of securing these interests necessitated preventing hostile powers, such as Saddam Hussein's Iraq or the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, from disrupting the regional status quo. Following the 2001 al-Qaeda attacks in the US, counterterrorism also became a key driver of Washington's regional engagement.

The Carter Doctrine saw the US build a substantial forward military presence in the Gulf and the wider Middle East to enable military interventions, such as Operation Desert Storm in 1991, to reassure allies, and to dissuade foes, including Iraq between 1990 and 2003 and Iran under Khomeini.[1] The US has military bases, facilities, and several thousands of military personnel (some 43,000 in 2020[2]) in numerous countries in the Middle East (see map). Joint military exercises and training with regional allies, as well as arms transfers, have also helped foster close relations with friendly Middle Eastern states and ensure their compatibility with the US military. Diplomacy and foreign aid, directed at promoting economic and political reforms, have also often been used to help shape the regional landscape. Military aid has proved another useful bargaining chip; the 1978 Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel, for example, includes a provision for an ongoing commitment of US military aid to Egypt. Military aid similarly helped facilitate peace between Israel and Jordan in 1993. Moreover, Israel receives considerable US military aid to ensure it maintains a military advantage in the region. Trade more generally and investment never formed a significant part of US policy in the Middle East, however.[3]

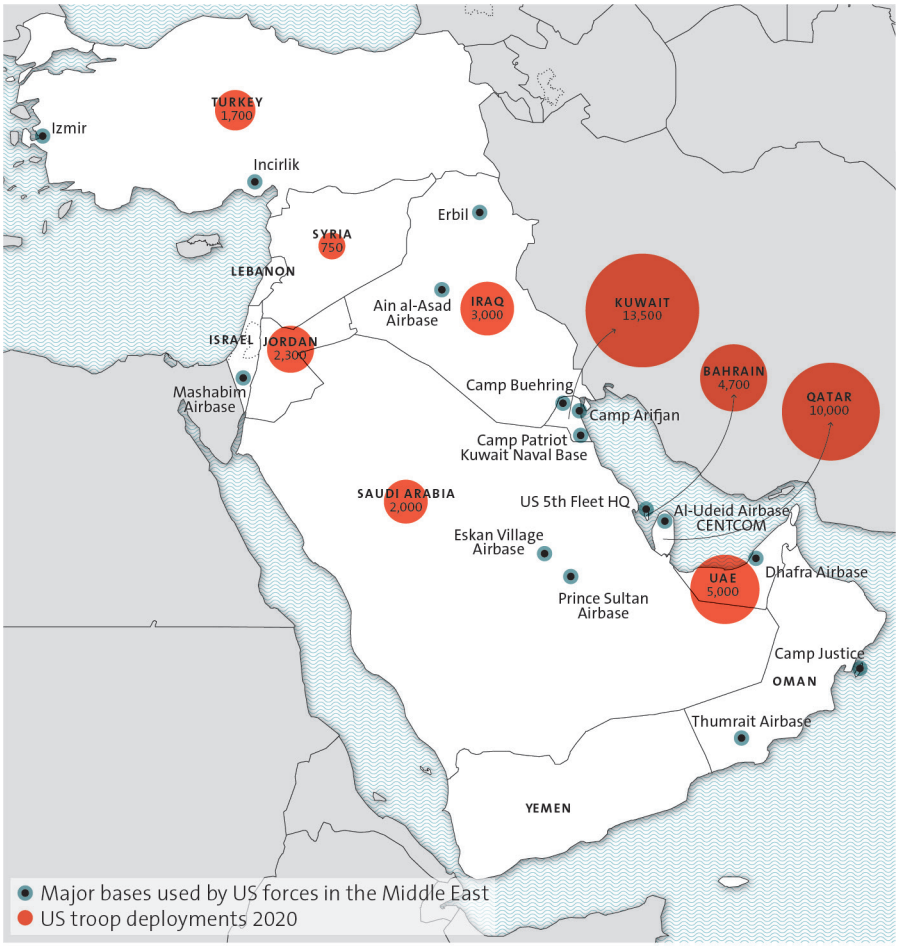
The US began to recalibrate its approach in the region under the Obama administration (2009–2017). Though US opposition to Iran's nuclear ambitions has been a constant for decades, changing US interests necessitated a different prioritization of attention and resources. With the rise of China, Washington began to refocus its attention on the Asia-Pacific, now known as the infamous "pivot to Asia." Increased domestic production of shale oil and gas also freed the US from dependence on crude oil imports from the Persian Gulf, which had been a key driver of its engagement in the Middle East. In addition, the threat posed by al-Qaeda to the

US homeland was less pronounced. As a result, Washington became less willing to police the regional order as it once did.[4] Instead, the US increasingly relied on its allies, both state and non-state, to intervene in the region's major conflicts. Washington also worked behind the scenes to promote a balance of power between Saudi- and Iranian-led blocs in the hope of fostering regional strategic stability. In addition, American appetite for nation-building initiatives diminished greatly in the wake of the difficulties experienced in stabilizing Afghanistan and Iraq post-2003.

A clear early example of Washington's change in approach came in 2011, when the US opted to "lead from behind," in the words of an unnamed Obama administration official, in the intervention against the Qaddafi regime in Libya, rapidly handing over the task to NATO and several Middle Eastern allies. It was clear at that time that there was no appetite in Washington for rebuilding post-Qaddafi Libya. This emergent trend was further confirmed when the Obama administration, after publicly declaring a "red line" over the use of chemical weapons, chose not to intervene militarily in response to the Assad regime's use of sarin in Ghouta in 2013. Instead, the US went with Russia's initiative to dispose of Syria's declared chemical weapons, which only became possible because the US took the lead in this process. Washington's primary concern in Syria, particularly following the so-called Islamic State's seizure of territory in the country in 2014, has been counterterrorism in cooperation with regional proxies and allies, rather than reversing the course of the war or effecting anything like regime change.

Although the Trump administration's (2017–2021) stance on the Middle East differed in many respects from its predecessor's, not least in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iran, reticence to engage in large-scale military interventions involving boots on the ground and post-conflict reconstruction remained unchanged. Although the Trump administration did carry out military strikes against the Assad regime in 2017 in response to its use of chemical weapons, Washington again showed no desire to deploy the US military to radically alter the situation on the Syrian battlefield or to end Bashar Al-Assad's rule. In fact, in line with Trump's broader move towards isolationism, the US' narrow emphasis on counterterrorism became even more pronounced. Once territory was recaptured from the "Islamic State" in 2019, the Trump administration lost no time withdrawing military personnel from Syria. Trump also made it clear to Syria's regional allies that it was *their*

US Forces in the Middle East



Sources: Al Jazeera; US Congressional Research Service; The Military Balance 2021

responsibility to pay for and support the reconstruction of the country.

Even with this trend towards a lower level of engagement in the Middle East, Iran remained a priority for the US on the world stage. The Trump administration once again looked towards its allies in the region, Israel and the Arab Gulf states, to counter Iran's activities. The US-brokered 2020 Abraham Accords normalized relations between Israel and both the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

and Bahrain, and is a clear example of this new approach in action. In fact, it was fears of US retrenchment among Washington's regional allies that helped pave the way for this rapprochement. Even the 2019 Iranian attack on Saudi oil tankers in the Gulf did not provoke US military action against Iran. Only when Iran launched an attack on troops and embassy staff in Iraq that same year did Washington respond with direct, though limited, military action (drone strikes) that killed the commander of Iran's Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani.

Notwithstanding the new US approach in the Middle East, regional dynamics were already shifting following the Arab uprisings of 2010/11. The so-called Arab Spring weakened regional heavyweights, such as Egypt and Syria, and allowed other states to exert their diplomatic influence and their military power. Several states have gained more room for maneuver, generating increasing instability. Iran's regional influence has expanded, especially in Iraq and Syria. Its rival, Saudi Arabia, has equally been more assertive in its efforts to shape the regional order. At Riyadh's behest, the Gulf Cooperation Council intervened to suppress a popular uprising in Bahrain in 2011 that Saudi Arabia claimed was being stoked by Iran. Similarly, the Council launched a military intervention in Yemen against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in 2015. Yet, Riyadh's more robust regional role has also stoked divisions within the Sunni world. The blockade of Qatar was partly a product of a more assertive Saudi foreign policy aimed at bringing Doha back into line on issues such as its support for political Islam and its relations with Iran, both of which Saudi Arabia perceives as existential threats. Riyadh has often been flanked by an equally more strident UAE, which has even intervened on its own in Libya to prevent the growth of political Islam. This action brought the UAE into direct confrontation with another Middle Eastern actor, Turkey, which has also been able to exploit the gaps created by a lower level of US engagement in the region (see Niklas Masuhr's chapter).

While some changes can already be perceived in US policy in the Middle East under President Biden's administration, continuities also remain. Although the security of Israel will remain a steady element of US policy in the region, a more balanced approach to the Israel-Palestinian conflict can be expected, as well as a more multilateral effort to deal with Iranian nuclear issues. The Biden administration has already announced that it wishes to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA). The Biden administration's

precondition of this action, however, is Iran's return to full compliance regarding the restrictions on its nuclear program. To prevent Iran from extending its regional influence further, Washington will likely continue to build coalitions in the region, but in a less flagrantly anti-Iranian manner than under Trump. Pressure on the "Islamic State" will also continue, which will likely require some form of continued engagement in Iraq and Syria. Although many officials in the Biden administration also served under Obama and supported past military interventions in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, the US is unlikely to engage in large-scale military interventions in the foreseeable future. Changing US interests in the region and clear public opposition to such military interventions mean that unless the US homeland is directly attacked, there is little appetite for this type of direct engagement at present.[5]

Despite a shift in US engagement in the Middle East, those US interests in the region that remain constant mean that the US is unlikely to radically pare back US military presence, military aid, or even arms sales to the region. While the US may not be dependent on the region's energy resources, many of its allies are, and stable global oil prices remain in the US interest.[6] As a result, the security of Washington's Arab Gulf allies, and lucrative shipping routes in the region, must remain a priority. It appears, however, that Biden may take a more principled approach to the misadventures of regional allies, as is already the case in relation to Saudi Arabia. Another factor that will work against a drastic rupture in its bilateral security relations with allies in the region is great-power competition in the Middle East.[7] As the US has stepped back from policing the regional order, Russia and China have been gaining ground.

Russia Steps In

Russia has benefited spectacularly from the US' recalibrated approach to the region. Although Russia's activities in the Middle East have only fairly recently attracted international attention, it has been re-engaging with Middle Eastern states for the last two decades. Initially, economic considerations were a major factor driving Russia's return to the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Islamist extremism and its potential capacity to spill over into the North Caucasus also focused Moscow's attention on the region. Moreover, in recent years, Moscow has increasingly desired to reassert itself as a global power in a multipolar world. This, alongside a fundamental opposition to Western efforts to spread their normative agenda through regime change, has

Arms Deliveries to the Middle East*

SIPRI Trend Indicator Values (TIVs) (in millions)

Note: The SIPRI TIV is a calculated value to measure trends in international arms flows over periods of time. It is based on the known unit production costs of a core set of weapons and is intended to represent the transfer of military resources rather than the financial value of the transfer. Therefore the figures do not represent sales prices for arms transfers.

* Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudia Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Yemen

Source: SIPRI

increasingly shaped Moscow's regional activities. Washington's resistance towards engaging in military operations in the region has created opportunities for Russia to promote itself as a major power broker. As seasoned observer Dmitri Trenin aptly puts it, President Putin is using the Middle East as "the springboard for Russia's comeback as a global power."[8]

As Russia began to re-engage with the region in the early 2000s, its search for new markets and revenue streams led Moscow to focus on increasing arms sales to the region. These saw a marked growth in the first decade of the 2000s (see graph). This had the added value of creating valuable dependencies associated with maintenance and training requirements. Arms sales in return for the cancellation of Soviet-era debt proved a particularly effective way of reconnecting with a number of Soviet-era regional allies, including Iraq and Syria. Russian arms are relatively inexpensive, robust, and well-adapted to regional conditions. Critically, Russian arms are also reliably available; the US,

by contrast, may refuse to sell arms in certain conditions or to certain states. Diversifying arms suppliers then becomes a very prudent exercise for some countries hoping to ensure a continued supply of weaponry. Cairo, for example, has been increasing its acquisitions of Russian helicopters and fighter jets since the US partially suspended military aid in response to the 2013 ouster of former President Mohamad Morsi and Egyptian security forces' subsequent crackdown on Islamists. Turkey too has been buying Russian. Despite being a NATO member, Turkey has recently acquired Russian S-400 air and missile defense systems. Even Saudi Arabia concluded an arms deal with Russia in 2017. Yet, even if Russia can now be considered one of the Middle East's "go to" arms suppliers, the US remains the largest arms supplier for both of these states and the region as a whole.

Similarly, Moscow has pursued increased cooperation with many Middle Eastern states in the energy sector, providing both diplomatic and economic benefits. The Russian state-owned company Rosatom has secured contracts to construct and maintain nuclear power plants and research reactors in several countries in the region, including Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Energy cooperation of this kind is not only lucrative, but also a beneficial long-term investment; these nations will be reliant on nuclear fuel rods of Russian origin, thus facilitating enduring cooperation in the energy field. Russian sales of crude oil and gas have also proved a useful tool to engage Middle Eastern states like Israel and Turkey, which are today the biggest importers of Russian energy resources in the region.[9] Russian companies are also investing in the oil and/or gas sectors in Egypt, Iran, and Iraq, and have won contracts to reconstruct Syria's oil and gas sector. As an oil producer itself, Moscow has an interest in cooperating with the oil-rich countries of the region, especially Saudi Arabia, to maintain stable oil prices. This has proved particularly important since 2016, as significant increases in global oil inventories resulted in some price volatility.

Although these commercial activities helped re-establish Russia's presence in the region, the pivotal moment for Russia's renaissance in the Middle East came in 2015 when it began its military intervention in Syria. Moscow felt compelled to act not just to defend its closest regional ally, but also to prevent international interventions that support regime change, an effort that was central to its efforts to distinguish itself from the US. Concerns about what Moscow perceived as

Western-instigated regime change grew in Russia following the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the "color revolutions" in former Soviet states, particularly in Ukraine, and were further reinforced by Washington's inaction regarding Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in 2010/11. Having voted in favor of the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution that mandated military intervention in Libya in 2011 to protect the civilian population, only to see that resolution subsequently interpreted to justify regime change by NATO and its Arab allies, Putin was determined to prevent a similar situation in Syria. Russia's intervention also clearly sent the message that copycat revolutions closer to home would not be tolerated. After describing a "red line" for the US, Washington's failure to follow through with airstrikes against Assad in 2013 clearly signaled that the US was unwilling to intervene to the extent it had in the past, and that the risk of direct confrontation between Russia and the US over Syria was thus relatively low.

Stepping in to defend the Assad regime has helped Russia consolidate its diplomatic and military role in the Middle East. The Russian military is set to remain in Syria for some time in order to protect Assad's forces. Moscow's loyalty to Assad has also won it long-term use of Khmeimin air base and continued use of its naval facility at Tartus, which means that Russian naval vessels in the Mediterranean need not return home for servicing. Russia's intervention in Syria also made Moscow look like a more reliable ally than Washington. This perception was reinforced when the Trump administration pulled its forces out of northeast Syria in October 2019 and left its Syrian Kurdish allies vulnerable to advancing Turkish forces. It was Russia (alongside Syrian forces) that moved into opposition-held areas in northeast Syria to prevent the Turkish army from advancing. It was also Russia that struck a deal with Turkey to jointly patrol areas captured by the Turks. Moscow's centrality to the Syrian conflict has not just strengthened its relations with the Assad regime and Ankara, but also Iran, despite the fact that Moscow and Tehran do not share the same end game for Syria. Whereas Russia wishes to prevent the fall of an ally and promote its great-power status by intervening in the conflict, Tehran wants to create a Shia crescent extending from Iran to Lebanon. In addition, Russia is now an unavoidable interlocutor in conversations among Tel Aviv, Amman, and Beirut, all of which hope that Moscow will help them to advance their interests vis-à-vis the Syrian conflict. Russian companies will also play a part in the reconstruction of Syria, even if the

Russian Federation itself has limited funds to help rebuild the country.

In short, it is impossible to deny that Russia is now a major actor in the Middle East. It has effectively used its involvement in the Syrian conflict to boost its image as a great power, while adeptly managing to maintain balanced relations with countries in the region. Furthermore, Russia's presence in the region is likely to endure for some time. There are strong economic incentives for Russia to continue strengthening its relations with Middle Eastern states, through arms, energy, and grain sales, as well as the construction of nuclear facilities and investments in oil and gas sectors. If opportunities to enhance its image as a regional power broker arise, Moscow will likely capitalize on them, as far as it is able to given the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on its economy. Although Russia's military intervention in Syria has not been too costly in terms of both "blood and treasure," the Kremlin's attention may have to turn inwards. The economic slowdown in Russia due to the pandemic, combined with the slump in global oil prices, could circumscribe Moscow's foreign policy ambitions over the near term[10], as well as turn its attention to shoring up domestic stability and support. Faced with a difficult economic recovery, the Russian public may have less tolerance for "foreign policy adventures."[11] That said, when Moscow does intervene in the region it will, as Nikolay Kozhanov notes, use such openings to contrast itself with Western actors,[12] especially the US. Furthermore, the prominent security dimension of Russia's role in the Middle East stands in contrast to that of another international actor whose profile in the region has equally grown – that of China.

China Steps Up

Like Russia, China's engagement in the Middle East has been growing over the past 20 years. China's activities and influence expanded significantly following the launch of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, an ambitious infrastructure and investment program designed to increase China's global connectivity and fuel domestic growth. Energy is at the heart of Beijing's interests in the Middle East; the region is one of China's principal crude oil and gas suppliers. Some 40 per cent of its crude oil imports originate from the region, despite the increase in Russian crude oil exports to China.[13] Notably, the bulk of oil imports from the Middle East come from Saudi Arabia.[14] Energy imports from the region, as well as Chinese exports to Europe and Africa, need to transit through the Middle East's numerous maritime chokepoints,

notably the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal, making regional maritime security equally important to Beijing.

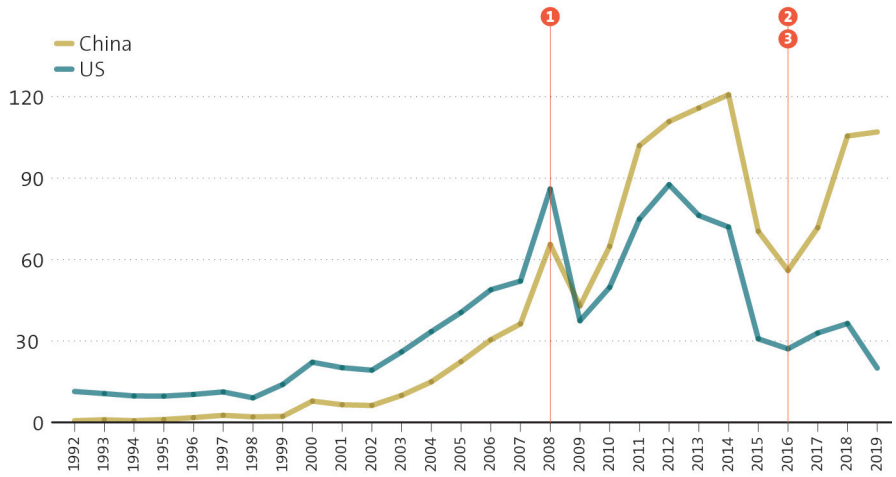
Although China does not have an overarching strategy for the region, its 2016 *Arab Policy Paper*[15] is indicative of its approach. The paper states that Beijing intends to expand mutually beneficial, "maximum pressure" cooperation with Arab states, particularly through the BRI. It also emphasized respect for sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs of states in the region, mirroring Russia's narrative. According to Beijing's "1+2+3 cooperation pattern,"[16] energy should be at the core of its relations with Middle Eastern countries, complemented by infrastructure as well as trade and investment, and enhanced by cooperation in areas such as nuclear energy, satellites, and renewable energy sources.

In a similar vein to Russia, China is engaging with all states in the region regardless of their alliances or involvement in regional divides, such as the Saudi-Iran rift. Bilateral relations with Middle Eastern states are bolstered through a series of partnership deals that vary in scope and reflect the importance of the region for China's energy and economic interests. Most were signed after the launch of the BRI in 2013. Among countries in the region, Egypt (2014), Saudi Arabia (2016), Iran (2016), and the UAE (2018) have established comprehensive strategic partnerships, the fullest form of partnership that Beijing offers in terms of fields covered. Against the backdrop of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, a draft copy of a 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership deal between Tehran and Beijing was leaked to the media in 2020. China and Iran signed the document in March 2021, but it still awaits ratification by the Iranian parliament. China and Israel signed a similar type of deal, known as a comprehensive innovative partnership, in 2017. A number of other countries in the region, including Turkey (2010), Qatar (2014), Jordan (2015), Iraq (2015), Kuwait (2018), and Oman (2018), have concluded strategic partnerships with Beijing. Although less ambitious than comprehensive strategic partnerships, they still allow for wide-ranging cooperation.

In general, governments in the region tend to view China as a welcome source of trade opportunities and foreign direct investment (FDI). The last decade in particular has seen greatly increased trade between China and Middle Eastern states. Not surprisingly, trade has grown most dramatically with the energy-rich Gulf states that are now fulfilling China's enormous

Crude Oil Imports from the Middle East

In current USD (billions)



1. **In 2008:** OPEC cut crude oil production.
2. **In 2016:** OPEC+ cut crude oil production. This agreement was extended into 2017, 2018, and 2019.
3. **As of 2016:** The Trump administration sought to reach complete energy independence and made progress on that front.

Source: WITS / UN Comtrade

energy demands; for these states, energy sales to China are a lucrative source of revenue as US energy demands continue to decline. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are China's top regional trading partners.[17] Were it not for US and UN-mandated sanctions, Iran too would have benefited from a significantly higher volume of trade with China, particularly through the sale of oil. Though Beijing allegedly continues to import illicit oil from Iran in contravention of the 2018 US sanctions, declared imports have nevertheless significantly dropped.[18] As one might expect, most non-energy-rich countries have seen less growth in trade with China. Egypt is a clear outlier, however, reflecting the Suez Canal's importance for regional maritime security. China is today Egypt's biggest trading partner, though much of this trade is composed of Egyptian imports of Chinese goods, with few Egyptian exports to China. This imbalance in trade tends to be characteristic of the relationship between China and non-oil producers in the region.

Chinese investments in the Middle East have also been on the rise, particularly in the energy sector. China has devoted significant resources towards building petrochemical facilities, as well as in port, canal, and land transportation infrastructure. According to the American Enterprise Institute's China Global Investment Tracker, the region has seen some 123 billion USD worth of Chinese investment since 2013, and China became the Middle East's largest external investor in 2016.[19] Most Chinese FDI is in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Israel, Egypt, and Turkey – states that are critical for fulfilling China's energy needs and/or the distribution of its goods.[20] Some of these investments, particularly those in Israel, have raised alarm in Washington. Chinese firms are building Israeli railway infrastructure, as well as expanding and then operating the ports at Ashdod and Haifa. For 25 years, China will help control and facilitate the shipment of goods from the Gulf of Aqaba to the Mediterranean Sea and on to Europe.[21]

China's investments, rising number of nationals in the Middle East, and dependence on energy imports from the region naturally lead to a stronger regional security role. China contributes to regional security through UN-mandated peacekeeping in the region and anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and Horn of Africa. In a crisis situation, Chinese naval presence in the region can be used to evacuate Chinese citizens from regional hotspots. A Chinese vessel from the Gulf of Aden was deployed to help evacuate 35,000 Chinese citizens from Libya in 2011 and a smaller number from Yemen in 2015, for example. Since the 2013 Chinese defense white paper explicitly mentions the protection of Chinese citizens abroad as a priority for the nation, more of these kinds of missions can be expected in the future.[22] Military-security cooperation is also a component of almost all of China's partnership deals. Beijing's interest in maritime security in the Gulf has seen it carry out joint naval exercises with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Oman, as well as establish its first overseas naval base in Djibouti. This base, which flanks Bab el-Mandeb, is officially described as a "logistical hub" to support Chinese contributions to peacekeeping, maritime security, and humanitarian relief. On a very modest scale, the PLA is also engaged in joint training exercises with Saudi armed forces and will likely do the same with the Emiratis. If ratified by the Iranian parliament, the 25-year deal between China and Iran would also imply some level of military-to-military cooperation, though this may simply formalize what already takes place. China is

likely to tread cautiously in order to avoid provoking the US or antagonizing Saudi Arabia.

China is also seeking to boost arms sales to the region, especially to the Gulf, where its interests are concentrated. While China cannot offer weapons that are technologically superior to those of the US, many states are nevertheless interested in diversifying their arms suppliers. Many of these states, however, are heavily integrated with US weapons systems, which limits the extent to which China can engage and win a bigger share of the market. That said, China has been exporting missiles to the region and has managed to carve out a niche for itself in the supply of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), due in part to Washington's reluctance to sell UAVs to Middle Eastern states. The expiry of UNSC restrictions on arms sales to Iran in late 2020, and the commercial opportunities this might present, may see China try to tap into the Iranian market again. Nevertheless, as in other domains, Beijing's first priority will likely remain maintaining good relations with Riyadh and avoiding direct confrontation with Washington, including by respecting its red lines in relation to its allies.

All in all, Beijing's considerable interests in the region have translated into a form of engagement that has a stronger economic component than that of Russia, as well as a modest but growing security dimension. Over time, China's military involvement may increasingly encroach on US military positions and interests, particularly if the US continues to reduce its security burden in the region and the intensity of its security relations with regional allies. Yet, at present, Beijing knows that it is unable to provide the kind of security assurances that the US has for decades, and Middle Eastern states also know this. Moreover, China's bilateral military-security relations and military infrastructure in the region pale in comparison to that of the US. China has one military base in Djibouti with 1,000–2,000 military personnel, compared to US bases in ten countries in the region that host around 43,000 military staff, not to mention the US' own base in Djibouti.[23] Consequently, Beijing has an interest in continuing to build up its economic presence in the region and leaving security provision to the US for as long as possible.

That said, tension with the US may be difficult to avoid in the Middle East. Chinese involvement in technological and physical infrastructure projects in the region is already raising alarm in Washington, and such investments

are only likely to increase. For example, Washington fears that China's investments in Israel could enable Chinese surveillance of US naval operations at the Port of Haifa, where the US Sixth Fleet regularly docks. Another possible point of contention is the Chinese company Huawei's involvement in the deployment of fifth-generation (5G) wireless networks in several countries in the region that are digitalizing fast, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman. Since the US accuses Huawei of being a potential "backdoor" to Chinese government surveillance, these states may find it hard to avoid future US diplomatic pressure to find other 5G providers. The US, for example, strongly supported the Israeli decision to exclude Huawei from its 5G networks in 2019[24] and has already warned Turkey that Huawei's participation in Turkish 5G networks could complicate their already strained relations.[25] Though clearly not ideal for many states in the region, the Middle East is likely to come under increasing pressure from Washington to "choose" between the US security guarantee and economic relations with China. This choice is likely to be complicated further given China's early recovery from the coronavirus crisis. Moreover, the US will almost certainly oppose deepening security-military cooperation between China and its regional allies.

The EU Knocked Off Balance

In the shadow of these three external powers is Europe. Its regional engagement in the Middle East is driven by concerns about refugee and migration movements, radicalization, terrorism, navigation security, and the need to maintain stable oil prices. Despite the extent to which instability in the region can have serious ramifications for Europe, given its geographical proximity and societal ties to the region, the EU is comparatively less visible as an actor than the US, Russia, or even China in the region. Yet, this is by no means due to a lack of involvement. The Middle East is a focus of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), established in 2004 to foster stability in the EU's periphery through reforms to improve governance capacities, the rule of law, socio-economic development, as well as to help the EU manage irregular migration, largely through economic-related incentives, such as increased access to EU markets and development assistance. Through the ENP, the EU has substantial bilateral relations with several Middle Eastern states and actors, including Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria (suspended since 2011). In addition, the EU also engages with states in the region through multilateral fora, including the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the League of Arab States, the

Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and the Gulf Cooperation Council. It is also present in the region through its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which inter alia promotes EU involvement in peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and crisis management. The EU is currently responsible for two civilian CSDP missions in the Middle East, EUBAM Rafah in the Palestinian Territories and EUAM Iraq, aimed at border security capacity building and broad security sector reform respectively. The EU also runs a maritime security operation, EU NAVFOR Atalanta, in the Gulf of Aden.

Yet, despite this fairly substantial engagement, the EU appears fairly absent in the region for several reasons. As the above activities suggest, its approach to promoting peace and stability as a means to protect its interests requires a multi-dimensional transformative agenda that is not amenable to quick fixes or catchy headlines. Moreover, responding rapidly to unfolding crises or taking strong diplomatic positions on Middle Eastern issues is challenging for the EU as an actor. The EU is necessarily limited by its need to find consensus among member states that have differing stakes in the region, as well as diverging strategic cultures (see Julian Kamasa's chapter). Fostering consensus on regional issues in a more consistent way would, at the very least, require France to act as a consensus builder within the EU. Among EU member states, France has the greatest interests (not to mention the largest historical and diplomatic clout) in the Middle East. However, Paris does not view a collective position on Middle East issues as always in its interest.[26] There are times when it prefers to act alone or in minilateral coalitions to raise its profile in the region. For example, the E3 format (France, Germany, and the UK) was critical in negotiating the JCPOA. France, following tensions in the Gulf in 2019, also helped initiate the European Maritime Awareness Mission in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) alongside likeminded Member States. When Europe needs a strong diplomatic or security response to crises in the Middle East, individual EU member states tend to lead.

Protecting European interests in the face of great-power shifts will, therefore, pose challenges for Europe, particularly in this fragmented form. Though many questions remain over how the adjustment in US engagement in the Middle East will manifest, the US and Europe will continue to work together. Particularly under the new Biden administration, US and European interests still closely converge in counterterrorism, navigation security, stable oil prices, and preventing Iran

from disrupting the status quo in the region. The true risk of US recalibration in the Middle East, at least for Europe, relates to the consequences of increased regional tensions, as well as the uncertain ramifications of Russia's growing security role in the region.

As mentioned earlier, the changing US role in the Middle East is creating more opportunities for power plays in the region, leading to the regionalization of conflicts and an intensification of existing rifts, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their respective partners. A large number of actors in a conflict situation, particularly if they are trying to assert themselves as regional powers, are likely to exacerbate a situation and make it even harder to resolve. Humanitarian and refugee crises that may become protracted are already resulting from heightened regional volatility. These tensions are also compromising maritime security, as witnessed in the Gulf in 2019. Aside from humanitarian aid and assistance for vulnerable refugee host countries, the EU will find it hard to respond decisively to crises and conflicts as a result of the aforementioned restrictions. If Syria is anything to go by, this could be further exacerbated if Russia is an intervening external actor. Russia's military intervention in the Syrian conflict is making it harder for the EU to promote the kind of political solutions it sees as essential for long-term stability, given that the intervention has ensured Assad's survival. Moreover, Russia's mediation efforts with Turkey and Iran through the Astana Process have effectively marginalized the UN-facilitated peace talks on the Syrian conflict that the EU supports.

Beijing is still reluctant to become directly involved in the region's crises and conflicts. Therefore, as long as the US and other actors engage in ways that do not interfere with its interests, its security role in the region poses less of an immediate concern for Europeans than that of Russia. However, potential tensions over maritime security between China and the US could arise and cause instability with consequences for Europe. Although the US has been calling on other states to do more to protect their commercial vessels in the Gulf, Washington is unlikely to want Beijing to increase its maritime security activities and thus its naval presence in the area. Europeans could do more to ensure the safety of shipping and to avert US-China tensions in the region. The EU's CSDP EU NAVFOR Atalanta in the Gulf of Aden is a good example of how the EU can contribute positively to maritime security and deconfliction. Yet, the EU may be slow to reach agreement on such operations for the very reasons described

above. Fortunately, in the latter case a core group of EU states were willing and able to work together on maritime security outside of an EU framework, leading to EMASoH. Although the EU would have an interest in boosting its maritime security role in the Gulf, it has yet to be seen whether EMASoH will eventually lead to the establishment of an EU operation.

The EU will need to evaluate how China's BRI may affect its ability to promote its transformational approach to sustainable stability in the Middle East. China provides a model of economic success combined with authoritarianism that is appealing for many leaders in the region. Moreover, its investments in the region could help sustain authoritarian tendencies, for instance, through the export of surveillance technologies. Promoting political reforms that the EU views as central to good governance practices and long-term stability could become harder for Brussels as a result. However, as pointed out earlier, China's trade with and investments in the region are uneven and largely focused on energy-exporting states or those that constitute critical nodes in global transportation, such as Israel and Egypt. Given that the latter is one of the less wealthy states in which China is especially active, the EU should carefully monitor the impact that increased economic relations with China has on its leverage in Egypt, as well as the extent to which Chinese infrastructure projects are likely to contribute to growth and the extent to which they risk leaving Egypt indebted. Overall, there is still room for the EU to use its economic strength to engage the poorer, non-resource-rich countries in the region as a means of promoting good governance and long-term stability, as well as to reduce the level of irregular migration to Europe. This could be a particularly effective approach since the US and Russia underutilize trade (outside of arms sales) and investment as vectors for shaping change.[27]

Ultimately, the EU will find it challenging to respond to many of the consequences of the geopolitical shifts happening in the region, particularly intensified regional rivalries and Russia's growing security role. Differences in the interests and strategic cultures of EU member states will inevitably limit the scope of what the EU can do. Its efforts will most likely continue to focus on humanitarian assistance, using the depth of its bilateral relations with several states to promote good governance and reduce irregular migration to Europe. Coalitions of European states working within multilateral formats, with both EU and non-EU members, will be crucial to

furthering European interests in the Middle East through stronger diplomatic and security responses.

To be sure, the more complex regional environment will pose challenges not just for Europe, but for the West in general. The scaling down of US ambitions in the region is generating greater regional instability as Middle Eastern states respond by adopting more assertive foreign policies and engaging in military interventionism, complicating existing conflicts and potentially fueling new ones. The extent to which the US will be able to manage the tension between scaled back involvement and heightened instability, while continuing to protect its interests, has yet to be seen. An ever-deepening Saudi-Iranian rift will make it harder for Washington to curtail Iran's regional activities, for example. Yet, managing Iran is still central to the rationale for US engagement in the region. Moreover, the increased involvement of Russia and China could also make it doubly difficult for the West to promote its political and security agendas in the Middle East. The agendas of both states will create more options for governments in the region and encourage the entrenchment of state power above all else. As a result, it is not just Europe but the broader West that may find itself knocked off balance in the Middle East.

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CHAPTER 5

Japan and South Korea: Adapting to Asia's Changing Regional Order

Linda Maduz

Small and middle powers in Asia find themselves in a key arena of accelerating great-power competition. Nowhere are the economic dominance and politico-military ambitions of a rising China more evident and nowhere is the potential for military escalation between China and the US greater than here. Much sooner than in other regions of the world, countries in Asia have had to position themselves in the growing US-China rivalry. The experience of Japan and South Korea shows that middle powers have a role to play in shaping the rivalry, and thereby in shaping their own regional strategic environment.

Trade ministers pose for a photo during the 3rd Inter-sessional Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Ministerial Meeting in Hanoi, Vietnam May 22, 2017. *Kham / Reuters*

The US has led the post-war regional order in East Asia for over half a century. Its dominance in East Asian political, economic, and security affairs has remained unchallenged until recently. To establish and maintain the order, the US has relied on strong partnerships with East Asian countries, Japan and South Korea (officially the Republic of Korea) foremost among them. A security architecture built on a US-centered, bilateral alliance system has constituted the hard backbone of the regional order. This architecture has been part of a larger political bargain, though, which has closely tied the US and its East Asian partners to one another both economically and politically. Today, voices critical of US engagement in Asia exist on both sides of the Pacific. Under US President Donald Trump's administration, the US even openly called into question the value of bilateral alliances and free trade to the US – central pillars of the US-led East Asian order.

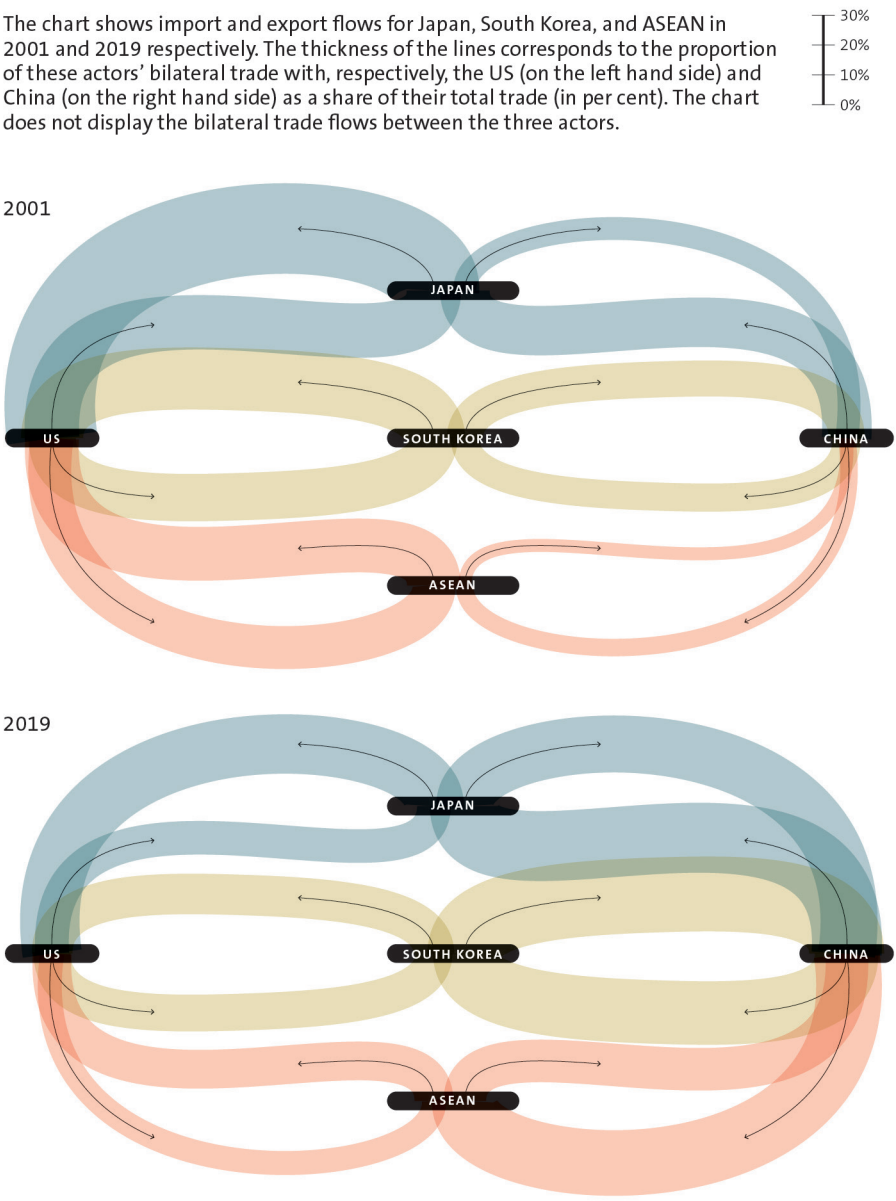
In addition to internal sources of erosion, the rise of China constitutes another critical challenge to the existing regional order. Trade and investment flows in the East Asian region increasingly center on China, which since 2010 has been the world's second-largest economy (see chart on trade flows). Along with its rapid economic development, the country has developed new political ambitions and security priorities. A particular focus for Beijing lies in its immediate neighborhood in East and Southeast Asia. These trends have become especially pronounced under Xi Jinping, who became general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in November 2012 and president in March 2013. Under Xi's leadership, China has adopted a more activist foreign policy and is increasingly modernizing its military. It has stepped up its diplomatic efforts and intensified cooperation with its neighbors while at the same time engaging in new (territorial) disputes with them. Particularly in the economic sphere, China today is a powerful leader that has successfully leveraged its influence to establish new China-centered infrastructures and hierarchies in East Asia.

As a consequence, the regional order in East Asia is currently undergoing a transition. This is evidenced by the fact that existing arrangements, processes, and rules are called into question and are being (re-)negotiated. While the emerging and established hierarchies can complement each other, they are, in certain respects, also of a competitive and mutually exclusive nature. China, which was absent from the establishment of the US-led order in Asia, is contesting some of the established rules of the order: For example, its claims in the South China Sea,

Bilateral Trade Flows with the Great Powers

Japanese, South Korean, and ASEAN perspectives

The chart shows import and export flows for Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN in 2001 and 2019 respectively. The thickness of the lines corresponds to the proportion of these actors' bilateral trade with, respectively, the US (on the left hand side) and China (on the right hand side) as a share of their total trade (in per cent). The chart does not display the bilateral trade flows between the three actors.



Source: WITS / UN Comtrade

which the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague rejected, have raised concerns about the preservation of freedom of navigation. In addition, relations among Asian countries are changing and have become more conflictual, indicating that the mediating effect of US leadership in the region is waning. An important feature of the US-led regional order was that the US prevented conflicts among regional partners. That the old order is weakening is clearly in evidence as long-held conflicts flare across the region, particularly in reference to old unsettled territorial disagreements and unresolved claims regarding Japanese reparations for wartime atrocities.

What form the future regional order will take will depend in part on how East Asian countries, particularly the more influential ones, position themselves in the great-power rivalry. Two key actors in the regional architecture are Japan and South Korea. As middle powers, they lack great-power capabilities. However, given their economic and military strength, as well as their geostrategic positions, they are in a position to project influence and shape politics at the regional and international levels.[1] The great-power rivalry affects them in complex ways. It reveals their existential security dilemma, leaving them with no real alternative to relying on the US as their main security provider. Consequently, waning US leadership and a related weakening of the rules-based, multilateral regional order limit their strategic options. At the same time, the ongoing geopolitical shifts call into question US security guarantees and stimulate discussions in both countries about taking increased responsibility for their security while still keeping the US engaged.

With an ever more powerful and assertive China in their neighborhood and uncertainties surrounding their strategic ties with the US, Japan and South Korea find themselves in a predicament. In this uncertain, pressing situation, Japan is opting for a proactive approach, seeking a new leading role in the region as well as in its alliance with the US. With initiatives such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Japan wants to set the regional agenda and shape the order in its interest. Japan is the country in East Asia that most openly opposes China's rise. South Korea, by contrast, is more accommodating and holds a position that is similar to that of other countries in the region. It is hedging against China by increasing its military spending and reinforcing its security ties with the US. In parallel, it is deepening its ties with China in economic and other domains. It actively avoids making choices

between the two great powers, whose co-presence is considered beneficial.

This chapter analyzes the changing power configuration in East Asia, highlighting the implications of China's rise and the erosion of the old logic behind US engagement in the region. A primary focus of the chapter is on how key actors in the region, such as Japan and South Korea, conceptualize the changes in their new strategic environment and formulate policies in response. The chapter reflects more generally on the role of middle powers in the US-China rivalry and on how much agency they have in shaping the regional order. Lastly, the chapter examines the position of the US, which has recently proved the least consistent in its approach towards the region as compared to other major actors in East Asia. The chapter argues that whether the US will be able to strike a new grand political bargain with countries of the region and reinforce its position as an Asian power is an open question and will depend on whether the interests of the US and its East Asian partners continue to align. The coming years under the Biden administration will be crucial in this regard.

China Rising: Shaking up the Post-War Regional Order in East Asia

Today, two orders coexist in East Asia. China dominates the economic sphere, while the US continues to dominate the security sphere. China is the main trading partner of Japan and South Korea and most Southeast Asian countries; this continues to be true in the face of efforts by some regional governments, including Japan, to divert supply chains away from China. Formerly the region's main trading partner, the US is still a key economic player, and it remains many countries' first choice for security provision. Yet, in light of China's rise, new uncertainties exist regarding US security guarantees towards the region. While investing in their ties with the US, countries in East and Southeast Asia continue deepening their relations with China as well. The emerging order seems more complex and less predictable. The jury in the battle for "Asia's soul" – seeing whether the region will prioritize security or economics – is still out.[2]

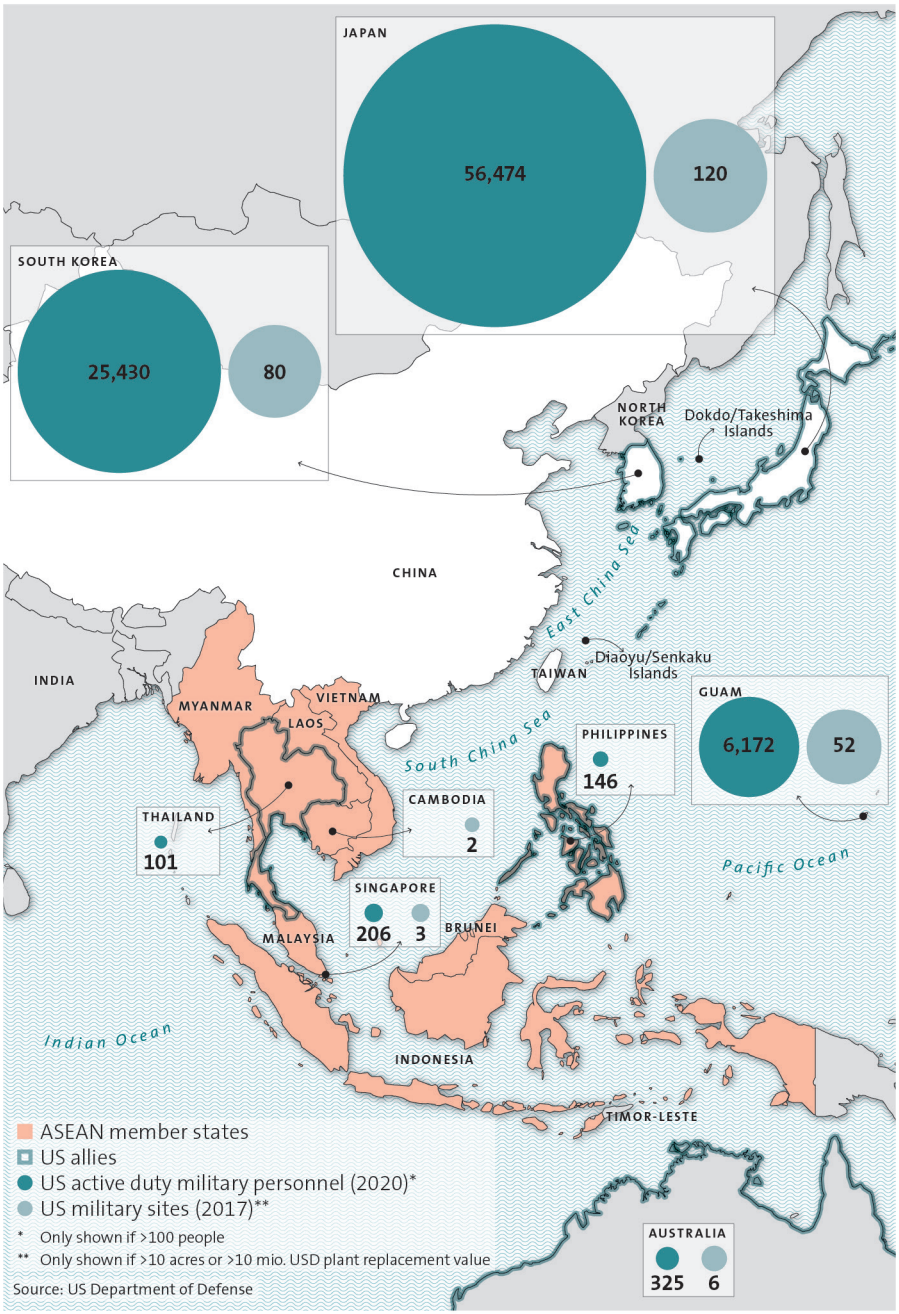
The complex circumstances shaping and dictating the regional order in Asia have roots that extend as far back as the early 1950s. The communist victory in China (1949) and the course of the Korean War (1950–1953) had fueled fears in the United States that countries in Asia would fall to communism (in line with the "domino theory"). Accordingly, the US sought to establish a system of bilateral security ties with

a range of countries, including mutual defense treaties with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, among others (see map). The United States undertook several tasks that it perceived to be in its own national security interest, including building a bulwark against communism in the region, managing the reintegration of war-defeated Japan, and preventing other allies such as South Korea and Taiwan from engaging in further conflicts.[3] Thus, the alliances served the US as effective tools to manage trans-Pacific relations as well as regional relations.[4]

The US-led alliance system was the basis for a dense US-centered network of bilateral ties that included not only a security dimension, but an equally important politico-economic dimension. In exchange for US security guarantees, which required substantial financial contributions towards stationing US forces on their soil, Japan and South Korea received privileged access to the US market and direct political channels to Washington.[5] This helped facilitate extremely rapid economic development. Japan became the second-largest economy in the world from 1968–2010, and South Korea developed from one of the poorest countries in the world into a fully developed nation in the span of just a few decades, holding Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and G20 memberships by the late 1990s. In recent years, East Asian partners ran trade surpluses with the US, and capital flows from East Asia financed the growing US trade deficit. Thus, even after the economic assumptions underpinning their cooperation had changed, elites on both sides of the Pacific continued to support the arrangement.

One of the key features of this US-led "hub-and-spokes" system, which defined East Asian policymaking for decades, is its focus on Japan. The system is also known as the San Francisco system, for it is in San Francisco where the World War II peace treaty with Japan was concluded in 1951. Considering Japan's crucial strategic position in East Asia, the US invested in rebuilding the country's economy and integrating it into the emerging Western-led global order. Against the backdrop of the communist security threat, the US wanted Japan to be economically successful and politically stable. At the same time, the US restrained the country's military capabilities by making Japan adopt a pacifist constitution and non-nuclear principles during the post-war US occupation. Washington thereby also offered reassurance to countries in the region with lingering concerns about Japan's regional ambitions and

US Alliances and Military Presence in the Asia-Pacific



potential for renewed aggression, including South Korea. The arrangement successfully transformed Japan from a former enemy of the US into a reliable junior partner, both regionally and globally.[6]

China's rise occurred while the country remained outside of the established US-led regional order. Since the beginning of the Deng Xiaoping era, China has made the quest for security and the reduction of vulnerabilities a priority. Seeking to stay under the international radar, China successfully promoted its economic growth, facilitated by the 1978 market reforms, and modernized its military. For decades, China's economy enjoyed fast, often double-digit, growth. Consequently, the mismatch between its increasing economic weight and its low profile in regional and world politics was growing. This changed with the accession to power of Xi Jinping in 2012: In contrast to his predecessors, Xi is pursuing a far more assertive agenda, openly communicating China's global political ambitions, seeking confrontation when considered necessary, and creating facts on the ground, imposing them on weaker neighbors.[7]

China's challenge to the regional order is a consequence of its growing economic power, but it is also due to China's dedicated efforts to institutionalize a new, China-centered regional order. Projected to overtake the US in the coming decades as the world's largest economy, China recently replaced the US as the most important trading partner in East Asia. It became the primary trading partner of South Korea and Japan in 2004 and 2007 respectively. China has also turned into an important source of foreign direct investment (FDI) and loans in Asia and a willing partner for infrastructure and technology development. Some of the smaller Southeast Asian countries, such as Cambodia and Laos, are heavily indebted to China. Beijing has sought integration into existing institutional formats such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), joining the ASEAN+3 grouping in 1997, as well as the World Trade Organization (WTO), which it joined in 2001. China has also started creating its own international and regional institutions, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB, 2015) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP, 2020).

For many countries in the region, China looms large not just as a leading economic power, but also as a potential security threat. While US military and technical superiority remains unmatched for the time being, China is catching up – notably

focusing on improving its maritime power capabilities. China has invested in the expansion of its coast guard into Asia's largest, and has also focused on improving its navy. Beijing now controls the world's largest fleet, though the US navy remains the world's premier fighting force. China's increasing military strength and ambitions are reflected in a more assertive approach towards its neighborhood, particularly evident since 2010. In breach of established international conventions, China backs its controversial claims in the South China Sea with naval maneuvers, the creation of artificial islands, and administrative arrangements. This results in territorial conflicts with neighboring states and increased tensions with the US. In reaction to the perceived "containment" and "encirclement" by the US and its allies, China is likely to further strengthen its efforts to drive a wedge between them – a particularly direct challenge to the existing order.

Waning US Dominance: Weakening Hub, Weakening Spokes

Under the Trump presidency (2017–2021), open rifts in US alliances with its East Asian partners became visible. In an unprecedented push, the Trump administration asked South Korea to quintuple its annual payments for stationing US troops on its territory to 5 billion USD and Japan to quadruple its annual payments to 8 billion USD. In the dispute over bilateral cost sharing, the US threatened to withdraw its troops from the countries were Washington's demands not met. The disputes reflected Trump's long-held misgivings about maintaining a US military presence overseas. He had repeatedly criticized allies, such as Japan and South Korea, as "free riders" that would exploit the US security umbrella and fail to pull their weight in regional security. This assessment did not appear to take into account that Washington's Asian allies consistently increase their defense spending, finance US military facilities on their territories, conclude major arms deals, and contribute to US-led military and peacekeeping operations across the world.[8]

Trump's approach towards US allies in East Asia, and his election more generally, reflect a broader politico-societal trend in the US, namely disappearing domestic support for the old grand political bargain with East Asia. In the Cold War context, there was political consensus among both the elites and the broader public that it was beneficial to give trade and investment privileges to East Asian partners and have them pay for the US security umbrella in exchange. This was to the detriment of US workers in sectors competing with East Asian

economies, namely the automobile, consumer electronics, and steel sectors. With the changing international context (particularly the collapse of the communist threat) and changing economic power relations between the US and its East Asian partners, the value of the larger political bargain with the region, including the value of US military presence and partners in Asia, has been called into question in the United States.[9]

Well before Trump's arrival in office in January 2017, US leadership in East Asia had shown signs of inconsistency and at least temporary disengagement. In the post-Cold War period, US foreign and security policymakers had increasingly shifted their attention to other world regions and new security threats. After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush focused on the "War on Terror." Growing political awareness of the increasing economic, demographic, and geopolitical weight of Asia, and China in particular, led the US under President Barack Obama to pursue a policy of reengagement with Asia starting in 2011, which was known as the "Pivot to Asia." At the heart of this shift in strategy was the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (TPP). Trump, however, withdrew the US from this free trade agreement on his first day in office. With its distinctively protectionist and unilateral approach, the Trump administration disrespected previous modes of US engagement with East Asia, lowering East Asian countries' confidence in US leadership. At the same time, the Trump administration's embrace of open competition with "long-term strategic rival" China meant increased strategic attention to the region.

The weakening of US influence in East Asia affects not only US ties with its East Asian partners, but also relations among them. The fraught relationship between Japan and South Korea is a particularly illustrative example. Japan's 2020 defense white paper makes no mention of plans to continue defense cooperation with South Korea. According to the annual report, such cooperation and exchange would be difficult to sustain in light of recent events, including a 2018 radar incident in which a South Korean warship allegedly directed its fire-control radar on a Japanese surveillance plane. Similarly, South Korea had recently threatened to end a military intelligence-sharing pact known as the General Security of Military Information Agreement. In turn, South Korea's 2020 Defense White Paper dropped a reference to Japan as "partner" and described it instead as close neighbor. The biennial report listed a number of issues

hindering "forward-looking defense relations," including Japanese leaders' "distorted perceptions" about the country's colonial past, Japan's territorial claim to the Dokdo/Takeshima islands, the 2018 radar incident, and Japan's 2019 decision to tighten export controls on high-tech products to South Korea in reaction to court rulings over compensation for South Korean wartime forced laborers.[10]

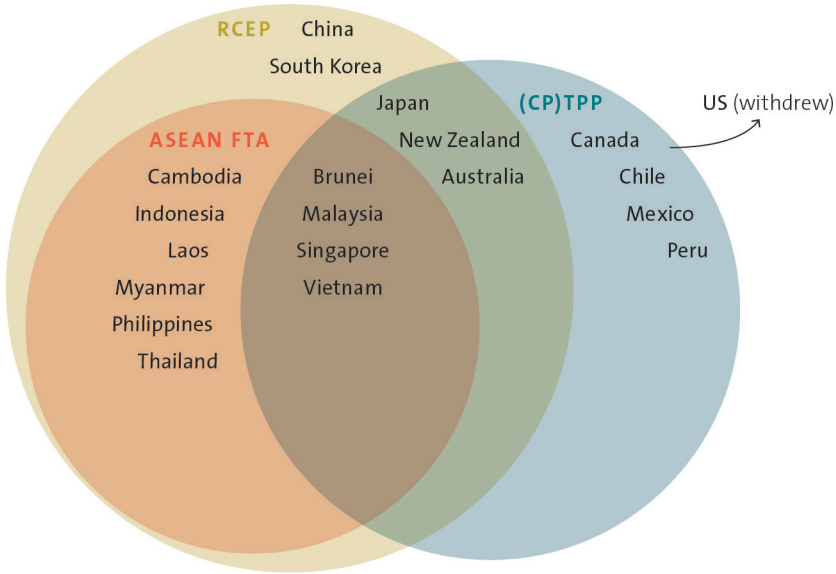
Japan: Seeking a New Leadership Role in Asia

In the face of a changing security environment and unsteady US leadership in East Asia, Japan has stepped up its role in the region.[11] It has taken proactive steps to promote a liberal economic order and to protect and stabilize the security framework in East Asia. In 2007, Japan became the first country to propose a strategic framework for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), designed to counter China's expansive and illiberal behavior in the East China Sea and the South China Sea.[12] When the US under Trump withdrew from the TPP in early 2017, Japan took the lead and led it to completion. Ultimately, 11 Pacific states signed the Comprehensive Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership in March 2018 (see graph on Asia-Pacific trade agreements). Japan competes with China over regional influence, for example in the area of development aid and infrastructure financing, as well as at the level of regional organizations. Japan, holding a leading position in the Asian Development Bank, decided, for example, not to join the China-led AIIB.

In light of China's rise and growing doubts about US commitment to regional allies, Japanese concerns about its weakening regional position prompted Tokyo to take an increasingly proactive approach in its efforts to set a regional agenda. In contrast to smaller countries in the region, including South Korea, Japan acknowledged China as an economic competitor and security threat early on. Japan's economy suffered from chronic deflation that began in the late 1990s and lasted until 2013. In 2010, China's economy overtook Japan's to become the world's second-largest, though Japan remains in third place. The technological advantage that Japanese companies hold over their Chinese competitors is also shrinking. Other areas of concern include China's growing military capabilities and their potential application. China has made maritime and sovereignty claims in the East China Sea, including over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, which directly conflict with Japan's own claims. Furthermore, Chinese activities in the South China Sea potentially threaten freedom of navigation.

Major Trade Agreements in the Asia-Pacific

Indicators of a changing economic order



These newer challenges combined with older, unabated threats emanating from a nuclear-armed North Korea highlight the worsening of Japan's security environment. With its military activities restricted by its postwar constitution, Japan continues to depend on US security arrangements, including the nuclear umbrella.

Recent policy documents reveal how Japan defines its strategic interests and foreign policy position in the changing geopolitical environment. The country identifies itself as a "maritime state."[13] As a trade-dependent island nation, Japan depends on stable access to the sea. Against the backdrop of China's sweeping sovereignty and territorial claims in the East and South China seas, Japan is proactively promoting a maritime order in which the rule of law at sea is respected. To this end, Japan sees the preservation of the status quo, in which the US holds naval primacy in the region, as in its interest. Japan also emphasizes the importance of "values" and increasingly positions itself as a contributor to the liberal and rules-based international order. Seeing a strong US leadership role in East Asia as in its interest, Japan takes

an active role in encouraging Asian countries to support the US in the strategic US-China rivalry.[14]

Part of Japan's efforts to strengthen aspects of the existing order and pursue its own interests has been to emphasize multilateralism and cooperation with out-of-the-area states. To advance regional security cooperation, Japan has reached out not only to the US, but also to Australia and India. Japan seeks such cooperation not only in security affairs, as in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), but also as part of an effort to work with partners to strengthen the liberal order in the region through initiatives such as "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," as well as on the broader international level.[15] With the EU, Japan concluded a trade agreement as well as a strategic partnership agreement, which makes reference to common values such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. Through these initiatives and others, Japan has taken the lead in responding to the rise of an illiberal China. Japan's conceptual work on issues such as FOIP is an essential part of its leadership on strategic issues in East Asia.[16]

Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan started to adopt a more activist foreign policy and a more assertive security policy. Abe's tenure was characterized by its longevity (2006–2007 and 2012–2020), unique in Japan's post-war history, and an unprecedented concentration of executive power. Abe pursued domestic policies reflecting the nationalist and revisionist political thought of the conservative establishment, of which his long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party is a part. Since the end of the Cold War, conservative calls have existed to re-prioritize Japan's military strength over economic development.[17] Abe successfully pushed security reforms despite opposition from parliament and the public, which holds relatively liberal positions (as seen in popular protest against US military installations). This led to a reinterpretation of Article 9 of Japan's pacifist post-war constitution in 2015.[18] According to the new doctrine, Japan's Self-Defense Forces may now participate in collective security operations and defend the military of an ally, including the United States, when it is under attack. Some analysts see this change in Japan's security policy as an evolutionary step,[19] pointing to Japan's previous support for the US wars in Afghanistan or Iraq, whereas others consider it to be revolutionary and marking the end of Japan's post-war pacifism.[20]

In summary, Japan's strategy in the face of China's rise and the relative decline of the US is multi-faceted. It

has launched new initiatives in which it partners with other countries both inside and outside of the region. This also includes closer security cooperation with ASEAN states, for example within the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus. Japan has also increased its defense spending and adjusted its security policy, broadening the profile of its Self-Defense Forces. However, and importantly, Japan has also invested in improving its relations with China. The Diaoyu/Senkaku islands dispute in 2012/2013, when Abe retook office (and previously in 2008), significantly strained the relationship between the two nations. Abe's subsequent stabilization of Japanese relations with China is one of his foreign policy achievements.

South Korea: Navigating Great-Power Rivalry

In his first press conference in 2021, South Korean President Moon Jae-in made it clear: South Korea would not take sides in the US-China rivalry. Relations with China and the US would be "equally important."[21] South Korea has resisted recent calls by the Trump administration to join its Clean Network initiative, which would require countries not to use Huawei equipment for their 5G networks. South Korea has also refrained from officially supporting the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy, which was introduced in 2017 as a response to China's expansionism. Under Moon, South Korea even agreed to increase defense exchanges and establish military hotlines with China.

The reluctance to join US initiatives against China is noteworthy since modern South Korea would not exist if not for its close strategic ties with the US, forged during the post-war period. Historically, South Korea had only limited strategic options; the "geographic location at the vortex of great-power rivalry in Northeast Asia" made the country "a victim of the tragedy of great-power politics." Great-power conflicts resulted in the Korean Peninsula's loss of sovereignty in the early 20th century, its division after World War II, and the Korean War. The US security umbrella has guaranteed South Korea's existence from the Korean War to the present against security threats from the North. The regime in Pyongyang continues to expand its nuclear and missile programs and could devastate the densely populated Seoul region with its conventional and possibly chemically equipped artillery deployed along the border.[22]

In the past, South Korea relied on the US not only for security, but also for its economic prosperity and positioning in the international

system. With US help, South Korea experienced spectacular (export-led) economic growth and successfully integrated into the Western-led liberal international order. It currently holds the position as the 11th-largest economy and sixth-largest exporter in the world. Since the 1990s, South Korea has been an active member of the UN, WTO, and the OECD. Despite these achievements, South Korea faces a rather hostile regional security environment with some of the world's largest economic and military powers in its neighborhood.[23]

An economic rationale, shared by other Asian countries, and a strategic dilemma specific to South Korea explain why South Korea will not easily commit to fully aligning with the US against China. Like its neighbors, South Korea sees its economic future with China, its main trading partner. Politically influential business circles hold, in general, a China-friendly view. The key to understanding South Korea's strategic engagement with China, however, is North Korea. Cooperation with China, the only ally and largest trading partner of North Korea, is seen as critical to achieving the reunification of Korea. Reunification is a key priority of South Korean foreign policy, along with economic prosperity and security/sovereignty. Even staunch supporters of a strong alliance with the US will also want to pursue good relations with China, given the expected negative effects of a deteriorating relationship with China on the South Korean economy and prospects for reunification.[24]

President Moon is a representative of the progressive political camp, which in the past was more critical of the country's alliance with the US and more likely to place equal value on the country's relations with China than was the conservative camp. However, South Korean politicians and the broader public see China less favorably than they did a few years ago. In reaction to South Korea's decision to deploy a US missile defense system (THAAD), China in 2016 launched an 18-month boycott campaign with severely damaging effects for the South Korean economy. This sowed public distrust on the Korean side. Recent public opinion polls reveal that the South Korean public holds a decreasingly favorable view of both great powers. However, if they had to choose between them, a clear majority of South Koreans would still choose the US over China.[25]

In the unfolding US-China competition, South Korea has so far opted for a "strategic nondecision."[26] Historically, South Korea has always tried to accommodate the most powerful

country. Currently, South Korea seeks to avoid making choices by accommodating both great powers. To accommodate China and settle the THAAD dispute, South Korea agreed to restrain itself militarily (including no additional THAAD deployment, no participation in any US-led regional missile defense network, and no trilateral military alliance with the US and Japan). It has also been open to joining China-led regional groupings, such as the AIIB (2015) and the RCEP (2020), the latter of which is the world's largest free trade zone encompassing China, Japan, and the ASEAN states, as well as Australia and New Zealand. At the same time, South Korea keeps investing in its alliance with the US. Even under arguably the most progressive Korean government (2003–2008), South Korea participated in the US "War on Terror" in Iraq as the third-largest contributor.

The Role of Middle Powers in the US-China Rivalry

The implications of the great-power rivalry for East Asian countries are twofold. First, countries in the region face increasing pressure to make choices and align with either China or the US. Second, the rivalry reflects and reinforces ongoing power shifts, giving rise to strategic uncertainties. East Asia is of core interest to both great powers, and both China and the US actively promote their competing visions for the region through regional organizations and other initiatives. China's Belt and Road Initiative is a clear example of the country building influence in its neighborhood. Yet, participation in these undertakings also risks alienating the other power. China-led initiatives may be seen as purposefully excluding the US, but Washington-supported proposals, such as the 5G Clean Network initiative, are quickly interpreted as attempts to limit or contain China. Such competing proposals leave countries in the region with zero-sum choices.[27]

In East Asia, no region-wide political or security mechanism exists that could mediate the effects of the unfolding great-power competition and its associated uncertainties on individual countries. While both great powers invest in establishing and reinforcing partnerships in the region, doubts exist as to how reliable these partnerships are and how well they align with partner countries' political, security, and economic interests. In reaction to the uncertain geopolitical environment, the small and middle powers of East Asia are increasing their defense spending and reinforcing security cooperation – not only with the US, but also with other global partners such as Australia and India. More generally, intraregional

interaction and cooperation, with a focus on economic activities (for example in the ASEAN context), are on the rise. While they reflect the general trend of intensifying economic ties, such joint activities can also be seen as countries' individual hedging strategies in an increasingly harsh geopolitical environment.

Cooperation between small and medium powers will be essential in enabling them to voice their interests in an environment increasingly dominated by great-power competition. However, the US-led order is heavily focused on bilateralism, with particularly strong links in Northeast as compared to Southeast Asia. In the past, South Korea has shown openness to multilateral solutions for the region, including in Northeast Asia. Seoul has also demonstrated an interest in deepening regional integration, for example through the ASEAN+3 forum. In fact, South Korea has proved far more open to such efforts than Japan. Most South Korean presidents in the post-Cold War period pursued a strategic vision of a regional security mechanism that could help overcome (military) insecurities and competition in the region. A main motivation was to ease tensions in both US-China and Sino-Japanese rivalries. The Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative, launched by the Park Geun-hye administration (2013–2017), is one among a number of initiatives that did not prove successful – arguably, because South Korea was not in a strong enough position to push it. It was also Park who pointed to the "Asian Paradox" of decades-long intensifying economic cooperation in East Asia in the near absence of political and security cooperation.

Another legacy of the US-led order that makes in-depth regional cooperation or even integration difficult is Japan's position in the region: It is strong and contested at the same time. Wanting Japan to be the economic engine and stable anchor of the region, the US shielded the country from claims to reparations for the colonial and war atrocities inflicted on neighboring countries. In contrast to Germany, Japan has never engaged in a process of critically coming to terms with its war crimes. The Philippines, for example, openly protested against the 1951 peace treaty as it did not commit Japan to pay reparations. In a related development, Japan's increased economic engagement in Southeast Asia starting in the 1970s led to backlash; anti-Japanese protests took place in Indonesia and Thailand. The ongoing conflict between Japan and South Korea is also rooted in unresolved historical conflicts, aggravated by new nationalism in both countries.

Due to the visible nationalism and revisionism in contemporary Japanese politics, combined with memories of imperial Japan, East Asian neighbor states remain suspicious of the country's ambitions to raise its regional leadership profile. But Japan's relations with smaller Southeast Asian states have, on the whole, improved over time. Japan's position in the region is today well established. Neighboring countries appreciate Japan as a business partner, leading source of FDI, or major donor of development aid. More problematic are the country's relations with South Korea. In recent years, the two countries found themselves in a downward spiral, constantly hitting new lows in their relationship. Japan will have to overcome such fundamental conflicts within the region and convince East Asian partners of their shared interests in order to have an impact on the emerging regional order. Its focus so far has been on political coalition-building outside the region. In a similar logic, South Korea could strengthen its position in the great-power rivalry by improving its relations with Japan.

In situations when power is rapidly shifting, as is the case in East Asia amid the US-China rivalry, a clear positioning of regional actors, especially the more influential ones, can be consequential for the forming regional order. The current power shifts indicate that US influence will wane in the future order and that some power will be shared with an ever more ambitious and powerful China. Japan's strategy towards China can be described as balancing or "heavy hedging." The country undertakes broad efforts to keep the US engaged in the region. By contrast, the approach taken by most other countries qualifies as some sort of "light hedging" or "dual hedging," meaning efforts to hedge against both China and the US by increasing cooperation with both great powers simultaneously.[28] Like many other countries in the region, South Korea refrains from competition over regional influence but seeks a stable regional order. South Korea has made it clear that it does not want to align with one of the great powers amid their rivalry. Timely, proactive, and consistent action and communication by middle powers can help ensure their continued position of influence and prove decisive in solidifying a new regional order.

In the absence of a regional architecture, middle powers have a key role to play in formulating indigenous solutions to new political and security challenges in East Asia and promoting their joint interests even if they conflict with those of great powers. Japan stands out as the actor that has

arguably most actively positioned itself in the new and changing geopolitical landscape of the region. During this formative period for East Asia, Tokyo demonstrated political innovation and leadership. It has been at the forefront of anticipating and reacting to power shifts in East Asia, including China's rise and the relative decline of the US. Under Abe's premiership, Japan managed to develop a long-term strategic vision of the region and Japan's role in it. Both conceptual work and political action have been important to bring political visions, such as the Quad and FOIP, to life. This included international networking efforts. Other countries, like the US, have embraced concepts like FOIP that have been promoted by Japan. Analysts argue that Japan has, over the past decades, become a more equal ally with the US and, today takes on a leading, forward-thinking role in the East Asian region.[29]

Towards a New Grand Political Bargain in East Asia

The East Asian order is at a critical juncture. The future of the region continues to depend critically on US engagement. Early indications from the Biden administration show that it seeks to abandon the unilateral approach taken under Trump and will strengthen cooperation with old and new partners and allies, such as Japan, South Korea, and India, in order to respond jointly to the challenges related to China's rise. Will strengthening old engagement patterns be enough, however, to hinder China's increasing geopolitical influence in the region? The US is still in a position to exert strong influence on East Asian partners, through either coercive means (such as the threat to exclude them from intelligence sharing) or positive incentives. The US, however, also increasingly needs to compete with China, an influential economic partner and provider of public goods to countries in the region. Unlike China, the US has until recently "shunned the region's various indigenous architectural efforts," for example by being "decidedly ambivalent" about past proposals such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).[30] The US under Trump placed priority on domestic needs and interests ("America first") over the interests of other countries, including those of East Asian allies. Defining common interests and developing joint perspectives will be a necessary part of the US attempt to re-establish itself as a reliable, consistent partner and leader in Asia.

Whether the US and its East Asian partners will arrive at a consensus over the rules and principles they want to promote jointly in the region is dependent on how closely the interests of the partners align. In this regard,

the US approach towards China and North Korea will be crucial. An approach that isolates China economically and politically is in the interest of neither Japan nor South Korea. At the same time, concerns over China's military ambitions are growing across the region and beyond. Signs exist that China will consolidate its military cooperation with North Korea and further strengthen ties with Russia.[31] For example, China and Russia's first joint air patrol in July 2019 proved aggravating to both Japan and South Korea. Both Tokyo and Seoul accused the joint air patrol of violating their national airspace. By making the incursion near the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islands, which South Korea administers but Japan also claims, China may have intended to drive a wedge between the two US allies, with Russia's help. Furthermore, changes in the US approach towards North Korea have also sown confusion and worry. Trump's summit diplomacy directly engaged with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, raising fears that the US could strike a deal with North Korea to the detriment of Japan and South Korea. The US will have to assure its partners and address such concerns and fears in a credible and sustainable way.

A good basis exists for continued and even strengthened military cooperation between the US and its East Asian partners. Threat perceptions and security interests of the US, Japan, and South Korea largely coincide. For all three countries, China's rise represents a primary security threat and one that will dominate discourse for the foreseeable future. As China continues to gain influence and power, mutual security ties among Japan, South Korea, and the US will become increasingly relevant. Similarly, a hostile North Korea that keeps increasing its nuclear and missile capabilities is another shared security priority. Furthermore, the impact of the long history of cooperation between the US and its Northeast Asian allies should not be underestimated. Past military cooperation has proven very successful, particularly in reference to close US-Japan collaboration on missile defense. Against the backdrop of the changing security environment, Japan even signaled its intention to step up its security cooperation with the US and expressed interest in joining the US Five Eyes intelligence partnership with Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK.

The growing military capabilities of East Asian partners and their continued commitment to their alliance with the US facilitate a strong US military engagement in the region. Both Japan and South Korea are interested in playing an active role in regional

security, though South Korea is far more reluctant than Japan to take sides in the US-China rivalry. Contrary to President Trump's claims, Japan and South Korea have been investing in both their own military power and their alliance with the US. Japan increased its defense spending by 13 per cent since 2013, after a decade of cuts. Tokyo also covered almost all of the costs for new US military facilities at Futenma and Iwakuni. It also relies heavily on US arms exports, as 90 per cent of Japanese defense systems and weapons are American. South Korea is among the world's top spenders on defense (currently 2.6 per cent of its GDP and rising) and paid 90 per cent of the 11 billion USD construction cost for Camp Humphreys, the US' largest overseas military base. It also purchased 13 billion USD worth of US arms in a recent four-year period.[32]

Aside from the military aspects of their partnership, the US also enjoys many other significant benefits from its Northeast Asian allies. Tokyo and Seoul are natural partners of the US with regard to both regional and global governance. Japan and South Korea are among the most economically and technologically advanced countries worldwide. They are active members of the Western-led international order, holding memberships in all important Western-led international organizations. Typical of middle powers, Japan and South Korea are also supportive of multilateralism. Both have stable democratic political systems and promote the rule of law, both domestically and internationally. Japan and South Korea are valuable partners from a regional geostrategic aspect, but also as international technological and infrastructure governance leaders – key areas in the effort to manage China's rise.

To strengthen its leadership going forward, the US will have to be sensitive to new, complex geopolitical realities in East Asia. Countries like Japan and South Korea are today in a far better position to shape regional politics than they were 70 years ago. In the early 1950s, the US established a system of strongly asymmetric relations with its East Asian partners, which reflected countries' relative power at the time. The US had established its military superiority through its role in World War II and the Korean War, and had by this time also proved itself as an economic powerhouse. The US accounted for half of global GDP and held 80 per cent of the world's hard currency reserves. In partnering with Japan and South Korea, the US was partnering with war-ravaged, economically weak nations. Today, they are among the leading economies in the world, running large trade

surpluses with the US. Both countries have modernized their militaries, which are among the best equipped in the region. China's rise makes Japan and South Korea indispensable partners of the US in the region. At the same time, China's growing power and influence creates new security challenges for Japan and South Korea, showcasing the benefits of a strong US position and partnerships in East Asia.

The Future of the Regional Order in East Asia

East Asia is transitioning to a more complex regional order where power will be more diffuse and both the US and China want to lead. Given East Asia's growing economic and geopolitical weight, success in this effort will influence their respective abilities to maintain and develop their great-power status. The positioning of middle powers will be decisive in how the great-power rivalry will play out in the region. Japan, for example, demonstrates how middle powers can have an impact on regional politics in ways that serve their interests by taking a proactive approach. Japan has proved successful in actively seeking cooperation with other extra-regional powers, such as Australia and India and potentially European countries, in a way that helps solidify Tokyo's position on the world stage. Whether middle and small powers in Asia can shape the order in their interest will also depend on their ability to cooperate. Yet simply sharing common interests, such as the pursuit of stability, peace, and economic prosperity, will not suffice. They also need to overcome impediments to multilateral cooperation at the regional level, some of which are legacies of the established US-led order. This includes East Asia's strong preference for bilateralism and unaddressed historical anti-Japanese sentiments.

What could a new grand political bargain look like from a US perspective? To continue playing a leading role in East Asia over the long term, the US will have to redefine the nature of its role as an Asian power and gain clarity in its strategic priorities. The political support at home for the old bargain is gone. President Biden faces domestic constraints regarding US participation in free-trade agreements. Yet it is just those tools that are of growing geopolitical relevance in East Asia. At the same time, assessments of the geopolitical role of both China and Japan enjoy a strong bipartisan consensus. China is seen as a long-term strategic competitor whose rise the US needs to manage. Japan is considered a key partner in this endeavor. In addition, North Korea continues to represent a significant security threat in East Asia of international relevance, an issue

on which the US will want to cooperate with East Asian partners including South Korea. Sufficient common ground seems to exist for continued US engagement in East Asia – an engagement that will be backed by its old East Asian partners.

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