



Strategic Panorama 2025

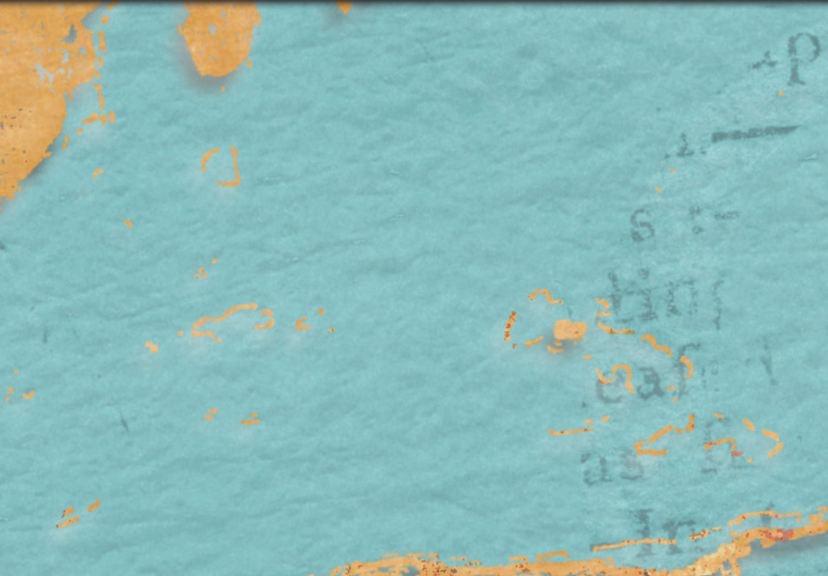
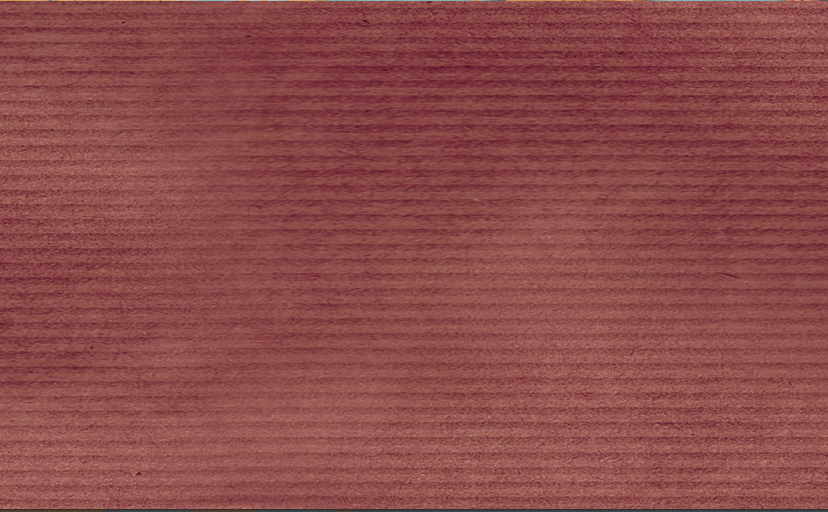
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cpage.mpr.gob.es

Edita:



Paseo de la Castellana 109, 28046 Madrid

© Autores y editor, 2025

NIPO 083-17-128-X (edición impresa)

ISSN 2792-2502 (edición impresa)

Depósito legal M 18695-2013

Fecha de edición: julio de 2025

Maqueta e imprime: Imprenta Ministerio de Defensa

NIPO 083-21-219-5 (edición en línea)

ISSN 2792-2510 (edición en línea)

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Introduction

Geopolitics in the age of rivalries

José M. de Areilza Carvajal

In light of rapidly transforming international politics, increasing tensions and global conflicts, analysis and forecasting have not only become even more urgent tasks, but are also more difficult. Recently, Mike Froman, the President of the Council on Foreign Relations, good-naturedly complained that the bad thing about making predictions in our time is that they have to be about the future. At this moment of accelerating geopolitical change, the publication of the *Strategic Panorama* in 2025 is more necessary than ever. It seeks to be a steady contribution from Spain to understand, contemplate and anticipate major trends and the main factors underpinning a changing international order.

We have entered a new era of rivalries as yet ill-defined, which Philip Stephens describes as “the end of the end of history”.

Russia’s invasion of eastern Ukraine has ended a long era in international relations and awakened Europeans to this different reality. It is a shift from a world structured on the basis of multi-lateral rules and institutions, with all their imperfections and limitations, to one that is divided and fraught with uncertainty. Some elements that define this increasingly unstable situation are the rise of China, the international withdrawal of the United States, the rise of threats such as cyber warfare or climate emergencies

and the persistence of others that have continued throughout the years (nuclear proliferation, international terrorism and uncontrolled migration).

The goal of global prosperity, central during the years of the *Pax Americana* that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, has given way to the imperative of security as understood in national or regional terms. Once again we are witnessing the confrontation between large blocs, the United States and its allies versus the alliance of China and Russia, two systems that are understood to be incompatible with each other despite their great economic interdependence. This unstable scenario may be described as a new Cold War, quite different from the first¹. This time, the vast majority of countries in the southern hemisphere are not taking sides, as the division into blocs leaves most as non-aligned. Some of them, emerging powers such as India, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, South Africa and the Emirates, triangulate effectively, taking advantage of the benefits of multi-alignment in the context of this rivalry.

The term “geopolitics”, which had fallen into disuse after the Second World War, is back and widely employed. Our words are our worlds: there is no longer a predictable framework in international relations, and ambition for power, geography and history are shaking the foundations of the world order. International law is being devalued, the use or threat of force is becoming more prevalent, economic de-globalisation is starting, and it remains to be seen how far protectionism and fragmentation will take us. As our much-missed Josep Piqué used to say, geography’s always there and history always comes back.

The demand for pervasive security is an expanding concept: it now encompasses not only defence, energy, trade and investment, but also disruptive technologies (with their impact on, among many other areas, the right to information), healthcare, and immigration. Interdependencies are increasingly understood as vulnerabilities, and the political debate in many democracies increasingly revolves around the axis of open *versus* closed countries, leaving behind classic ideological divisions.

At the centre of this geopolitical disruption is the United States. The former Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, has warned in a seminal article how the Western superpower is weighed down by a dysfunctional and polarised politics where it now appears

¹ Niblett, R. (2024). *The New Cold War*. London, Atlantic Books.

impossible to reach a basic consensus that would allow it to respond to a delicate geopolitical situation, with four autocracies that challenge it and are increasingly coordinated with each other: China, Russia, Iran and North Korea.

With Donald Trump's return to power, Washington is abandoning the reconstruction of foreign policy alliances, as Joe Biden did in his only term in office, to move towards a foreign policy that is somewhere between isolationism and a version of imperialism that takes us back to the 19th century.

The Republican has returned to the White House with a language of victimhood and aspires to quickly change the rules of the game, both of democracy and of an international order largely built by the United States. He seeks to leap over consensus, pacts, norms and institutions on the grounds that all local and global elites are corrupt. Reform is not possible and all that remains is a break with the established order. For Europeans, the return of this disruptive politician is bad news, because neither the Union nor its states are prepared and in agreement for what lies ahead. Trump's second presidency is a triple *shock* to the continent's defence, economy and democracy.

But Trump's gestures, statements and policies are not only a disruption, but also a major distraction. He is pulling the nation out from the global fight against the climate emergency and the coordination of global health issues, he ignores the importance of setting clear standards in developing artificial intelligence, and aspires to continue to maintain superpower hegemony without providing stability for the world. Trade and defence alliances are challenged and their fundamental premise denied. Leslie Vinjamuri, director of the US programme at Chatham House, London, has explained that while Trump's presidency raises the question of his country's global engagement once again, this issue has been on the back burner for decades under previous presidencies².

This time, however, the Trumpist combination of isolationism and nineteenth-century imperialism makes it much more difficult for countries to cooperate with each other to address common problems. It is true that US soft power in its new MAGA version is appreciated in more than a few places in the world: those ruled

² Vinjamuri, L. (2025). The new Trump administration could herald a remaking of the international order. How should the world respond? *Chatham House*.

by dictators and apprentice strongmen. The study conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations, *Alone in a Trumpist World*, conducted in January 2025, sheds light on some highly relevant data:

“The citizens most concerned about Trump’s return belong to the closest allied countries. Only 22% of continental Europeans, 15% of Britons and 11% of South Koreans think it is good for their nations. Meanwhile, 84% of Indians, 61% of Saudis, 49% of Russians and 46% of Chinese see it as positive for their countries³”.

Being an ally of Washington may well be much more difficult than being its rival in the future. The task for democracies for the next four years is to survive, adapt and play their cards right. Ivan Krastev recently reminded us that the best strategy when dealing with Trump is not to play the victim, and to not be in a hurry to please him or to oppose his plans⁴. It would be the time to push for freedom and prosperity with better policies and fewer TV scripts.

In his election campaign, Trump displayed remarkable political astuteness by weaving a broad coalition among voter groups with very different agendas: the MAGA movement, evangelicals, libertarians and many members of racial minorities. The international arena is where Trump can wreak the most havoc. He promises thrills, withdrawals, transactions and even territorial expansionism, all wrapped up in his fascination with the strong leaders of the worst autocracies.

Undoubtedly the most powerful presidential adviser at the start of the cycle is billionaire Elon Musk, who serves as *de facto* prime minister. On the one hand, he seeks to maintain and increase the numerous contracts his companies have signed with the federal government. On the other, he acts as the shadow mastermind of the Trump cabinet and fights on all fronts, from restructuring the Administration (entrusted to him) to peace in Ukraine, the rules of the AI game, or support for European ultra-right-wingers.

³ Garton, T., Krastev, I. and Leonard, M. (2025). *Alone in a Trumpian world: The EU and global public opinion after the US elections* [online]. *ECFR*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/alone-in-a-trumpian-world-the-eu-and-global-public-opinion-after-the-us-elections/>

⁴ Krastev, I. (2025). *The Key for Dealing with Donald Trump is not to play the victim*. *Financial Times*.

But it's not just this shifty tech entrepreneur who inspires Trump. Several leading business people in the world of digital technology support him and are taking the opportunity to promote their interests and worldview. Many of them are techno-optimists and practice a version of libertarian anarchism with Darwinian roots at odds with European sensibilities of recognition and protection of the weakest in society. They believe that curbing environmental degradation will only be achieved through market-driven technological solutions and by human beings (only a select few), who are set to become superior beings thanks to the findings of the digital revolution.

Members of the MAGA (*Make America Great Again*) movement, many of them workers who used to vote for Democrats, may be the first to suffer from Trump's domestic and international initiatives. As the tycoon cannot run again in four years' time, his hands are now unbound and the wind is in his sails. It is the euphoria of one who feels powerful, typically beyond the rules, and called to realise great projects. But Trump cares about popularity and polls, as a good TV *ratings* expert, and also about macroeconomic data and the stock market, even if he broadcasts his own version of them. The start of his mandate may well be different from what comes later. The best Trump experts know that they have to be prepared for surprising plot twists and constant shocks.

The United States' international priority for the past decade, which both Republicans and Democrats agree upon, has been to contain China, its rival superpower on the rise. Xi Jinping wants Taiwan back and is not willing to wait the hundred years suggested by Mao Zedong to Richard Nixon at the historic meeting in February 1972. The current Chinese leader, poised to go down in history as a great leader, has domestic problems piling up, which could lead him to speed up his plans to end democracy in Taipei: a collapsing real estate sector, ineffective state interventionism, protests by minorities and the youth, corruption, and the failure of the zero-Covid policy.

China projects its internal security requirements to the world through a long-term strategy that secures global influence, energy sources and raw materials. At the same time, it still has the mentality of being the central empire and views other countries as tributaries rather than equals, a mentality that has so far conditioned the growing export of its political and economic model.

The rest of the 21st century will be dominated by an increasingly fierce rivalry between China, which aspires to global hegemony, and the United States, which seeks to maintain its pre-eminence as much as possible.

The Asian superpower is responding at its own pace to the climate emergency, the planet's first existential challenge. The real problem in the face of this global threat is twofold: there is almost no time to put in place the green transitions that would prevent the planet from becoming irreversibly inhospitable. The mechanisms that have been put in place with the COP system are not entirely effective. Moreover, the United States is once again withdrawing from the multilateral framework, with a Republican party suffering from the virus of climate change denial. In this field, it will increasingly depend on the actions of states and companies, which rely primarily on possible technological solutions.

The EU and its member states are ill-prepared for a world in which security is the dominant imperative and which affects so many areas - economics, energy, technology, immigration, health. This is why Brussels' introspection in recent years, during which it has debated intensely and with a certain Byzantine attitude regarding the continent's strategic autonomy, needs to be reframed. In reality, the priority question is: how can Europe contribute to solving global problems in a world where security has become the overriding concern?

For Europeans, the new cycle of Trumpism may have highly negative effects on the economy, defence and democracy. The Union and its member states are ill-prepared for a world in which the Western superpower is no longer a provider of global stability.

By contrast, the new Western barbarians, as a character in Henry James' novel *The Americans* (1877) called the inhabitants of the United States, are willing to weaken multilateral organisations and openly support anti-European parties. Free trade, multilateralism, universal standards to improve the rules of the digital technology game and global working in the face of the climate emergency run the risk of being sidelined. And this would usher in a much worse world.

The EU has acted swiftly and unitedly in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but it is far from having taken sufficient steps to carry its own weight in this area. EU nations are investing more and more in defence (a total of around 40% of the US budget), but this is done on a national basis, with a worrying fragmentation

and lack of coordination, and without a sufficient industrial base. These limitations have been known for years, although nothing has been done to remedy them. There is a widespread pacifist mentality among voters, which means that the problem lies not only in institutions, capacities and means.

It is true that prior to the war in Ukraine in 2022, the Union had been busy managing a succession of existential crises: the triple crisis of banks, debt and growth in 2008 that forced the redesign of the euro, the migration crisis of 2015, the rise of populist and nationalist anti-European movements, well exemplified by Brexit, and finally, the pandemic and its devastating consequences on health and the economy. This latest crisis has spurred a major debate on the consequences of ongoing de-globalisation.

In each of these crises, the EU learned valuable lessons and adopted reforms guided by the objective of deepening integration. The most successful case of interpreting crises as opportunities, in the best European tradition, was the creation of the Next Generation Recovery Fund, a highly innovative federal economic-financial instrument. The sixth crisis is likely to come with the international disruption brought about by Donald Trump's second presidency.

Across Europe, nationalist and populist movements are on the rise, as was the case in the last legislative elections in France and in recent European elections. When institutions are weakened, the temptation is to look for strong personalities who will tackle large-scale problems, such as immigration or inequality, in a straightforward way and clash with external enemies.

One of the threats looming over the European continent is the overlap between the transgressive tide of US policy and the subversive activity of Russia's neighbour. Once again, a president is encouraging anti-European parties from Washington, from Nigel Farage's far right to Viktor Orban's ultra-nationalism in Hungary, Vladimir Putin's Trojan horse in the EU. Elon Musk has also publicly displayed his closeness to Farage and appears willing to fund the German neo-Nazi party, the AfD, currently in second place in the polls for the upcoming elections in February. For Musk, AfD and Giorgia Meloni's party in Italy are the same because of their rejection of immigration, regardless of the clear differences between the two discourses.

Conversely, surveys indicate that citizens trust EU institutions more than national ones. 77% call for a continent-wide security

and defence policy, although it is not clear that they are willing to pay the price.

Europe has lived comfortably under the US military umbrella while developing the best social state in history. In return, it has not made enough effort in security and defence, which is still a national responsibility. As with a long list of already Europeanised economic and social policies, there is an urgent need to take steps to share sovereignty in the area of defence.

Nevertheless, much of European nations' future work on overall security and defence must continue to be as a US ally, a great nation with which there are differences that must be overcome with loyalty and in permanent dialogue. The option of rapprochement with China clashes with European values and interests in the medium term, however much this rhetorical possibility may be wielded from Brussels or Paris. Despite the rise of nationalism and populism, the two sides of the Atlantic share a common history and civilisational foundations in a world where the West is increasingly ceding power to other emerging actors.

It does not seem right to focus the debate on being or not being "vassals" of the United States, as Emmanuel Macron did in order to defend his own policy towards China. It is preferable to consider the relationship with the US in terms of a friendship between partners who sometimes agree and sometimes disagree, but who are able to resolve their differences in the knowledge that they share the same long-term goals.

Europeans need the United States as a key security and defence ally, but they should not stop developing their own capabilities. In North Africa and the Sahel, for example, Europe will increasingly have to act without the US. At the same time, the US no longer has the capacity to contain China without working jointly with its allies. After once again intervening in a war on European soil, Washington hopes to make the transatlantic relationship work in the Pacific.

The EU has already changed its perception of China, and step by step they are moving closer to the US vision of containment of the Asian giant, though without, as is increasingly the case in Washington, considering it an enemy or recognising the need to decouple its economy and stop investing and trading.

Europeans must boost their response to this new era of rivalries and, in the meantime, develop new economic and defence

capabilities, as well as seek understandings with the new US administration in the short term. They must also rethink the rules of globalisation, first and foremost in strategic sectors such as semiconductors, critical minerals or batteries, in order to preserve the economic advantages of the international opening process and minimise risks. European industry, for now, needs to remain in China. The wave of protectionism, isolationism and instability unleashed by Washington should be used to boost the continent's internal market and political identity, and to do one's homework on defence.

It is however good news for continental Europeans is that increasingly more British citizens think that a closer relationship between the UK and the EU is necessary, including 26% of Brexit voters.

There are several reasons for this opinion. The threats to common security posed by the war in Ukraine makes good the saying that all European countries are small, only some don't know it yet. The return of Donald Trump to the White House, a president highly sceptical about the importance of the transatlantic alliance and one who is willing to unleash trade wars with his allies, also promotes cooperation between the two sides of the Channel.

This does not mean that the British will rejoin the EU in the short term. The trauma of Brexit is still experienced by people and it will be a generation before membership may be reconsidered. Political crises in France and Germany and differences between the two driving forces of integration also make it difficult for the EU to react quickly to threats to its security and to consider partnering with its former member state. There are, however, many concrete initiatives on which they may work together. The list of pending issues is endless: defence, the economy, education, research, technological development, the fight against the climate emergency, etc.

The UK remains the continent's leading military power and second largest economy, although the state of its public finances hampers the updating of its global capabilities. Keir Starmer's Labour government sees its reform agenda in terms of deepening relations with the EU internal market and improving access to it. While it is true that Conservatives have been radicalised after their electoral defeat, a third of their voters still want better cooperation with the European Union. Pragmatism is beginning to replace an arrogance masquerading as patriotism in 2016. On the continent, the UK is increasingly perceived as a part of the solution.

The big question today is whether the EU can evolve and equip itself in time with the security and defence capabilities required to handle major geopolitical issues. It is an existential question that forces us to review a well-established belief, refuted, among others, by Joseph Weiler:

“It is clear that no European country can defend itself alone. And that being so, it is ridiculous to consider that defence should not be pooled... European states have neglected their defence, thinking -based on memories of the 20th century- that when in need, the US will always come to the rescue⁵”.

The goal of boosting European defence requires answering three questions: how to promote the strengthening of the transatlantic alliance when the US is shifting priorities and may revert to isolationism; how far must powers be centralised in terms of EU defence; and how fast is it required and possible to move forward in either case.

No one knows how the war in Ukraine will end, but the chances of a partition of the country are growing. The big question will be what security guarantees may be offered from the West to the Kyiv-ruled territory. A victorious Russia would be an even more revanchist power and lead to permanent instability on Europe’s eastern border.

Finally, and before presenting each of the chapters that constitute this edition of *Strategic Panorama 2025*, I would like to end this preliminary analysis with a warning against the trap of realism in the resurrected geopolitics that we live in. This increasingly widespread perspective should only serve to analyse international relations as they are, but not as they should be. The use of force cannot become the first principle of international relations. Realism is useful for understanding how the distribution of global power is changing, but extremely damaging if it serves to dismiss any normative vision that defends diplomacy, negotiation, a rules-based world order, and international organisations. This view is profoundly mistaken: it rejects the existence of moral progress, and leads to paralysis and resignation. Above all, it could not be more alien to the meaning of the word Europe, the name of our civilisation.

⁵ Ramón, J. C. de (2022). Joseph Weiler: la omnipresencia de los derechos y la desaparición de los deberes. *The Objective*.

The 2025 edition of the *Strategic Panorama* rigorously analyses and studies the major issues of a changing international order.

Firstly, Ambassador Jorge Dezcallar reflects on Europe's role in a new international era. He asks the essential question of whether it is too late to adapt the geopolitical order that emerged after the Second World War, and adds a lucid and urgent reflection on the rise of artificial intelligence and its transformational capacity. He explains how power-sharing in international organisations has become outdated. The UN Security Council, the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank have problem regarding representation that they have so far failed to address. He also explores how wars accelerate the march of history and provides a far-reaching analysis of possible future scenarios in the evolution of power relations between states and also with non-state actors.

Colonel José Pardo de Santayana devotes his chapter to a precise and extremely clear study of how war has returned to the very centre of international relations and how nuclear weapons have regained their lost prominence. His study highlights how Europe is living under the threat of a worrying escalation and reflects on the questions posed by Donald Trump's second presidency.

The new Republican mandate is analysed as a period of prioritising national interests by Professor José María Peredo in his chapter on the evolution of US foreign policy. He also analyses the extent to which the Western superpower is in a stronger position to deal with the new competitive order.

The role of the European Union and its member states in this world in transition is addressed by Professor Daniel Fuentes. In his chapter, he discusses how they may advance towards a more sustainable and resilient future. By studying the economic projections and geopolitical risks for Europe, he outlines several possible scenarios and highlights the lessons learned from the handling of successive crises on the continent since 2008.

The evolution of the main actors and their strategies in the Indo-Pacific are studied by Professor Eva Borreguero. She devotes her chapter to explaining how this space of decisive regional competition is evolving and the impact of these dynamics on the global order. The two rival superpowers are vying to influence the new centre of the world: China has become more assertive owing to the authoritarian drift of Xi Jinping's government, while the United States has become more exacting towards its allies, demanding they increase defence investments. Washington is also a more

unpredictable actor with Trump's return to power. India, for its part, is managing its rivalry with China and is preparing itself to not be dependent on either of the two superpowers in the race.

Panorama also devotes a chapter to the Middle East, written by Professor Haizam Amirah Fernández and journalist Rosa Meneses. This analysis of a region undergoing a new period of war and upheaval highlights how Donald Trump's return to the White House will profoundly affect a Middle East that is undergoing a reorganisation of regional power balances.

Finally, *Strategic Panorama* also looks at two major regions of the world that are essential to the future of Europe and Spain: Latin America and Africa.

In the chapter dedicated to Latin America, Juan Pablo Toro, journalist and expert on politics and security in the region, questions how this group of countries may escape the trap of the global south. He analyses the influence of countries such as China and Russia and highlights the importance of Latin America's alliances with Western countries in order to move towards open societies and improve coexistence and prosperity.

In the chapter on Africa, Professor José Segura, Director General of Casa África, presents the continent as a political epicentre that attracts the attention of the main world powers. In his analysis, he unravels some of its complexities and addresses the major challenges of migration, governance and energy development. He suggests treating approaching these countries as "diverse and equal partners in building a more just and sustainable world order".

Chapter One

A world in deep transformation

Jorge Dezcallar de Mazarredo

Abstract

The world is undergoing changes of a geopolitical nature, accelerated by the ongoing wars, the likes of which have not been seen in a long time. They have shut down the international system to give way to another as yet undefined. The old rules set by the winners of World War II are no longer valid and new ones are required to better reflect the plurality of the world.

Advances in technology, especially Artificial Intelligence, pose a huge challenge, and nuclear weapons has made a strong comeback in the geostrategic arena.

As the world faces a dangerous decade in which the US and China look askance at each other and the world's centre of gravity is shifting towards the Pacific Ocean, Europe is in danger of being marginalised.

The war in Ukraine has boosted the emergence of what is now known as the Global South. Rather than take sides between the major powers, these countries prefer to leave all options open in order to align themselves according to their convenience at all times.

Keywords

Geopolitics, World order, Great powers, Global South, Technology, Nuclear weapon.

The war in Ukraine extends far beyond a border dispute over securing strategic territories and responds to profound forces of change in the geopolitics that have governed the world since the end of World War II. When Xi Jinping visited Moscow in March 2023, he said to Putin as he bid him goodbye: "Right now there are changes – the likes of which we haven't seen for 100 years – and we are the ones driving these changes together". And a smiling Putin responded: "I agree". He probably remembered the phrase attributed to Lenin that "there are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen". Or something very similar. Well, here we are.

In his *Empires of Eurasia. How Imperial Legacies Shape International Security*¹, Jeffrey Mankoff argues that a new "imperial age" is rising in the heart of Eurasia where four old empires -Russia, China, Iran and Turkey- now pursue "imperial geopolitics" that lead them to intervene in the affairs of their neighbours either by force of arms, as is the case of Russia in Ukraine, and Iran and Turkey in Syria; or by trade and ethnic and linguistic ties, as in China's case in Central and Southeast Asia. Mankoff believes that this imperial past is not mere rhetoric, rather it extends much further in the sense that, because of this past, these four countries neither see themselves as nor seek to be nation-states confined to clearly defined territories. They see themselves as "civilisation-states" that are somewhat beyond good and evil, with influence far beyond their established borders. The same may be stated of China, India or the United States. Whether or not this is true -and it seems to me that it is- there is no doubt that Russia's imperial past is very much present in the choreography and symbolism surrounding the Russian president's public appearances.

In Putin's mind -as in the minds of many others- there is a conviction that this is the end of one geopolitical epoch and the beginning of another, and this is a particularly uncomfortable and unstable time. As Claudio Magris says, when one epoch dies and another is not yet born, we find ourselves in "the age of monsters". This is exactly what is happening, because the West is losing strength, the global South is gaining weight, the world's economic centre has shifted from the North Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, and a number of emerging countries such as China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, Mexico, Nigeria and others seek

¹ Yale University Press, 2022.

two things that are fair but difficult to achieve without breaking the deck: a different distribution of power in the world, and different rules to govern global geopolitics. This was discussed at the start of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September 2024. While it does not seem to me to be a new order, since it will not be easy to achieve, it is certainly a new disorder.

These countries are right because the victors of the Second World War have shared global power and influence between themselves at Yalta, Cairo, Potsdam, Tehran, San Francisco, Bretton Woods, etc., and created the UN and its Security Council, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Today, eighty years later, the world has changed considerably, yet they are still the same. This has been recognised by António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, when he told the BRICS summit in Johannesburg something as obvious as "global governance must represent today's power and economic relations, not those of 1945". It's as simple as that. He is quite right because the victors of the Second World War have divided up the pie of power amongst themselves and have not allowed anything to change in the three-quarters of a century since then, as demonstrated by the fact that France is on the UN Security Council with a permanent seat and the right of veto, and India, which is also a nuclear power and has 1.4 billion inhabitants, but was still a British colony in 1945, is not. Or that there is not one African or South American country in the Council. Or that the US does not want to relinquish control of the IMF, which it has held since its founding. Or that China has more or less the same votes as Italy in the World Bank. It is obvious that there is a serious problem regarding representation.

These are things that must change and ideally from within, although it is not an easy task. For example, the UN Security Council, which everyone agrees is in need of reform, grants its permanent members the power of vetoing, and these members are prepared to exercise this power to prevent any move that goes against their interests. If these changes are not promoted from within, they will be forced from the outside -which I don't believe is any better- because reality is stubborn and will eventually impose itself one way or another, by hook or by crook, reforming them, expanding them to make room for others, or simply by creating other institutions more in line with the times, and which leave the old ones without tasks and empty of content. This is already starting to happen, as demonstrated by the

creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which has already begun its work. What does not adapt eventually breaks, and the current distribution of power is not only unfair and outdated, but also dysfunctional when it comes to tackling global problems such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, food and health security, poverty and growing inequalities, not to mention the need for digital regulation. The geopolitical organisation of the world prevents these challenges from being addressed as effectively as is desirable, because the partial solutions offered by states are simply insufficient.

The same goes for the rules: the rules that govern us are too white, too Christian, and too Western. For some, they are even too masculine. They are the product of Christian civilisation, Greek philosophy and Roman law; they are the product of a Renaissance that placed the individual at the very centre of creation; of Francisco de Vitoria and Hugo Grotius and their principles of international law; of Descartes who differentiated between the planes occupied by the human being, nature and divinity; and of the Enlightenment which has placed doubt at the very centre of rational debate, for without doubt, there is no progress. This was perfectly acceptable for a United Nations that had 53 -quite homogeneous- members in 1945, but there are now 193 UN member states, the majority of the world's population does not belong to the white race, and lives in countries that have other cultures and have followed other civilisational paths that are neither better nor worse, just different.

In China, heir to the legacy of Confucius, respect for authority or meritocracy takes precedence over democracy, just as they believe that the group should prevail over the individual. I remember a spirited discussion some time ago with the vice-chancellor of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, in which he told me that it was not that he thought gender equality was wrong, but that it was much worse: the very concept offended him because it was the opposite of what Allah revealed to the Prophet through the mouth of the angel Gabriel and which he recorded in the holy Quran; or that he did not share the idea of relegating religion to the private world when in his opinion, it should permeate all acts of a believer's daily life. Hence Muslims' incomprehension and irritation at offences against Mohammed or the Quran, which they consider blasphemous, and our profound differences over freedom of expression. In the summer of 2023, vociferous mobs stormed the Swedish and Danish embassies in Baghdad and Tehran in protest

at the burning of a Quran by a provocateur in Stockholm. Shortly afterwards, the UN Human Rights Council adopted, by the vote of 28 of its 47 members, a resolution condemning religious hatred and "calls upon States to review their laws [...] with a view to identifying gaps that may impede the prevention and prosecution of acts and advocacy of religious hatred [...] and to take immediate steps to fill those gaps". Only European countries, the United States, and Costa Rica voted against this motion, showing how Western values are now regressing in the face of rapidly changing power relations in the world. Following this ruling, the government of Denmark (where up to 150 Qurans have been provocatively burned in the last three years) has decided to change the law to protect in public spaces "the inappropriate treatment of objects that have religious significance for a community". I may understand this, but I do not agree with it. I believe that a religious symbol for a billion Muslims should not be despised -I would never do it because although they may be legal they are unethical and besides, I don't like hurting other people's sentiments- but I also believe that limiting freedom of expression is the wrong way to go because there is no end to it.

Western society sees itself as clean and spotless, but that is not how others see us: In an article published in *The European Council on Foreign Relations* on 28th August 2023, José Ignacio Torreblanca wrote that:

"ECFR polls have shown that many countries in the global south no longer see the EU as an actor that defends the open and rules-based system, but one that pushes them to join US and European efforts to defeat Russia and contain China. They see a world of sanctions, export controls, investment screening, and protectionist measures as detrimental to their growth and interests".

All this under the pretext of defending our values. Events such as the assault on the Capitol in the United States which is the leading country in the West and the head of democracies, damage our image and do nothing to enhance the prestige of the values we defend. And so do perceptions of hypocrisy and double standards in our handling of the Iraq, Ukraine and Gaza crises today. In my opinion, they are right.

Therefore, merging our Western values with those of these countries is not easy, but we must try to do so because the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* could not be approved by consensus

today as was done in 1948 in a United Nations that was much more homogeneous than today... and much smaller. The price of not doing so is a divided world, a disconnection, a *decoupling* that can force us to live between different and incompatible systems of standards, the Internet, or even the transfer of financial funds (SWIFT).

The issue is pressing and the exponential development of artificial intelligence in recent times makes it even more urgent because, as the British historian Arnold Toynbee said decades ago, the dust raised by the galloping horses of history does not allow us to see clearly what is happening around us. And he is quite right because today it is running amok. If Émile Zola was concerned about potential damage to the brain caused by the tremendous speed of the railway in 1840 (thirty kilometres per hour), today the historical tempo has run amok because four revolutions have converged within the space of our short lives: that of the atom or technology (robotisation), that of the bit or digital, that of the gene or biological, as well as the demographic revolution, which has multiplied the world's population by a factor of more than three from 1945 until today, from 2.5 billion to 8 billion. Together, they have brought about unprecedented changes on a scale never witnessed before, as well as rivalries to secure the food, energy, minerals and knowledge that are required to feed them, all the while moving at speeds that frustrate government attempts to regulate them.

Artificial intelligence offers so many advantages -from facial recognition to text generation- that we sometimes forget its enormous risks, such as spreading disinformation on an industrial scale, developing pathogens, or providing access to algorithms that may be used to produce both medicines and chemical weapons. The dramatic attack on *paggers* used by Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria in September 2024 is just one example of the possibilities offered by AI, sending a shiver down our spines when we look down at our own mobile phones.

In this regard it is worth recalling Angela Merkel's call -before leaving politics- to convene a global technology conference to jointly establish the rules to oversee this runaway progress that, alongside advances that were unimaginable just a few years ago, also generates risks and ethical dilemmas. Since the time has passed when Europeans and Americans dictated the rules, this is something we must now do together. Numerous scientists are concerned about this issue and therefore the major powers, without

setting aside an inevitable rivalry, should be able to cooperate on something that is in everyone's interest along the lines advocated by the heads of the main laboratories developing artificial intelligence and who, in May 2023, issued a statement that "mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war.". As Markus Anderljung and Paul Schafer warn in their article "*How to Prevent an AI Catastrophe*", published in *Foreign Affairs* on 14th August 2023, "the harms from AI in today's society come from yesterday's models", which is why some scientists have called for a pause in the development of its most advanced algorithms. Generative AI is humanity's greatest leap forward and, as Sam Altman says, it is not certain to succeed. In response to these warnings, as early as November 2023, an important first step was taken in what I believe is the right direction in attempting to control artificial intelligence. A process began at Bletchley House, near London, which has culminated in the adoption of the first AI regulation during the recent Spanish presidency of the EU. It is ironic that AI was created by the Americans and the Chinese, and we Europeans are the first to try to regulate it.

Be that as it may, it is imperative that we are able to regulate AI before it dominates us, as Yuval Noah Harari has so strikingly put it. The United Nations is so concerned with the issue that it has devoted special time to it and the Summit of the Future, held during the UN General Assembly in September 2024, called for the creation of an international agency because "the technology is too important, the stakes too high, to rely solely on market forces and a patchwork of fragmented national and multilateral actions". Amen to that.

Another threat -and not a minor one- is the nuclear threat which bears a similarity to the River Guadiana, appearing and disappearing according to Putin's interests at any given moment. It is currently on the rise because the American-Russian relations that secured peace during the Cold War have been broken: the Nunn-Lugar Agreement has been denounced to inspire confidence, as have the Open Skies and NIF treaties (on medium-range missiles in Europe). Additionally, the Russians and Americans have also put the START treaty on intercontinental ballistic missiles on hold, which is especially serious when each nation has 1,600 warheads and both are modernising their *stockpiles*. China, on the other hand, which has "only" 300, is growing at a rapid pace and expects to have 1,000 by 2030. In other words, there

are more and more bombs and less and less control. As if that were not enough, Russia has dropped its pledge that it will not be the first to use a nuclear weapon, and Trump has said that he will reauthorize terrestrial nuclear tests, which are conducted outside laboratories and are expressly prohibited by the CTBT (*Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty*), which has been signed by 187 countries but has not entered into force because Washington and many others have not yet ratified it. The result is that when the Soviet Union fell, the Doomsday Clock, which measures the proximity of a nuclear crisis, was at nine minutes and today it is only at seventeen seconds. According to US intelligence services in October 2022, the risk of Russia using nuclear weapons in Ukraine was a staggering 50%. As a consequence, the language of war is returning, defence budgets are increasing (by 7% from 2023, to 4.2% of global GDP, more than Italy or Brazil), and military service is returning to some countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, Serbia, Croatia and Sweden. For now.

In September 2024, the nuclear debate has been reignited in the wake of the Biden-Starmer controversy over whether to allow the Ukrainians to use allied long-range missiles against targets inside Russia. Putin has said that this would have consequences because it would embroil us in a war, and the loquacious Dmitry Medvedev added colour to the issue by declaring that Kyiv would be left flattened like “a giant grey, melted blob”. The British-US discussion ended in November 2024 when Biden and Starmer allowed Zelenskyy to use American (ATACMS) and British (Storm Shadow) missiles capable of penetrating up to eight hundred kilometres into Russian territory. Moscow responded on 21st November by launching a new medium-range hypersonic missile, the Oreshnik, capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, over Dnipro. Not only that, but it expanded Russia’s military doctrine to allow the use of nuclear weapons when the country is attacked by another non-nuclear power supported by nuclear powers. In a nutshell.

Donald Trump also unilaterally abandoned the nuclear deal with Iran, increasing instability in the Middle East, which Israel, Hamas, the Houthis, Hezbollah and Iran have also been busy pushing to the limit. There were discreet indirect talks between the Americans and Iranians in Oman for a new treaty, but Tel Aviv’s “targeted assassinations” (such as that of Hamas leader Haniye) and Tehran’s response in the form of missiles and drones over Israel have led to their breakdown, which was probably

Jerusalem's intention. Today Iran is enriching uranium without control and beyond the limits permitted by the International Atomic Energy Agency, and this brings it dangerously close to being able to acquire a nuclear weapon. For Israel, this is an unacceptable existential risk, since Tehran is not renouncing its goal of destroying "the Zionist entity". Moreover, should Iran get its hands on the bomb, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt will also want one, thus provoking an undesirable arms race in the Middle East. Iran has stated that it does not want a nuclear bomb, but it would be naïve to believe them, especially when they see how North Korea has become untouchable after crossing the nuclear threshold. The moderate speech of the new Iranian president Pezeshkian at the 2024 UNGA, has offered a measure of hope, offering to resume nuclear talks on the basis of the deal torpedoed by Donald Trump in 2016. With Trump's arrival in the White House, both countries will have to make decisions: Iran will have to determine once and for all whether it seeks to remain a revolution or become a normal state, and it will also have to decide whether or not it opts to cross the nuclear threshold to become untouchable like North Korea. The US will also have to decide whether to opt for negotiations with Iran on a new JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), as the nuclear deal torpedoed by Trump in his first term was called, or whether to return to a policy of "maximum pressure" (sanctions), or even one where "all options are on the table". The latter is a euphemism for regime change (although it does not seem that Trump's lack of appetite for foreign adventures will lead him down this path, which is what the most extremist sections in Israel would like to see).

Kim Jong-un, the satrap who rules unchecked over a paradise of communist automatons where people are starving, outwitted Donald Trump in a couple of meetings where he gained international legitimacy at no cost, and is today an untouchable nuclear power with ever more powerful missiles that can already reach American shores while, like Iran, it is supplying weapons to Russia for its "special military operation" in Ukraine. It has also deployed ten thousand soldiers. They have it clear: more guns and less butter. It should not be ruled out that one day North Korea might cooperate with Iran to help it cross the nuclear threshold and join the select club that already includes conflict-ridden countries such as Israel, and countries that are on very bad terms with each other, such as Pakistan and India. There are also the Europeans: France and the United Kingdom. Add Americans, Chinese and Russians and that's one too many.

This poses a serious problem for Europe which, without the American nuclear shield granted by NATO, could be at the mercy of an expansionist Russia if Trump, who won the election, does what he declared he would: refuse to help Europeans who do not spend enough on defence, or even exit NATO (the latter is impossible because he would never obtain the necessary 2/3 of the Senate votes), or deplete it by withholding arms and funding (which is perfectly possible). European defence autonomy is not credible without nuclear weapons and, after Brexit, only France possesses them in the entire European Union. There is no choice but to talk about the issue, however thorny it may be and however little our politicians like it.

All in the hope that it is not too late because China and Russia are no longer interested -unlike the United States and Europe- in adapting the geopolitical order inherited from World War II, because they consider it dead. This is the thesis defended by Mark Leonard in his article "*China is Ready for a World of Disorder*" published in the July-August 2023 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. This conviction is revealed in their differing responses to the war in Ukraine: while Washington perceives Russia's actions as a challenge to a rules-based order that must be reinforced, China believes that this order has, for many years, been the fig leaf employed by the West to conceal its dominance, and interprets the Russian invasion as a sign that the world is entering a phase of disorder from which it will need to guard against. It is no longer worth reforming, the time for reform has passed, today the reality is different and has already been imposed: the world as we know it is breaking up.

According to this thesis, Xi is also convinced that what defines the world in the 21st century is disorder rather than the multilateral order that has defined the 20th century and which, with its drawbacks and exceptions (Vietnam, Iraq, etc.), has provided stability for the last seventy-five years. Xi believes that the wind is in his sails and that China is better prepared than the United States to take advantage of what lies ahead. However, China may be a giant with feet of clay that tries to take on more than it is capable of handling, as pointed out by Ignacio de la Torre in his article "*Sobre la caída de los imperios y el declive económico de China*" (On the fall of empires and the economic decline of China), published in the journal *Política Exterior* in October 2023, where he maintains the thesis that China's weaknesses will prevent it from overtaking the United States economically. In my opinion, he is quite right.

Mark Leonard confirms that Xi Jinping is convinced that the world increasingly identifies more with disorder than with order, that China is better prepared than the United States to deal with it, and that this requires what he calls a “holistic” approach to national security that can no longer be stated solely in terms of military challenges, but also cultural, economic, technological, commercial, biological and other challenges -because everything may be weaponised today- against which precautions must be taken. The Chinese believe that the world is not experiencing a new Cold War because there is no ideological competition as there was in 1945 and because, as Gavin Mortimer states in an article published in *The Spectator* in September 2024, the competition today is between liberal capitalism and state capitalism; because economic power is much more evenly distributed: because the world today has an interdependence that did not exist then; and because the current geopolitical structure is moving away from the centre-periphery model in economic or security matters in favour of another polycentric competition and/or cooperation system. China will be able to play a leading role in this system without imposing its model on anyone, because the world will be richer and more varied and will avoid stable blocs or alliances, more along the lines of what the global south is already pursuing today.

Or which Russia itself is pursuing. This is the view of Kristi Raik, deputy director of the International Defence and Security Centre in Tallinn, Estonia, who clearly highlights the fear inspired by Russian expansionism in neighbouring countries, and they are not to be blamed for it. In an article published in *Foreign Policy* in November 2023, she argues that Europe faces a complicated future dominated by antagonism with Russia because Moscow will never accept a balance of power that reduces the sphere of influence it had in Tsarist and Soviet times, while Europe can never accept the existence of spheres of influence on the continent. This will lead -in her view- to the fact that, as soon as it rebuilds its military capabilities depleted in the Ukrainian war, Russia will again seek to reset the balance of power in Europe. To prevent this, the West will have no choice but to pursue a proactive containment policy that includes credible capabilities in the defence domain and also the admission of Ukraine into NATO.

As wars accelerate the march of history, the invasion of Ukraine has accelerated the process of EU expansion towards the Balkans as a geostrategic necessity in order to avoid “grey zones” over

which Russia might one day seek to extend its zone of influence, in Putin's case to match the borders of the former USSR, something that makes many of its neighbours' hair stand on end. Gaps are not good because they give rise to ideas. This was discussed at the Granada summit of the European Political Community. Ukraine is the clearest example of this historical acceleration: it applied for admission shortly after the Russian invasion and only a few months later, in June 2022, it was designated as a candidate country. A record. Since then, Ukraine has been working to meet the conditions for EU membership, the so-called "Copenhagen criteria", Ursula von der Leyen acknowledging that substantial progress had been made on some of these (fight against corruption, against the power of the oligarchs) during her visit to Kyiv in November 2023, fuelling Ukraine's hopes that negotiations could start very soon in early 2024 as resolved at the 2023 European Council under the Spanish presidency. When the Gaza conflict had just erupted, this was the kind of message that Kyiv, fearful of fading into the background in the Western spotlight, needed to hear. That is why its foreign minister expressed his thanks in Berlin when he said that "we made our reforms and passed the necessary legislation to comply with and implement the recommendations [...] Ukraine will become an added value, not a burden for the European Union", which must also now start making the necessary internal reforms (number of commissioners, voting rights, unanimity rule, etc.) for future expansion towards the Balkans. Since then the war has continued, with Russia advancing in recent months, in parallel with the slow but steady process of Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU and, more complicated still, with NATO. In this regard, the Washington Summit in July 2024 reaffirmed its willingness to welcome Ukraine into its fold once it has met the conditions and its members have so decided. In other words, yes, but when circumstances permit, and not, of course, while the current conflict persists, on which the arrival of Donald Trump to the presidency has sown some doubts, as he has assured that he would favour negotiations between Russia and Ukraine in order to put an end to it in a very short time. It will not be easy to bring them together, it would not be a good idea to sacrifice Ukraine (in terms of territory, in terms of its future NATO accession), and it would not be a good idea to hand Moscow a victory that rewards aggression and eventually encourages others. Another problem for Trump is that, once negotiations begin, all the pressure of public opinion will be on him; Putin has no opinions to worry about.

The Ukrainian war has also been a catalyst for what has come to be known as the global south, one of the most important developments of recent times, what Fareed Zakaria called *the rise of the rest*, with the appearance of a number of countries (134 no less) on the global geopolitical stage with ambitions to revise the power-sharing that took place in 1945. These countries, rich or poor, spread across Africa, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Ocean and Latin America, have experienced rapid growth in recent years and differ from the Non-Aligned Movement or the G77 of the last century in their much less ideological affiliation, as Sarang Shidore states in "*The Return of the Global South*" in *Foreign Affairs* (31 August 2023). They are "driven by national interests", they want more strategic autonomy, more political power in global geopolitics, and are interested in very concrete issues such as attracting investment and trade, calling for more aid to combat climate change, and pressing for debt relief for the neediest countries. Theirs is a pragmatic and de-ideologised approach that allows them to approach the tree that provides the best shade at any given moment.

The countries of the global south do not wish to take sides between the major powers in the race and prefer to leave all options open to align themselves as convenient at any given moment or not at all. Saudi Arabia and India are prime examples of this trend: the Saudis have gone from being Washington's staunch allies in the Middle East (the US remains their main arms supplier) to opening up to China, first economically, with their oil exports, and then politically, as it is China that has facilitated the resumption of diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran while negotiating oil prices with Russia in the framework of OPEC+. It is what is called a *politique tous azimuts*. Türkiye is a member of NATO, but at the same time maintains good relations with Russia and is seeking a space of influence in Central Asia, which puts it in competition with both Russia and China. India is distancing itself somewhat from Russia (although it is buying more and more oil and liquefied gas from Russia and remains its main arms customer) while opening up to cooperation with the United States in the Quad Pact (with Japan and Australia), which has the avowed aim of trying to contain China in the Pacific, with which it coincides in the BRICS group.

In relation to Ukraine, not only do these countries refuse to apply sanctions against Russia (unless mandated by the UN), but have also increased trade with Moscow: 68% for the United Arab Emirates, 87% for Türkiye and up to 205% for India. These are just a few examples.

Some signs of this global south in search of independence have been seen throughout 2023 at the last Ibero-American summit in Quito in March, at the EU-CELAC meeting in Brussels in July, and at the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in August. In all of these meetings, emerging nations have shown a hitherto unknown rebelliousness and firmness in relation to the war in Ukraine vis-à-vis Western positions. Thus, the Ibero-American summit only managed to agree -and this with great effort by Spain- on a vague text that neither condemned nor mentioned any country and which limited itself to calling in general terms for a "comprehensive, just and lasting peace throughout the world based on the United Nations Charter, including the principles of equality, sovereignty and territorial integrity of states". There was no way of condemning Russia.

A similar thing happened at the EU-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) summit in Brussels in July 2023, where it was unable to invite Zelenskyy, who had asked to be able to explain his views to the attendees in order to gain their support. It is not that there was no agreement, rather there was clear opposition to his presence from certain Latin American nations. Most CELAC members blame Russia for the invasion and have supported the four UN resolutions on the issue so far, but do not wish to apply sanctions against Russia. The reasons are varied, from believing that the UN and not individual countries should impose them, to latent anti-imperialism towards the US and anti-colonialism towards Europe, to a vague tradition of non-alignment, to seeing double standards in Western morality -which does not treat the Iraq and Ukraine conflicts in the same way-, to not wishing to antagonise Russia since they depend on its fertilisers, to Russia's generosity towards Europe and the US during the pandemic when Russia (as well as China) sent them vaccines (Sputnik V) and masks that they were unable to buy because the West had paid more and hoarded what was available on the market.

Another example was the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit in Johannesburg in August 2023. The meeting took another turn, advocating a new approach to international relations and abandoning the policy of confrontational blocs in favour of allies united by common interests, such as development or social welfare, with a free choice of political model without outside interference. All with a new architecture that involves the creation of new economic and financial institutions and -as a

desideratum- a progressive abandonment of the dollar as the universally accepted currency. In South Africa, the BRICS agreed to expand the number of members and, of some thirty candidates, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia and Argentina (Javier Milei declined the invitation when he arrived at the Casa Rosada) were invited to join the group as of 1st January 2024. It is not known what criteria were used to select and exclude other applicants such as Indonesia and Algeria. The enlarged group will have 35% of the world's GDP, 46% of the world's population, and its GDP will be higher than that of the G7, which has only 30% of the world's GDP and less than 10% of the population. If it can act together -which will not be easy because of disagreements between India and China, Egypt and Ethiopia, and Iran and Saudi Arabia, or as a result of Cairo, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh's own friendship with Washington- it may eventually become a counterweight to the G7 or an important weight within the G20, although this is certainly not likely to happen in the short term.

One major agreement between all members is on the need to reform the UN Security Council, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These are very important changes that are also supported by China. In his article "*The BRICS Expansion is not a Triumph for China*", published in *Foreign Policy* on 29 August 2023, Raja Mohan states that, although the BRICS will take time to transfer their economic weight to the political arena, the events that have taken place so far demonstrate that Europe can no longer count on the global south as it has done so far and that it "needs to come down from the high pedestal it has put itself on since the end of the Cold War and wrestle in the mud with the Chinese and Russian challenge". I think this is good advice, and indeed the G7 has already begun to respond with the *Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment*, while Washington has been very careful to prosecute recent coups in Africa, avoiding even calling them that.

This war also hastens the end of Western domination of the world. Europe and afterwards, the United States, have been hegemonic powers for the last five hundred years, since the early modern era: Portugal, Spain, England and the United States have had "empires on which the sun never set" and, thanks to them, our culture and values have been imposed at considerable economic benefit to us and at great cost to others - and we do not think enough of it as we should while they do -for the number of slaves

taken from Africa between the 16th and 18th centuries is estimated to be no less than thirteen million, according to Simon Sebag Montefiore in *The World. A family history*. This resentment is the one that arises from time to time in countries like Mexico when they ask Spain to apologise for the conquest or when they do not invite King Felipe VI to the inauguration of President Claudia Sheinbaum. It will eventually pass.

If we examine the maps we have at home, we see that the centre is occupied usually by the North Atlantic Ocean, with Europe on the right and the United States on the left. We have seen it this way since school and it seems natural to us, but it is no longer so and we should get used to seeing things differently. An image where the centre of the map is occupied by the liquid immensities of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, flanked on the left and right by Asia and North America respectively, and with Europe at the top left, almost off the map, as a projection of the great Eurasian landmass into the Atlantic Ocean. That is the world we are moving towards with speed. Europe is no longer the centre.

In what may be called the "Venice syndrome". Europe may be seen in the same light that Venice was once seen, which received spices from the Maluku Islands on camels that crossed India, the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt before embarking in Alexandria to sail across the Mediterranean to the Serenissima. From Venice, they were subsequently distributed throughout Europe at great profit. The Mediterranean Sea was the economic centre of the planet until Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1482 and, shortly afterwards, Christopher Columbus arrived in America, transferring this central location to the Atlantic Ocean through which spices from Polynesia and silver from Potosi reached the Iberian Peninsula by ship. Wealth passed into the hands of Portugal and Spain, and Venice collapsed. Today, history is repeating itself and the world is moving towards the Pacific and Indian Oceans and, more specifically, towards the Strait of Malacca, through which 60% of global maritime trade flows, and around which 65% of the world's population and 62% of the world's GDP are concentrated. We had better get used to the idea and look at the map as I indicated earlier, because Europe, which used to have 25% of the world's population and now has only 6%; is losing competitiveness and GDP to the United States every year; and may find itself in the very near future projected into an Atlantic Ocean where less and less will happen every day.

What seems clear is that, in the very short term, disorder will prevail as the world moves inexorably towards a multipolarity or, better still, an imperfect bipolarity in which China and the United States are the great hegemonies with a gross domestic product of 23.3 and 17.7 trillion dollars respectively, at a considerable distance from Russia (2.1 trillion) or India itself (3.1 trillion). However, when the hegemonies talk about weapons, they will have to rely on Russia, which has 1550 deployed nuclear warheads, and if they wish to discuss economics they will have to talk to the European Union (23.3 trillion dollars of GDP - the same as the United States). These hegemonies are now faced with the difficult decision of whether they want to compete or, on the contrary, to collaborate. Or to opt for a controlled combination of both options, competing on trade or human rights issues and cooperating on others such as climate change or food and health security, which is undoubtedly the most desirable scenario. The rest of us are watching this struggle as observers, with no actual ability to influence decision-making given that, in the short term, competition between the hegemonic powers is taking over, a new *major power competition* reminiscent of the Cold War where Washington has set itself the goal of "containing Russia" and "being more competitive than China", while these two countries join forces because they are convinced that the United States is using all means at its disposal to prevent them from achieving the global power and influence that their history, culture and political and economic weight confer on them.

All this is contributing to writing the epitaph of the geopolitical order that emerged in 1945. That is why Kevin Rudd has said that we are in a dangerous decade, because the US-China rivalry has to materialise at some point, and if or when it does, it will rival anything that may have happened during the war in Ukraine. What is desirable is that they reach an understanding and agree on a new distribution of power in the world and new rules to govern geopolitics in the coming years. The other alternative is so horrible that I prefer not to consider it because there would be none left to read it either.

In reality, *rebus sic stantibus*, there are three future scenarios that may be hypothetically considered on a planetary scale, assuming that another black swan does not appear and turn everything upside down again. It would not be the first time:

1. Worst case scenario. Everything that could go wrong, goes wrong. Undesirable, but...

- Russia defeats and carves up Ukraine, provoking a wave of impotence, frustration and desire for revenge in Ukraine while insecurity settles in Europe; or war breaks out and, in the worst case scenario, leads to a conflict between Russia and NATO, in other words, to World War III.
- The EU and NATO have failed in Ukraine and are in crisis. The consequences are worse for the European Union and negatively affect our welfare societies.
- The US and Europe blame each other and distance themselves.
- An emboldened China seizes the opportunity to invade Taiwan with all the ensuing consequences that dwarf any provoked by the war in Ukraine.
- The Israeli-Palestinian conflict spills over further, implicating other Middle Eastern countries, oil prices and global stability. Open conflict with Iran. Vital maritime trade through the Straits of Hormuz and Bab-El-Mandeb is affected, with global consequences.
- Donald Trump's entry into the White House plunges the world into the risks inherent in his unpredictable behaviour. Multilateralism is shrinking as international organisations lose their standing. Trump imposes tariffs on half the world and trade wars break out
- The economic crisis hits China, which exports less, and this has repercussions for the whole world because it also needs to import fewer raw materials.
- Supply chains are disrupted, globalisation and trade suffer. Global recession with several blocs at odds with each other erecting protectionist barriers. *Decoupling*.
- Artificial intelligence, unchecked and in the hands of undesirable entities, becomes an immediate danger to the survival of humanity.

2. Best-case scenario. Desirable, but...

- The war in Ukraine ends with a peace treaty that works miracles and satisfies everyone. Russia reintegrates itself into European security structures.

- China has not given up on Taiwan but is postponing its ambitions, in the hope that its eventual integration into the motherland will one day be resolved peacefully.
- The United States and China are cooperating to tackle major global problems: global warming, nuclear and food security, AI challenges, new power-sharing in the world, and new rules accepted by all, including the countries of the global south.
- An agreement is reached between Israel and Palestine on the basis of the two-state formula, ending a centuries-old conflict. The multiple crises in the Middle East are resolved as an amicable sharing of spheres of influence in the region takes place. The nuclear deal with Iran is resumed.
- In the US, Trump reverses course and opts to strengthen the transatlantic relationship and NATO.
- The global economy rebounds strongly and inflation is brought under control. Globalisation makes the world increasingly more interconnected and interdependent. Trade wars are avoided.
- There is broad international agreement to regulate the risks involved in the development of artificial intelligence.
- The integration of the European Union is progressing and it is enacting common policies (foreign policy, defence, AI, energy, capital, migration, etc.) that enable it to influence world affairs and maintain its enviable standard of living.

3. Medium-case scenario. The most likely?

- The Ukrainian war drags on, with or without an armistice, with more or less stabilised fronts and World War I-style trenches. Conflict may flare up again at any time and this creates insecurity on the continent. The humanitarian drama, the refugees and the high economic cost for all continue to test the bonds of Europe.
- Russia and the West remain locked in a dangerous and unstable equilibrium as Russia's drift towards China is accentuated.
- China continues to harass and threaten Taiwan, but does not dare take the decisive step and invade the island. It decides to bide its time and arm itself better.
- The conflict between Israel and Hamas, Hezbollah and others is closing in on a false end, as it always has, and threatens to

flare up again at any moment with the potential to engulf the entire region. Iran continues to flirt with nuclearisation, but without quite taking the plunge.

- The United States and the European Union continue to cooperate, but distance themselves from each other because they do not share the same vision, especially with regard to China or the Middle East. There is mutual distrust. US protectionism increases and this irritates Europe.
- There is no agreement on a new distribution of power in the world or new rules for its functioning. The United Nations suffers the consequences. Frustration and unrest is growing among the countries of the global south, which are seeking their way out of bloc politics.
- The world avoids recession, but inflation persists, affecting it in a very different way. Inequalities continue to increase. Public discontent rises. Populism also rises and the countries of the South struggle to meet their foreign debts.
- The WTO continues to be in crisis and the world is still limping in the face of major global problems such as global warming, nuclearisation, growing inequalities, the risks of AI, international terrorism, food and health insecurity, etc., aware of local limitations in tackling global problems.
- AI continues its runaway development, but without yet endangering our relative control.

Any one of these options, and what is possibly more likely, a combination of them, can determine the future.

The hope is that the future is unwritten and to a large extent depends on us. We are aware of the problems, we know how to solve them, and we have the necessary tools to do so. We only lack leadership, political will and a geopolitical context that allows for the necessary international cooperation to confront problems of a global nature that cannot be tackled individually. What we do -and especially how we do it- will determine the world we leave to our children.

In the specific case of Europe, perhaps Donald Trump's arrival as the President of the United States is the push it requires to determine its actions in order to maintain its enviable standards of living. This means a more integrated Europe, even if the current situation of our two main driving forces, France and Germany, is not exactly at their most favourable.

Chapter Two

War has returned in full force to geopolitics

José Pardo de Santayana

Abstract

The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the communist system and the subsequent triumph of the liberal-democratic model lead to the dominant idea in Western societies that WAR in capital letters had been relegated to history.

Three decades later, the global panorama is the opposite: war has returned to the very centre of international relations, nuclear weapons have regained their lost prominence, and Europe is living under the threat of a worrying escalation.

The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East have placed the final nail in the coffin of the international order presided over by the USA, distanced the Global South from Western leadership, and are bringing the revisionist powers, China and Russia, closer into line with Iran and North Korea.

Additionally, wars are speeding up exponential advances in certain technologies that, in sorcerer's apprentice fashion, may take on a life of their own and intensify warmongering dynamics.

If the growing rivalry between the major powers is not reversed, the world could end up sleepwalking into the abyss of a devastating war. It is therefore essential to review the intellectual parameters from which the war phenomenon is interpreted.

Keywords

Geopolitics, War, Strategic thinking, Technology, Great powers.

“The global outlook for peace remains bleak. The world is experiencing an unprecedented number of conflicts, which appear increasingly intractable due to the growing involvement of both domestic and external actors, a complex array of underlying drivers, and escalating geopolitical tensions. Meanwhile, the intensity and human cost of armed conflicts continue to surge. Fatalities from violent events rose by 37% year-on-year during the reporting period”.

(Armed Conflict Survey 2024)¹.

1. Introduction

With the decline of the Cold War, the idea became widespread in Western societies that war as a phenomenon faced by major powers and the most advanced societies had been superseded by the progress of history.

The triumph of the liberal-democratic model over its Marxist-Leninist alternative was interpreted as the preamble to a historical moment where the rest of the world would eventually converge towards the social model - both politically, economically and ideologically - consolidated in Western countries under the banner of individual freedom and moral autonomy.

Francis Fukuyama became the great prophet of what was interpreted as a pivotal moment in human history. In his famous 1989 article “The End of History?” where he makes a Hegelian reading -according to Alexander Kojève’s interpretation- of what was to become an “absolute moment”, Fukuyama stated:

“In watching the flow of events over the past decade or so, it is hard to avoid the feeling that something very fundamental has happened in world history. [...] The triumph of the West, of the Western *idea*, is evident first of all, in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism. [...] What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. [...]

¹ Mia, Irene. (2024). Editor’s Introduction [online]. *Armed Conflict Survey 2024*IISS. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: Armed Conflict Survey 2024: Editor’s Introduction.

This does not by any means imply the end of international conflict *per se*. For the world at that point would be divided between a part that was historical and a part that was post historical. Conflict between states still in history, and between those states and those at the end of history, would still be possible. [...] But large-scale conflict must involve large states still caught in the grip of history, and they are what appear to be passing from the scene. [...]

The end of history will be a very sad time. . The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands"².

However, the passage of time has rather proved the opposite to be true, and the period that began "with soaring visions of global peace [...] is ending, three decades later, with surging risks of global war"³.

"Today, Europe is experiencing its most devastating military conflict in generations. A brutal fight between Israel and Hamas is sowing violence and instability across the Middle East. East Asia, fortunately, is not at war. But it isn't exactly peaceful, either, as China coerces its neighbours and amasses military power at a historic rate. If many Americans don't realize how close the world is to being ravaged by fierce, interlocking conflicts, perhaps that's because they've forgotten how the last global war came about."⁴.

These wars have reshaped geopolitics by drawing in dozens of other nations and a whole host of fearsome non-state actors. The international landscape is thus dominated by a confrontational logic which, from opposing world views, has relied on force to shape the future global order according to its own values and interests. Moreover, with humanity's astonishing material progress, warfare has become more destructive with potentially apocalyptic aspects.

² Fukuyama, F. (1989). The end of History? [online]. *The National Interest*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: Fukuyama, Francis - The End of History | PDF | Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel | Liberalism.

³ Brands, H. (2024). The Next Global War: How Today's Regional Conflicts Resemble the Ones That Produced World War II. *Foreign Affairs*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

Countless headlines warn of a third world war. The possibility that such a scenario may occur, regardless of whether it actually takes place, influences decisions taken by major world leaders. Similarly, there is a danger of passion overtaking reason in circumstances where there is a tendency to demonise the opposition, and where certain quarters argue that there is only room for victory⁵.

In the US, the fear that the passage of time will favour China and only serve to postpone the clash between the two powers within a context of *détente*, weakens the voices calling for a reversal of these dynamics by means of a strategic dialogue similar to the one held during the Cold War.

Donald Trump's second term as US President is likely to bring about a significant change in global geopolitics, whose impact is still difficult to assess.

Armed conflicts are also acting as laboratories for the escalation and acceleration of the technological, geopolitical and social processes of transformation that are shaking up our times, opening up new future scenarios conditioned by the major fractures within the international system.

This escalation of the phenomenon of war is the result of the global disorder that Ambassador Dezcallar describes in the first chapter, where, paraphrasing Claudio Magris, he states that when one era dies and another is not yet born, we find ourselves in "the age of monsters".

However, nothing is set in stone. Multiple interests at stake in a closely interlinked world and the fear of the catastrophic consequences of war balance out the forces and inertia that are pushing towards a military confrontation.

This paper seeks to reflect on the phenomenon of war in order to understand the seriousness of the situation today and to provide a chance for a more peaceful world. War sows the seeds of hatred, revenge and violence, and thus of new wars, but it also makes societies aware of the need to work together for peace. It is just as bad to fall into the anthropological optimism that considers peace to be the natural and definitive state of relations between and within nations, as it is to hold the opposite

⁵ Pottinger, M. and Gallagher, M. (2024). No Substitute for Victory: America's Competition With China Must Be Won, Not Managed. *Foreign Affairs*.

Hobbesian and Machiavellian view which blocks all opportunities for human conscience, in the efforts to build a fairer and more peaceful world.

2. How did we get here?

As may be seen in Figure 1, following the Cold War, there had been a fall in the number and intensity of armed conflicts. However, in the second decade of the 21st century, the process was reversed, mainly due to the rise of internationalised domestic conflicts, and war regained prominence without Europe paying comparable attention, because they affected peripheral regions and had little impact on the material well-being of its societies.

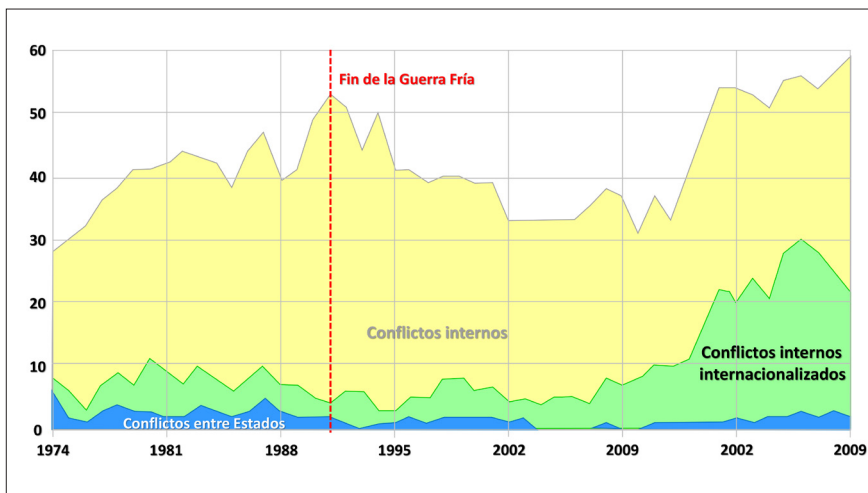


Figure 1: Evolution of the number of armed conflicts from 1946 to 2023.
Source: Author's own with data from UCDP Charts, Graphs and Maps (UU.SE)

Moreover, some of those wars had nurtured radical movements and ideologies that employ terrorism as a mode of action. If the victory in the Soviet-Afghan war at the end of the Cold War had bolstered the birth of Al Qaeda -and consequently 9/11- and the wars in the Middle East had led to the emergence of various terrorist militias, US intervention in Iraq in 2003 destabilised the Middle East and served as a breeding ground for the emergence of the Islamic State. These multinational terrorist groups launched their shock waves in all directions.

Thus, the national security strategies of Western powers focused on the fight against transnational radical Islamic terrorism, which was understood as a highly serious phenomenon but one rooted in a periphery that was resistant to progress. Fukuyama's thesis was therefore not refuted.

All of this distracted Washington, even though Graham Allison had already warned in an early article in 2012 -followed by another in 2015, and in his renowned book in 2017- that China's rise would eventually generate a dangerous warmongering logic:

"China's increasingly aggressive posture towards the South China Sea and the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea is less important in itself than as a sign of things to come. For six decades after the second world war, an American "Pax Pacifica" has provided the security and economic framework within which Asian countries have produced the most rapid economic growth in history. However, having emerged as a great power that will overtake the US in the next decade to become the largest economy in the world, it is not surprising that China will demand revisions to the rules established by others. The defining question about global order in the decades ahead will be: can China and the US escape Thucydides' trap?"⁶.

However, it was not until the 2017 US national security strategy (NSS) that Western powers became aware of the sea change in the globalising and democratising trends that sustained the illusion of moving towards the perpetual peace predicted by Kant. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, rivalry between great powers emerged as the strategic priority:

"China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity [...] China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests"⁷.

Thus, in 2020, Robert C. O'Brien, the US National Security Advisor, stated that:

⁶ Allison, G. (2012). Thucydides's trap has been sprung in the Pacific. *Financial Times*.

⁷ The White House. (2017). *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. [Accessed on: 2024]. Available at: NSS_BookLayout_FIN_121817.indd.

“For decades, conventional wisdom in the United States held that it was only a matter of time before China would become more liberal, first economically and then politically. We could not have been more wrong—a miscalculation that stands as the greatest failure of U.S. foreign policy since the 1930s. How did we make such a mistake? Primarily by ignoring the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party. Instead of listening to the CCP’s leaders and reading its key documents, we believed what we wanted to believe”⁸.

However, as explained in the previous *Panorama Estratégico*⁹, Beijing and Moscow had signed a strategic partnership in 1996 aimed at opposing the unipolar international order and the US power shaping the global order in its own image without the agreement of the other powers, which at the time were still quite weakened.

Despite the intense rivalry and mistrust between the two neighbouring states, there was a noticeable and progressive rapprochement as they distanced themselves from the great hegemon.

While the possibility of a clash of wills with the US and its allies was looming in China and Russia, strategies of rapprochement with non-Western countries were also being developed, in order to weaken Washington’s leadership and dominance of the international system. Resentment in much of the world for the imperialism and colonialism of the Western powers was exploited and leveraged for geopolitical purposes.

2.1. Insufficient response

As discussed above, little attention was paid to the objective reality developing outside the Western world and all reliance was placed on one’s own subjective vision, granted universal scope. As Kissinger points out in his latest book:

“Leaders think and act at the intersection of two axes: the first, between the past and the future; the second, between the enduring values and aspirations of those they lead. [...] They must balance what they know, which is necessarily

⁸ O’Brien, R. (2020). How China Threatens American Democracy. *Foreign Affairs*.

⁹ Pardo de Santayana, J. (2024). The Revisionist Powers and the Global South. *Panorama Estratégico 2024*, IEEE. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: *Panorama estratégico 2024 - CESEDEN*.

drawn from the past, with what they intuit about the future, which is inherently conjectural and uncertain. It is this intuitive grasp of direction that enables leaders to set goals and lay down a strategy"¹⁰.

Thus, the decisions taken by leaders in terms of national security policies are conditioned as much by their expectations of the future as by their own value system, aspirations and corresponding interpretation of reality.

Over-optimism had led to the dismantling of almost all mechanisms created during the Cold War to handle rivalries between Moscow and Western capitals. The seductive power of the Western way of life and its associated values has been relied upon, ignoring the cautionary wisdom of historical experience.

Additionally, the latest US NSS, dated October 2022, states that: "the need for American leadership is as great as it has ever been. We are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order. [...] In response, the United States will lead with our values"¹¹.

However, it is clear that this strategy is not being well received outside the West: the rest of the world questions US leadership and resists the values that the West stands for, given that the American power is deeply divided on a question of values.

On the other hand, the armed forces of Western countries were not preparing enough for the armed conflicts to come. In the case of the European capitals, their security relied on big brother America; in Washington's case, it was considered that, although technological superiority displayed numerous shortcomings in limited asymmetric wars, confrontations with other great powers would be eminently conventional in nature, where military and technological supremacy would be highly favourable.

"After the shock of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, attention shifted to terrorist organizations, insurgents, and other non-state groups. The resulting "war on terror" pushed thinking about state-on-state conflict onto the sidelines. War was a major feature of the post-9/11 period, of course. But it was

¹⁰ Kissinger, H. (2022). *Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy*. New York, Penguin Press.

¹¹ The White House. (2022). *US National Security Strategy*. [Accessed on: 2024]. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf>.

a highly circumscribed phenomenon, often limited in scale and waged in remote locations against shadowy adversaries. For most of this century, the prospect of a major war among states was a lower priority for American military thinkers and planners¹².

Moreover, the dazzling military success of the 2003 invasion of Iraq pointed to highly agile, short-duration conventional wars with relatively small forces under the umbrella of highly advanced military intelligence and the use of state-of-the-art equipment and procedures. Subsequently, great confidence was placed in the fact that the fourth industrial revolution, the digital one, would not fail to play in favour of the nation leading it: The US.

“Just under a decade ago, there was a growing consensus among many experts about how conflict would reconfigure itself in the years ahead. It would be faster, waged through cooperation between people and intelligent machines, and heavily reliant on autonomous tools such as drones. Space and cyberspace would be increasingly important. [...] Nuclear threats would persist, but they would prove limited compared with the existential perils of the past¹³.”

2.2. The harsh reality

All in all, since 2017, the rivalry between major powers has continued to deepen year after year. From 2022 onwards, the picture has darkened further with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the shadow of nuclear weapons looming over Europe and the subsequent unleashing of a series of armed conflicts in the Middle East, a region that, after decades of low-intensity proxy conflict, offered reasonable prospects for stabilisation and development.

Today, there are four major fronts, increasingly interlinked, that have the potential to further deteriorate the international landscape and, in the worst case, to drag the sleepwalking world into the abyss¹⁴:

¹² Karlin, M. (2024). The Return of Total War: Understanding and Preparing for a New Era of Comprehensive Conflict. *Foreign Affairs*.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Westad, O. A. (2024). Sleepwalking Toward War: Will America and China Heed the Warnings of Twentieth-Century Catastrophe?. *Foreign Affairs*.

- In the war in Ukraine, Kyiv and its allies face the dilemma of taking a high nuclear risk or prolonging a devastating war with no clear prospect of victory while Moscow finds support in the global south¹⁵. Trump's arrival in 2025 poses a major question mark.
- In the Middle East, the buckle of global geopolitics, the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas has destabilised the region and beyond, threatening the onset of several inter-state conflicts including a full-scale war between Iran and Israel¹⁶. The ceasefire agreed in January this year offers some hope.
- The possibility of a war over Taiwan or the multiple nearby points of contention constitute a slumbering volcano that draws the strategic attention of the two giants of world geopolitics, haunts many of their neighbours, and may affect the rest of the world.
- North Korea is staging a surreal show of increasingly belligerent attitudes. Its regime is emerging from isolation and is being encouraged by the war in Ukraine and disagreement between the major powers. There are fears in Washington that if these last two scenarios were to ignite while the other two are still active, the situation may become intractable.

Two other conflicts outside Western powers and associated with unrecognised borders, between India and Pakistan and between India and China, have the potential to become major conventional wars with nuclear implications.

Our southernmost neighbour Africa, despite the scant attention paid to it in Europe, is the continent with the highest number of war-related deaths this past year.

“There, clashes between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda and between Ethiopia and Somalia, as well as the confrontation between Niger (together with Mali and Burkina Faso) and the Economic Community of West African States, especially Nigeria, pose significant risks of escalation into inter-state conflicts”¹⁷.

Stavridis, J. and Ackerman, E. (2021). How the U.S. Could Sleepwalk into a War with China [online]. *TIME*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: How the U.S. Could Sleepwalk into a War with China | TIME

¹⁵ Pardo de Santayana, J. (2024). Rusia enrocada. *Revista de Política Exterior*.

¹⁶ Mia, I. *Op. cit.*

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

With Donald Trump back in the US presidency, something will undoubtedly change within the global war landscape. At the time of concluding this paper (January 2025), its scope is still difficult to assess. The war in Ukraine opens a new chapter with the highly complex and uncertain challenge of a peace process with potential scenarios in both directions depending on whether this process affects unity among EU member states. The Middle East will test Trump's leadership. His strident declarations regarding Canada, Greenland and Panama suggest that his geostrategic focus is clearly going to be China and that this challenge requires a rescaling of US power and influence.

"We live in times of change and this new administration will be formed on the basis of this idea. It does not intend to continue or rectify certain policies. Its mood is more radical and its will strong, both due to personality traits and because they will have only four years in which to implement a policy that seeks to bring about major changes. The rush is obvious"¹⁸.

2.3. The Global South takes the floor

In the meantime, a phenomenon was taking place in the shadows that is now emerging into view. The nations now referred to by the rather ambiguous term of the global South had been observing how the "alpha male" of world geopolitics was being challenged, how it could lose its privileged position, and that the time of a handover was approaching. Having spent a great deal of time as subordinates within this hierarchy and annoyed by Western paternalism, they now perceive an opportunity to shake off Western supervision and claim the role and dignity they believe they are entitled to.

However, European societies have paid little attention to the wars that ravaged parts of this new south. One only need recall the attitude of European states during the genocide in Rwanda. It is therefore not surprising that, when the war in Ukraine broke out, the countries of the global South were reluctant to align themselves with Western powers to impose sanctions on Russia.

¹⁸ Portero, F. (2024). Qué Alianza [online]. *El Debate*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: Florentino Portero | Qué Alianza.

As India's Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar stated: "Europe must stop thinking that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems"¹⁹.

The Gaza war has further alienated Western nations from developing countries owing to what they perceive as double standards with regards to the war in Ukraine.

The BRICS expansion and its potential development as an alternative to the G7 is working in favour of revisionist powers, as it significantly reduces the ability of the US and its allies to use sanctions and its economic dominance via the dollar for strategic purposes. Russia's economic resilience until now in the war in Ukraine is proof of this.

However, it is still unclear how the BRICS will evolve in the future and how this will affect geopolitical balances.

"Some of its members, chief among them China and Russia, want to position the grouping against the West and the global order crafted by the United States. The addition of Iran, an inveterate adversary of the United States, only deepens the sense that the group is now lining up on one side of a larger geopolitical battle. Other members, notably Brazil and India, do not share this ambition. Instead, they want to use BRICS to democratize and encourage the reform of the existing order, helping guide the world from the fading unipolarity of the post-Cold War era to a more genuine multipolarity in which countries can steer between U.S.-led and Chinese-led blocs"²⁰.

Perhaps what is most worrying is how the latest wars are fostering a toxic and globally consequential alignment of revisionist powers with Iran and North Korea, bringing them out of their isolation and boosting their profile as middle powers.

Russia and Iran's military partnership was forged in 2015, when Russia intervened in the Syrian war to support the Basar al-Assad regime. Tehran granted Russia access to a military base in Iran from which it could launch air strikes.

¹⁹ Jaishankar, S. (2022). Statements made at the GLOBSEC Forum in Bratislava on 4th June. *Youtube*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: Russia-Ukraine War | Jaishankar Calls Out West Again, Questions 'Isn't Europe Funding The War?' ([youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)).

²⁰ Gabuev, A. and Stuenkel, O. (2024). The Battle for the BRICS: Why the Future of the Bloc Will Shape Global Order. *Foreign Affairs*.

“The countries also established a joint military commission to facilitate high-level engagement between their generals, personnel training, and arms procurement. But since 2022, Moscow and Tehran have taken their defence cooperation to a whole new level. Iran is now supplying Russia with combat drones, ballistic missiles, artillery shells, small-arms ammunition, antitank rockets, mortar bombs, and glide bombs. Iran also helped Russia build a drone factory in Russia’s Tatarstan region. In return, Russia has agreed to send Tehran fighter jets, attack helicopters, jet trainers, and radar systems. It has shared cyber-capabilities and intelligence as well. [...]

Iran and Russia are cooperating on far more than just conventional military matters. [...] The Kremlin has shared secret information and technology to help Tehran develop nuclear weapons. Russia has leveraged its UN Security Council seat to shield Iran from accountability for its destabilizing actions and violations of international law. Moscow has shared intelligence and provided weapons to Iranian-backed groups including Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis”²¹.

In the case of North Korea, in addition to significant quantities of ammunition for Moscow, North Korean troops have also been deployed in Russian territory to fight against Ukrainian troops in the Kursk region. This has destabilised domestic politics in South Korea and has also set off alarm bells in Japan.

The strategic and geopolitical alignments around the ongoing wars are significantly impacting the struggle to reconfigure the future world order between the Western powers and the revisionist bloc. The recent fall of the Syrian regime after more than fifty years in power is a serious blow to Russia and Iran in the Middle East, but also carries the associated danger of reinforcing jihadist terrorism both regionally and globally. Moscow and Tehran responded by signing a comprehensive strategic partnership on 17 January.

Despite the fact that Washington still enjoys global military primacy, the West’s prestige and influence is being eroded and challenged.

²¹ Snegovaya, M. and Alterman, J. B. (2024). Iran and Russia’s Fragile Partnership: How America Can Divide Two of Its Main Adversaries. *Foreign Affairs*.

3. The global war panorama in figures

The number, intensity and duration of global conflicts are at their highest even before the end of the Cold War. Wars are increasingly difficult to address and feature more armed violence amidst a proliferation of actors, complex and overlapping motives and global influences, not least the progressive internationalisation of internal conflicts.

This trend is due to increasing competition among major powers and the more assertive foreign policy stances of several emerging powers within a context of gradual geopolitical fragmentation. Recent *shocks* from the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine have added to the woes of fragile states and regions by reinforcing the causes of conflict while reducing resources to solve or at least mitigate them²².

In 2022, there were 55 active conflicts with an average duration of eight to eleven years. In the previous decade, there were 33 active conflicts with an average duration of seven years²³. In addition to the two wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, there

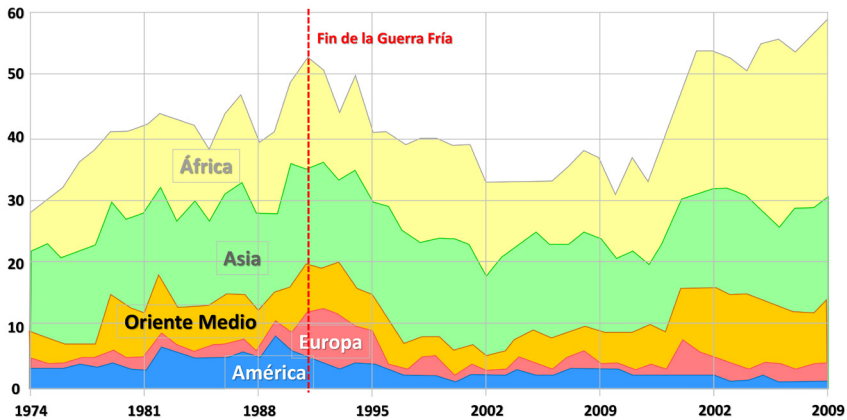


Figure 2, number of state armed conflicts by region from 1946 to 2023. Source: Author's own with data from UCDP Charts, Graphs and Maps (uu.se)

²² Mia, I. *Op. cit.*

²³ According to the *Uppsala Conflict data program* available at: <https://ucdp.uu.se/year/2022>.

were active armed conflicts in 50 other states in 2023. As may be seen in Figure 2, the largest number of conflicts are in Africa, followed by Asia and the Middle East.

Globally, the intensity of armed conflicts has increased between 1 July 2023 and 30 June 2024, with 17% more fatalities on average per conflict. Deaths from violent events increased by 37% year-on-year and reached almost 200,000 worldwide. This points to an increasingly problematic situation in terms of humanitarian, stabilisation and reconstruction needs.

The highest death toll was in Sub-Saharan Africa, with 62,631 deaths and a 28% increase over the previous year, followed by the Middle East and North Africa with 52,164 deaths and a 315% increase; Europe and Eurasia with 38,789 deaths, an increase of 2%; Asia with a 3% drop to 21,347 and the Americas with 17,845 deaths, a 9% decrease²⁴.

4. War as a technological laboratory and catalyst for change

Major wars have always served both as laboratories for military innovation and as catalysts and instigators of profound geopolitical change. In this case, with the world in the midst of a Heraclitean revolution, the phenomenon has become even more stark.

Moreover, the powers are closely observing the phenomenon of war to learn military lessons and assess the effectiveness of war as a geostrategic instrument. The conclusions they draw, as in the case of China with regard to Taiwan, may determine their future behaviour.

With all clashing parties under existential threat in both Ukraine and the Middle East, these wars have taken on a comprehensive character and are played out across multiple domains -land, sea, air, cyber, space and cognitive- turning theory into reality. However, the fear of nuclear escalation imposes certain limits.

As wars have become more protracted, their all-out nature has meant that huge quantities of ammunition and other military assets have been consumed, necessitating the use of the war economy.

“An era of limited war has ended; an age of comprehensive conflict has begun. Indeed, what the world is witnessing

²⁴ Mia, I. *Op. cit.*

today is akin to what theorists in the past have called “total war;” in which combatants draw on vast resources, mobilize their societies, prioritize warfare over all other state activities, attack a broad variety of targets, and reshape their economies and those of other countries. But owing to new technologies and the deep links of the globalised economy, today’s wars are not merely a repeat of older conflicts”²⁵.

The interaction of a phenomenon of such magnitude with new technologies, already in place prior to 2022 -and which have now found opportunities for experimentation- creates enormous synergies. Thus, for example, an immense volume of real data is available to AI, without which progress would be very difficult, and which only a high-intensity armed conflict could provide.

“Artificial intelligence has in fact further enabled the proliferation and utility of uncrewed systems both in the air and under the water. Drones have indeed transformed battlefields—and the need for counterdrone capabilities has skyrocketed. And the strategic importance of space, including the commercial space sector, has been made clear, most recently by Ukraine’s reliance on the Starlink satellite network for Internet connectivity”²⁶.

However, we are again seeing broad, entrenched fronts combined with artillery hammering, reminiscent of past scenarios that were thought to have been overcome. The massive use of satellites and drones has made the battlefield transparent, making it difficult to concentrate the forces required for an offensive and are inducing a stalemate.

Another surprise has been the massive use of lower-cost, less technologically developed drones and missiles to overwhelm defences, which have prevailed over more sophisticated means.

“... advances in artificial intelligence and autonomous systems, combined with a new generation of commercially available technologies and reduced manufacturing costs, are allowing militaries and militant groups to bring “mass” back to the battlefield”²⁷.

²⁵ Karlin, M. *Op. cit.*

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ Horowitz, M. (2024). Battles of Precise Mass: Technology Is Remaking War-and America Must Adapt. *Foreign Affairs.*

Moreover, it is much more expensive to defend against a massive attack with less advanced means than to launch it.

“In April [2024], Iran flung more than 300 weapons, including one-way attack drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles, at Israel. With support from the United States and a handful of Middle Eastern countries, Israel repulsed almost all of the weapons. But at what cost? One report suggests the strike cost about \$80 million to launch but \$1 billion to defend against”²⁸.

In both Ukraine and the Middle East, we also witness the growing importance of maritime combat. The vulnerability of warships to aerial and maritime drones is making it necessary to rethink the use of naval power and especially large fleets.

“Safeguarding freedom of navigation has historically been one of the US Navy’s primary missions. But its inability to secure the Red Sea has cast doubt on its ability to fulfil that mission in an increasingly turbulent Indo-Pacific”²⁹.

It is interesting to note how both Turkey and Iran, countries that were not deemed especially relevant in the field of military innovation, have overtaken Russia as well as other European nations in the development of drones. This, together with the increasing operational value of these cheap and easy-to-produce resources, increases the number of states and actors of strategic relevance.

Moreover, the use of these new technologies is also becoming more widespread in armed conflicts in less developed nations. In Sudan, for example, both insurgents and the government use drones and algorithms in their fight³⁰.

Within a context with so many remotely guided weapons, electronic warfare is gaining enormous importance. Russia is using it highly effectively and has reduced the hit rate of long-range artillery such as HIMARS, against its targets by more than 90 per cent, for example.

A specific technology being tested by the Americans and British in the Middle East against aerial drones which may reduce the cost per shot of defending against drone swarms is directed energy

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Milley, M. A. and Schmidt, E. (2024). America Isn’t Ready for the Wars of the Future: And They’re Already Here. *Foreign Affairs*.

weapons: weapons that employ highly concentrated energy, such as lasers or particle beams, rather than a solid projectile³¹.

Quantum technology is also poised to revolutionise the art of warfare. Although there are still major technical challenges to overcome, quantum encryption will make any communication unbreakable. In a theatre of war where all command and information transmissions are made over long distances, and where attempts to electronically jam them are vital, the side that moves ahead in this area will be able to nullify much of its opponent's combat capability³².

The pace of change and progress in the wars is frenetic. In the case of AI, innovations are introduced every two weeks or so. Thus, the availability of research and development, as well as a domestic military industry is of crucial importance within this context of permanent adaptation, as it enables a faster and more suitable reaction to new weapons and technologies by creating appropriate countermeasures³³.

If, prior to 2022, grey zone warfare and hybrid warfare were seen as a means for revisionist powers to challenge their rivals, now it is an additional means of harassment outside the war zone itself. Cyber-attacks are the most common means used for this purpose, making it necessary to protect critical infrastructures. States will need to boost their cyber defences through a combination of regulatory measures, new legislation and innovative technical efforts that are able to complicate attackers' ability to penetrate networks.

"As digital technology increasingly becomes a part of every aspect of our lives, the importance of cyber security cannot be overemphasised. Studies suggest that cybercrime damages could touch \$10.5 trillion annually by 2025, so the need for robust defences should be rather self-evident."³⁴.

³¹ Horowitz, M. *Op. cit.*

³² Giles, M. (2029). How Quantum Weapons Will Change Future Warfare [online]. *MIT Technology Review*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: How Quantum Weapons Will Change Future Warfare | MIT Technology Review.

³³ Horowitz, M. *Op. cit.*

³⁴ SentinelOne. (2024). What is Cyber Security? Types, Importance & Threats [online]. *SentinelOne*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: What is Cyber Security? Types, Importance & Threats.

The longer these ongoing wars last, the more radical the transformation will be. The knowledge and experience gained give the actors involved in these conflicts a significant advantage. Thus, for example, although it may appear counter-intuitive, if it avoids collapse, Russia will emerge stronger because it has gained knowledge and experience in the use of new combat technologies of enormous strategic value. For Beijing, which aspires to have a state-of-the-art military, this increases the value of its ties with Moscow.

5. Renewed threat of mutual assured destruction

Perhaps the most influential factor in the geostrategic reconfiguration of the world is the renewed prominence of nuclear weapons. In addition to Putin's threat to use them in the Ukrainian war, China is building up its nuclear arsenal at a rapid pace. According to the annual report to the US Congress:

"... the PRC has surpassed 600 operational nuclear warheads in its stockpile as of mid-2024 and will have over 1,000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030, much of which will be deployed at higher readiness levels. The PRC will continue growing its force through at least 2035³⁵".

China may reach 1,500 deployed nuclear warheads by 2033, matching the US and Russia, and completely transforming the global nuclear balance. Will Washington allow Moscow and Beijing together to clearly surpass its own nuclear capability? How will India and consequently, Pakistan, act? How will Israel react if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold? What will other regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey do? And in Far East Asia, how will Japan and South Korea act in the face of North Korea's constant provocations?

In his latest book, *War*³⁶, Bob Woodward describes a fact that had already been discussed by Jim Sciutto³⁷ on CNN in March 2024.

³⁵ U.S. Department of Defence. (2024). *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024 Annual Report to Congress* [online]. U.S. Department of Defence. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024.

³⁶ Woodward, B. (2024). *War*. New York, Simon & Schuster.

³⁷ Sciutto, J. (2024). Exclusive: US prepared 'rigorously' for potential Russian nuclear strike in Ukraine in late 2022, officials say [online]. *CNN*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: Exclusive: US prepared 'rigorously'

According to both journalists, in late-2022, based on information from inside the Kremlin, US intelligence services, rated Putin's chances of using tactical nuclear strikes at 50 percent when the 30,000 troops deployed and isolated north of the Dnieper River were at risk of being annihilated.

Nor can the possibility of accident or human error be forgotten. In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, Jakub Grygiel stated:

"Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, it has put approximately 30 percent of its estimated 5,580 warheads in an untenably precarious position. Early in the war, concerns that the invasion increased the danger of a nuclear detonation or accidental explosion focused on the risk to Ukraine's four nuclear power plants and Russia's threats to intentionally escalate the conflict past the nuclear threshold. But the more Ukraine seeks to hit targets inside Russia, the clearer it becomes that Russia's unwillingness to adequately secure the nuclear arsenals it has stored in its west—which are now within striking distance of Ukrainian missiles and drones and even Ukrainian troops—poses a dire risk"³⁸.

This is reminiscent of the Cold War when deterrence was the main component of the strategic dialectic pitting the two blocs against each other.

"Today, almost every debate on US foreign policy and national security boils down to the challenge of deterrence, which is one of the keys to managing escalation - a task that, while neither glamorous nor rewarding, largely determines Washington's policy in both Ukraine and the Middle East."³⁹.

Similarly, the development of AI is not only revolutionising the battlefield, but, if left unregulated, despite being pursued with great effort -and so far to no avail- it may, in typical sorcerer's apprentice fashion, create an out-of-control dynamic. Progress in AI development is exponential and its value as a tool lies in its response speed and the integration of innumerable factors, making human intervention increasingly marginal. Kissinger went so far as to state:

for potential Russian nuclear strike in Ukraine in late 2022, officials say | CNN Politics.

³⁸ Moon, W. (2024). How the War in Ukraine Could Go Nuclear—by Accident. *Foreign Affairs*.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

"We're in the classic pre-world war one situation [...] where neither side has much margin of political concession and in which any disturbance of the equilibrium can lead to catastrophic consequences. [...] In [his] view, the fate of humanity depends on whether America and China can get along. [I believe] the rapid progress of AI, in particular, leaves them only five-to-ten years to find a way"⁴⁰.

6. Diversity of actors involved

Another important feature of the new era of more comprehensive conflicts is that the number and variety of actors continues to grow. If there was a proliferation of terrorist groups, militias of various kinds and improvised armies in previous wars, we must now add traditional conventional armies and technology companies, in addition to multiple actors that make their presence felt through social networks. Some of these non-state forces have made surprising military achievements and strategic impact, such as the Houthis in Yemen who, with Iranian assistance, are embarrassing the US Navy and gravely affecting shipping through the Suez Canal route.

The participation of various mercenaries and volunteers, nationals and foreigners, fighting alongside regular forces on both sides of the war in Ukraine may also be noted. Additionally, thanks to mobile phones and multiple apps, anonymous citizens can provide valuable military information in real time without wielding weapons, thus further blurring the lines between combatants and non-combatants.

How citizens follow events in the course of a war has changed completely. There has even been talk of the first open-source war in Ukraine.

The narrative that accompanies and forms a part of the wars themselves is being greatly enhanced by new communications technologies. This has led to enormous efforts, largely in vain, to combat disinformation. However, it is worth bearing in mind that the first casualty in all wars is the truth, not only in defending of the legitimacy of the cause, but also as a means of surprise, which is essential for military advantage.

⁴⁰ Kissinger, H. (2023). Henry Kissinger explains how to avoid world war three. *The Economist*.

7. A Spanish perspective

Spain's distance from the battlefields of Ukraine and the Middle East also reduces the immediate impact of these wars on its territory. Spanish troops deployed on NATO's eastern border do so, in principle, out of commitment and solidarity with their allies. However, the resolution of the war in Ukraine may have a decisive impact on the future of the EU, to the extent that a potential break up cannot be ruled out.

When the war in Ukraine is over, European countries will have to devote much military and political effort to securing the eastern flank. In any case, the Spanish state will be required to significantly increase its defence spending.

A supplementary and related concern is Russia's presence and attitude in Africa, where it appears to have arrived and firmly established itself. This poses an obstacle to Spain and the EU's relations with the continent, and especially to security strategies aimed at the region. Equally worrying is the possibility that the Kremlin may act to destabilise one of the southern neighbours as a means of forcing Western powers to divert attention and resources in that direction.

The numerous conflicts in Africa and their exacerbation are a serious obstacle to the continent's development; may have a direct impact on Spain's security; and exert, now and in the future, demographic pressure towards Europe. It is only a matter of two to three decades before every fourth person on this earth is African⁴¹. All of the above is a priority for Spain, which faces the challenge of convincing the rest of Europe that the southern flank, its stability and development are decisive for the future of the entire Old Continent.

In the case of conflicts in the Middle East, these may also have several ramifications. To the potential economic and energy consequences must be added the diplomatic consequences of differences with Tel Aviv. Should tensions escalate and fully reach Iran, it may have a very serious global impact.

Similarly, we cannot help but wonder what consequences may the despair and pain of the Palestinian population due to the Gaza

⁴¹ Robledo, R. (2024). Esperando a los bárbaros [online]. *Panorama Estratégico 2024*, IEEE. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: [Panorama estratégico 2024 - CESEDEN](#).

war have, both in the Middle East and beyond. Will it lead to a new version of jihadist terrorism or strengthen the existing one? Will it send shockwaves through European societies or the Sahel, the region where terrorism has so far grown the most?

The warlike climate of rising tensions is also seriously affecting the cyber security of Spain and its European partners. It is to be expected that this will continue to be the case as well as deepen, even if some kind of peace is achieved in Ukraine.

8. Reflections on the nature of war

The philosopher and Jesuit Carlos Valverde considered the human being to be a disconcerting reality. He did not mean this in either a positive or negative light, rather as the inability to interpret, explain and foresee human behaviour down to its last details and consequences⁴². This means that there would be no theory capable of encompassing human phenomena in their entirety. There would always remain, in some degree, the ability of human beings to surprise themselves.

Nothing is more disconcerting today than war, its extreme violence and destruction, and the danger that it may drag the planet towards Armageddon. Within the Anglo-Saxon world -and by extension, in the West- the phenomenon of war has been interpreted mainly from idealist and realist theories, both with contradictory and maximalist philosophical foundations (Rousseau's good man by nature -the noble savage- on the one hand, and Hobbes' *homo homini lupus* on the other), which has prevented or at least hindered the necessary dialogue between the two schools of thought.

Falling into anthropological optimism disarms societies in the face of the fact that contradiction, and consequently conflict, are facets of human nature - and where there is conflict there is the potential for it to degenerate into war - and so is the capacity of human beings to deal with conflict with varying degrees of success. There are examples to suit all tastes in history.

The most commonly used arguments that we were moving towards an increasingly peaceful world were as follows:

- Democratic peace theory: democracies do not wage war against each other. This would only apply if we were truly

⁴² Valverde, C. (1996). *Génesis estructura y crisis de la modernidad*. BAC.

moving towards an increasingly democratic world, which does not appear to be the case, nor is there an absolute guarantee that, if it were to happen, there would be no more wars. Although few, there have been wars between democracies, especially between the US and Britain. However, both states have also initiated a large number of such operations against non-democratic countries.

As the US is the guarantor of the security of all major democracies, one wonders whether democratic peace might not in reality be the peace that the great American power is projecting on its own empire.

- The theory of economic interdependence. Although with the interests thus created it is reasonable to believe that the likelihood of war is reduced, history shows that it is not eliminated.
- Kant's perpetual peace. In 1795, the influential Prussian philosopher wrote a pamphlet entitled *Zum ewigen Frieden. philosophischer Entwurf*, translated as *Perpetual Peace. A philosophical sketch* in which he summarised, paraphrasing the gospel: "Seek ye first the kingdom of pure practical reason and its righteousness, and the object of your endeavour, the blessing of perpetual peace, will be added unto you"⁴³. Well, since then there have been three full-scale wars in Europe and countless others of a limited nature. There is no objective reason to think that Kant's moral imperative will be simply accepted by mankind. The facts rather prove the opposite.

In the opposite camp of anthropological pessimism, Mearsheimer, who has been able to predict in great detail the events of the Ukrainian war⁴⁴ and who presents himself as a new Machiavelli (Mearchiavelli), states that: "I am a realist, which means that I believe that the great powers dominate the international system and constantly compete with each other on security issues, which sometimes leads to war"⁴⁵.

The American professor establishes as the premise of his theory that the concern for expanding their own security is the decisive factor governing the relationship between the great powers

⁴³ Kant, I. (1795). *Hacia la paz perpetua. Un diseño filosófico*. Alamanda.

⁴⁴ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2015). *Why is Ukraine the West's Fault? Featuring John Mearsheimer* [online]. Lecture delivered at the University of Chicago, 25 September. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: [Why is Ukraine the West's Fault? Featuring John Mearsheimer - YouTube](#)

⁴⁵ See: Mearsheimer, J. J. on his own website: [Mearsheimer | Home](#).

and, consequently, the international system. It is true that when security concerns are very high, as they are today, they become a priority and dominate the international scene, but this is not necessarily always the case. For example, it was not the priority under Yeltsin in Russia, or under Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin in the People's Republic of China.

However, the main problem lies in basing a theory of international relations on a thinker as obscure as Hobbes who denies the existence of free will,⁴⁶ or one as amoral as Machiavelli who argues that the end justifies the means in the pursuit of political goals, erasing all ethical limits and referring everything to the results achieved. In the end, everything revolves around power because the more powerful entity eventually imposes itself and the narrative or discourse of values is reduced to one more means of domination.

If no window of hope is opened, one ends up believing that everything is in darkness. It is a different matter to bear in mind that Hobbesian and Machiavellian behaviour cannot be ruled out on the international stage, which calls for prudence. The balance of power not only facilitates the management of such an eventuality, but also reduces the perception of threats and facilitates the creation of confrontation management mechanisms. This healthy measure of caution was discarded after the Cold War as unnecessary in a world that appeared to be discarding nineteenth-century mentalities and marching inexorably towards the triumph of liberal democracy that would eliminate the contradictions that lead to war⁴⁷.

Moreover, the experience of war itself makes a deep impression on human beings' interpretation of the reality around them. Thus, for example, Hobbes' thinking (1588-1679) was conditioned by the bloody nature of the English civil wars (1642-51), which coincided with a key period of his philosophical maturity⁴⁸. In times of war and intense geostrategic confrontation such as those that we are currently experiencing, realist theories gain currency.

Conversely, the devastating experience of war and violence can also bring about a deep vocation for peace and a need for reconciliation. This was the case with the birth of the European project

⁴⁶ Kreeft, P. (2023). *Socrates' Children, Volume III, Modern Philosophers*. World on Fire.

⁴⁷ Fukuyama, F. *Op. cit.*

⁴⁸ Kreeft, P. *Op. cit.*

following the two world wars or Nelson Mandela's emphasis on forgiveness in the African spirit of UBUNTU⁴⁹. For UN Secretary-General António Guterres, "Mandela is an example that inspires us to improve the world. A central aspect of his civil battle was forgiveness"⁵⁰.

Neither idealists nor realists are successful in capturing the full complexity of the human condition when faced with war. Claudio Sánchez Albornoz stated that "freedom makes history and history makes freedom"⁵¹, which means that human societies and their leaders have the power to choose between the path that leads to peace and the path that leads to war. Neither of the two options is predetermined, although every historical moment finds circumstances and conditions that are more or less favourable to one or the other.

Currently, the ongoing wars and fear of potential ones - especially over Taiwan and the South China Sea - pose serious obstacles to a reasonably just and peaceful international system.

In recent years, when there has been an increasing trend towards more warlike activity and technological dynamics may have counter-productive effects, strategic dialogue between the major powers is more necessary than ever.

If the current situation were to continue for several decades and, furthermore, if the animosity between the opposing powers were to continue growing, sooner or later the world would slide into a devastating world war.

The priority should therefore be to reverse this confrontational trend by establishing confidence-building measures and mechanisms for coexistence. As Graham Allison has long argued, the emphasis should not be on winning the great power contest, but rather on preventing war between the great powers, while ensuring that their rivalry does not spread the phenomenon of war elsewhere.

⁴⁹ Mthembu-Mahanyele, S. (2024). *South Africa's Foreign Policy* [online]. [IEEE Discussion Paper 49/2024, 10 July]. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: Opinion pieces - CESEDEN.

⁵⁰ Gisotti, A. (2022). El perdón los hará libres: La lección de Nelson Mandela [en línea]. *Vatican News*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: El perdón los hará libres: La lección de Nelson Mandela - Vatican News.

⁵¹ Valverde, C. *Op. cit.*

It may also be argued that if the West is to have a positive influence on the rest of the world, it must begin by resolving its own internal contradictions. Societies that are so fractured and polarised around their own values cannot dictate the design of the future international order, let alone claim that their worldview will be accepted as a universal benchmark.

9. Conclusion

Following the Cold War, the excessive faith that peace would find a way via globalisation and the progressive democratisation of the world weakened the mechanisms and mental attitudes to oppose antagonistic wills which, however much they were despised, had not ceased to exist. This “paradoxically” enabled the phenomenon of war to grow.

Those ideas prevailed in Western societies at least until 2017, when the US NSS recognised rivalry between great powers as its strategic priority.

Thus the revisionist powers, which had signed a strategic partnership in 1996 with the primary goal of putting an end to the unipolar order presided over by Washington, found the way clear to strengthen their international position.

While Beijing and Moscow were aware of the importance of cultivating relations with the nations of the so-called global South, navel-gazing Western nations paid little attention to the armed conflicts taking place there.

Now, in the struggle to shape the future global order, war has once again come to the fore: Europe is living under its effects, the shadow of nuclear weapons is once again looming over its territory, and ongoing armed conflicts threaten to escalate dangerously.

Moreover, there is a risk that the law of the pendulum will swing Western societies from Kantian optimism to warmongering jingoism. Neither idealism nor realism holds the key to addressing the challenges facing the world. We must not lose confidence in human freedom to find the path to peace, nor should we rule out the possibility that it may opt for war. We must prepare for war, while building an international context conducive to peace.

For the time being, it would suffice to ensure that the trend of intensifying rivalry between major powers gives way to a certain

détente and a strategic dialogue at the highest level, so as to avoid an undesirable outcome and reverse the deep mistrust and hostility between opposing parties.

Chapter Three

United States 2025: America strengthened for competition

José María Peredo Pombo

Abstract

Having obtained a majority in both houses of Congress and significantly more popular support, Donald Trump begins his second term in office from a position of strength. He has integrated nationally oriented proposals, from the most orthodox conservatism and traditional sectors of the Republican party to the so-called libertarian visions, associated with entrepreneurs, big business and financial capital managers.

For him, a larger America is a country with greater production capacity and more tariffs on imports to rebalance the trade balance. Trump is betting on a more cohesive country with a reinforced national vision and a society where traditional values are respected and promoted, and he will prioritise what he considers relevant to the American interest.

There will mostly likely be continuity in how the United States adapts to the new international order and in the general strategy of boosting the capabilities to lead it. The geopolitical vision will be accompanied by a realist criterion regarding the defence of national interests, which will mean a change of orientation in certain regions where the United States has not been sufficiently

involved in political terms (Latin America) or in others where it has been practically absent (Africa). There will be no substantial changes in the Asia-Pacific, where the United States has been competing with China for years. A possible negotiated end in Ukraine or its Middle East policy are not explicit in any roadmap.

Keywords

United States, Donald Trump, Geopolitics, Foreign policy, Security strategy.

1. Introduction

If almost 75 million citizens vote for the same US presidential candidate on a recurring basis in three consecutive elections within an eight-year period, that candidate may feel legitimised. If the results also allow the same party to gain a majority in both houses of Congress and significantly increase popular support, it would be difficult to understand why the Republican Party would not consider itself in a position to develop a strategy consistent with the policy proposals presented to citizens in the 2024 campaign. Therefore, the first hypothesis that may be made for this chapter of the *Strategic Panorama* in 2025 is that the United States has greater internal cohesion to implement its policies and that these will tend to respect liberal economic proposals that are tax-reductive, conservative on social and cultural issues, and protectionist on trade.

The second hypothesis that may be put forward is that Donald Trump's second term in office starts from a position boosted by integrating proposals with a national-Americanist orientation, aimed at the most Trumpist electorate, with others from the most orthodox conservatism and traditional sectors of the Republican Party, and with the liberal visions, called libertarian in recent years, associated with entrepreneurs, big business and the managers of financial capital. Thus, although the president's media notoriety or his messages on restructuring the administration based on efficiency criteria may generate concern in public opinion, the truth is that the resounding victory of his political project at the polls conveys the image of a stronger and more cohesive country, which faces international leadership from a firm economic position and a political perspective that prioritises national interests and guarantees its development and protection abroad.

A third hypothesis may be that changes in domestic policy will be most visible in issues such as tax cuts, the treatment of immigration -to the extent necessary to cope with domestic production growth-, the raising of import tariffs for both strategic and commercial-economic reasons, and the conservative response to social and identity debates. While foreign action and security policy may have a more ongoing nature, a significant boost in defence spending and military modernisation is expected, as well as a strategic reorientation of alliances to make American interests more prominent within the current order, of competition between powers. This will mean stepping up demands on

European and Asian allies to meet spending commitments and to work with the United States to redefine certain goals.

2. The United States in 2024

The economy has grown within the four years of the Biden administration. This recovery has made it possible to forget the crisis years and conclusively overcome the consequences of the pandemic. The United States' GDP is once again higher than the sum of the incomes of the three nations immediately below. Domestic production has strengthened, labour rates are close to full employment and sectors such as technology and energy compete strongly in international markets and lead in strategic innovation. Despite these macroeconomic figures, inflation and corporate relocation, among other reasons, have prevented this growth from decisively reaching the middle classes while political polarisation has continued to fuel social division.

However, these social divisions have not affected, on this occasion, the presidential transition, which has been carried out with full institutional normality. However different anti-democratic and radicalising tendencies in both the supremacist right and the ultra-progressive left, activated by social media ecosystems, continue to be present in society and are viewed as a risk by different specialists such as Robert A. Pape: "the greatest source of danger comes from a cultural clash over the nature of the United States' identity..."¹. The political identity of Democrats and Republicans has changed, according to the author, in recent years.

This divide on cultural and identity issues is also replayed in different perceptions of what the US' global priorities should be. Condoleezza Rice sums it up this way: "The United States is a different country now—exhausted by eight decades of international leadership, some of it successful and appreciated, and some of it dismissed as failure. The American people are different, too—less confident in their institutions and in the viability of the American dream"². According to the former Secretary of State, these uncertainties give rise to two discordant interpretations in

¹ Pape, R. A. (2024). Our Own Worst Enemies. *Foreign Affairs*, 103(6), 68-142.

² Rice, C. (2024) The Perils of Isolationism. *Foreign Affairs*, 103(5), 68-23.

public opinion: for some, the country has already done enough in recent years, and for others, the United States must act more intensely to face the challenge posed by the transformation of the international order.

Despite these divisions in social perceptions, US society remains dynamic and is arguably becoming better structured in many ways. The demographic pyramid in the United States, for example, displays a balanced curve for the coming years, which anticipates an advantage for the American power over its competitors. Moreover, the massive arrival of immigrants confirms the country's continuing attraction, but also requires the designing of policies that look at both the short and long term, and which combine domestic and foreign policy criteria. The Heritage Foundation's *Project 2025*, to cite one document that is currently making an impact, proposes tightening asylum application conditions and a bilateral reworking of migration agreements. Moreover, Donald Trump himself has declared his intention to reduce both legal and illegal immigration. However, the magnitude of the phenomenon not only affects the nation's economy and internal security, but also spills over borders, which places countries such as Mexico and regions such as Central America as priority areas for the new Republican Administration's foreign action, as will be analysed below.

Continuing with the review of the foreign policies inherited by the new government, it is worth recalling that, upon taking office in 2020, Joe Biden expected that the United States would return to the international stage with a vocation for leadership. The withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, the creation of new alliances in the Indo-Pacific (AUKUS and Quad), support for Ukraine and Israel, as well as the revival of joint action with partners and allies in Europe (NATO enlargement and sanctions against Russia), in Asia (trilateral agreement with Japan and South Korea), and in the Middle East, to prevent the regionalisation of the conflict that began in Gaza, have confirmed in 2024 Joe Biden's idea of recovering America's leading role in international relations.

In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, the Secretary of State Anthony Blinken summarises the intense activity of his department in this legislature and gives a positive assessment of these actions, which leads him to consider that: "...although the party in power in Washington can change, the pillars of U.S. foreign

policy will not"³. However, this optimistic vision that moves him to defend the continuity of US foreign policy is not shared by others close to the Republican Party, which qualify the achievements and put forward other arguments as a counterpoint to assess the results obtained.

For Condoleezza Rice herself, the historic moment in 2025 would require a new president who would develop a foreign policy that is more in line with and aware of the transformation process underway in the international order. However, like Blinken, the former Secretary of State is also optimistic that the United States will be able to reconfigure its leadership in this historic post-liberal period thanks to its various accumulated strengths, of which she highlights four: the private sector's commitment and its capacity for innovation; the alliance structure, superior to any other stage; the influence that North America continues to deploy; and the technological leadership that the United States is capable of implementing.

However, other more conservative Republican perspectives, such as that of the Heritage Foundation, believe that the Biden Administration has projected an image of weakness and inconsistency in today's increasingly unstable global environment by failing to reduce the inefficiency of the departments involved in foreign and security action, and by failing to undertake the necessary reforms to strengthen US interest in multilateral networks and organisations and alliances. From these points of view, spending on conflicts such as Ukraine is interpreted as a non-priority and the strategy of renationalisation implemented to redirect the de-globalisation process as insufficient.

Whatever the more or less positive assessment of the last Democratic administration in international policy, two general considerations may be established that are also key to understanding reality: The first is that in the last four years, the world order has not changed substantially in terms of the multipolar distribution of power and the rise of China, nor in terms of its dynamic of competition between rival and cooperating powers to position themselves to adapt to or lead the transition of the liberal order initiated in the last decade. The second is that this dual dynamic of competition and transformation has been internalised by US foreign policy both in its overall strategy and in the

³ Blinken, A. (2024). America's strategy of renewal. *Foreign Affairs*, 103(6), p. 76.

decisions and actions taken over the past four years, projecting an image of a power that is more aware of and consistent with both dynamics.

The arrival of a new Republican administration may therefore be seen as the next step in this adjustment to the new order, and in the overall strategy of boosting US capabilities to lead it. To address these two questions and others that require more precision, it is necessary to look at the theoretical underpinnings of the second Trump administration's foreign policy.

3. Foundations for a renewed foreign policy in 2025

The shift in the distribution of international power is a reality. The fact that different doctrines do not agree on the exact definition of the unipolar, bipolar, multipolar or even heteropolar nature of this redistribution confirms that the world order is being reshaped. At the same time, different technological, socio-cultural and political trends are increasing this complexity and occasionally adding new uncertainties to unresolved tensions in the previous order. This is the case of regional geopolitical issues (Middle East, Central Europe, Sahel, Taiwan Strait, southern border of the United States) or the harmful effects of economic globalisation (relocation, imbalances, energy competition), of political dynamics (illiberal systems, eroding democracy, energy competition), and of socio-cultural tensions (immigration, identity clashes, violence, disinformation).

One of the consequences of the undefined order and increasing global complexity is that strategic thinking and theoretical reflection have been reactivated. Amongst other reasons, this is because the visions from different centres of power enable the pluralism in geopolitical and economic environments to be reproduced in theoretical-strategic interpretations with different foundations. And also because the trend towards greater closeness between the dominant liberal and realist schools of thought that had been occurring for some time has been disrupted by the emergence of academic and critical revisionism within liberal democratic systems.

Constructivism, for example, interpreted from ultra-progressive orientations and groups, has led to a series of proposals whose objectives have been related to institutional deconstruction and violent activism. The consequences of this atmosphere of social and media turmoil have led to phenomena such as democratic

regression, authoritarianism and polarisation in different countries. Internationally, these effects have spilled over into international relations and affected the external image of certain democracies, including the United States.

However, these currents of opposition to the globalising phenomenon do not only come from the most progressive sectors or from revisionist approaches that take shape for various reasons. Walter Russel Mead identifies two specific trends confronting globalist liberalism in the United States and have become progressively radicalised: on the one hand, nationalist populism, which, according to the author, has historical Jacksonian roots, and on the other, the anachronistic emergence of isolationism, of Jeffersonian origins⁴.

In any case, this convergence of realism and liberalism has been one of the prevailing trends of thought in different schools over the last decade. The analyst Charles A. Kupchan discusses this in the podcast *A New U.S. Grand Strategy: The Case for Liberal Realism*⁵, where he proposes reviving the ideas and principles of the liberal order by framing them within a more realistic strategic design. According to the author, this would permit its implementation within a multipolar system such as the one today, as opposed to the previous bipolar or unipolar systems where liberal realism served as a doctrinal foundation after the Second World War and at the end of the Cold War.

In his view, liberal internationalism, albeit with a greater dose of realism, would maintain the attraction of the West among the middle powers and open up competition with China to different cooperation policies. At the same time, the inclusion of national interests would serve as a means to improve collaboration with the global south and to assess the level of globalisation that may be promoted by the United States without having a negative effect on its own production system and labour market. Moreover, a liberal system facilitates the identification of more stable leaders and allies, while realist pragmatism allows for “working with countries that are not necessarily democratic”⁶.

⁴ Russell Mead, A. (2024). The return of Hamiltonian statecraft: a great strategy for a turbulent world. *Foreign Affairs*, 103(5).

⁵ Kupchan, C. (2024). *A New U.S. Grand Strategy: The Case for Liberal Realism James Lindsay Podcast*. Council of Foreign Relations.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

Nor is the idea of building a grand strategy on the basis of such doctrinal convergence new in American thinking. In 2021, John Lewis Gaddis and Hel Brands⁷ proposed a grand strategy for dealing with the rising bipolarity with China. Russell Mead also refers to it for the incorporation of a concept historically associated with American doctrine: pragmatism, whose basis the author finds in Hamilton's ideas and whose validity is now motivated by the need to find a paradigm to overcome the end of globalist liberalism and to confront the new rivalry between powers. Hamilton's model identifies trade as the predominant activity within a dynamic and healthy society, reinforces patriotism as a support for social cohesion and identity, and in enlightened rationalism, finds the philosophical framework that integrates both political and cultural values.

"Never has the strength of the state been so closely tied to the dynamism of the corporate world. This connection operates most strongly at the most advanced levels of tech and production... Both business and government leaders are today discovering something that Hamilton could have told them has long been true: economic policy is strategy, and vice versa⁸".

For this reason, Russell Mead proposes a pragmatic doctrine to interlink the demands of capitalist markets, the demands of domestic politics, and the realities of the international system and from there, to return from the post-national paradigm that somehow inspired liberal globalisation to rebuild a more nation-centric foreign policy.

"The separation of the business agenda from any sense of a national or patriotic goal had profound and sharply negative consequences for the political standing of pro-business politicians and interests in the United States. . It also encouraged the rise of antibusiness populism across the political spectrum"⁹.

In order to apply Hamiltonian principles, Russell Mead believes that the United States must first strengthen the financial system, infrastructures and infostructures, and market enabling policies -though not promote a free market without national

⁷ Brands, H. and Gaddis, J. L. (2021). The new cold war: America, China and the echoes of history. *Foreign Affairs*.

⁸ Russell Mead, A. Op cit., p. 55.

⁹ Russell Mead, A. Op cit., p. 60.

criteria- where tariffs may become tools for coordination and the search for greater efficiency. Secondly, he sees American patriotism as the result of building a legislative policy framework that promotes the security, prosperity and freedom of citizens. Thirdly, he identifies enlightened realism as a theoretical support, a source for an ideological reflection that remains distant from naïve liberalism and also from the cold Machiavellianism of the most intransigent realists¹⁰.

The question now is whether President Trump and his project fit within these pragmatic visions or whether, on the contrary, it is far from them. Also whether some of the uncertainties generated by the weak theoretical underpinnings of his first presidency may be reproduced during this second term. This cannot be fully answered until the first decisions and strategy papers emerge, but, in principle, it does not seem that this Hamiltonian spirit is far removed from the ideas that the Republicans have put forward in the campaign. For Donald Trump, a greater America is a country with greater production capacity and where higher tariffs on imports restore the balance of trade; a country that is more cohesive through a strengthened national vision and a society where traditional values are respected and promoted; a country that prioritises what is in its interest and discards what is not.

In any case, this reflection does not resolve the question of the orientation of Trump's future doctrine because, from other perspectives that are also influential and created from a more offensive realism, it is considered that foreign action must address competition from a more confrontational strategy. This is the case of the Heritage project which, referring to the rivalry with authoritarian regimes such as China, points out:

“As in all global struggles against communist and other tyrannical regimes, the issue should never be the Chinese people, but the communist dictatorship that oppresses them and threatens the well-being of nations around the world. That said, the nature of Chinese power today is a product of the history, ideology and institutions that have governed China

¹⁰ An interesting reading that observes the trend of theoretical convergence may be found in the work of Lake, D. (2013). Theory is dead, long live theory: the end of the great debates and the rise of eclecticism in International Relations. *European Journal of International Law*, 12(3), 567-587.

over five millennia, inherited by the current Chinese leadership from previous generations of the CCP. In short, the PRC's challenge is rooted in China's strategic culture and not only in the CCP's Marxism-Leninism. The aggressive behaviour of the PRC can only be curbed by external pressure"¹¹.

The report also calls for urgently renewing the foreign service along efficiency and modernisation criteria, as well as appointing new ambassadors and institutional representatives with profiles committed to the planned change in Washington's political orientation. This conveys the intention to put pressure on the administration to act with greater doctrinal firmness and not merely as a continuing exercise.

The policy of cohesion with Allied countries and the renewal and creation of new alliances developed by the Democratic administration may serve as an example of a foreign policy that can move forwards or backwards from now on, depending on the decisions of the Trump administration. In this sense, the prioritisation of national interest may result in maintaining the strategy of alliances considered valuable for this purpose, such as those in Asia, and in reviewing those that extend beyond the US, such as NATO, where the demand for greater European commitment seems an irrevocable decision. The same argument could undermine some multilateral organisations where US involvement does not yield tangible results compatible with the idea of a larger and more profitable country. *A priori*, Trump is more comfortable in bilateral rather than multilateral frameworks and, in his view, the US is more comfortable making unilateral decisions and not necessarily participating in multilateral projects.

Trade agreements adjusted to economic benefits and tariff increases adjusted to production interests have been two recurrent messages in the presidential campaign, whose materialisation in the coming months will also serve as an indicator of the administration's priorities and as a guide for foreign policy analysis. However, the multipolar framework within which trade relations are developing, with the growing activity of multilateral organisations such as the BRICs and China's influence in different regions, will pose an obstacle to a policy that seeks to turn its back on a competitive order whose areas of negotiation

¹¹ See: *Project 2025* of the Heritage Foundation (<https://www.project2025.org>), Accessed on November 2024.

are both bilateral and multilateral. Consequently, protectionism should be applied on the basis of results and not according to a theory predetermined by doctrinal ideologies.

This geopolitical complexity requires a far-reaching strategic vision. Therefore, in addition to economic figures and trade measures, the main guide for foreign policy analysis will be the national security strategy itself, which defines the order promoted by the United States and the inherent risks it perceives, as well as the priorities with which the power intends to strengthen itself to meet both challenges.

4. The security strategy: competing with greater precision

The continuity of the 2017 and 2022 security strategies was made explicit in both documents when identifying the current order of competition between powers, and the need to incorporate the objectives into the new environment. However, this identification of the framework of relations failed to precisely delineate some of the US' priority objectives within the new multipolar complexity. Firstly, because the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar conception required a period of adaptation that the abrupt shift in Trump's foreign policy failed to interpret and that the pandemic blurred. Secondly, because Biden's policy has attempted to integrate mainstream post-liberal trends with the leadership inherited from the pre-Trump globalisation era.

The result of Biden's more pragmatic liberalism has not reduced either the risks or the challenges, although he has been able to address both uncertainties. The challenge posed by Russia in its attempt to change the Euro-Atlantic defence and security order by invading Ukraine has been contained but not resolved, nor have the risks of increased Chinese revisionist activity in Asia-Pacific been resolved, even if new agreements and alliances have been built (AUKUS) and others strengthened (Quad). In the Middle East, the Hamas attacks and the subsequently disproportionate Israeli response have deactivated the project of regional realignment around the Abraham Accords, even though diplomatic efforts have prevented escalation.

In 2024, the US has more allies and better coalitions, but some of their interests are divergent and remain disconnected. Although the various economic figures show that China's growth has

slowed, its influence on international politics is not waning, not least because there are no alternatives to counterbalance its economic weight.

In 2022, there was a sense that everything had its place within a multi-thematic and politically inclusive strategy document. Now in 2025, security and defence strategies have the challenge of better coping with global complexity by setting more concrete priorities and more defined objectives. A grand strategy is not necessarily a strategy with more concepts embedded in it, rather one with better defined objectives in a more interconnected framework. National interests can help shape these criteria, although their application is subject to the interactions of a diversified and interdependent network of state and non-state powers and actors.

In both cases, the 2017 and 2022 strategies were globally oriented and offered a geopolitical vision that sought to integrate the totality of regions, domains, powers and strategic actors. Although this totality was delimited by specific priorities and challenges, the globalising vision made it difficult to analyse specific problems and risks more closely. Regions and domains, although structured, remain variable in their dimensions, as the size of a power in order for it to be considered as such remains undefined in many respects and strategic actors may or may not be so, depending on developments. This lack of precision, caused in large part by incessant transformations, may not have been resolved by the plurality of converging sectoral interests when attempting to determine a single national interest and by the lack of conviction that such an approach is shared by other countries, allied or not.

The success of the American liberal order lay in the wisdom of thinking that the opening up of trade and freedoms to third countries would have a positive knock-on effect, because the will of the majority of the people who had been imprisoned by communism was to gain access to welfare and progress. Its failure, however, lay in the mistake of acting hegemonically within an order that, being open, was not predestined for unipolar Westernisation, but for a multipolar competition that could be initiated within it. The United States opened the door to the liberal order thinking it would be led by its policies, but by shifting the focus of its political leadership to pursuing terrorists, lost it. As the focus of its leadership in regulating the economic order also shifted, the US entered into crisis and the would-be hegemon reverted to super-power status.

The historical inaccuracies of the liberal order are well known and manifest, but the lack of precision in devising a strategy that enables for competition between powers makes it unclear so far. Why did Donald Trump openly support Brexit, and then Biden create the AUKUS with the UK and behind the backs of European allies? Why did Obama sign an Asia-Pacific deal and Donald Trump reject it? Why did Donald Trump visit North Korea and Biden, immediately afterwards, reinforced agreements with Asian allies? Why support a Middle East restructuring process around the Abraham Accords and not avoid the failure of the process after the disproportionate Israeli response in Gaza? Why stop Russia successfully in Ukraine and not draw up a plan to close the conflict afterwards? And many other such decisions that, also highlight the difficulty of acting within a competitive order and, at the same time, do not reduce complexity, but rather promote it.

Within the analysis of the global environment proposed by the new Republican government, geopolitical vision will be accompanied by a realistic approach to defending national interests. The consequence will be that the lens through which each region is analysed will not be defined by the impact of that area's geopolitical stability on the international order, but by US interest in increasing its competitive advantage in an order that is definitely open to the objectives of other powers. This will entail a change of orientation in some regions where the US has not been sufficiently involved in political terms (Latin America), or others where it has been virtually absent (Africa).

In the case of Latin America, the United States has been losing its comfortable position of low political cost, which China and Russia have weakened with their economic and destabilising activity. Political action and the reactivation of investments in certain countries will probably be aimed at provoking a political or ideological clash, but look into the dynamics of exchange and the search for economic benefits. The choice of Marco Rubio as Secretary of State may be along these lines. Rubio is an orthodox Republican, Catholic and of Hispanic origin, and may serve as a symbolic and tangible exponent of the priority that Mexico and Latin America have for the United States at this historic moment. Mexico continues to be identified as the most important country for ensuring stability in the US and the rest of the hemisphere, and Washington will seek partners that recognise the value of the economy and security provided by the great ally to the North.

Rivalry with China in the Western Hemisphere and specific social problems stemming from illegal immigration or drug trafficking, as well as political problems such as instability and polarisation, may shift US interests to a region with a high economic projection.

The Heritage report clarifies these two issues. With regard to Mexico, it highlights concerns about the loss of sovereignty caused by organised crime in the country: "Mexico can no longer be considered a first world nation; it has functionally lost its sovereignty to the powerful criminal cartels that run the country"¹², and asserts that the new administration "must both adopt a stand that reclaims a fully sovereign Mexico and take all measures within its power that will give the quickest possible results"¹³. With regard to the revival of relations with the Western Hemisphere as a whole, the report notes:

"Re-emphasising manufacturing and industry closer to home will not only eliminate some of the most recent supply chain problems that damaged the US economy, but will also represent a significant economic improvement for parts of the Americas that require growth and stabilisation"¹⁴.

Albeit to a lesser extent, Africa will be incorporated as a specific objective to deploy a more far-reaching strategy in the global south. Ignoring Africa has meant an influx of Chinese investment and Russian political intervention, as well as hostile groups and countries. New agreements with regional players such as Morocco, Nigeria or Angola, or with allied countries such as Spain, Italy, Portugal, Turkey or the United Arab Emirates could help this political and commercial reactivation if the United States chooses to favour friendly and allied countries in its regional projects. Given that Africa and its Mediterranean basin are an area where multiple interests between regional and non-regional actors converge, it is easy to define a comprehensive strategy that does not contradict any of them.

Whether in the Ibero-American region or in large parts of Africa, such as the Sahel or the Mediterranean and Atlantic basins, the United States' security, investment and commercial interests may require a coalition of a range of interests. The triangulation between Italy and the Iberian Peninsula, Brazil and South America, and the Atlantic coast of Africa can generate a space for

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 183.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 183.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 184.

trade relations reinforced by shared security. Within this space, the United States can find a strategic target to balance its loss of prominence in both regions and to increase its regional and global competitive network.

This greater precision in determining objectives will not mean substantial modifications to those set in the Asia-Pacific because the United States has been competing for years with China in this region on the basis of bipolarity and with dynamics that are closer to the traditional tension between blocs. China is seen as the great rival, and its willingness to replace US leadership in Asia is explicit in its official documents and policy speeches. However, China's formula for leading a world order with an orientation other than the liberal one is less clear.

As a result, the US is not likely to change its policy of maintaining the *status quo* in Taiwan, but it is likely to boost security alliances in the region. In this sense, more actors may be included in regional maritime security projects, which could also open the door to collaboration with Spanish and other European naval or support forces. The Navy's latest document, *Vision 2050*, mentions the importance of increasing its presence in the Pacific, while Navantia has consolidated its business in Australia and is also making inroads into the Indian market. The Spanish Navy is increasingly present at naval fairs and has recently participated in manoeuvres in the Pacific Skies exercise together with German and French air and naval forces.

However, China's global strategy is multidimensional in nature. Among other objectives, it seeks to boost organisations such as the BRICS in order to provide multilateral cooperation with an expanded framework, with more actors and new policies. It is also developing a multipolar economic and trade strategy in different regions, with projects as important as the Road and Belt and with positioning via a network of ports and infrastructures in Africa and Latin America. At the same time, it maintains links and political support with the three main revisionist actors, Russia, Iran and North Korea, which has been used by US propaganda and diplomacy to elaborate and project the concept of the revisionist axis with the intention of weakening China's image in countries affected by the policies of these hostile actors, such as Japan, South Korea, Germany and Saudi Arabia. As Erik Lin-Greenberg puts it: "China wants to replace the United States and become the world's dominant power, partnering with Iran, North Korea and Russia... but it

does not seek to build an anti-US, anti-Western bloc owing to interdependence”¹⁵.

This diversified policy of regional and global actions and projects is supplemented with competition in technological innovation and efforts to influence and control energy markets. US policy towards China therefore needs to recognise the multipolar environment and set specific objectives for action in each sphere and sector of the environment. The broad areas of cooperation set out in previous official texts such as defence of common assets, health or sustainability, were in many cases not realised. The concrete issue now is to determine the criteria, whether more pragmatic or more offensive, by which the relationship with China will be managed, and also the protectionist policies by which the Trump administration can place or relax pressure on Beijing.

However, diplomacy and the possibility of reaching *ad hoc* agreements on more concrete and high-impact issues such as conflict resolution, the fight against drug trafficking, or energy cooperation may also become agenda items should the following period bring a rebalancing of bilateral tension. This may be reflected, for example, in the possibility of a negotiated end to the conflict in Ukraine if the diplomatic rapprochement between the US and the EU and China were to pressurise Russia and Ukraine to reach a ceasefire and start peace talks. Although such a hypothesis would in turn overwhelm the regional interests of the great powers in Europe, which are affected in other conflict scenarios such as the Middle East.

In this sense, the fall of the al-Assad regime in Damascus emerges as an initial challenge to the Trump administration because this conflict brings together the competing interests of actors involved in the Middle East’s regional order. Some of these actors are Israel, Iran and Hezbollah, involved in the latest war in Gaza, and others are Saudi Arabia, Turkey or Russia, and the United States themselves, protagonists in the tragic political and religious war in Syria that maintained al-Assad in power, and the influence of Iranian Shi’ism. If the new Syrian political framework were to result in conflict, if the Russians were to threaten their interests in the Mediterranean, the Turks their sovereignty, and the Saudis or Iranians, the stability provided by their areas of influence, this endless war may be replayed in the region and internationally.

¹⁵ Lin-Greenberg, E. (2024). Wars are no accidents, *Foreign Affairs*, 103(6), p. 27.

In any case, speculation about a possible negotiated endgame in Ukraine is not explicit in any roadmap, let alone that such a process might involve China. Indeed, analysts' positions range from those who believe that the goal of the conflict should be Russian defeat to those who believe that support for Ukraine should be withdrawn as it is not a member of NATO. The Heritage report, meanwhile, proposes an eclectic solution that maintains US military aid to Ukraine, but leaves economic aid in European hands. Therefore, ending the war in Ukraine by means of a negotiation involving China is not considered a priority, the latter's government being the main threat to the US in the 21st century. Once again, the trade-off between pragmatism and the most offensive realism is present in the visions supporting the Trump administration's foreign policy decisions.

If speculation is not an option for realist visions regarding the overall treatment of an order of powers, it is much less so in an environment as complex and unstable as the Middle East. The priority of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear material or developing its military industry in this direction is a guaranteed goal of the new Trump administration, as may also be the boosting of alliances with Saudi Arabia and Turkey via Saudi integration in the Abraham Accords and their revitalisation, and Turkey's anchoring in the Atlantic Alliance. A second priority may be detected in the Heritage report's proposal to create a new maritime security pact in the Middle East that would include the Gulf States, Israel, Egypt and India in a second Quad to protect shipping in the Red Sea and Suez Canal.

5. Increasing competitive advantage in defence

Donald Trump's four most direct proposals on the campaign trail have been to lower taxes, cut immigration, raise tariffs and increase defence spending, already the largest federal government expenditure, to over 3 per cent. *The Economist* (October 2024) reported the Republican candidate's intention to allocate 5% of the budget to defence and to use other specific legal vehicles, such as the National Defence Authorisation Act, to increase it. The conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza have highlighted the need to increase production of conventional weapons and ammunition and to reconfigure deterrence strategies with renewed naval and air assets. However, the order of competition also calls for a review of certain approaches to nuclear defence and cyber-security systems, as well as increased spending on specific threats such as Taiwan, which could require allocations of up to \$5,000 billion.

The reality is that active conflicts in Europe and the Middle East have only confirmed that defence policies must cope with a multi-domain environment subject to hyper-disruptive technological innovation and multi-polar rivalry, opening the door to the difficult concept of total war. "Every age had its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions"¹⁶, warns Mara Karlin in her article "The Return of Total War" to explain the simultaneous integration of the processes of change in the nuclear field, with the application of technologies such as AI, or China's ascent to a tripolar scenario, and in the conventional field, with multiplying weaponry requirements in traditional conflicts on the ground, and against combatants and terrorist groups that capable of using new and highly accessible resources such as drones.

This new diversity of modes of combat and applied technologies calls for the drawing up of new concepts and strategies. For example, with regard to the concept of deterrence, which is based on the classic goal of making it difficult for the enemy to succeed and having the means to prevent adversary action and/or produce damage through counter-action, but which now, in a highly diversified environment of threats, requires greater precision and engagement of allies, as Karlin herself explains. These have traditionally been set according to geographical criteria or according to the type of targets and the intensity of their actions, but now include the grey areas of cyberwarfare or proxies, as Lin-Greenberg explains when referring to: "The creation of a new system of unwritten rules, as well as declarations and commitments to action and reaction, as appropriate"¹⁷.

Generally speaking, the analyses closest to the Republican Party agree on the idea of increasing spending and adapting it to this complex environment, and also on reactivating the army's image, which has deteriorated after the withdrawal from the Middle East and weakened in the public's perception. However, it is too early to establish the final direction of the defence strategy until it is drafted. Therefore, the following discussion of certain proposals made by the Heritage Project 2025 is only intended as a guideline towards goals that may or may not be translated into an official text.

The first proposal, as noted above, is to unequivocally identify the threat of China as the main target of US defence and, in this

¹⁶ Karlin, M. (2024). The return of total war, *Foreign Affairs*, 103(6), p. 8.

¹⁷ Lin-Greenberg, E. *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

sense, to provide Taiwan's defence with all necessary political and military resources to prevent any Chinese attempts to break the line of defence that the island links in the region. The second is to demand effective, multipolar allied engagement in all scenarios requiring shared conventional defences.

This includes transforming NATO so that European states build a system of conventional forces capable of dealing with the Russian threat -and others- and allowing for the reduction of US forces, even as the United States maintains its commitment to nuclear deterrence. It also includes promoting greater spending and collaboration with Taiwan and allies such as Japan and Australia to create a collective defence model; empowering South Korea and supporting its autonomy to confront North Korea; and maintaining support for Israel while urging the reinforcement of Gulf allies' autonomous defence systems. The proposal also refers to the upgrading and expansion of US nuclear defence systems and the targeting of terrorism as a present and diversified threat that also requires the engagement and collaboration of various allies.

In addition to defining these parameters, the text emphasises the need to modernise both command and decision-making structures and budget management, as well as legislation and mechanisms that connect the defence department with companies and research and technological innovation centres.

"To maintain leadership in an era of great power competition and succeed against our adversaries, a key effort of the Department of Defense must be to create mechanisms and processes to leverage America's most significant competitive advantage: innovation"¹⁸.

The document outlines the increase in spending in all department sectors: Army, Armed Forces, Marines, Air Force, Space Force, Cyber Command, Special Operations Forces, Nuclear Deterrence and Missile Defence. Moreover, it does so in accordance with the three criteria mentioned above: the targeting of China as the main adversary, the regionalisation of threats in a multipolar scenario, and innovation as a strong idea to maintain US leadership in the face of constant technological transformation.

In the case of the Army, it proposes accelerating some of the priorities set for its modernisation: improving accuracy in

¹⁸ See: Heritage Foundation's *Project 2025*, p. 99.

long-range weaponry, next-generation combat vehicles, Future Vertical Lift, missile structure and lethality of individual troops, as well as increasing troop numbers and improving recruitment. In the case of the Navy, it proposes expanding the fleet to 355 ships to reinforce its technological and strategic superiority over China, balance the size of both fleets, and extend operational presence, jointly, with partners and allies. In the case of the Air Force, it focuses on reversing the deficit accumulated in recent years and reaching the goal of 386 operational squadrons set out in the document *The Air Force We Need*, published by the air force itself in 2023. It also takes on the basic lines of the Force Design 2030 project, proposed by the Marine Corps Command, to implement the largest upgrade of the Marine Corps since World War II.

As for reforms in other departments, the document conveys the idea that the Cybersecurity Command should be decoupled from the National Security Agency in order to act with greater precision on strategic and defence objectives. It also calls for a redefinition of the concept of irregular (hybrid) warfare in order to increase more precise intelligence and counter-propaganda actions, and engagement with regional groups in order to counter Chinese activity, which is embedded in projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative and in regions and countries where rival actors have taken advantage of hybrid warfare. Finally, it calls for a reorientation of the nuclear defence policy for its regional diversification, increasing innovation and missile production to transfer deterrence capabilities to specific environments and countries.

Pragmatism or the application of a more offensive realism is the alternative for developing a renewed strategy in 2025 and in the coming years of the new Republican administration. Donald Trump has conveyed an image that is more inclusive and less confrontational than the one he displayed when he came to the White House in 2016. His resounding victory enables him to take decisions with a longer-term perspective once the Republican Party has assumed his leadership as the best option to face the transformation required by US foreign policy. The next few months will be decisive in identifying the direction chosen by the president and his team, and the next few years will also be decisive in assessing whether the direction chosen has been the right one in order to succeed in the challenge. What is certain is that since 2012, after four presidential elections and seven legislative elections, in 2025, the United States is arguably in a stronger position to confront the order of power competition.

Chapter Four

Europe: a review of geopolitical, economic, social and climate risks

Daniel Fuentes Castro

Abstract

Europe's role as a global player depends on its ability to adapt to a changing world, balancing its objectives of growth, sustainability, stability and internal cohesion. This chapter identifies the most pressing risks grouped into four blocks (geopolitical, economic, social and environmental), and explores different strategic scenarios that may define Europe's course in the coming decades.

From a scenario of greater integration and consolidation to more pessimistic scenarios of fragmentation and decline, the analysis seeks to offer perspectives in order to anticipate risks and promote the making of informed decisions. Drawing on lessons learned from previous crises, such as the importance of solidarity among Member States, structural reforms or social cohesion, it argues for a proactive and coordinated approach to address current and future challenges.

The main geopolitical risks cited include the rivalry between the US and China, the re-emergence of Russia as a challenging power, the threat of international terrorism, challenges in cybersecurity and hybrid warfare, and the need for the EU to strengthen its Common Foreign Policy.

On the economic and financial front, it examines investment requirements, the public debt situation, the energy crisis, regional and rural-urban inequalities, and a review is made of the economic outlook for 2025, with especial attention to the current weakness of Germany and France.

As for social risks, demographic changes (population aging, immigration), as well as the rise of extreme right-wing populist movements that pose a challenge to European democracies, are especially noteworthy. Finally, amongst the most relevant environmental and climatic factors, reference is made to the energy transition, the decarbonization of the economy, and the fight against climate change.

Keywords

Europe, Geopolitical risks, Foreign policy, Draghi plan, Ageing, Immigration, Energy transition, Hybrid threats, Social cohesion, Populism.

1. Introduction

Europe finds itself within a period of profound transformation marked by geopolitical tensions, economic change, disruptive social dynamics and an increasingly noticeable climate crisis. This chapter reviews the major risks within a global context marked by high uncertainty, and explores different strategic scenarios that may guide Europe towards a more sustainable and resilient future.

On the geopolitical front, the growing rivalry between the United States and China as an emerging power directly challenges Europe and its role in a multipolar world. Meanwhile, Russia's re-emergence as a challenging actor, the war in Ukraine, and regional conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa continue to generate instability on its borders. To this may be added the latent threat of international terrorism, new forms of hybrid warfare and cyber-attacks, which underline the need for a coherent and effective European foreign policy, which is an actual unfinished business for an EU weakened by internal fragmentation.

On the economic front, the Covid pandemic and the energy crisis triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, along with the ensuing inflation, have highlighted Europe's vulnerability to supply chain disruptions and competition for strategic natural resources. Regional inequalities, the rural-urban divide, and the impact of monetary and fiscal policies on economic growth and financial stability will be decisive factors in the near future.

Although 2024 appears to have been the low point of the post-pandemic economic recovery cycle for the eurozone as a whole, the economic projections for 2025 and 2026 still point to weak growth (with the exception of Spain), pending successive interest rate cuts by the ECB and the materialisation of the investment plan set out in the Draghi report. Attention must be paid to Germany's economic crisis, with both structural and circumstantial factors, and to the evolution of the public deficit in France and its impact on government bond markets.

Social and demographic challenges add another layer of complexity. Population ageing, migration and tensions associated with cultural diversity raise questions regarding social cohesion and the future of European democracies. Moreover, the rise of populist movements, fuelled by social inequalities and the perception

of abandonment in certain sectors of the population, represents a direct threat to democratic values and political stability in several countries on the continent.

Climate change and environmental risks are perhaps the most widely affecting and urgent challenge. The energy transition is a priority for Europe not only because of the need to reduce carbon emissions, but also because of its dependence on external energy sources. This chapter examines how energy diversification, decarbonisation and innovations in sustainable mobility can help Europe meet its climate goals and mitigate the effects of a changing climate that is already affecting the continent.

Finally, the chapter explores different strategic scenarios that may define Europe's orientation in the coming decades. From a path of integration and consolidation to more pessimistic scenarios of fragmentation and decline, the analysis seeks to provide perspectives in order to anticipate risks and boost the making of informed decisions. Drawing on lessons learned from previous crises, such as the importance of solidarity between Member States, structural reforms and social cohesion, it calls for a proactive and coordinated approach to address current and future challenges.

Europe's role as a global player will largely depend on its ability to adapt to a changing world, balancing its objectives of growth, sustainability, stability and internal cohesion. This chapter identifies the most pressing risks and offers a roadmap to a more secure and prosperous future for all Europeans.

2. Geopolitical risks

2.1. Global tensions and their impact on Europe

2.1.1. The US-China rivalry and its impact on Europe

The growing rivalry between the US and China is a decisive element of global geopolitics with direct implications for Europe. The United States, historically Europe's main security ally, has focused its efforts on countering China's rise as a global power. This strategic shift has generated growing uncertainty about the US's long-term commitment to Europe's security, which is accentuated by Donald Trump's return to the White House and

reflects a dynamic of strategic competition that places Europe in a delicate position.

- Trump has proposed universal tariffs of 10 per cent and targeted measures against European exports such as cars, putting the transatlantic trade relationship, worth €1.6 trillion in 2023, at risk.
- In the area of defence, its scepticism towards NATO and eventual decrease in support for Ukraine could force the EU to take on greater security responsibilities.
- Moreover, its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in the past and its sceptical stance on climate change could weaken global decarbonisation efforts, leaving the EU as the sole leader of this agenda.

China, for its part, has expanded its global influence not only in Asia, but also in Europe through investments in key infrastructure, such as the New Silk Road project, and its thriving presence in technology markets. Reports by the European External Action Service (EEAS)¹ highlight how this strategy has been designed to gain influence in critical sectors and warn of economic dependencies and lack of opportunities for European companies. While many European countries, including Spain, have sought to strengthen trade relations with China, the rise of geopolitical competition between the US and China places Europe in a vulnerable position when balancing its relationship with both global players.

China's economic and trade policies, especially its focus on strategic supply control and technological development, are reshaping global dynamics. According to the OECD's *Economic Outlook 2024*², these policies directly affect the economic interests of Europe, which faces the dilemma of securing its interests without compromising its geopolitical autonomy or its ability to form strategic alliances with Western powers. The risk of Europe being caught in a conflict of interests between the US and China is significant, and Spain is no stranger to this pressure.

¹ Report leaked to the media and available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/report-eu-countries-to-be-straitjacketed-by-chinas-new-silk-road/a-43437084>

² OECD. (2024). *OECD Economic Outlook* [online]. OECD. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-outlook-volume-2024-issue-2_d8814e8b-en.html

2.1.2. Russia's re-emergence as a challenging power

Russia's return as a power challenging Europe has been one of the most significant developments in global geopolitics in the last two decades. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has marked a turning point in international relations and exposed Europe's vulnerabilities to external military aggression. For Spain and the rest of Europe, this conflict has had a direct impact in terms of energy security, migratory flows and internal political stability.

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has adopted an increasingly aggressive posture, using its military and energy as tools to influence European policy. According to NATO's Annual Report 2023³, this strategy has revealed Europe's inadequate preparation for direct military threats in its immediate neighbourhood. Despite the Alliance's existence as a guarantor of collective security, the growing tension with Russia highlights the need to strengthen defensive capabilities and deterrence strategies.

Spain, in its role as a member of NATO and the EU, has been affected not only by the direct security challenges, but also by the economic repercussions of the sanctions imposed on Russia, especially in the energy and trade sectors. Gas supply disruptions and rising energy prices have had a direct impact on the Spanish economy, exacerbating existing social and economic tensions. Several reports by the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA)⁴ point to increased cyber threats from Russia, representing an ongoing challenge to the cyber security of European countries.

2.2. Regional conflicts and international terrorism

2.2.1. Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa

Long-running conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa remain a major source of global instability with direct implications for Europe.

³ NATO. (2023). *Annual Report 2023* [online]. The NATO SPS Programme. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/4/pdf/240419-SPS-AnnualReport2023.pdf

⁴ ENISA. (2022). *ENISA Threat Landscape 2022* [online]. ENISA. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.enisa.europa.eu/publications/enisa-threat-landscape-2022>

The war in Gaza is of great relevance to the European Union both internationally and domestically. Instability in the region can directly affect security in Europe by increasing the risk of terrorism and extremist activities within its borders. Moreover, internal tensions have intensified within the EU due to differences over how to respond to the conflict, which could strengthen far-right movements and lead to more Islamophobia. The humanitarian crisis could also lead to an increase in migration flows to Europe, putting member states' migration and border management policies to the test.

This is compounded by developments in the Syrian civil war, Libya's frozen conflict and tensions in the African Sahel.

Spain, due to its geographical proximity, is at the front line of the effects of these conflicts, especially in relation to migratory flows and border security. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), between January and September 2023 alone, 281,924 people were recorded as having left North Africa for Europe on irregular maritime journeys⁵.

2.2.2. The threat of international terrorism

International terrorism remains one of the most persistent threats to Europe. Although major terrorist attacks have declined in recent years, radicalisation and violent extremism continue to pose risks to the internal security of European countries. Attacks perpetrated by groups such as Al Qaeda or the Islamic State have left a deep impression on Europe's collective memory and continue to incentivise stringent security policies.

The phenomenon of jihadist terrorism remains a concern, especially in countries such as Spain, which has been targeted by terrorist groups in the past. The radicalisation of young Muslims in major European cities, exacerbated by a lack of social and economic integration, remains a significant challenge to internal cohesion and security. Additionally, the phenomenon of lone wolves, radicalised individuals acting in isolation, has created a new type of threat that is difficult to predict and prevent.

⁵ UNHCR. (2024). *West and Central Mediterranean situation* [online]. UNHCR. [Accessed on: 2025., Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/west-and-central-mediterranean-situation>

2.3. Challenges in cybersecurity and hybrid warfare

2.3.1. Increase in cyber threats

Cybersecurity has become a major concern for European governments due to the rise of cyber-attacks and hybrid warfare. Cyber-attacks from both state actors and criminal groups are designed to destabilise countries and affect their critical infrastructure, including financial, energy and health systems.

Cyber warfare has become a key geopolitical strategy tool, with Russia and China at the forefront of cyberthreats. According to ENISA⁶, these threats are becoming increasingly sophisticated and affect both public and private entities. In the case of Spain, cyber threats have intensified in recent years, with attacks targeting critical infrastructure.

The Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI), compiled by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), assesses states' levels of preparedness in terms of cybersecurity. According to the GCI 2024, while many countries have made progress in terms of cybersecurity, significant gaps remain in key areas such as legislation, technical measures and capacity building⁷.

The European Union must boost its cyber defences through greater public and private cooperation, as well as provide training to specialised personnel in order to deal with cyber-attacks. However, the increasingly sophisticated nature of these attacks, which often come from non-state actors or states with covert intentions, makes combating these risks extremely complex.

2.3.2. Hybrid warfare strategies

Hybrid warfare, which combines conventional and unconventional tactics (such as disinformation, cyber-attacks and covert operations), is another key challenge to Europe's security. The threat of disinformation campaigns and media

⁶ ENISA. (2022). *ENISA Threat Landscape 2022* [online]. ENISA. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.enisa.europa.eu/publications/enisa-threat-landscape-2023>

⁷ ITU. (2024). *Global CyberSecurity Index* [online]. International Telecommunication Union. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Cybersecurity/Documents/GCIv5/2401416_1b_Global-Cybersecurity-Index-E.pdf

manipulation has grown, especially with regard to Russia, seeking to destabilise European democracies and undermine confidence in institutions. These attacks on the internal cohesion of EU member states are a latent risk to social and political stability.

Spain, much like other European countries, has been the target of disinformation and *fake news* which have had a direct impact (yet difficult to estimate) on electoral processes, social polarisation and public opinion. The manipulation of social networks and digital media has become a powerful tool for influencing the domestic and foreign policy of countries, and there is a need to strengthen defensive capabilities in this area.

2.4. European foreign policy: a challenge for strategic coherence

2.4.1. A fragmented Europe

Tensions between Eastern and Western European countries, differences in migration policies, and the growing rise of populist and nationalist movements are clear examples of how global dynamics affect the EU's internal cohesion. Various notes of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) have, for years, analysed how these tensions hinder joint action in European foreign policy⁸.

Brexit has clearly demonstrated how internal tensions in Europe, exacerbated by dissatisfaction with the EU, can lead to the exit of a key member. This event has generated economic and political uncertainty and raised questions about the future of European integration. Populist movements in countries such as Hungary, Poland, Italy and, to a lesser extent, Spain, also reflect a growing distrust of European institutions and their ability to manage global crises.

This atmosphere of mistrust is exacerbated by technological competition between Europe, the US and China, especially in strategic sectors such as artificial intelligence (AI), telecommunications (5G) and cybersecurity. In the report presented at the 2024 annual meeting in Davos, the World Economic Forum (WEF) stressed that Europe needs to invest more in clean technologies,

⁸ Zerka, P. (2019). The benefits of political fragmentation, *ECFR*.
Dennison, S. *et al.* (2019). How to govern a fragmented EU: What Europeans said at the ballot box, *ECFR*.

artificial intelligence, semiconductors and other strategic sectors. Furthermore, the importance of balancing international collaborations with reducing dependencies in critical value chains was emphasised.

2.4.2. The common foreign policy: a challenging road ahead

The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was designed to promote peace, stability and human rights globally. However, the implementation of this policy has been a constant challenge due to policy differences between member states, which vary according to their history, geographical location and economic priorities.

The lack of a unified stance on global crises, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war in Ukraine or the crisis in Syria, has weakened the EU's influence on the international stage. The EU's inability to respond forcefully to Russia's aggression in 2022 or Israel's disproportionate reaction to Hamas attacks in October 2023, for example, has highlighted the urgent need to move towards a more coherent foreign policy that is less dependent on the dynamics between member states.

Moreover, growing populism within the EU, which calls into question the fundamental values of European integration, further complicates the creation of a cohesive external strategy. Despite this, the EU remains a global power in terms of trade and diplomacy, and its capacity to influence the global agenda, especially in areas such as climate change, human rights and peace, remains considerable.

3. Economic and financial risks

3.1. Global and regional economic impacts

3.1.1. The energy crisis and the impact on inflation

In recent years, Europe has faced its biggest energy crisis since the 1970s, marked by rising gas and electricity prices and the resulting inflation. This situation has been exacerbated by three factors: bottlenecks in the global supply chain during the recovery phase of the Covid crisis, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the (until then) too-slow transition to renewable energy.

In Germany, dependence on Russian gas (which accounted for 55% of supply before the conflict) exacerbated the situation when supplies were disrupted. In 2022, gas prices in the EU increased by 1000% compared to historical values⁹, contributing to a record inflation of 10.4% in October of that year according to the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP). To mitigate the effects, the German government approved a 200 billion euro fund to subsidise energy costs and support households and businesses, which required the temporary suspension of a constitutional limit on public borrowing¹⁰. In 2024, inflation has been around the ECB's 2% target, with a low of 1.6% in September.

France, less dependent on Russian gas due to its extensive nuclear infrastructure, has also experienced tensions in the energy market. Maintenance issues at several nuclear plants reduced their generation capacity, forcing the nation to import electricity. This contributed to an inflation rate of 6.2% in October 2022, the highest in decades. The French government limited the increase in electricity tariffs to 4 % and offered aid to the most affected households. In 2024, inflation has been around the ECB's 2% target, with a low of 1.2% in September.

Overall, the euro area reached an all-time high for inflation of 10.6 % in October 2022. The crisis has led Europe to prioritise energy transition through initiatives such as REPowerEU, which seeks to reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels and encourage the use of renewables.

3.1.2. Regional inequalities and the urban-rural divide

One of the most worrying consequences of the succession of economic crises of the last fifteen years (2008 international financial crisis, 2012 euro crisis, 2020 Covid crisis and 2022 inflationary crisis) is the deepening of economic inequalities, both within and between countries. These inequalities are reflected in differences in income, access to basic services and

⁹ See: Council of the EU infographics, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/infographics/a-market-mechanism-to-limit-excessive-gas-price-spikes/#:~:text=En%20agosto%20de%202022%20los,y%20los%2035%20%E2%82%AC%2FMWh>

¹⁰ The Federal Government of Germany. (2022). *Relief for electricity and gas prices: 200 billion euros for economic protective shield* [online]. The Federal Government. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/protective-shield-2131014>

employment opportunities that affect both social cohesion and sustainable economic development.

At the regional level, there is a marked difference in GDP per capita between the more developed regions in the north and west of Europe and the less developed regions in the east and south. In 2023, Luxembourg's GDP per capita was the highest in the European Union, 139% above the EU average, while Bulgaria had the lowest, 36% below the average, according to Eurostat data. These disparities are compounded by regional differences in infrastructure, education and technology investments.

Thus, for example, the economic inequality between East and West Germany persists even decades following reunification. According to the Halle Institute for Economic Research (IWH), average earnings in the east of the country are approximately 16 % lower than in the west, and labour productivity is also lower in the eastern regions.

The urban-rural divide is also a growing concern. In rural areas, employment rates are generally lower, with limited access to essential services such as education and health care. The risk of poverty or social exclusion in rural regions remains especially significant and stands out in countries such as Romania and parts of southern Italy, where rates are particularly high. Conversely, risk levels are significantly lower in many European capitals, due to better economic opportunities and access to services¹¹.

In addition, digitalisation and automation are rapidly changing labour markets, bringing new challenges for skills and the restructuring of national economies. There is a high risk of large sections of the population being left behind in this process, especially for people working in low-skilled jobs or in industries that are being replaced by more efficient technologies.

3.1.3. Competition for natural resources

Growing economic nationalism and competition for natural resources is a geopolitical trend affecting Europe's transition to a more sustainable future. As natural resources such as rare metals required for renewable energy technologies and transport electrification become scarcer and more in demand, geo-economic

¹¹ Eurostat. (2014). *Risk of poverty or social exclusion in regions* [online]. Eurostat. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20241015-1>

tensions between major global powers such as the United States, China and the European Union are intensifying¹².

Spain, with its increasing focus on renewable energies and its commitment to the electrification of the economy, faces the need to secure access to critical resources such as lithium, cobalt and graphite, which are essential for the manufacture of batteries and other technological devices. Dependence on China for the supply of these materials presents a significant risk to Europe's economic security. Indeed, protectionist policies in some countries have made global supply chains more fragile and created a more aggressive environment of competition for access to these resources.

3.2. Economic situation and projections

3.2.1. Economic projections for 2025

The European Central Bank (ECB) forecasts moderate growth for the eurozone economy in 2025 and 2026, with rates of 1.4% and 1.6% respectively, supported by rising domestic demand and a more controlled inflation environment¹³. Headline inflation, as measured by the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP), is expected to be 2.2% in 2025 and 1.9% in 2026, which is close to the ECB's target of 2%. This reflects a decline in inflationary pressures, especially in food and energy, thanks to the stabilisation of commodity prices and a moderation of labour costs.

Risks to these projections include geopolitical tensions, such as the deepening of the conflict in Ukraine or the escalation in the Middle East, which may destabilise energy markets. Additionally, the effects of climate change, such as extreme weather events, pose a threat to economic stability. On the domestic front, structural problems in manufacturing and a fiscal adjustment that is more severe than expected may slow growth.

As strengths, the labour market continues to show resilience, with historically low unemployment rates at around 6.3% in the

¹² European Commission. (2020). *Critical Raw Materials for Strategic Technologies and Sectors in the EU: A Foresight Study*. European Commission.

¹³ ECB. (2024). *Macroeconomic projections* [online]. European Central Bank. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/projections/html/index.en.html>

eurozone. Moreover, the ECB's monetary policies have dampened credit demand and contributed to a gradual reduction in inflation without having a disproportionate impact on economic growth.

As for interest rates, they have decreased recently thanks to the fall in inflation, which is close to the ECB's 2 % target, and the need to boost weak economic growth. At its last meeting in 2024, the ECB lowered the deposit rate to 3% and current projections indicate that it could be around 2% or 2.25% by the end of 2025.

In contrast, markets expect fewer cuts for the Fed in 2025 than for the ECB, reflecting the greater strength of the US economy and the need to maintain a vigilant stance on inflation across the Atlantic. In any case, there is still some indirect coordination between the monetary policies of the ECB and the Fed, albeit with differences that may be significant in their pace and targets, depending on the economic situation in each economic area.

3.2.2. The Letta and Draghi reports: Europe requires investment

The Letta report and the Draghi report, both published in 2024, agree on the urgent need to adopt integrated and ambitious measures to secure the economic and social future of the European Union.

The Letta report¹⁴, commissioned by the European Council, addresses the modernisation of the European single market. Letta proposes adding a "fifth freedom" to the single market, the free movement of knowledge and creativity as a basis for adapting to the challenges of a digital and green economy. It also suggests reinforcing financial, energy and telecommunications integration, and simplifying regulation to foster business competitiveness. This single market must boost social cohesion, provide quality jobs in local communities, and ensure that EU expansions are planned and sustainable.

Letta points to an important vulnerability of the European capital market: the existence of abundant private savings that are currently funding investment in other areas, namely the US.

¹⁴ European Council. (2024). *Much more than a market* [online]. European Council. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf>

The Draghi report¹⁵, commissioned by the European Commission, focuses its analysis on the EU's productivity and competitiveness vis-à-vis the US and China. Draghi stresses the need to invest EUR 800 billion per year (representing around 5% of Europe's GDP) to close the technology gap and improve productivity, which is key to sustaining the European social model. It proposes measures such as strengthening technological and energy independence, creating a stronger capital market union and prioritising innovation in strategic sectors.

Draghi proposes to finance his investment plan through common debt issuance at EU level and following the model of the NextGenerationEU programme implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic. The proposal has met with resistance from some countries such as Germany and the Netherlands which fear disproportionate tax burdens and argue that the structural problems of certain states will not be solved by joint borrowing.

3.2.3. Public debt and risks to financial stability

Public debt in the eurozone continues to be a key issue for economic stability, especially because of the challenges associated with EU fiscal compliance and within the context of the investment requirements identified in the Letta and Draghi reports. France is especially concerning due to its high government deficit, closing 2024 at over 6% of its GDP, and its rising debt trajectory, already above 122% of its GDP.

France's high public expenditure, which accounts for almost 60% of its GDP (the highest in Europe) and political instability make it difficult to implement the necessary reforms. The short-lived Barnier government proposed adjustments of 60 billion euros combining cuts and tax increases that were rejected in the no-confidence motion that ended his time in Matignon and which, *de facto*, has led to the extension of the current budget for the year 2025.

Although the risk of a generalised sovereign debt crisis in the eurozone is currently low, the French situation may have repercussions. Its risk premium has surpassed even that of Greece, reflecting market concerns. Additionally, the European Commission

¹⁵ European Commission. (2024). *EU competitiveness: Looking ahead* [online]. European Commission. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead_en

has reactivated the excessive deficit procedures, which will force France to make stricter adjustments in the coming years to avoid financial tensions in the region as a whole.

4. Social and demographic risks

4.1. Demographic changes and challenges to social cohesion

4.1.1. Population ageing

One of Europe's greatest social risks is its ageing population. In many countries, such as Spain, Italy, Greece and Germany, the proportion of older people is increasing rapidly, while the young population is stable or decreasing. This demographic phenomenon has profound implications for social, economic and political systems, as it puts increasing pressure on pensions, health systems and the labour force.

An ageing population requires adaptation of public policies, as the number of dependent people in Europe will increase significantly in the coming decades. This translates into increased demand for health services, elderly care and pension expenditure, which could place unsustainable pressure on national budgets, as pointed out in the European Commission's *Ageing Report 2024*¹⁶. In Spain, for example, the population over 65 years of age is expected to reach almost 30% of the total population by 2050, which will require an in-depth review of the funding sources for social welfare and public health policies.

The challenge lies not only in managing ageing, but also in maintaining an active workforce that can sustain the continent's economic growth. Pay-as-you-go pension systems, which are common in Europe, are especially vulnerable to population ageing, as they require a large base of active workers. Given current population growth forecasts, the evolution of immigration flows is of critical importance, as the OECD's *International Migration Outlook* has pointed out in its various updates.

¹⁶ European Commission. (2024). *Ageing Report. Economic and Budgetary Projections for the EU Member States 2022-2070* [online]. European Commission. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/2024-ageing-report-economic-and-budgetary-projections-eu-member-states-2022-2070_en

4.1.2. Migration and Diversity: opportunities and social tensions

In parallel to population ageing, migration remains a key phenomenon in Europe. While migration may be seen as an opportunity to rejuvenate the population and strengthen the economy, it also creates significant challenges in terms of social cohesion, cultural integration and political management.

Since 2022, Spain has experienced a migration *boom* from countries such as Venezuela, Morocco, Ukraine, Latin American countries and Eastern Europe. This phenomenon contributes, in part, to explaining the higher growth of the Spanish economy as compared to the European average and, especially, in sectors such as agriculture, tourism and services in general.

Migration tests the capacity of receiving countries to integrate newcomers effectively and mitigate potential social and political tensions. This also depends, to some extent, on the adaptation of basic public services (education, health, transport, etc.) to the increase in population in the most stressed areas.

In some European countries, nationalist and populist movements have exploited the issue of immigration as a form of political capital, arguing that mass immigration endangers cultural identity and social security. These movements have gained ground in nations such as Hungary, Poland and, to a lesser extent, Spain and Italy, leading to increasing social polarisation.

The challenge of social integration is not only an economic or cultural issue, but also a political one. The EU has developed policies to manage migration, such as the Pact on Migration and Asylum, but the lack of a common strategy and growing disagreement among member states over the distribution of refugees and migrants has hindered an effective response. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) highlights the challenges of ensuring the inclusion and fundamental rights of migrants in its *Fundamental Rights Report 2023*.

4.1.3. Social inequality: risk of internal fragmentation

Economic inequality in Europe has evolved differently depending on the regions and policies implemented. According to the World Inequality Lab, in Europe the richest 10% own 58% of the total wealth, while the poorest half own only 4%. This reflects a significant concentration of resources, although less

so compared to regions such as Latin America, where the richest 10% own up to 77%.

In terms of income, Europe is characterised by lower inequality thanks to the strong redistributive role of the welfare state. However, the proportion of people at risk of poverty is shown to have increased in two-thirds of Member States between 2006 and 2021, and the size of the middle class has decreased in several countries. This phenomenon especially affects young people, the poorly educated and single-parent families, exacerbated by rising housing prices and the effects of recent inflation.

Strengths such as access to social policies mitigate these impacts, but tax progressivity must be strengthened and coverage extended to the most vulnerable individuals. In the long term, this will be key to dealing with structural inequalities and ensuring social cohesion in the region.

This inequality is not only economic, but also geographical, as rural areas and southern European regions suffer from chronic underinvestment. Educational inequality and lack of access to housing are factors that aggravate social polarisation and can contribute to social unrest and increasing political radicalisation.

4.1.4. Housing: a bottleneck for emancipation

Access to housing is a significant challenge for young people in Europe who have been affected by rising prices and the scarcity of available market supply. According to Eurostat, in 2023, 10.1% of young people (15-29 years old) spent more than 40% of their disposable income on housing, a level higher than the overall EU average of 8.9%. Countries such as Greece (31.1 %), Luxembourg (27.5 %) and Denmark (27.3 %) had the highest rates of housing cost overburden for this age group.

According to Eurostat, house prices in Europe have risen by 48% since 2010, with a disproportionate impact on young people. In fact, the percentage of 25 to 34 year olds still living with their parents has grown significantly in recent years. For example, in Ireland, this percentage increased from 27% to 40% between 2017 and 2022, while in Spain it increased from 35% to 42%. Factors such as rising rental prices, difficulties in accessing home ownership and the rise of holiday rental platforms have exacerbated this situation.

Overcrowding is also a critical problem: 17% of young people in the EU were living in overcrowded conditions in 2023. In countries such as Romania and Bulgaria, this figure rises to 68.3% and 51.6% respectively among 15-19 year olds, reflecting a marked inequality between countries and age groups¹⁷.

These trends underline the need for public policies aimed at increasing the supply of affordable housing and improving conditions for access for the younger generation.

4.2. Populist movements and the challenge to European democracies

4.2.1. The rise of populist movements

In recent years, Europe has witnessed a resurgence of populist movements, both from the far right and left that challenge the EU's democratic institutions and political cohesion. These movements are fuelled by citizens' frustration at the loss of purchasing power, immigration and the failure of traditional parties to solve economic and social problems (in some cases entrenched since the international financial crisis of 2008, in others caused by the Covid crisis and, more recently, those generated by the energy crisis of 2022).

In Spain, the rise of parties such as Vox, with its nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric, reflects a broader trend in Europe where dissatisfaction with the *status quo* has led to increased numbers of people voting for parties that oppose European integration, globalisation and immigration. Some Central and Eastern European countries, such as Poland and Hungary, have adopted more authoritarian policies that challenge the EU's democratic principles and fundamental values, such as the rule of law or human rights¹⁸.

Populist movements are eroding public confidence in democratic institutions and European mechanisms of governance. This growing disaffection with traditional parties and formal political structures may lead to a delegitimisation of the democratic system,

¹⁷ European Commission. (2024). *Young people - housing conditions* [online]. European Commission. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young_people_-_housing_conditions

¹⁸ International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Report 2022 highlights how populist movements affect the stability of European democracies.

increasing the risk of political instability and polarisation in the future. The Brexit crisis is a clear example of how popular discontent with European institutions can have profound consequences.

4.2.2. Political instability in Germany and France

In 2024, both Germany and France experienced political crises that reflect the growing instability of their governing systems and the gradual pressure of populism. In Germany, the collapse of the three-party coalition government led by Olaf Scholz has led to early elections scheduled for early 2025. The breakdown was due to irreconcilable fiscal disagreements between coalition members within a context of economic slowdown and far-right pressure, whose support has especially grown in the east of the country.

On the other hand, in France, the no-confidence vote against Prime Minister Michel Barnier just three months after his appointment, and the subsequent appointment of François Bayrou, has led to a scenario of legislative paralysis. The lack of consensus in the National Assembly prevents the formation of a stable government as Marine Le Pen's National Rally continues to gain ground and capitalise on social discontent following the controversial 2023 pension reform and the loss of purchasing power of wages.

It cannot be ruled out that, in addition to elections in Germany, new legislative elections may also be held in France in 2025 if the parliamentary deadlock continues. Both countries may see support for populist parties consolidate, complicating governance and challenging political stability in the heart of the EU.

5. Environmental and climate risks

5.1. The energy challenge: transition and external dependence

5.1.1. The challenge of energy transition in Europe

Although the EU has been a pioneer in implementing climate policies, such as the European Green Pact and setting the goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, the transition to renewable energy presents significant obstacles: lack of adequate infrastructure, dependence on traditional energy sources (such as gas and oil), and the need to invest heavily in clean technologies.

In the case of Spain, although the country has been one of the European leaders in implementing renewable energies, specifically solar and wind energy, structural challenges persist. The energy system remains dependent on natural gas, largely due to insufficient interconnection with other European countries. This lack of infrastructure makes Spain highly dependent on gas imports, especially from Russia, which exposes the country to risks arising from fluctuations in international prices and the policies of supplier countries. In its *World Energy Outlook* report, the International Energy Agency (IEA) highlights the importance of diversifying these sources and strengthening energy infrastructures to minimise risks.

Rising energy prices, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine and Russia's energy policy, have highlighted Europe's vulnerability to external shocks in the energy market. Increasing dependence on external sources such as natural gas and oil, is putting the EU and Spain's energy security to the test. The global energy crisis has put pressure on European households, which have seen their electricity and gas bills rise, affecting social welfare and economic competitiveness.

5.1.2. Diversification of sources and energy geopolitics

Europe has begun to diversify its energy sources to reduce dependence on Russia. Spain plays a key role in this strategy, as it has one of the most developed liquefied natural gas (LNG) infrastructures in Europe, which allows it to import gas from different parts of the world, including the United States, Qatar and Algeria. These infrastructures are critical to the region's energy resilience.

Moreover, Spain has positioned itself as a leader in renewable energy generation, and investment in energy sources such as solar photovoltaic and wind power continues to increase. This shift towards more sustainable sources is also aligned with EU targets to reduce CO₂ emissions and comply with the Paris Agreement.

However, the challenge of energy interconnection remains a major obstacle. The lack of a sufficiently developed cross-border infrastructure network between Spain and its neighbours means that renewable energy produced in Spain cannot always be used by other EU countries. This limitation prevents Spain from playing an even more prominent role in the European energy transition and reduces the efficiency of renewable energy distribution.

As for nuclear energy, political positions in Europe are divided: some states see it as part of the green transition, while others see it as a temporary or inadequate solution to current energy challenges. France considers it essential to decarbonise and ensure energy security. On the contrary, Germany has shut down its nuclear plants and prioritises renewables, citing safety and waste management concerns. Countries such as Sweden and Finland support their use, while Spain and Austria have rejected the development of new projects.

5.1.3. Decarbonising the European economy

Decarbonisation of the economy is one of the most urgent responses that must be implemented by Europe to mitigate the effects of climate change. The transition to renewable energy sources such as solar, wind and hydro, is essential to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and achieve the climate goals of the Paris Agreement. However, this transition presents major challenges in terms of both infrastructure and investment.

In recent years, Europe has made great strides in developing renewable energies and the EU has committed to achieving climate neutrality by 2050. However, the transition to a green economy requires a complete overhaul of the energy, industrial and transport sectors, which implies substantial investments in infrastructure, clean technologies and innovation policies.

Despite the potential of renewable energies, the shift towards a clean energy grid is not without risks. Reliance on intermittent energy sources, such as solar and wind, can create supply problems at times of low production. Energy storage through batteries or green hydrogen is one of the proposed solutions, but its development is still at an early stage and requires investment and an appropriate regulatory framework.

5.1.4. The automotive industry and sustainable mobility

The automotive industry is another key pillar of Europe's energy transition. Internal combustion vehicles are responsible for a significant proportion of CO₂ emissions and therefore the electrification of transport is one of the main ways to reduce Europe's carbon footprint.

The European automotive industry is undergoing a process of transformation marked by the transition to electric vehicles (EVs) and more sustainable mobility. In 2023, EV sales reached 15 % of total EU sales thanks to stricter emissions regulations and subsidies for their adoption. However, challenges remain, especially in Germany, where the EV market share is still low at 2% of total vehicles in 2023, and government targets of 15 million EVs by 2030 seem difficult to achieve due to the weak local demand and competition from Chinese manufacturers and Tesla.

Other structural challenges to sustainable mobility in Europe are its reliance on China for critical battery materials, and the implementation of charging infrastructure. However, there are promising developments, such as research into solid-state batteries, which promise longer range and lower costs in the medium term.

The most significant risks in the transition to electric vehicles are supply chain disruption, job losses in the traditional car industry, and a disadvantaged starting position in the face of rapidly expanding Chinese industry. Europe will need to boost its industrial and technological capacity to compete on a global basis.

5.2. Climate change: global and local challenges

Climate change is one of the most serious medium to long-term risks facing Europe. As global temperatures rise, European countries are experiencing increasingly frequent extreme weather events such as heat waves, prolonged droughts, floods, intense storms and natural disasters. Not only do these events have a direct impact on people and infrastructures, but they also affect the economy, food security and public health. The European Environment Agency (EEA) has described these impacts in several reports and warns of the urgent need to implement measures for adaptation¹⁹.

Due to its geographical location and unique climate characteristics, Spain is exposed to the effects of climate change. The south of the country, especially the Mediterranean region, has experienced a significant rise in temperatures in recent decades, with hotter and drier summers increasing the risk of forest fires and

¹⁹ EEA. (2022). *European Climate Risk Assessment, EEA Report No 1/2024* [online]. EEA. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment>

“cold drop” events, and dwindling water resources. As desertification progresses in agriculture-heavy regions, food production and water security may be at risk.

Additionally, rising sea levels in coastal areas pose a direct threat to many European cities, such as Valencia or Barcelona, which face risks of flooding and loss of maritime ecosystems. Coastal erosion is also a growing problem in many areas of the Spanish Mediterranean coastline, which could affect tourism and local communities alike.

Climate change is also associated with an increase in climate-related diseases such as respiratory and cardiovascular diseases caused by air pollution, as well as vector-borne diseases such as dengue fever and Zika, which have become more pronounced in Europe due to the proliferation of mosquitoes in warmer climates.

6. Overall conclusion

6.1. Reflecting on future scenarios: possible outcomes based on current strategic decisions

Europe’s future depends, to a large extent, on the strategic decisions taken today, both at national and European levels, as geopolitical, economic, social and environmental risks are becoming increasingly complex.

6.2. Scenario 1: integration and consolidation

If EU countries can overcome current internal divisions and make progress in terms of political and economic integration, the continent could emerge more united and resilient in the face of global challenges. Internal cohesion, solidarity on issues such as security, migration and energy transition, and a push for a green economy could strengthen Europe’s global position, allowing it to compete more effectively with powers such as the United States and China. In this scenario, Spain would play a key role as a bridge between Europe and other areas of the world, especially Latin America and North Africa, thanks to its strategic geographical location and its growing economic and political influence within the EU.

6.3. Scenario 2: fragmentation and decline

In a more pessimistic scenario, increasing political polarisation and internal tensions could lead to further fragmentation within

the EU, with some countries adopting more isolationist or nationalist policies and others seeking greater integration. Mutual distrust could weaken European institutions and slow down efforts to address global challenges such as climate change, energy security or technological competition. In this context, Spain could be caught between the pressure of having to respond to internal tensions and its commitment to European solidarity, which may affect its economic development and its pro-Europeanism.

6.4. Scenario 3: Sustainable transition and resilience

A third possible scenario is that Europe, and Spain, manages to lead a sustainable economic, social and environmental transition. The drive towards renewable energy, the circular economy, and digitalisation could provide an opportunity to reduce dependence on external resources and boost Europe's competitiveness in key economic sectors. In this case, social welfare policies that address inequality (with a particular focus on housing access for young people) and population ageing could be key to ensuring a cohesive society and an inclusive labour market. If properly managed, these reforms could make Europe a global model of resilience in the face of social and economic risks.

6.5. Scenario 4: Rising geopolitical tensions

Competition for natural resources, tensions with powers such as Russia and China, and the risk of armed conflict could lead to an unstable geopolitical scenario in Europe. Within this context, security would become a top priority, which would imply increased military spending and collective defence policies. Spain, as a key NATO member, would play a crucial role in reinforcing Europe's defences and managing potential crises in its neighbourhood, especially in the Mediterranean and Africa. However, this scenario could also accentuate economic disparities within Europe, with the regions most vulnerable to conflict lagging behind in terms of development and the deterioration of current standards of social cohesion.

6.6. Lessons learned from past crises: how they may guide future policies

Past crises, such as the 2008 global financial crisis, the 2015 migration crisis and the Covid pandemic, offer valuable lessons

for Europe's future policies. These crises have not only revealed the region's structural vulnerabilities, but also the EU's capacity to adapt and learn from its challenges.

6.7. Lesson 1: the importance of European solidarity

One of the main lessons of the sovereign debt crisis and the migration crisis is that, in times of uncertainty and pressure, solidarity among EU member states is essential in order to address common problems. The unified response to the Covid health crisis, through the centralised purchase of vaccines or Next Generation EU funds, demonstrated how cooperation and financial solidarity can be a powerful tool to overcome economic challenges. This experience should guide future policies, where union is not just an abstract principle, but a concrete strategy for dealing with geopolitical and economic risks.

6.8. Lesson 2: The Need for Structural Reforms

Past crises have also highlighted the need for structural reforms in key areas such as the labour market, pensions and fiscal management. Spain, like other countries, has made and must continue to make significant adjustments to its social welfare and fiscal systems to ensure economic sustainability. Reform policies should be seen as an opportunity to strengthen the foundations of the economy, ensure social equity and improve global competitiveness. Ageing populations and labour challenges require far-reaching reforms that not only ensure a sufficient and sustainable pension system, but also boost the creation of quality jobs and promote education and retraining.

6.9. Lesson 3: The importance of social cohesion in the face of divisions

The crises have also highlighted social risks stemming from growing economic inequality and political tensions. The rise of populist and nationalist movements in Europe reflects the unease of those who feel excluded from the benefits of economic progress. To prevent this social polarisation from becoming a systemic risk, Europe must invest in social cohesion by promoting policies that reduce inequality and strengthen democratic values. Social inclusion and access to opportunities must be key priorities to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are equitably distributed.

6.10. Lesson 4: the need to anticipate geopolitical risks

Finally, recent experiences reveal the need to be more proactive in the face of geopolitical risks. The war in Ukraine, tensions with China and the global energy crisis highlight the importance of anticipating strategic risks and taking quick action. Energy security and technological autonomy must be key objectives for Europe in its future geopolitical strategy. Spain, due to its strategic geographical position, has a key role in European security policy and can contribute significantly to regional stability.

Chapter Five

Indo-Pacific 2025: strategies, cooperation and competition

Eva Borreguero Sancho

Abstract

This article explores major events in the Indo-Pacific over the past two years, with an especial focus on the economic and security aspects shaping relations between key players in the region.

Interest in the Indo-Pacific has reached unprecedented heights among the world's major powers, which consider the region a priority area. The optimism that characterized the "Kissinger order", with its vision of a fully globalised world, has given way to a scenario marked by the resurgence of the struggle between great powers. This new context poses the challenge of coexistence between a hegemonic power, the United States, and an emerging one, China. Within this framework, the Indo-Pacific has become a central scenario of rivalries and convergences, with an intricate network of interests and ambitions that shape the main realignments of our time. Returning to the terminology of the 19th century, we would be facing the contemporary version of the "Great Game".

The study will focus on the major economic powers of the Indo-Pacific: the United States, China, India, Japan and South Korea.

It will also include a mention of North Korea and the Philippines because of the risks that characterise their security contexts.

Keywords

Indo-Pacific, Geopolitics, Security Strategies, US-China rivalry, India.

1. Introduction

From the 1970s onwards, the United States facilitated China's economic rise in exchange for China's tacit acceptance of its global military hegemony. This was the "Kissinger order"¹ that followed the end of the Cold War and ushered in an era based on faith in globalisation which promoted the "end of history", to use Francis Fukuyama's expression. This new order began to splinter during the second decade of the 21st century, under the leadership of Xi Jinping and Donald Trump.

Using Michael Mann's terminology², -the four sources of social power- it may be argued that, in its approach to China, Washington pursued a separation of interests in the spheres of *economic* and *military power* in the belief that they would develop autonomously, without mutual interference and in watertight compartments. China's inclusion in the liberal economic order could be expected to lead to a transition to democracy -*ideological* power-and full membership of international institutions -*political* power. Neither Nixon nor Kissinger foresaw the trajectory that the Communist Party of China (CPC) would take. Despite the economic leap that led it to become the world's second economic power, Beijing not only failed to embrace the political ideals of liberalism, but under Xi Jinping's "new era", it began an authoritarian and cult of personality drift reminiscent of the Mao Zedong era. It created a series of global institutions competing with those under the "Washington consensus" and, in the sphere of military power, began to flex its muscles in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea and on the border with India.

It is under these circumstances that the Indo-Pacific strategies and partnerships have emerged. Australia, USA, ASEAN, India, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea will publish a series of documents that highlight the region's dilemmas and the unfolding of a new geopolitics that has at its core the rivalry between an emerging power, Beijing, and a hegemonic power, the United States. These state actors hold different views on the regional balance of power, a diversity that is reflected in the realist, liberal and constructivist approaches that explain their priorities and concerns.

¹ Rachman, G. (2019). The Asian strategic order is dying [online], *Financial Times*. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/f4725b7e-b51e-11e9-8cb2-799a3a8cf37b>

² Mann, M. (1991). *Las fuentes del poder social*. Madrid, Alianza Editorial.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) promoted by the US, India's *Act East Policy*, Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI) plans, the Asia-Africa Economic Corridor, Australia's 'dependent ally' relations with the US, and the Malabar trilateral naval exercises, among others, are all aimed at containing China's growing influence³. China's plans to increase its influence through the Maritime Silk Road challenge the US as the conventional protagonist in the region, and the *2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, an example of a constructivist approach, emphasises an inclusive, rules-based Indo-Pacific.

The European Union did not remain unaffected by these transformations. Its incorporation into the Indo-Pacific represents a transition from "Europe does not do geopolitics" to the development of a grand strategy of external action that, among other things, includes the *global gateway*. This shift, which started with the European Commission's 2019 strategic outlook and defined China as a partner, competitor and systemic rival, received an abrupt boost with the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Both events affected current perceptions of China, especially when Beijing's response to the war in Ukraine was interpreted as tacit support⁴.

Other EU turning points include the Strategic Compass and the 2021 EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. If the initial approach proposed the EU as a "third way" away from great power competition, over time it has abandoned this position and realigned itself with Washington's recommendations. This realignment became evident with Joe Biden's arrival in the White House, when the EU suspended the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment previously negotiated with China, marking a new strategic rift.

Consequently, the EU has entered a phase of collaboration with so-called "like-minded countries" of the Indo-Pacific, a security-focused regrouping of economic, ideological and political interests

³ Josukutty, A. and Sabina Lobo, J. (eds.). (2024). *The New World Politics of the Indo-Pacific: Perceptions, Policies and Interests*. London, Taylor & Francis Group.

⁴ Sabanadze, N., Vasselier, A. and Wiegand, G. (2024). *China-Russia alignment: a threat to Europe's security* [online]. MERICS. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://merics.org/en/report/china-russia-alignment-threat-europes-security>

in which it participates alongside the United States, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and India.

In this vein, recent EU proposals include the Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA) project and the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership. However, like other economies, Europe faces the complex challenge of balancing the advantages of trading with China against its security drawbacks. The *de-risking* approach to digital technology production clashes with its dependence on China for the supply of critical minerals, while European import controls lead to retaliation from Beijing. The interconnectedness of globalisation and the central position of China in production chains make decision-making difficult, opening up rifts between EU partners, whose views and preferences often diverge.

Although the EU continues to define China as a partner, competitor and rival, in practice it is becoming less of a partner and more of a rival.

This article analyses the main trends and developments in the Indo-Pacific with especial focus on the economic and security aspects that shape relations between key actors in the region. The study will focus on the major economic powers: United States, China, India, Japan and South Korea. Furthermore, it will include mentions of North Korea and the Philippines due to the risks posed by their security contexts.

2. The United States, continuity and rupture

“The US is an Indo-Pacific power”. This laconic and forceful statement begins the Indo-Pacific strategy approved by the Biden Administration in 2022. Indeed, part of the US is located in the Pacific Ocean - the west coast, the Hawaiian Islands and Alaska to the north. It has also had an extensive presence in the region as a hegemonic power. Washington has signed eleven security and defence treaties, most of them bilateral (with South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, Australia and New Zealand), but also collective, such as the Quad, AUKUS, the Five Eyes Alliance, and the Southeast Asia Collective Defence Treaty. Additionally, it has military bases in Japan, South Korea, Guam, Hawaii and Alaska. It has a regular military presence in the Philippines, Singapore, Australia and the Marshall Islands, and rotating military partnerships with Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, East Timor, New Zealand and Thailand.

The US made a significant shift in its foreign policy towards Asia under the Obama Administration, with the famous *Pivot to Asia*. The strategic shift was formulated by Hillary Clinton, who identified the Asia-Pacific as a vital region for the US. The 2017 Indo-Pacific strategy was published during Donald Trump's term in office. The national security strategy also defined the Indo-Pacific as the region of greatest strategic interest to the US.

The Trump administration went a step further and singled out China as a threat to US goals. In this regard, Vice President Mike Pence's 2018 speech at the Hudson Institute⁵ marked a turning point. Pence accused Xi Jinping of interfering in US domestic politics. He outlined the main arguments shared by Democrats and Republicans towards China: Beijing seeks to change the international order in its favour, and with the militarisation of the South China Sea and the high increase in military spending, it is attempting to drive the US out of the South China Sea and prevent it from aiding its allies. There is a general fear that China's policy of trade dominance is a covert strategy to assert itself as a hegemonic power in other areas. In the area of security, Beijing's aggressive claims to disputed territories in India, the South China Sea and the East China Sea is of concern. To this diagnosis must be added other recent episodes, the "friendship without limits" pact between China and Russia weeks prior to the invasion of Ukraine, the failure to honour commitments in the reunification of Hong Kong, the intrusion of an alleged Chinese spy balloon in 2023 and the devastating *Salt Typhoon* hacking of the US telecommunications system in December last year that has set off alarm bells regarding the cyber threat and digital vulnerability of the United States.

2.1. America's Indo-Pacific strategy

These concerns were reflected in successive Indo-Pacific strategies, its national security strategy, NATO's strategic concept, AUKUS, the Quad, as well as in its bilateral and trilateral security agreements with the Indo-Pacific countries.

⁵ Pence, M. (2018). *Vice President Mike Pence's Remarks on the Administration's Policy Towards China* [online]. Hudson Institute. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.hudson.org/events/-vice-president-mike-pence-s-remarks-on-the-administration-s-policy-towards-china102018>

The 2022 *Indo-Pacific Strategy* recognises that “American interests can only be advanced if we firmly anchor the United States in the Indo-Pacific and strengthen the region itself, alongside our closest allies and partners”. The document avoids a confrontational approach with China and recognises the need to collaborate in areas of common benefit, such as climate change and nuclear non-proliferation.

The action plan includes, among others, leading an *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)*; strengthening deterrence against China’s aggression towards the US and its allies, including in the Taiwan Strait⁶; boosting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); supporting India’s continued rise and regional leadership; operationalising the Quad; and expanding cooperation between the US, Japan and South Korea. The proposal includes several highly specific tools: the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, the Maritime Security Initiative and the AUKUS alliance. Within this framework, and during the Biden Administration, the following measures have been taken:

- Progress in the negotiations of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) 2022. The IPEF is a project launched by Biden that may be an alternative to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiated by Barack Obama and subsequently rejected by Trump. Fourteen countries from the Indo-Pacific region are members along with the USA. Its goal is to foster sustainable and inclusive economic growth and promote the resilience of production chains. Critics have however questioned its lack of content and concrete measures.
- The announcement of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) during the G20 summit in Delhi. The MoU was signed by Saudi Arabia, the European Union, India, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), France, Germany, Italy and the United States. This physical and digital infrastructure project will connect the UAE with Israel via Saudi Arabia and Jordan. IMEC emerges as a US counterweight to China’s *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) and its growing diplomatic influence in the region, and is tied in with the US goal of stabilising the Middle

⁶ Regarding Taiwan, President Biden stated on several occasions that the US will defend the territorial integrity of the island if Beijing invades, but simultaneously stated that Washington respects what it has agreed with China, i.e. it has maintained its traditional policy towards Taiwan of “strategic ambiguity”.

East and maintaining the momentum of the Abraham Accords between Israel and Arab countries⁷.

- Holding the special US-ASEAN summit.
- Deepening trilateral cooperation between the United States, Japan and the Republic of Korea with the Trilateral Leaders Summit at Camp David in August 2023.
- Launching the Quad *Investors Network* to boost co-investment in critical technologies, and the *Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness* (IPMDA).
- Launching the Partners in the Blue Pacific (2022) initiative with Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the UK to provide support to economic and security priorities among Pacific island nations.
- Conducting the first joint US-EU naval exercise off the coast of Oman.
- Strengthening trilateral cooperation with Japan and the Philippines.
- Upgrading bilateral relations with Vietnam and Indonesia to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership.
- For the first time in 2022, NATO's Madrid summit hosted the heads of state and government of Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand. In its 2022 Strategic Concept, NATO declared that its partners will work together "to address the systemic challenges posed by the PRC to Euro-Atlantic security".
- The Minerals Security Partnership (MSP)⁸, aimed at strengthening the supply chains of critical minerals to ensure resilient production chains. Although this is not strictly an Indo-Pacific project, the main US partners in the region are a part of it.

⁷ Rizzi, A. (2024). The infinite connection: How to make the India-Middle East-Europe economic corridor happen [online]. *ECFR*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-infinite-connection-how-to-make-the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-happen/>

⁸ MSP is an initiative to strengthen the supply chains of critical minerals and ensure that critical minerals are produced, processed and recycled in accordance with environmental, social and corporate governance standards. The MSP consists of 14 countries and the EU: Australia, Canada, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Norway, South Korea, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union.

- AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom and United States), the trilateral military cooperation pact formalised in September 2021.

On the economic front, the Biden Administration has advanced the policy of tariffs and limiting China's dependence on Trump, a process that oscillates between *-risking*, *friendshoring* and decoupling. However, it is not yet clear what level of decoupling will be sought, nor the principles that underpin the measures.

In August 2024, the Chip Act to improve the semiconductor industry and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) were passed. The *friendshoring* has extended the embargo beyond the United States. The Netherlands and Japan have signed agreements to restrict the export of semiconductor manufacturing machinery to China. This technological decoupling is widening. In September last year, the House of Representatives passed the Biosecure Act, legislation aimed at strategically decoupling from China in the area of biotechnology. In recent weeks, there has been debate about whether to ban certain apps such as Tiktok, and in September last year, the Biden Administration proposed a rule banning the sale of Chinese cars in the US and their import through third party channels such as Mexico or Hungary.

To sum up, in recent years, we have witnessed steady progress in the implementation of US policies towards the Indo-Pacific region, an effort clearly documented in various official publications. Both Democrats and Republicans agree on the importance of countering certain aspects of China's involvement in the global economy. However, this strategy is not without significant risks, including the potential for higher prices and their impact on inflation, the complexity of decoupling Chinese technologies from critical sectors of the US economy, and the disruptive effect on a system as interdependent as the globalised economy.

Donald Trump's recent election victory marks the beginning of a new phase in a global situation fraught with uncertainty. On one hand, there is a broad bipartisan consensus which anticipates a policy of continuity and deepening of the Indo-Pacific strategy conceived of as an ambitious effort at regional integration with projected global impact⁹. However, Trump represents a break with Democrat ways and diplomacy, which raises serious

⁹ Borreguero, E. (2024). Asia, a la espera de Trump 2.0 [online]. *El País*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://elpais.com/opinion/12-02/asia-a-la-espera-de-trump-20.html>

questions. During his first term, the president implemented a policy of pressuring key allies such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan by demanding significant increases in their defence budgets. His return may entail similar or even harsher policies. However, as Secretary of State Marco Rubio pointed out in a recent article in *Nikkei Asia*, the United States is not in a position to confront Beijing's ambitions on its own, and will need to strengthen and preserve relations with its allies through cooperation in order to balance the balance of power in the region.

The presidential cabinet decisions reflect a clear redirection towards a more confrontational stance with China. Key figures such as National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth - all of whom are recognised "hawks" on China issues and staunch supporters of India - augur a hardening of the rivalry with Beijing in India's favour. Trump has repeatedly threatened to use tariffs as a weapon of pressure and negotiation, but given his contradictory and unpredictable nature, it is difficult to predict any scenarios.

In any case, the success of the US strategy will depend on its ability to navigate the complexities of an interconnected global economy, balance Trump's *America First* protectionism with strengthening coalitions, and managing the risks inherent in an increasingly polarised foreign policy.

3. China, the Indo-Pacific with Chinese characteristics

For Chinese analysts and leaders,¹⁰ the Indo-Pacific concept shifts the strategic value of the Asia-Pacific towards the Indian Ocean, a shift that in turn benefits India's privileged location. They also recognise that given the central role of the Indian Ocean in shipping routes, India and China will intensify their strategic competition. In general, they view the liberal democracies' plans for the "Indo-Pacific" as intended to boost US power and contain China's expansion. Consequently, the Indo-Pacific vision was rejected by Beijing, whose foreign minister Wang Yi said in 2018 that the idea would eventually disappear "like foam on the sea".

¹⁰ Elliot, S. J. (2024). Chinese Perspectives on the "Indo-Pacific" as a Geostrategic Construct [online]. *National Bureau of Asian Research*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/chinese-perspectives-on-the-indo-pacific-as-a-geostrategic-construct/>

However, Beijing has had its own Indo-Pacific strategy for more than a decade: the Maritime Silk Road for the 21st century, which is part of the Belt and Road Initiative launched by Xi Jinping in 2013 to boost trade and connectivity between Asia, Europe and Africa.

3.1. Xi Jinping's Indo-Pacific Strategy

According to its official website,¹¹ the Maritime Silk Road encompasses a vision of two connected oceans linking "ASEAN, South Asia, West Asia, North Africa, and Europe, and a strategic partnership for the South China Sea and the Pacific and Indian oceans. It consists of three "blue economic passages", including the "China-India Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Sea" passage. As Australian analyst Rory Medcalf¹² puts it, the BRI is the "Indo-Pacific with Chinese characteristics". The project has become one of the pillars of Beijing's international relations alongside Made in China 2025 and the Global China Initiative. Institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank are also associated with it.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a strategy designed to address the priorities and goals of the CCP. On the trade side, it mitigates the "Malacca dilemma"¹³ and protects export sea lanes, and grants control over critical facilities such as ports. Politically, the BRI facilitates the expansion of Chinese influence by creating a "community of friends".

Many of the BRI's objectives have been achieved. In the Indo-Pacific region, China has developed deep-water naval power, the world's largest naval force¹⁴, and has established a military presence in Djibouti, close to bases held by France, the United States and Japan. It has also formed a constellation of ports which it controls, wholly or partially, through the acquisition of

¹¹ See: Belt and Road Portal, available at: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/project>

¹² Medcalf, R. (2019). The Indo-Pacific with Chinese characteristics [online]. *Politique Étrangère*, 3, pp. 49-61. Available at: <https://shs.cairn.info/journal-politique-etrangere-2019-3-page-49?lang=en>

¹³ Over-reliance on the Malacca Strait for transporting oil and gas imports and, in general, for the movement of goods to Europe and Africa.

¹⁴ Palmer, A., Carroll, H. and Velázquez, N. (2024). *Unpacking China's Naval Buildup* [online]. Center for Strategic and International Studies. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/unpacking-chinas-naval-buildup>

shareholdings¹⁵. Investments in ports along the Maritime Silk Road give China anchorage at points of great geostrategic value, such as the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, just 400 kilometres from India, the port of Gwadar in Pakistan, close to the Strait of Hormuz, and the aforementioned naval base in Djibouti, located at the entry point of the Suez Canal. Other key port facilities include facilities in Myanmar, Cambodia, Brunei, Thailand and Tanzania.

However, the proximity of these sites to the borders of countries such as India raises concerns. There are fears that they serve a dual purpose, i.e. used for both commercial and military purposes in a given scenario.

The Belt and Road Initiative exemplifies the distinguishing element of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) power-building strategy: commercial diplomacy. The hegemonic presence of the US as the military power which is signatory to the largest number of defence treaties limited Beijing's ability to compete with Washington in this area. As political scientist Oriana Skylar Mastro argues, the US "kept all the good allies"¹⁶ (China has only signed a mutual defence agreement with North Korea). The CCP therefore sought unexplored alternatives and found a window of opportunity in economic agreements and comprehensive strategic partnerships. The Belt and Road Initiative has channelled the CCP's aims and enhanced Beijing's economic security. Today, China is the world's largest export economy, the world's largest global creditor and the biggest trading partner of over 120 countries. It dominates maritime trade in terms of volume, shipbuilding activity, and port creation and ownership worldwide¹⁷. Over the past decade, China has become an important partner of as well as providing assistance and loans to Pacific island nations, most notably the Solomon Islands, with which it signed a security pact in 2022, much to the concern of the US and Australia.

¹⁵ Zongyuan Z. (2024). *Tracking China's Control of Overseas Ports* [online]. Council on Foreign Relations. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/tracker/china-overseas-ports>

¹⁶ Rachman, G. (2024). China's great power strategy [online]. *Financial Times*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/bcc32b19-2eac-434a-af2c-82f58903eead?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹⁷ Runde, F. D., Hardman, A. and Bonin, C. (2024). Responding to China's Growing Influence in Ports of the Global South [online]. *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/responding-chinas-growing-influence-ports-global-south>

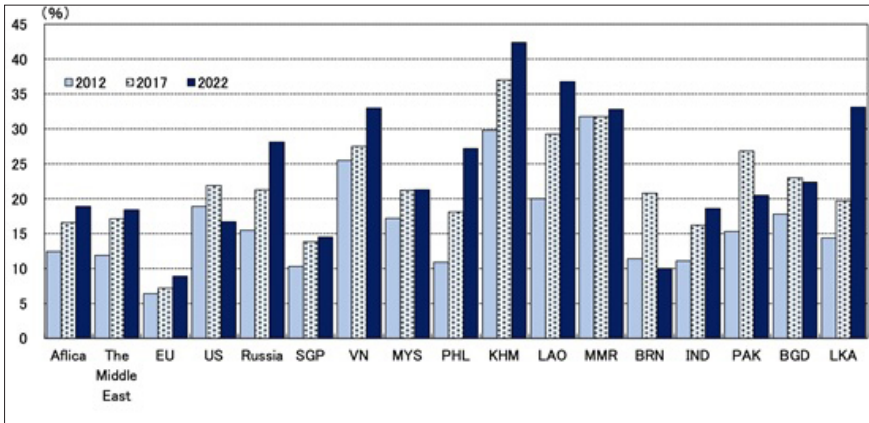


Figure 1. Evolution of China's share of its total imports. Source: Japan Center. for Economic Research

The expansion of the BRI has extended beyond the initial official boundaries to Latin America and the Caribbean, where twenty-two countries have signed up to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Although the scope of the BRI has been slowed down by the pandemic and the slowdown in the Chinese economy, the opening of the Chancay mega-port in Peru in 2024 demonstrates the ongoing nature of the project. In light of Xi Jinping's speech at the third BRI forum, analysed by the *Merics think tank*, it can be concluded that in the future the initiative will be aimed at green energy and telecommunications equipment¹⁸, and will expand into the countries of the so-called global South, free from the restrictions imposed by the markets of the US and its allies.

The BRI responds to Xi's vision of "China's dream of national rejuvenation" (2013), a narrative that places special emphasis on progress in science, technology and innovation, with the digital Silk Road as the technological dimension. For the techno-nationalism embodied in Xi's vision, innovation is a priority to ensure national security and global economic and political leadership¹⁹. According to the findings of expert Tai Ming Cheung, the development of critical

¹⁸ Banachc. and Gunter, J. (2023). How the BRI is shaping global trade and what to expect from the initiative in its second decade [online]. *MERICs*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://merics.org/en/tracker/how-bri-shaping-global-trade-and-what-expect-initiative-its-second-decade>

¹⁹ Atkinson, R. D. (2024). China Is Rapidly Becoming a Leading Innovator in Advanced Industries [online]. *ITIF*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://itif.org/publications/2024/09/16/china-is-rapidly-becoming-a-leading-innovator-in-advanced-industries/>

technologies has a specific impact on the region that interests us²⁰. In his book *Innovate to Dominate*, the author stresses that China's technological security state pursues a comprehensive merger of civilian and national security. China is currently transitioning towards a model of indigenous innovation in order to become a self-sufficient, world-leading innovation powerhouse, a goal it will achieve throughout the 2020s and early 2030s according to official plans - especially, the Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) 2030 programme and the Medium- and Long-term Science and Technology Development Plan (MTP) 2021-2035. Finally, he points to the shift from a defensive realist approach focused on economic development and with a low international profile to an offensive one that maximises zero-sum security in the Asia-Pacific region and in new technological domains such as cyber and outer space. This is in line with the sharp increase in military investment and the national security strategy.

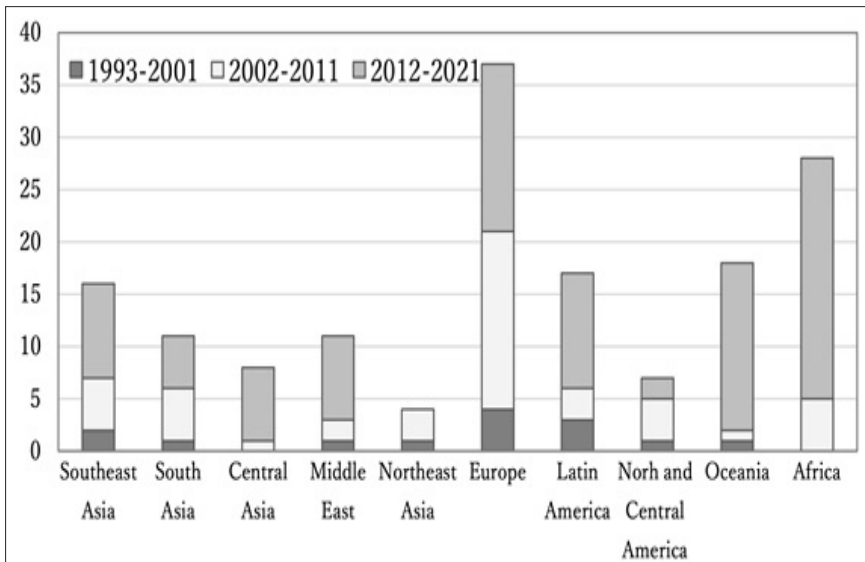


Figure 2. Evolution of the number of completed and upgraded partnerships in China. Source: Japan Center for Economic Research

The CCP's strategy of turning the country into a global economic power serves the principle of preserving social stability, a priority objective of the white paper *China's National Defence in*

²⁰ Cheung, T. M. (2022). *Innovate to Dominate: The Rise of the Chinese Techno-Security State*. Cornell University Press.

*the New Era*²¹. This stability depends on sustained economic growth, which in turn provides the CCP with the legitimacy required to govern without domestic shocks. The slowdown in the Chinese economy over the last two years, together with other factors such as demographic decline, creates a scenario of risk and uncertainty.

In 2024, despite the economic downturn, the defence budget increased to 1665 billion yuan (\$236 billion), a nominal increase of more than 7% in the 30th consecutive year of increases. Although as a proportion of GDP (1.27%), the Chinese budget is lower than the global average of 1.8% and NATO's traditional target of 2%, it is still significantly higher than that of the rest of the individual Asian countries, which together spent an estimated US\$298 billion²².

Along with social stability, the white paper emphasises the preservation of China's national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and maritime and international rights as pillars of national security. The paper points to the US as responsible for intensifying competition between the major powers. While acknowledging the existence of maritime and territorial disputes, it avoids specifics, stating only that "the South China Sea islands and the Diaoyu Islands are inalienable parts of China's territory". It also reaffirms China's right to exercise sovereignty over these areas by building infrastructure and deploying defensive capabilities in both the South and East Seas. With regard to Taiwan, it maintains that what it seeks is peaceful reunification, although it makes clear that it "does not renounce the use of force" and reserves the option to take "all necessary measures".

It will be worth paying attention to these aspects in 2025, especially since, in recent years, Beijing has sought to legitimise its maritime sovereignty claims through a policy of expansion. In 2023 and 2024, there has been a marked increase in hostility from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the waters of the "first

²¹ See: https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html

²² McGerty, F. (2024). Asian defence spending grows, China's grows more [online]. *IJSS*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2024/05/asian-defence-spending-grows-chinas-grows-more/>

island chain"²³, the group of islands off the coast of East Asia stretching from the Japanese archipelago through Taiwan and the Philippines to the Malay archipelago, which China considers its first line of defence.

PLA air and naval forces have increased the frequency and intensity of military operations around Taiwan, justified in response to what it sees as provocations by the island and the US. In 2024, a few days after the election of President Lai Ching-te, whom Beijing describes as a "dangerous separatist", the Chinese armed forces conducted the "Joint Sword 2024A" military exercise as a punishment. According to the Australian *think tank*, The Jamestown Foundation²⁴, this exercise was conducted in nine locations and represents a significant escalation to include offshore islands for the first time. It also demonstrates the PRC's continued use of "gray zone" tactics, coercive actions that remain below the threshold of armed conflict but permit the escalation and de-escalation of military operations without triggering a full-scale conflict. The second part of the "Joint Sword 2024B" military exercises took place in October. Taiwan, for its part, has increased its defence budget and raised its military capabilities.

Tensions between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea have hardened with the escalation of violent clashes in the Second Thomas Shoal, which lies within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and over which China has no rights, as ruled by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. Last year, the Philippines adopted a new strategy of publicising the clashes by broadcasting videos of attacks by the Chinese Coast Guard and inviting international journalists aboard its ships. The Defence Secretary of the Philippines, Gilbert Teodoro, said China has become an "existential threat" in the South China Sea.

The election of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. as president in 2022 marked a turning point in relations between China and the Philippines.

²³ Sharp, A. (2024). China's 3-pronged maritime threat rattles Japan, Philippines and Taiwan [online]. *Nikkei Asia*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/China-s-3-pronged-maritime-threat-rattles-Japan-Philippines-and-Taiwan>

²⁴ Yu, C. C. (2024). Joint Sword-2024A: Blockades and Gray Zone Tactics [online]. *China brief volume*, 24(15). [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/joint-sword-2024a-blockades-and-gray-zone-tactics/>

Marcos Jr. has distanced himself from his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte's moves towards a friendly rapprochement with Beijing and has strengthened ties with the US and its allies to develop a joint regional security architecture. In 2023, the Government of the Philippines announced that it was extending the *Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement* (EDCA) that provides the US with access to Philippine military facilities at four new bases. It also signed a classified military intelligence sharing agreement, the *General Security of Military Information Agreement* (GSOMIA). Other collaborative defence measures have included the Philippines' participation in mini-lateral summits and exercises, such as the first Japan-Philippines-US summit in 2024 or the first Australia-Japan-Philippines-Republic of Korea-US Defence Ministers' Meeting in November.

China in turn has introduced new regulations in June that give its Coast Guard broad authority to use force against foreign actors for "trespassing" in the South China Sea territories claimed by it, including the EEZs of other countries, among them, the Philippines²⁵.

In short, a dynamic cycle of mutually feeding forces has developed in recent years: on one hand, Washington has tightened alliances with its Asian partners and, on the other, Beijing has flexed its muscles and attempted to unilaterally change the *status quo* in disputed territories and waters, prompting affected countries such as India, Australia, Japan, the Philippines and South Korea (also Taiwan) to increase their defence budgets, forge new coalitions, and build closer relations with the US. This dynamic will continue throughout 2025.

Another aspect to be taken into account will be the influence of the Chinese economy on Beijing's external movements. For Medcalf, China's assertiveness is explained more as a weakness than proof of its strength. Beijing, on the brink of a perfect storm of domestic difficulties (slowing economy, frustrated aspirations of its population, inequality, environmental problems, demographic aging), is trying to secure a series of global gains while it can. Other hypotheses raise the possibility that, in the face of domestic turbulence, the CCP may be reinforcing nationalist and confrontational positions towards other countries or Taiwan,

²⁵ Legarda, H. *et al.* (2024). China Security and Risk Tracker [online]. MERICS. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://merics.org/en/tracker/merics-china-security-and-risk-tracker-022024>

or, on the contrary, avoiding diverting resources and attention to external conflicts that would lead to unnecessary attrition in order to deal with the domestic crisis. In any case, given the build-up of tensions and the intensification of military activity in the “first island chain”, there is a real risk that the situation could accidentally escalate, with the possibility of involving the US and other powers.

4. India, between dependence and autonomy

India enjoys a privileged geostrategic position in the Indo-Pacific that of a continental wedge embedded in the Indian Ocean from where it connects with the Arabian Sea to the west and the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea to the east. On the other hand, the Indian islands of Andaman, Nicobar and Lakshadweep provide a projection of power that extends beyond the subcontinent. Today, 95% of India’s international trade by volume and more than 70% by value flows through these waters. However, the major influence exerted by the Indian Ocean over India is not a new phenomenon, as the Indian historian and diplomat K. M. Panikkar recalls. In his words : “a true appreciation of India’s historical strengths will prove beyond doubt that whoever controls the Indian Ocean has India at their mercy²⁶”, which would indicate India’s renewed interest in its maritime environment.

Consequently, the Indo-Pacific acquired a new relevance in Indian geopolitics after Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014.

4.1. Narendra Modi’s Indo-Pacific Strategy

The priorities of Narendra Modi’s government for India may be summarised in three areas: positioning the country as a global power in line with its economic and demographic weight, responding to the rise of China, and preserving strategic autonomy. Officially, India has no allies -the government has never used the term- which allows it to pursue a multi-lateral foreign policy, as well as maintain good relations with countries that are antagonistic to each other, such as Israel

²⁶ Purushothaman, U. (2024). India’s interests and strategies in the Indo-Pacific. In: C, A. J., & Lobo, J. S. (Eds.). (2024). *The new world politics of the Indo-Pacific: Perceptions, policies and interests*. Taylor & Francis Group.

and Iran or Russia and the US. This has not prevented it from signing agreements aimed at a policy of rapprochement with partner countries and institutions, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the US through the Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region (2015), the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement (2008).

Along these three lines, the Indo-Pacific plays a decisive role in projecting India's foreign policy, which, as foreign minister S. Jaishankar points out, deploys a strategy in concentric circles from the national maritime infrastructure to the maritime space beyond India's waters and its immediate island neighbourhood²⁷. In line with these objectives, in 2015, the Indian Navy developed a Maritime Strategy and undertook an expansion of the "maritime focus areas" to the entire western and south-western Pacific Ocean²⁸. In 2019, the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs created a new Indo-Pacific division, and the defence budget allocation for the Navy has been increased from 14% in 2021-2022 to 20% in 2023-2024²⁹. An incremental effort for a country that, as Uday Bhaskar³⁰, director of the Society for Policy Studies, says, is second only to China in the region and is projected to be a maritime power, a goal that is still aspirational.

Along with the aforementioned maritime goals, the Indo-Pacific represents an arena of competition with a rising China perceived by Delhi as a regional hegemon. Suspicion of Beijing has only increased with its close proximity to India through the Belt and Road Initiative, which includes the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and military and trade facilities at the ports of Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Chittagong in Bangladesh. The so-called "pearl necklace" which circles India.

India's Indo-Pacific strategies have been reinforced in recent years through the country's participation in the Quad³¹,

²⁷ Jaishankar, S. (2022). *The India Way*. Harpers Collins, p. 186.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ According to the European Parliamentary Research Service.

³⁰ Bhaskar, U. (2025). Atmanirbhar at sea [online]. *The India Way*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/atmanirbhar-at-sea-9783372/>

³¹ Saran, S. and Pant, H. V. (2024). *Two Decades of the Quad: Diplomacy and Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* [online]. ORF. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/two-decades-of-the-quad-diplomacy-and-cooperation-in-the-indo-pacific>

conducting joint maritime exercises, and the *Act East Policy*, the policy of connectivity between India's Northeastern region and Southeast Asia.

The Quad Forum provides a matrix of bilateral and mini-lateral relations. Having remained in a state of hibernation since its creation in 2007, it held its first summit of heads of state in 2021, at the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. India and the US moved closer together to include real-time intelligence sharing and build military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific. In 2022, they launched the Critical and Emerging Technologies Initiative, aimed at fostering cooperation in the defence industry, manufacturing jet engines in India, and creating alternative semiconductor supply chains to China.

New Delhi has advanced its maritime geopolitical objectives via naval diplomacy with the Indian Navy's visits to the Indo-Pacific region increasing in number and scope, a tool it uses both to cement maritime partnerships and to indirectly send deterrent messages to Beijing. If between 2011 and 2021, the Indian Navy visited 72 foreign countries, between 2023 and 2024, it visited over 50 foreign ports³². In 2023, it participated in a joint exercise with seven ASEAN naval forces in the South China Sea, followed by a joint statement with the Philippines calling on China to respect international law in its territorial claims.

Apart from this, India has conducted its first naval exercise with the European Union in 2023 in the Gulf of Guinea, with ships from Italy, France and Spain. These operations are of minor importance, but nevertheless have a symbolic value that should not be underestimated. The same applies to the *Maritime Partnership Exercise* (MPX) conducted in September 2023 between the Indian Navy Ship (INS) Sumedha and the Spanish Navy Ship (ESPS) *Meteoro*, and the Indian Navy frigate INS *Tabar* with the Spanish Navy patrol vessel *Atalaya*, both in the Mediterranean Sea.

4.2. Rivalry with China

Disagreements between India and China are an issue that is often left out of the media spotlight. Even the CCP's public stance tends

³² Deshpande, S. (2024). Increased deployment, joint exercises, foreign training & faster aid - Indian Navy's growing footprint [online]. *The Print*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://theprint.in/defence/indian-navys-growing-footprint-foreign-deployment-training-allied-personnel-backyard-aid/2154505/>

to relativise the importance of the neighbouring country, with an attitude of disdain. This is not surprising, as it is a well-known fact that the CCP cannot afford to ignore the relevance of India, the only country in the region that can counterbalance its power and challenge its hegemony, especially considering that, as R. Kaplan argues, “while China seeks to expand its influence vertically, i.e. reaching southwards to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, India seeks to expand its influence horizontally, reaching eastwards and westwards to the borders of Victorian-era British India, parallel to the Indian Ocean”; that is, their respective ambitions intersect and are destined to meet head-on. India, for its part, recognises the exceptional nature of the problem with its neighbouring power, as reflected in the latest words of India’s foreign minister, Jaishankar: “India has a *special problem with China* that goes above and beyond the world’s *general China problem*”³³. At present, the Indian Army is the only one engaged in hand-to-hand combat with Chinese soldiers, resulting in casualties of wounded and killed soldiers.

4.3. Territorial disputes

India, much like the US and the EU, maintains a dual relationship with Beijing for national security and economic growth needs that are compartmentalised, though increasingly less so.

Ever since China and India fought a one-sided war in the Karakoram range in 1962 that cost India vast tracts of land, border disputes have continued. Although the two countries have never agreed on a formal demarcation, they are aware of the boundaries patrolled by their armies. Other disputes include China’s claim to India’s 90,000 km² of the north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, which Beijing calls “Southern Tibet”, as well as the dispute over the Doklam Plateau in Bhutan. On the other hand, China enjoys a significant strategic advantage over India in dominating the geopolitics of water, as the main rivers that supply northern India, the Brahmaputra and the Indus, originate in the glaciers of Tibet. This control over water resources gives Beijing considerable power over its neighbours, as demonstrated by New Delhi’s concern over

³³ Express News Service. (2024). India has a special China problem above the world’s general China problem: Jaishankar [online]. *The Indian Express*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/state-ties-china-calls-investments-from-scrutinised-jais-hankar-9543086/>

Beijing's decision to build the world's largest hydroelectric dam on the Tibetan course of the River Brahmaputra.

In recent years, there have been border clashes between the two armies in three stretches.

- In 2017, Chinese army engineers entered the Doklam plateau to build a highway. After coordinating with the Bhutanese authorities, Indian soldiers on the other side of the border intervened and halted the Chinese manoeuvres. This territory is of vital importance to India, as it lies in close proximity to the narrow Siliguri corridor, also known as the 'chicken's neck', a link connecting India's seven north-eastern states to the subcontinent.
- In May 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, thousands of border guards of the People's Liberation Army crossed the Line of Actual Control (LAC), which separates the two countries along the Karakoram range section of the border, into multiple areas on the Indian side in the Ladakh region, capturing territory along five separate points. When their armed forces attempted to check the PLA's advance, an unusually violent clash ensued, resulting in the deaths of twenty Indian and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers, the first combat-related deaths on the Sino-Indian border since 1975³⁴. In 2024, Beijing and New Delhi have engaged in a diplomatic dialogue to address the issue, but until India returns to the *status quo* as it was before April 2020 -which is difficult to foresee so far- there will be no return to normality. This was emphasised by the Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar in a statement: "the state of the border will determine the state of the relations".
- In December 2022, hundreds of PLA soldiers armed with spiked bats and other pre-modern weapons³⁵, attempted to dislodge an Indian Army post in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, resulting in a fierce clash that left 34 Indian soldiers injured.

In these cases, the PLA resorts to the tactic of "gray zones" and so-called "*salami slicing*", a policy of occupying territory by taking

³⁴ Shukla, A. (2024). Disengagement at the border [online]. *Business Standard*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://www.business-standard.com/opinion/columns/india-china-signal-progress-on-ladakh-dispute-but-key-questions-remain-124103101144_1.html

³⁵ Agreements between India and China to patrol the Line of Actual Control do not allow soldiers to carry firearms in order to prevent an escalation of violence.

small steps that gradually change the facts on the ground, which it has successfully applied in other territories such as the South China Sea, the East China Sea, in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands area and in Taiwan³⁶.

There is an additional apprehension: the modernisation of China's nuclear arsenal with the largest deployment in quantity and diversity of nuclear weapons to date, in line with the defence white paper's goal of enhancing the People's Liberation Army's competence in all domains of warfare - land, air, maritime, space, counter-space, electronic, cyberspace and nuclear³⁷.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reported that, in January 2024, China had an estimated arsenal of about 500 nuclear warheads³⁸, a number that the Pentagon has updated to 600 by December 2024. This figure, which SIPRI predicts will increase over the next ten years, is three times that of India -174 warheads - which is almost on a par with Pakistan with 170 warheads. Some projections also suggest that China could potentially deploy at least as many intercontinental ballistic missiles as Russia or the United States within that period, although its total stockpile of nuclear warheads is still smaller than that of either of those states.

India's nuclear strategy has traditionally focused on Pakistan, although it was China that pushed India to develop its own nuclear arsenal after the 1962 defeat and Beijing's detonation of its first atomic bomb in 1964. Similarly, "it was China, not Pakistan's military alliance with the US, as is often believed, that brought the Cold War to India's doorstep"³⁹, notes analyst Tanvi Madan. China and India subscribe to the principle of *no first use* (NFU) while Pakistan maintains a policy of "first use, but as a last resort".

³⁶ Krishnan, A. (2024). Shivshankar Menon and Ashok Kantha on the Border Agreement and the Future of the India-China Relationship [online]. *The India China Newsletter*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://indiachina.substack.com/p/shivshankar-menon-and-ashok-kantha>

³⁷ Pradhan, S. D. (2024). Growing nuclear arsenal of People's Republic of China: Implications for India [online]. *The Times of India*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/ChanakyaCode/growing-nuclear-arsenal-of-peoples-republic-of-china-implications-for-india/>

³⁸ Kristensen, H. M. and Korda, M. (2024). World nuclear forces. In: SIPRI Yearbook 2024. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/YB24%2007%20WNF.pdf>

³⁹ Madan, T. (2020). *Fateful Triangle. How China Shaped US-India relations during the Cold War*. Penguin Books.

The Observatory Research Foundation think tank notes that in Delhi⁴⁰, there is concern that China is preparing a more aggressive rearmament to compete with the US. In recent years, China's defence documents have omitted any reference to the NFU, and its nuclear modernisation is taking place not in limbo, but in circumstances that include North Korean nuclear proliferation, the war in Ukraine, Beijing's refusal to allow India to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and increased cross-border tensions. What is the purpose of this increase in nuclear capacity? Is it the annexation of Taiwan? Is it shape an international order in line with its national objectives involving the countries of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean?

The question leads Indian analysts to propose a review of its nuclear doctrine, the denial of the NFU to enemy nations, or even the formation of an AUKUS-like arrangement. This is the proposal of Ashley Tellis, author of *Striking Asymmetries. South Asia's new nuke symmetry*. For Tellis, China's nuclear superiority over India is so pronounced that India should sign a pact with the United States and France that is similar to AUKUS: INFRUS.

4.4. Rapprochement with democracies in Asia and the West

In the wake of the confrontations with China, India has decided to play a more active role and seek closer ties with the US and other democratic regimes in the West and in Asia. Of these is its relationship with Japan, India's most important partner in Asia. India has also strengthened its participation in the Quad and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

In his third term, Modi is taking a tougher stance towards Beijing, moving closer to areas that the CCP considers its own. In 2024, it asked Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te to collaborate on joint semiconductor manufacturing. The same year, India delivered BrahMos cruise missiles to the Philippines. India is also developing defence ties with Spain via the acquisition of 56 aircraft and an agreement between Airbus and Tata Advanced Systems that provides for the manufacture of sixteen aircraft in Spain, with the

⁴⁰ Mohan, P. (2023). China's Nuclear Ambitions, the Implications for India, and the Future of Global Disarmament [online]. *ORF*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-s-nuclear-ambitions-the-implications-for-india-and-the-future-of-global-disarmament>

remainder in India. This move inaugurates its first privately run military aircraft factory, which in the long term will also reduce its dependence on Russian imports.

4.5. Economic security

India's economic relations with China are conditioned by two major factors: India is the largest recipient of grants from the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the trade balance between the two countries has evolved towards a growing asymmetry in favour of Beijing, with a trade deficit of over \$85 billion⁴¹. Moreover, most of the goods imported from China are capital goods and raw materials used by the Indian industry to manufacture finished products for export. This dependence affects two key sectors of the Indian economy: the pharmaceutical industry and the electronics and telecommunications sector, which are key to the transformation towards a digital society. Aware of the vulnerability imposed by Chinese investments, the Indian government took steps to curb them in the aftermath of the pandemic. However, following the 2024 elections, the number of influential voices calling for opening the doors to Chinese investment, which included the Ministry of Finance, have increased.

To sum up, in its interactions with China, India finds itself trapped in a dilemma where it has to choose between ensuring economic growth and addressing threats to its territorial sovereignty. In 2025, the government must consider whether it can balance these conflicting trends, whether it will go for *derisking* or move in the direction of *decoupling*.

There is one major factor to consider in this dilemma. As witnessed, the Indian economy is benefiting to a great extent from the US strategy of diversifying away from China. Since the pandemic, there has been a growing increase in foreign direct investment in India. Analysts Harsh Pant and Kalpit Mankikar⁴² argue

⁴¹ T. P. (2024). India has highest trade deficit with China, but gap narrowing: Goyal [online]. *The Economic Times*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-has-highest-trade-deficit-with-china-but-gap-narrowing-goyal/articleshow/112041552.cms>

⁴² Pant, H. V. and Mankikar, K. A. (2024). The Fatal Flaw in India's China Strategy: Economic Dependence Will Make New Delhi Forever Vulnerable to Beijing [online]. *Foreign Affairs*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/fatal-flaw-indias-china-strategy>

that if India expands the scope of the bilateral relationship with China, it could undermine the idea of the country as a bulwark against Beijing's expansionism and jeopardise proposals which include India in the creation of alternative supply chains.

At the same time, given that tensions along the Sino-Indian border have increased and that the two countries are developing infrastructure along strategically valuable stretches of the border in order to support better troop deployment, this dynamic is likely to continue.

5. Japan, moving forward along Abe's path

Until the 1990s, Japan's foreign policy was characterised by low-profile diplomacy and heavy reliance on the US security umbrella. This approach changed with the rise of China following its accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001. At the time, Japan was in a period of economic stagnation and the effects of China's economic growth on its regional influence were beginning to be felt.

Shinzo Abe arose as a central figure in Japan's new strategic vision⁴³. The prime minister adopted an approach to international relations which he defined as "proactive diplomacy", focused on upholding democratic values and the rule of law. This "proactive" character contrasted with the previous "passive pacifism" that appeared to have proven ineffective vis-à-vis Beijing. His strategy included strengthening Japan's defensive capabilities in response to China's ascent, and deepening alliances with countries that shared its values and strategic goals, such as the US and India⁴⁴. This vision was embodied in the Quad and the new Indo-Pacific concept promoted by Abe. It also reinterpreted Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution by expanding the definition of self-defence to include collective defence, which allows Japan to collaborate militarily with other countries outside its territory. Within this framework, Japan has boosted relations

⁴³ Kiglics, B. (2021). Japan's Asia-Pacific Diplomacy in the Twenty-First Century: Empty Rhetoric or a New Paradigm? In: Patman, R. G., Köllner, P and Kiglics, B. (eds.). (2021). *From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: Diplomacy in a Contested Region*. Springer Singapore.

⁴⁴ Japan is under the US security umbrella because the "U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty signed in 1951 ensures U.S. protection to Japan in the event of an attack, enabling Japan to concentrate on its economic growth while depending on U.S. military support".

with India, Australia and South Korea, by means of agreements such as the Japan-India Special Strategic and Global Partnership and the Memorandum of Defence Cooperation with Australia, as well as trilateral alliances with the US.

5.1. Strategies and key documents in Kishida's government

Following the assassination of Abe, the Fumio Kishida government approved the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defence Strategy (NDS) and the Defence Buildup Programme. These documents highlight the alliance with the US as the cornerstone of national defence and regional stability. They also reflect a more realistic approach in considering the possibility of Japan facing direct military aggression⁴⁵.

These texts recognise Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a violation of international norms and warn of potential similar acts in East Asia. They also criticise China's activities in the South China Sea, its strategic alliance with Russia and its incursions into the Senkaku Islands.

In this regard, 2024 was marked by an unprecedented series of incidents in Japan's air and maritime spaces⁴⁶. In August, a Chinese Y-9 military intelligence aircraft penetrated the Japanese air defence identification zone. In September, the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning, accompanied by two destroyers, appeared off Okinawa and entered the area adjacent to Japan's territorial waters. In November, 27 Russian and Chinese military aircraft conducted joint flights near Japan and, in December, a Russian submarine was detected sailing between the Yonaguni and Iriomote islands.

5.2. Economic relations and disputes with China

Japan's relationship with China is characterised by a dual bond of economic interdependence and strategic rivalry that has intensified in recent years. While their respective economies are

⁴⁵ Tsuneo, W. (2023). What's New in Japan's Three Strategic Documents? [online]. *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/whats-new-japans-three-strategic-documents>

⁴⁶ Nikkei (2024). Infographic: How Chinese and Russians intrude into Japan's territory [online]. *Nikkei*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/Infographic-How-Chinese-and-Russians-intrude-into-Japan-s-territory>

integrated through trade and investment -China is Japan's largest trading partner, with Chinese direct investment reaching more than ¥1 trillion in 2022, an increase of 4.4% over 2021⁴⁷- they also compete for sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. In addition, China has unilaterally developed the Shirakaba gas field in disputed areas and has established an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) covering the disputed islands which overlaps with Japan's ADIZ in the region⁴⁸.

5.3. Japan's strategic actions

In 2024, Japan has boosted its security by means of the following initiatives:

- Strengthening the alliance with the US, including rapprochement with South Korea.
- Alignment with US technology restrictions by limiting the export of 22 types of semiconductor production equipment.
- High-level bilateral meetings, such as the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (CSC) ("2+2") from January 2023⁴⁹.

These measures consolidate Japan's position as a key strategic actor in Asia in response to growing geopolitical pressure from China and Russia.

6. The two Koreas

Since the 2019 failure of Washington's diplomatic attempt to eliminate North Korea's nuclear programme, relations between the two Koreas have rapidly spiralled downwards. Cooperation agreements have ground to a halt as Pyongyang attempts to re-establish a dynamic of force that is met by defensive measures from Seoul.

In 2022, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) adopted a nuclear offensive doctrine that included the threat to

⁴⁷ Divya, A. (2024). China-Japan Relations at a Crossroads Amid Strategic Challenges[online]. *The Diplomat*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/china-japan-relations-at-a-crossroads-amid-strategic-challenges/>

⁴⁸ Kiglics, B. *Op. cit.*

⁴⁹ See: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3265559/joint-statement-of-the-2023-usjapan-security-consultative-committee-22/>

use nuclear weapons pre-emptively if the regime's survival was threatened. While it is questionable whether Pyongyang will follow through on its warnings given the military asymmetry with the US, these declarations -and following ones- have raised tensions to alarming levels. In January 2024, Kim Jong-un abandoned the official goal of reunification and proposed declaring South Korea a "major enemy" of the DPRK, opening up the possibility of "incorporating" the Republic of Korea by force. In October of the same year, Kim declared that he might use nuclear weapons against South Korea and the US, accusing both nations of escalating tensions with their military cooperation. The same month, Pyongyang inaugurated a plant to produce weapons-grade uranium.

In parallel, DPRK-Russia cooperation has been upgraded to a "comprehensive strategic partnership" under the agreement signed in June 2024, raising concerns about a potential transfer of Russian nuclear technology in exchange for North Korean weapons. Thousands of North Korean soldiers joined Russia in the war in Ukraine, cementing the military partnership. Beijing, annoyed by the rapprochement, organised a trilateral summit with South Korea and Japan in May 2024. However, given North Korea's close dependence on Beijing, analysts such as Lee Hee-ok and Sungmin Cho have argued that Pyongyang's bullying tactics could be a means of getting China's attention in order to secure its support. This option is not without risk. If cornered, the North Korean regime could generate an external crisis by attacking South Korea, forcing China to intervene.

6.1. South Korea

In recent years, South Korea's military strategy has evolved towards a more offensive stance. Its 2022 defence white paper defines North Korea as an enemy and justifies this change by the need to maximise deterrent capability in the face of Pyongyang's escalating nuclear provocations. This strategy includes pre-emptive strike capabilities and immediate retaliation.

In 2023, the new defence minister, Shin Won-sik, summed up this stance with the acronym "PISU" (*Punish Immediately, Strongly, and Until the End*). Seoul has also strengthened its alliances with countries that share democratic values and reject authoritarian policies, such as the US, Japan, Australia and India. This is why the failed self-coup of President Yoon Suk-Yol was so

extraordinary, and why there is a growing trend in democracies of increasing cults of personality among leaders⁵⁰.

6.2. Japan-South Korea rapprochement

Trilateral collaborations and recent developments:

- Economic and technological security. In 2024, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington signed the *Trilateral Economic Security Partnership*, focusing on semiconductor supply chains, clean energy and cybersecurity. They are also collaborating on advanced technology, artificial intelligence and critical minerals to diversify away from their dependence on China.
- Military security. In July 2024, the three countries signed the *Memorandum of Cooperation of the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework* (TSCF) institutionalising their defence commitment. They have also worked on radar clustering to share real-time data on North Korean missile activities.
- Institutional relations. Since 2024, security, economic and technology dialogues have been held, such as the third trilateral economic security dialogue in Busan, South Korea. These partnerships reflect a growing strategic convergence to counter the influence of China, North Korea and Russia in the region. Despite progress, there are challenges that still persist trilateral relations:
 - Historical tensions. The dispute between South Korea and Japan over war crimes during World War II remains an unresolved sore point.
 - The fall of the ruling People Power Party after Yoon's failed self-coup in 2024 and the victory of the Democratic Party, critical of Yoon's foreign policy, may affect trilateral cooperation.

7. Conclusion

The United States, under President Joe Biden, has materialised its strategy of a free and open Indo-Pacific by integrating its

⁵⁰ Borreguero, E. (2024). Corea del Sur, un autogolpe fallido [online]. *El País*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://elpais.com/opinion/2024-12-07/corea-del-sur-un-autogolpe-fallido.html>

traditional allies as well as new partners, establishing collaborative networks, and building a strategic convergence that has been joined by Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and India to a greater or lesser degree, under the shared perception of the Chinese threat.

The US strategy has boosted security ties with AUKUS, the Quad, bilateral agreements with the Philippines and Japan, and trilateral approaches, but it also introduces the economic variable with programmes such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, which aims to be an alternative to the challenge of a double bind with China. In other words, the separation of the security and economic spheres of the old “Kissinger order” is being reversed, the four spheres of power are being reintegrated and securitised, and progress is being made towards a selective decoupling-bifurcation that is still uncertain.

China, for its part, has continued to expand the maritime branch of the Silk Road which, according to data from the State Council of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), has reached 117 ports in 43 countries⁵¹ and has consolidated its dominance in overseas ports, especially in the global south. Much like the US, it is broadening its foreign policy focus to other domains, in this case beyond economic and energy concerns into politics and security, with a marked increase in military capabilities in all areas of warfare, as well as pursuing an offensive foreign policy in support of its maritime claims.

The Indo-Pacific is thus being consolidated as a strategic space of regional competition. From a broader perspective, it takes on a global dimension by linking up with the India-Middle East-Europe economic corridor. This corridor, designed to boost connectivity between Asia, Europe and the Gulf, has the potential to reshape trade and energy routes by establishing a direct counterweight to the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative. In this context, along with the Abraham Accords, the US, India and the EU emerge as a key tool for altering power balances in Eurasia, strengthening relations between Israel and the Gulf states, while weakening the alliances of China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran.

⁵¹ China Daily. (2023). The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future [online]. *China Daily*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202310/11/WS6525de2ba31090682a5e7d01.html>

Similarly, if one takes into account the impact of open conflicts such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza and the disputes in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, where Beijing seeks to consolidate its strategic control over essential maritime routes, one can appreciate how both conflicts and strategic projects are part of a broader struggle for global hegemony, where the dominance of the *rimland* -according to Nicholas Spykman's concept- becomes fundamental. Control of these peripheral regions not only determines the power projection of the major powers, but also redefines the dynamics of influence within the international system.

Chapter Six

The Middle East: facing reconfiguration projects in 2025

Haizam Amirah Fernández, Rosa Meneses

Abstract

The Middle East is witnessing a new cycle of change, reconstitution and realignment amidst major conflicts that have crossed some of the existing red lines. For the first time, Iran and Israel have attacked each other from within their own territories. Israel's offensive on Gaza and Lebanon has decimated the Hamas and Hezbollah leaderships. The collapse of the Assad dictatorship in Syria opens a momentous phase with ramifications throughout the region. The combination of these events has further weakened Iran and led to the decline of the so-called Axis of Resistance. Donald Trump's return to the White House will profoundly affect the Middle East, which is undergoing a reshuffling of regional power balances. The new president is likely to maintain strong US support for the Israeli government's policies, but his transactional approach portends further shake-ups on the regional chessboard.

Keywords

Middle East, Gaza, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Iran, Syria, United States, Donald Trump, Abraham Accords, Hamas, Hezbollah

1. Introduction

Amidst the process of conflict and regional reconfiguration in the Middle East since October 2023, a thesis has emerged that a new regional order dominated by Israel can only mean moving the region towards a more stable, peaceful and sustainable socio-political reality. However, Israel's ability to force change through brute military force, the crumbling of the self-styled 'axis of resistance' following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and the severe blows dealt to Hamas and Hezbollah cannot be identified with a promise of a 'new Middle East' where conflict has been banished, the Palestinian question defused, and the dynamics of power balances definitively shifted.

Donald Trump's return to the US presidency and regional dynamics since the Hamas attack on Israel on 7th October 2023 point to an unfavourable, interventionist and highly disruptive scenario. However, the Republican president faces a Middle East that is markedly different from the one he encountered during his previous term in office. The main unknown is how Tehran will react to the collapse of its strategic alliance with the "axis of resistance". The regime's own survival is more at stake than at any time since the rise of the Islamic Republic in 1979. The fall of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, once Tehran's main Arab ally, opens the door to a political earthquake that will be felt across the region and beyond. While Syria and Lebanon are redressing their power balances outside Iranian influence, the Arab states of the Gulf continue to make progress in their internal cohesion, at the same time restructuring their dynamics of disaffection with the West and rapprochement with the global South, accentuated by the Gaza war.

2. The Middle East in 2024, a year of blown up red lines

The Hamas attack of 7th October 2023 on Israel unleashed an unprecedented military response against Gaza that lasted all of 2024. The war has set off a shockwave of regional consequences, some of which will be revealed in early-2025 while others will have long-term impacts. One by one, the conflict has destabilised regional power balances and exploded important red lines. Moreover, it has made clear to the international community that the problem of Palestine is still alive and that the normalisation agreements between Israel and some

Arab states, forged by Donald Trump's first administration and further promoted by his successor, Joe Biden (Álvarez-Ossorio, 2024), have not solved the Palestinian issue or prevented a new clash of wars.

2.1. Gaza-Israel and the uncertainty of a ceasefire

On the eve of the inauguration of Trump's second presidency on 20th January 2025, mediators succeeded in getting Hamas and Israel to agree to a ceasefire. Fifteen months of failed negotiations with only a fragile and brief humanitarian ceasefire appeared to be behind us¹. It was precisely this *interregnum* between the outgoing and incoming administrations that made it easier to put pressure on the parties -especially Israel, the most reluctant- to reach the deal. Donald Trump claimed it as a diplomatic victory right at the start of his new term, but his pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was undoubtedly key in the face of outgoing President Joe Biden's acquiescence. The Democrat not only gave political support to Netanyahu's bid for a ruthless and merciless war, but was also his main arms supplier. Under Biden, ceasefire negotiations had become a smokescreen that allowed Israel to continue its military campaign while the US vetoed a UN Security Council resolution imposing a ceasefire on up to four occasions.

The major challenge was to quickly change the ceasefire into a permanent agreement and to address the consequences of the war. The most obvious are the unprecedented levels of death and destruction caused by the Israeli army's bombardment of the Gaza Strip. According to the official count, more than 47,000 Gazans were killed in the conflict by the end of February 2025 - two-thirds of them women and children - but there may be up to 40% more according to a study in *The Lancet* (Jamaludine *et al.*, 2025). The number of wounded and maimed exceeds 111,000; Gaza already holds the sad record for the highest number of amputated children in the world according to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)² and almost the

¹ There was a temporary truce at the end of November 2023 that lasted only seven days, during which 105 hostages were released by Hamas and 240 Palestinian prisoners by Israel. Despite attempts to prolong it, hostilities resumed on 1st December.

² See: UNRWA, *Informe actualizado de la situación en Gaza*. 9 December 2024. Available at: <https://unrwa.es/actualidad/noticias/informe-actualizado-de-la-situacion-en-gaza-2>.

entire population (before the war, some 2.2 million people) has been forcibly displaced from their homes. All along, Israel has prevented essential aid from entering the territory, in violation of the Geneva Convention, resulting in a humanitarian catastrophe in which famine and disease have ravaged the Palestinian civilian population. Additionally, Israeli attacks have destroyed more than 90% of houses, vital infrastructure, hospitals and educational facilities in Gaza, and have razed entire towns. The Israeli army attacked schools and facilities, killing at least 272 workers and leaving more than 450 buildings destroyed.

Israel's actions have also been aimed at eroding UNRWA as an institution. For years, Netanyahu has been attacking its key role in aiding the population with a view to dismantling it in order to end the issue of the right of return of refugees who were driven from their homes. Gaza has witnessed another episode of this harassment. The army attacked its schools and facilities, leaving more than 450 buildings destroyed, and accused the agency of "employing Hamas terrorists"³. Although Israel did not present conclusive evidence to back up its allegations, sixteen UN member states withdrew funding to the agency, while others imposed conditions for handing it over, effectively suspending some \$450 million in funds. On 28th October 2024, the Israeli Parliament passed legislation to prohibit UNRWA from operating directly or indirectly in Israel and Palestine.

This is the context in which the ceasefire came into force on 19th January 2025, the first glimmer of hope in fifteen months. However, the difficulties in reaching the agreement were evident from the outset, as its acceptance by Israel triggered a government crisis,

³ The UN Secretary-General and UNRWA commissioned an independent report by a working group led by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, which investigated the allegations and published its findings on 20th April 2024. According to the document, the Israeli authorities "have provided no evidence to substantiate their claims that a significant number of UNRWA employees are members of terrorist organisations". The report concluded that, in the absence of a political solution to the conflict, UNRWA remains "key" to ensuring vital assistance and essential social services, especially with regard to health-care and education, to Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The working group made recommendations to strengthen the agency's governance and reform prevention strategies and oversight of its employees. The full 54-page report is available at https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/unrwa_independent_review_on_neutrality.pdf

while there was patent distrust on the Palestinian side. Moreover, simply maintaining the ceasefire meant ongoing negotiations for its consolidation and bridging the considerable gaps between the visions and interests of Israel, the US and Palestine within a different context than that of 2024, with the Trump administration already in control of the process.

In any case, this plan did not extend beyond a temporary solution to the conflict unleashed on 7-O. It did not address further negotiation of a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian issue, nor did it mention a two-state solution. The planned phase of reconstruction of Gaza clashed from the outset with Israel's plans for the north of the Palestinian Strip: according to information provided by the Israeli authorities themselves, the intention is that it shall never be the same again. Although the Israeli army denied implementing what has been termed the "generals' plan", a proposal by former national security adviser Giora Eiland aimed at the military depopulation of the area, senior Israeli officials did admit that one of the aims of the offensive was to create a "security zone" (Srivastava *et al.*, 2025) which puts more distance between Israeli communities and the Palestinian population in Gaza.

The war has left Hamas severely decimated. Its military structure and political leadership have been disbanded, especially after the death of Yahya Sinwar at the hands of Israeli soldiers on 17th October 2024. Sinwar was Israel's number one target, as it considered him to be the mastermind of the 7-O attacks. Just a month and half earlier, following the assassination of Ismael Haniyah, he had risen from leading Hamas in Gaza to become the head of the Islamist organisation's political bureau. Whatever happens, it is clear that Hamas will not rule the Strip again. The biggest challenge after the war ends will be to search for an alternative political leadership, one that must overcome the difficulty of a process to rebuild the West Bank and Gaza's social fabric, regardless of what control Israel intends to exert. Failure to adequately address this phase can lead to a dangerous vacuum. With the Palestinian National Authority lacking internal credibility and ignored at home and abroad as an institution, the Palestinian leadership is experiencing a moment of unprecedented crisis.

2.2. The other fronts of the war: Iran, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen

Since the day following 7-O, the war fronts have multiplied for Israel and important red lines have been crossed. Armed groups

recruited by Iran for its so-called “axis of resistance” soon allied themselves with Hamas and elevated the conflict to the level of a *multi-front* war. On the Israel-Lebanon border, the Shi’ite militia Hezbollah launched a series of missile and drone strikes against Israeli territory, although it appeared to be a strategy of limited intensity. The Israeli army responded with extensive shelling.

Meanwhile, in the Red Sea, the Ansar Allah militia (the Houthi rebels) opened another front. Its attacks and boarding attempts against cargo ships bound for Israeli ports succeeded in jeopardising world maritime trade through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait - a corridor that is part of the main east-west route and responsible for a quarter of the world’s seaborne trade. The Houthis posed a direct threat to Israel from day one by launching ballistic missiles at cities such as Eilat (2,000 kilometres away) and Jaffa. Although these attacks were easily intercepted by the Iron Dome system and US and British maritime defence deployments in the Red Sea, they added a large and unexpected source of regional tension. 2024 ended with a wave of Israeli strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen and Netanyahu’s threat of a full-scale offensive against their strongholds. On a smaller scale, but not without impact, pro-Iranian militias in Iraq attacked US military targets in the country. However, the conflict on this front was limited to low-intensity levels throughout 2024 and by early 2025 appeared to be defused.

This war has also been waged in the capitals of Syria and Iran, bringing to light for the first time the direct confrontation between Israel and the Islamic Republic, hitherto concealed in a “proxy war”. Israel’s attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on 1st April 2024 broke several red lines that had been respected until then, elevating the risk of direct conflict between the two countries. The bombing killed General Mohamad Reza Zahedi, the former leader of the Quds Force in Syria and Lebanon, and at least six other senior commanders of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard. This was the first red line crossed between the two enemies.

Iran responded on 13th April by launching hundreds of missiles and drones against Israel, in the first direct attack in the history of the confrontation between the two nations. Another important red line was thus crossed. It was, as the Iranian leadership later declared, “an exercise of maximum restraint”, as the Iranian military establishment gave advance warning of the attack and 99% of the drones and missiles missed their target -Israeli military bases and intelligence facilities involved in the bombing of its

diplomatic headquarters in Damascus- as they were intercepted by allied defences (mostly in Jordanian skies) before they reached Israeli airspace. The Iranian response was indeed calculated, calibrated and limited, but there was a paradigm shift in its interpretation: Iran had chosen to respond without hiding behind the "forward defence" of its territory through its *proxies*, at the same time preferring not to engage in outright war. It was therefore a change in strategic doctrine: Iran was abandoning the "strategic patience" through which it had relied on allied militias to indirectly confront Israel and its regional rivals for decades, in favour of what it called a direct deterrence doctrine of "multi-layered defence" (Meneses, 2024b). A response that sought to establish a new form of deterrence in the region but which subsequent events relegated to a mere attempt.

For months there were fears of an Israeli counter-strike that would unleash a spiral of attacks and ultimately, a direct war. That too arrived, but in the form of a different coup, on 31st July 2024: a "targeted attack" in the middle of Tehran to kill Hamas's top political leader, Ismael Haniyah. Israel had hunted big game, testing Iran's doctrine of deterrence while humiliating its new authorities: Haniyah had attended the inauguration of the new president, Masoud Pezeshkian, the day before. After heightening its rhetoric of retaliation, Iran let the situation in its direct battlefield cool down between negotiations for a ceasefire in Gaza and intensified bombing in the Palestinian Strip and Lebanon. Its agony had begun.

In September, increased war activity on these two fronts led to a weakening of Hamas and Hezbollah's leadership, which lost their top leaders -Yahya Sinwar and Hasan Nasrallah, respectively- in Israeli strikes within days of each other. This, in turn, weakened Iran in a snowball effect that has increased after the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on 8th December 2024. With the Syrian dictator ousted and a new Sunni-style regime in the making that is closer to Turkey, Iran has not only lost its biggest ally in the region, but has been left out of the equation in the "multi-front" war against Israel. The "axis of resistance" has cracked.

This crack started to become visible in late September 2024 with the Israeli attacks that targeted thousands of pagers and walkie-talkies used by Hezbollah members. The devices were rigged with explosives before arriving in Lebanon and were detonated simultaneously in two separate operations, injuring thousands of people and killing at least 39. This breached the Shia militia's line

of communication and further weakened its chain of command. This was followed by the assassination of the commander of the Radwan Force, Hezbollah's elite unit, Ibrahim Akil.

The bombardment of residential neighbourhoods in southern Beirut -where the "party of God" has one of its stronghold - increased and, on 27th September, an air strike destroyed what Israel identified as its headquarters during a meeting of its leadership. Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah and several senior commanders were killed. With the Lebanese militia headless and in chaos, Israel invaded southern Lebanon on 1st October in the first ground incursion since the war in 2006. The risk of repeating Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon (Parkinson, 2023) and the mobilisation of international diplomacy to prevent the northern front from spinning out of control led to the signing of a ceasefire agreement in principle between Israel and Hezbollah on 26th November. This fragile truce has been subject to numerous violations by both sides.

The fighting in southern Lebanon has been the biggest challenge facing the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), the peacekeeping mission patrolling the Blue Line since 1978, and was reinforced by Security Council Resolution 1701 in the aftermath of the 2006 war. Its troops have suffered several attacks by Israeli forces, which has fuelled a debate over the blue helmets' withdrawal or the reinforcement of their capabilities and rules of engagement (Meneses, 2024a). UNIFIL's role in southern Lebanon has proven to be key to controlling tensions on the border. From 2006 until 7-O, UNIFIL has maintained the *status quo*, despite the fact that the terms of Resolution 1701 providing for the withdrawal of Hezbollah's militia to the Litani River line and the deployment of the Lebanese army have not been implemented.

Despite its failures, UNIFIL remains the best card in the international community's hand to stabilise the Lebanese-Israeli border. With over 11,000 blue helmets from 46 countries, it is one of the longest-running and largest UN missions. It is also one of Spain's foreign policy and peacekeeping missions, as it has one of the largest contingents (some 650 Spanish military personnel are involved) and, since 2022, Spanish General Aroldo Lázaro has been the commanding officer. Events over the past year and a half have demonstrated that peace in southern Lebanon and northern Israel depends on the effective implementation of the UNIFIL mandate and Resolution 1701,

which is more necessary than ever. In this sense, Spain can play an important role given the capital acquired from its experience in this UN mission.

3. The “new Middle East” once again

When observing and analysing developments over the past year in the region, some analysts have sought to see the imposition of an “Israeli vision” (Yadlin and Golov, 2024) wherein Israel is using its power to reshape the Middle East. However, neither the elimination of Hamas’s military capabilities and the decapitation of Hezbollah’s leadership which have left the Iranian regime isolated, nor the fall of dictator al-Assad, suggest -as this theoretical framework advocates- that the situation may lead to a political scenario that would materialise Israel’s “successes” on the battlefield. There is no guarantee that this may be the “opportunity” to de-escalate the conflict and reach stable agreements to build a reality in line with Israel’s vision of a “new Middle East”, and even less so should it be via the imposing of a *Pax Israeli* that puts the interests of the ultra-conservative government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu ahead of a just and lasting peace for the region.

3.1. Precedents for the use of the term “the New Middle East”

Over the past decades, the concept of the “new Middle East” has been evoked on numerous occasions when major regional changes have taken place. On each occasion, the concept has had different meanings depending on those responsible for using it, the geopolitical context, and the agenda that was sought to be promoted. In general, allusions to a “new Middle East” have been made to mark transformational moments in the region’s history, often associated with optimistic visions of peace, democracy and prosperity. This followed the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israelis and Palestinians in 1993, when Israeli leader Shimon Peres promoted the idea of a regional peace based on economic integration and shared prosperity. There was also talk of a “new Middle East” after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq in 2003, and after the war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006. In both cases, the term alluded to the triumph of a US-led agenda to reshape the region through democratisation and the weakening of authoritarian regimes and armed non-state actors.

The “new Middle East” appeared again in 2011 in the wake of the anti-authoritarian uprisings, also known as the Arab Spring, implying that a new era characterised by a transition to democratic systems based on good governance and respect for human rights was dawning in several Arab countries. During the current decade, there was renewed talk of a “new Middle East” at the end of US President Donald Trump’s first term in 2020, with the signing of the so-called Abraham Accords between Israel and four Arab countries (United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan), believing that these normalisation agreements would bring regional stability through economic and technological cooperation, setting aside the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and reducing Iran’s regional influence.

The balance sheet is not positive. There are too many “new Middle Easts” and yet the region to continue to suffer from armed conflicts, geopolitical rivalry, human suffering, socio-economic hardships and lack of freedom and good governance. Neither did the Oslo Accords bring the long-awaited and much-needed peaceful coexistence among the peoples of the Middle East, nor did the war to change the regime in Iraq trigger a domino effect of new democracies. The Arab Spring also failed to replace autocratic regimes with pluralistic and representative political systems. Nor have the Israeli-Arab normalisation deals promoted by both Donald Trump and Joe Biden successfully addressed the root causes of widespread regional instability. Although geopolitics is not governed by the same laws of physics, all too often the promoters of partisan projects for the transformation of the Middle East according to the desires and interests of each forget that all actions are accompanied by reactions. In the case of geopolitics, if the forces applied by some parties seek to produce exclusionary outcomes, there are likely to be other parties that are simultaneously exerting force in the opposite direction.

4. Middle East in 2025: unknowns amidst regional and global shocks

began with a sense of hope within the Middle East, something that people within the region have not been used to for a long time. Firstly, the exile of Syrian despot Bashar al-Assad shortly before the turn of the year was greeted with massive displays of joy and jubilation among broad sectors of Syrian society, as well as among

the Syrian diaspora exiled by the war. Despite the scant resources and the enormous difficulties in rebuilding the nation, the sense of liberation and hopes for a change for the better are real.

Secondly, Lebanon started the year with a new phase in its modern history thanks to the election of a new president, General Joseph Aoun, with a broad consensus after two and a half years of paralysis and political deadlock. Almost immediately, the prestigious judge Nawaf Salam, who until then had been the president of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, was appointed prime minister. Both developments reflect the new dynamics of reactivation of Lebanese institutions as a result of new internal and regional power balances. The sense of hope was reinforced by the entry into force of the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas on the eve of Donald Trump's return to the US presidency, after 470 days of ruthless human and physical destruction accompanied by near-total impunity.

4.1. The "axis of resistance": decimated, but not finished

The evolution of the Middle East in 2025 and beyond will be marked by interconnected dynamics that have become more complex and unpredictable over the course of 2024. One of the most salient realities is that Iran faces a regional context in which its position has been significantly altered. This is due to the weakening of the so-called "axis of resistance" as a result of the heavy blows received from Israel, as well as the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. In a matter of a few months, the "advanced defence" strategy by which Iran sought to project its influence and establish a network of allies and militant groups in the region to keep conflicts away from its borders and strengthen its geopolitical position has been severely compromised, taking with it much of Tehran's decades of massive investment.

One of the biggest unknowns is the strategic choice that the Iranian regime will make in response to its new regional situation, against the backdrop of an unfavourable international context with the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency. Four options may be envisaged for such a strategic choice: 1) attempting to rebuild a smaller 'axis of resistance', perhaps with a greater role for the Houthi militia in Yemen and other related ones in Iraq; 2) engaging directly in actions to destabilise other Middle Eastern and Gulf states to divert attention and relieve some of the pressure it expects to receive from the US; 3) adopting a

more isolationist approach focused on strengthening its home front and defensive capabilities, including the possible pursuit of non-conventional means of deterrence by accelerating its military nuclear programme; and 4) assuming a conciliatory attitude towards the new Trump administration in order to seek a compromise for a new “nuclear deal” that would guarantee the continuity of the regime in exchange for Iran abandoning its aspirations to regional hegemony.

None of these four options will be easy for the Iranian leadership to accept, and all of them will have an external or internal cost for the regime, especially when the changeover of the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran may be on its way, given the advanced age of the current supreme leader, Ali Khamenei (86 years old). Whatever foreign policy Iran pursues and whatever methods it chooses to project its power, it is not an isolated country, as demonstrated by the signing of a new Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty between Russia and Iran in January 2025, which includes cooperation in multiple areas such as defence, security, economy, trade and energy. This is in addition to the fact that Iran joined the BRICS group in 2024, which has allowed it to mitigate some of its international isolation and diversify its diplomatic and economic relations.

On the Lebanese side, the Hezbollah militia also faces the dilemma of how to respond to the severe blows struck in 2024 by Israel, which eliminated its leadership, seriously undermined its military capacity, and conducted highly successful intelligence operations against its members. Despite all of the above, Hezbollah has not been annihilated as a resistance movement and retains many of the ingredients necessary to rebuild, albeit on a smaller scale and with less support. If there is one thing that characterises groups such as Hezbollah, it is their ability to adapt and their resilience after suffering major setbacks, as was the case in the 2006 war against Israel. As long as the Israeli army occupies territory in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah will be able to portray itself to sections of the Lebanese population as a legitimate movement resisting the occupation. It also remains to be seen how the new Hezbollah leadership will recalibrate its approaches to regional politics (especially after the disappearance of the arms supply route offered by the Assad regime) and Lebanese domestic politics (with the election of a new president of the republic and a prime minister who are not part of any alliance favourable to the Hezbollah).

4.2. Syria after al-Assad: daunting challenges and cautious hopes

The unexpected and rapid fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in December 2024 is a momentous event that is changing the Middle East. The country faces daunting challenges, after fourteen years of devastation due to war and over half a century of ruthless dictatorship. The immediate priorities are to maintain security conditions inside the country and to lay the foundations for economic and social recovery. The interim authorities have done well to maintain the country's governmental structures from the outset, as well as to integrate various militias into the new national army. They have also embarked on intense diplomatic activity abroad, showing a clear willingness to integrate constructively into the international system.

For the new Syria to become a stable country and rise from the ashes of war and dictatorship, the interim authorities are required to exercise state control over the entire territory and to improve basic public services provided to its citizens. They must also create the conditions for the gradual and orderly return of the millions of refugees and IDPs (about 60% of the total population), for the launch of an inclusive national dialogue leading to the adoption of a new constitution for all Syrians, as well as the holding of pluralistic and inclusive elections within a reasonable period of time.

An urgent challenge facing Syria is the recovery of its devastated economy. Syria's gross domestic product (GDP) shrunk by more than 76% between 2011 and 2023 due to the impact of the war, forced displacement of people, the collapse of key production sectors (such as agriculture and oil), the destruction of infrastructure, and international sanctions. Bashar al-Assad fled the country leaving 90% of the population below the poverty line. For its part, the Syrian pound has lost more than 99% of its value against the dollar since 2011. International cooperation is vital to help Syria emerge from this dire situation, create security conditions, rehabilitate state institutions, rebuild the country's infrastructure, and help people and communities rebuild their lives.

The recovery and reconstruction of the Syrian economy will be decisive for the success or failure of the transitional phase that has opened up in the country. Social peace and economic opportunities available to the population will depend on this. In turn, this will condition the return of internally displaced persons

(around 8 million) and of refugees (around 5 million), or at least a significant part of them. Early technical and financial assistance from international donors is a priority. To this end, it is urgent that international sanctions imposed against the Assad regime be lifted now that it has collapsed. Maintaining them amounts to collective punishment of the Syrian population at a time when what is most required is for the people to heal their wounds and rebuild their country. The European Union (EU) has a crucial role to play in lifting sanctions and providing technical and financial assistance, both on humanitarian grounds and to enable the return of refugees. Failure to do so will lead to the EU being displaced by other neighbouring countries, further diminishing the EU's relevance in its Mediterranean neighbourhood.

4.3. Trump's return to a changed Middle East

Donald Trump's return to the US presidency will have a major impact on the Middle East. There is no certainty about what policies the unpredictable 47th US president will pursue and what the consequences will be. However, his track record during his first presidency (2017-2021), his statements during the election campaign, the profiles of his advisors and envoys to the region, as well as the first decisions taken on the very first day of his return to office indicates that he will adopt an interventionist approach and shake up the regional scene to implement his *America First* agenda. However, the Middle East inherited by Trump from the Biden Administration is very different from the one Trump left behind at the beginning of 2021.

The past four years have witnessed tectonic shifts in the region and many red lines have been crossed: Iran and Israel have attacked each other from their own territories, Israel has dealt heavy military blows to Hamas and Hezbollah, and the Syrian Assad regime, once Iran's most important ally in the Arab world, has collapsed. However, the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar) are also more united than in 2017 and have diversified their foreign relations, especially by strengthening ties with Asian powers (mainly China) and reacting lukewarmly to the war between Russia and Ukraine. The Arab states of the Gulf are also on better terms with neighbouring Iran than they were four years ago (Naar, 2025). Moreover, Trump will find that the image of the US among the vast majority of the

populations of the Middle East has seriously deteriorated due to its perceived complicity in the war crimes and genocide held by many to have been committed in Gaza.

All indications are that Trump will maintain the highly strong US support for the Israeli government's policies, as in the past. This includes defending it in cases against Israel and its leaders at the International Court of Justice (for possible genocide) and at the International Criminal Court (for possible war crimes and crimes against humanity). However, Trump has shown that he can be unpredictable and disruptive. As far as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is concerned, it cannot be ruled out that he will present himself as a businessman looking to cut deals. While President Joe Biden had a strongly ideological approach (he declared himself to be a Zionist on multiple occasions), Trump may be expected to be transactional and listen to other voices in the region to reach great bargains, something that was not the case with Biden. Within a context of profound transformations in Middle Eastern geopolitics, Trump's reappearance on the scene anticipates further shake-ups on the regional chessboard.

His first term in office culminated in the signing of the so-called Abraham Accords, whereby the aforesaid four Arab states normalised relations with the State of Israel in exchange for diplomatic, economic, technological and military quid pro quos. This was a departure from the agreement between the Arab states that full relations would only be established with Israel when the two-state solution materialised, as enshrined in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. The Abraham Accords were based on the premise that the Palestinian issue was no longer central to regional agendas and could be settled on Israel's terms once it had normalised relations with the major Arab countries. This sequence of events was disrupted on 7th October 2023 with Hamas' attack on Israel and the spread of the conflict to other parts of the Middle East, with major consequences for the international system.

From the outset, Biden's foreign policy towards the Middle East revolved around a single issue: getting Saudi Arabia to join the so-called Abraham Accords. This failed to materialise during his tenure and many believe that the 7-O attacks were intended to derail normalisation between the country and Israel. Trump will certainly seek to claim credit for closing such a deal, should it happen. However, Saudi Arabia's current crown prince and strongman, Mohammad bin Salman, can hardly justify such an

agreement to Saudis, Arabs and Muslims unless it is accompanied by tangible progress towards self-determination for the Palestinian people. Saudi leaders have repeated that normalisation with Israel is out of the question as long as there is no clear horizon for the establishment of a Palestinian state. On the other hand, Riyadh has shown interest in reaching a security pact with the US in exchange for normalising relations with Israel. These elements of a potential transaction may lead to Trump offering an updated version of his so-called “deal of the century” in order to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on terms that are more favourable to the Saudis than those offered in his 2020 plan. The impact of the devastation in Gaza on public opinion and the danger of open regional war could lead Trump to force Israeli leaders to make more concessions than they would like in order to close the coveted deal. Some believe that Trump seeks to go down in history as the president who brought peace to the Middle East.

One of the big unknowns for 2025 is the new US administration’s policy towards Iran, both in terms of its nuclear programme and its regional influence and ambitions. There is every reason to believe that the second Trump administration will return to a policy of “maximum pressure” on Tehran, with tougher economic sanctions, efforts to isolate Iran internationally, and measures to weaken the regime in the eyes of Iran’s own population. Several Israeli leaders see the new US administration as an opportunity to launch a full-scale military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities. Benjamin Netanyahu has for years sought to drag the US into an open confrontation with Iran. The Biden administration resisted doing so, deeming the risks associated with such an attack too high, both for Iran’s neighbours and for the economy and the international system as a whole. In Tel Aviv and Washington, there are those who expect this to change under Trump. To back a military intervention, they argue that the weakened “axis of resistance” during 2024 makes Iran more vulnerable and fragile, and this presents an opportunity to attack it and destroy its nuclear and defence infrastructure. Iranian leaders have, in turn, challenged the US and Israel to see who is more fragile and vulnerable.

In the event of an armed conflict against Iran, the consequences may be devastating for the Middle East and the entire international system. Despite the setbacks of the past year, Tehran still retains significant military capability and has shown that, when

necessary, it does not hesitate in attacking its enemies from its own territory, invoking its right to self-defence, and to respond to previous attacks on its interests and national security. This was the case in April and October 2024, when Iran launched hundreds of drones, rockets and ballistic missiles against Israel and the Golan Heights. Rather than causing damage (the attacks were announced in advance), Tehran sought to restore its deterrence capability vis-à-vis Israel.

Should the Iranian regime perceive that it faces a vital threat, it may be expected to carry out military retaliation against US and Western interests, including military facilities in Gulf states. It could also block the entrance and exit of ships and tankers through the Strait of Hormuz, which is of crucial importance for the international energy market. If this were to happen, there would be serious consequences for the Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, derailing their ambitious economic and social development projects, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. The region still remembers how, during Trump's first term in office, in September 2019, several Saudi oil facilities were attacked -presumably by Iran- and how the US was neither able to prevent it nor give a firm response.

It remains to be seen whether "Trump 2.0" will seek to strike a deal with Iran's supreme leader in what could be the *Trumpian* version of the "nuclear deal" (known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) that Barack Obama signed in 2015 and from which Donald Trump withdrew in 2018. Iran's current president, Masoud Pezeshkian, has reiterated that his country is open to negotiations with the governments of the US and the five other countries that originally signed the nuclear deal a decade ago. The other alternative is for the current US president to be swayed by the more ideological and militaristic elements in his entourage, and for this to lead to armed conflict. Given such a high level of uncertainty and perceived dangers, it is also worth asking whether the Iranian regime will seek to build its own nuclear deterrence capability and whether 2025 could lead to a nuclear race in the Gulf and Middle East.

For their part, the GCC states face changing realities within and beyond their borders. Despite their long-standing rapport with Trump and members of his family, some differences may emerge on key issues such as Israel and Iran in the new phase. Differences over energy policies may also lead to frictions. While the new Administration is full of *hawks* on the

Iranian dossier and staunch defenders of Israeli positions, Arab leaders of Gulf states have long called for Washington to adopt more dialogue-based positions on Iran and tougher positions on the Netanyahu government in Israel. Several Arab leaders of Gulf states have publicly condemned “the continuing genocidal massacres committed by the Israeli occupying forces against the Palestinian people” in Gaza since October 2023, a view which is shared by the vast majority of their populations.

Regarding Iran, its Arab neighbours have called on Washington to open diplomatic channels with Tehran to avoid a regional conflict of incalculable dimensions. This new mood reflects the agreement reached in March 2023 between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran under the auspices of the Government of the People’s Republic of China, whereby the two formerly warring neighbours re-established diplomatic relations and contacts at the highest level. It should be recalled that, as part of their policy of diversifying alliances, both Iran and the United Arab Emirates were admitted to the BRICS group (which brings together the world’s main emerging economies) at the beginning of 2024, while Saudi Arabia has shown interest in doing the same in the future, although it has not yet taken the step.

5. Israel and Palestine: from the rubble of Gaza to the West Bank

The war has not stopped in Gaza. Since its inception and under its shadow, Jewish settler violence against Palestinians and land confiscation have increased in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. In 2024, Israel approved the building of new settlement housing⁴ and annexed more Palestinian land while establishing new outposts⁵. This has meant creating greater impediments to future

⁴ All Jewish settlements in the West Bank are illegal under international law. Israel opposes this statement.

⁵ The outposts, which are initially created by extremists without the authorisation of the Israeli government and later *legalised*, constitute the embryo of a settlement. In June 2024, two new outposts were established in the Ramallah district and in mid-2024, seven new outposts were established in the Bethlehem district, all in Area B (under Palestinian civilian control and Israeli military control as per the Oslo Accords), as documented by the UN, which noted that this has led to a substantial increase in settler aggression against neighbouring Palestinian communities. See: <https://>

Palestinian statehood just as international diplomacy was placing the two-state solution back on the table and when Palestinian voices were expressing initiatives to build a transformative entity of their own (Khalidi, 2024) in the face of the horrors of war.

Settler violence and harassment against Palestinians in the West Bank has multiplied under the protection and complicity, in many cases, of the Israeli army and thus, the Israeli government. According to the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem, settler attacks on Palestinian civilians have so far forced them to leave twenty West Bank villages⁶. According to the UN humanitarian agency, 2024 brought record numbers of forced displacement of Palestinians, destruction of homes and widespread violence throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem⁷. At the same time, Israeli forces have intensified the restrictions on and arrests of the Palestinian people in areas under their control, such as H2 in Hebron, where the installation of barriers has left residents without access to essential services and livelihoods. The army raided several Palestinian cities and shelled refugee camps such as Tulkarem and Jenin (where it launched a wide-ranging offensive in December that intensified after the Gaza ceasefire). Since the Gaza conflict began, the West Bank has experienced another shadow war whose death toll exceeded 800 by early 2025.

In the aftermath of 7-O, the climate of violence has become normalised in the Israeli political context. The far-right and Jewish supremacist parties, which have been part of Netanyahu's coalition government since December 2022, are the main cheerleaders of the war. The prime minister has relied on the support of extremist parties such as Jewish Power (led by Itamar Ben-Gvir) and the Religious Zionist Party (led by Bezalel Smotrich) to keep

www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/humanitarian-situation-update-256-west-bank

⁶ See: B'Tselem, Forcible transfer of isolated Palestinian communities and families in Area C under cover of Gaza fighting. Updated report as of 30 October 2024. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://www.btselem.org/settler_violence/20231019_forcible_transfer_of_isolated_communities_and_families_in_area_c_under_the_cover_of_gaza_fighting

⁷ It has tallied over 40,000 displaced persons (more than 20,000 in Jenin alone) as of mid-February. More than 1,750 homes have been demolished and there were more than 1,400 violent settler attacks by December. See: OCHA: *Humanitarian Situation Update #252 West Bank*. December 2024; *Humanitarian Situation Update #264 West Bank*. February 2025. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/humanitarian-situation-update-252-west-bank>; <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-264-west-bank>

him in power, despite mass demonstrations calling for his resignation over the massive security breach on 7-O. These parties do not recognise the two-state solution and advocate Israel's annexation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In Gaza, they also advocate annexing the Strip and reviving the settlements that were dismantled in 2005 under Ariel Sharon.

Both Smotrich and Ben-Gvir have promoted anti-Palestinian hatred from their seats in power and have declared themselves in favour of promoting "a solution for them to emigrate from the territory" to other countries and for Israel to occupy Gaza permanently once the war is over⁸. Ben-Gvir has supported recent calls by Jewish settler leaders for Israel to also annex the West Bank to expand its territory, ideas that gained further traction for them after Trump's election victory⁹ and the repealing of sanctions against radical settlers, once sworn into office. Netanyahu had already tried to annex all Jewish settlements in the West Bank in 2020, but Trump stopped him before he lost the election. With the Republican back in the White House and facing the rubble of Gaza -which at his inauguration he called "a great place", "by the sea" and where "beautiful things can be done"- these plans to annex settlements, control more territory, and "voluntarily" move all Palestinians from Gaza to other neighbouring Arab countries, such as Egypt or Jordan, to create "the Riviera of the Middle East" in the Gaza Strip, could end up destabilising the entire region, starting with the countries directly involved (Jordan and Egypt).

5.1. Internal dynamics in post-Netanyahu Israel

The war in Gaza and the regional conflict that Netanyahu has sustained since 7-O have had and will have consequences for Israel's domestic politics as well as its foreign relations. Disagreements between the various elements of the coalition government have

⁸ The Likud MP Danny Danon also declared himself in favour of provoking the "voluntary emigration" of Palestinians from Gaza. See: *Middle East Monitor*, 18 January 2024. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240118-israel-national-security-minister-ben-gvir-calls-for-full-occupation-of-gaza-emigration-of-palestinians/>

⁹ Cranston, J. (2024). Two settlement leaders, Ben-Gvir call to annex West Bank after Trump victory [online]. *The Times of Israel*, 6 November. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/two-settlement-leaders-ben-gvir-call-to-annex-west-bank-after-trump-victory/>

been evident since its formation, but the war in Gaza has not mitigated these internal conflicts. The government's tensions with extremist parties revolve mainly around the Gaza ceasefire. The early 2025 agreement triggered these tensions and caused Ben-Gvir and two other ministers from his party to leave the executive. These resignations damaged the alliance underpinning Netanyahu, but did not bring it down immediately. At that point, the pragmatism of other leaders who threatened to resign but made their political calculations and decided to stay in the hope that the truce would not come to fruition, won the day.

However, Netanyahu's time is running out. The biggest sources of dissent within his cabinet are regarding new conscription laws for men from the ultra-Orthodox community, who have been hitherto exempted from military service, and spending controls on the budget. For now, the war in Gaza and the other regional fronts and the as-yet-unpublicised post-war plans are holding the government together. However, once the prime minister can no longer wield the state of war to ensure his continuity in power, his political life will collapse. He will then be held accountable for the corruption cases pending before the Israeli judiciary, as well as for his failure to protect Israeli citizens on 7th October.

Post-Netanyahu Israel is a half-unknown. Polls point to a continuation of the far-right trend in Israeli society in the upcoming elections. Part of the current prime minister's legacy is his government's assault on the judiciary to demolish the last pillars that made Israeli society believe it lived under the rule of law.

Israel will also have to rebuild its damaged international image. Its violations of international humanitarian law and the Geneva Convention have led the International Criminal Court to issue arrest warrants for Benjamin Netanyahu and his defence minister, Yoav Gallant, for crimes against humanity and war crimes¹⁰. At the same time, Israel is being sued before the International Court of Justice for non-compliance with the obligations contained in the UN convention against the crime of genocide (Torrecuadrada, 2024). The case was brought by South Africa and was subsequently joined by, among others, Spain, Belgium and Ireland (Amirah Fernandez, 2024). It also sparked parallel lawsuits against arms sales to Israel by the UK and Germany on the grounds that they contribute to the genocide. Human rights

¹⁰ See: <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/icc-arrest-warrant-netanyahu-nov24/>

organisations such as Amnesty International backed up these allegations by conducting their own research to conclude that “Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinian population of Gaza”¹¹. These accusations have broken down another red line - that of its narrative that its military operations are always in self-defence - and have caused the country to lose some of its international political capital.

While countries such as the US and Germany have supported Israel unconditionally,, many others in Europe and the global South have questioned its behaviour and engaged in diplomatic confrontations. The Gaza war revitalised international diplomatic efforts towards a two-state solution (Amirah Fernández, 2023), with Spain and Belgium leading initiatives whose materialisation is as yet uncertain, but are on the table. Both joined forces and recognised the Palestinian state in an attempt to generate momentum to stop the war and hold an international peace conference. However, it was not until the change in the US administration that a minimal breakthrough in the form of a ceasefire was achieved. Circumstances in the Palestinian political arena predict a road not free of obstacles, with the Palestinian Authority in a state of internal decay and internationally ignored, and a shattered Gaza Strip that will have to wait years to rebuild its social fabric.

6. Conclusion

The Middle East chessboard will continue its reconfiguration process in 2025 and will be further shaken by the new Trump era. In his second term, the US president faces a very different scenario than the one he left in 2021. At that time, the Abraham Accords had created the illusion that the Palestinian issue was no longer central to regional agendas. 7-O dismantled this belief and put Palestine back on the table. All indications are that Trump will continue to apply unconditional US support for Israel, but his approach is likely to be transactional and he will listen to other voices, unlike Biden.

¹¹ Amnesty International. (2024). *“It’s as if we were subhuman beings”*. *Israel’s genocide against the Palestinian population of Gaza*. 5 December. See: <https://www.amnesty.org/es/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/>

The red lines that have been broken since 7-O exacerbate this scenario of major upheavals. In Gaza, the consequences of an unfinished war are still simmering. In Syria, following the unexpected fall of Bashar al-Assad, the immediate priorities must be to maintain security and lay the foundations for the country's economic recovery. Lifting sanctions is key to this process and the EU has a crucial role to play here. In Lebanon, stabilising the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel depends heavily on strengthening the UN peacekeeping mission (UNIFIL) and implementing Security Council Resolution 1701 once and for all. In this regard, Spain has a major opportunity to capitalise on its experience in UNIFIL to reinforce the mission.

The last piece of the puzzle is an Iran whose regional power has been eroded by major blows to its proxies in the "axis of resistance". However, this alliance is weakened but not finished and it remains to be seen how it fits into the new scenario. Within this context, there is reason to predict that Trump will return to a policy of "maximum pressure" towards Tehran, especially with regard to its nuclear programme. The Iranian regime, at one of its greatest crossroads since 1979, can choose to revolt, isolate itself, or adopt a more conciliatory attitude.

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Chapter Seven

Latin America: how to escape the trap of the Global South?

Juan Pablo Toro

Abstract

Latin America faces numerous internal challenges, from the expansion of organised crime to low economic growth rates. The political fragmentation reflected in the ineffectiveness of its regional institutions is also inauspicious. However, the hope that it will be able to distance itself for much longer from the current geopolitical competition is not the same as a positioning strategy. In this sense, it must avoid falling into the conceptual trap of the Global South and recognise that it is inextricably linked to the Global West, which is formed by the United States and Europe. It is there that democratic countries with open economies and cooperative security structures in the region are more likely to succeed.

Keywords

Latin America, Global South, Geopolitics, United States, China.

1. Introduction

In little more than two hundred years of its independent history, Latin America has been largely ignored by history, and has even become “relegable” at times, in the words of the former Chilean President, Ricardo Lagos¹. Whenever there has been a profound reordering of the international system, the nations of this part of the world observe the changes, accommodate to them as best as they can and, with difficulty, decide where they would like to fit within the new geometries of power being developed.

In an article published in early 2024, Ikenberry argued that the Russia-Ukraine war is acting as a watershed and pushing the planet back into geopolitics, where the debate over global institutions and rules identifies three groups of nations: the Global West, led by the United States and Europe; the Global East, led by China and Russia; and the Global South, an amorphous collection of non-Western and undeveloped nations². They would not be poles, like those of the Cold War, nor coherent blocs, but loose coalitions seeking to shape the current international system with agendas that may both coincide and collide.

Given that the first two groups are more consistent, being maritime democracies and territorial authoritarianisms in their own right, both would compete to attract members of the so-called Global South through incentives ranging from security assistance (US) to soft loans for infrastructure projects (China).

The so-called Global South would attempt to navigate this context, seeking to obtain the best of both worlds while staying out of the most direct clashes by invoking long-standing principles of neutrality and non-alignment. This has been possible so far, although there is no guarantee that this lack of engagement may be sustained over time as tensions between Beijing and Washington are set to escalate. If it is assumed that neither the Global West nor the Global East is able to shape a new international system on their own, then coalitions will become imperative, in which increased membership will always be optimal.

¹ Lagos, R., Castañeda, J., and Aguilar, H. (2022). *La nueva soledad de América Latina*. Santiago de Chile, Penguin Random House, p. 13.

² Ikenberry, J. J. (2024). Three Worlds: the West, East and South and the competition to shape global order. *International Affairs*, 100(1), pp. 121-138.

It is in the Global South that potential partners may be found, some of which have significant economic weight, significant populations, critical resources for energy transition, or crucial geographic positions to ensure the flow of global trade (e.g. Brazil, Turkey, Indonesia, South Africa).

Latin America, like most countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, is often placed within this diverse collection of underdeveloped nations, regardless of the nature of their political regimes or their own geopolitical orientations³. Public authorities, academics and journalists use this concept without giving much thought to its implications. This has at least two fundamental problems. The first is that it forgets the cultural creation of the region as a legacy of the West, and the second is that it accepts the conceptual validity of the so-called "Global South".

Huntington himself warned that, as a cultural area, "Latin America could be considered as either a sub-civilisation within Western civilisation, or a separate civilisation, intimately related to the West and divided in its belonging to the West." He suggested that to carry out an analysis focused on the international political consequences of civilisations, including relations between Latin America on the one hand and North America and Europe on the other, the second option was the most appropriate and useful⁴. In other words, Latin Americans are not Westerners, but they resemble them, even if they do not always agree among themselves about this.

³ See, for example, Vinjamuri, L. and Yoeli, M. (2024). America's Last Chance with the Global South: In an Age of Great-Power Competition, Washington Needs the G-20 [online]. *Foreign Affairs*. [Accessed on: 2025] Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-last-chance-global-south>Shidore, S. (2023). The Return of the Global South: Realism, Not Moralism, Drives a New Critique of Western Power [online]. *Foreign Affairs*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/return-global-south-critique-western-power>Mohan, C. R. (2023). Is There Such a Thing as a Global South? The category is emotionally powerful but fundamentally flawed [online]. *Foreign Policy*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/09/global-south-definition-meaning-countries-development/>and Brooke-Holland, L. (2024). What is the Global South? [online]. *House of Commons Library*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/what-is-the-global-south/>.

⁴ Huntington, S. (1997). *El choque de las civilizaciones y la reconfiguración del orden mundial*. Barcelona, Paidós, p.52.

It is not only a matter of looking at the Iberian languages that are widely spoken in the region or the predominant Judeo-Christian religion, but even the countries' governing institutions have their origins in a common branch. Despite the context of "chronic institutional weakness" and the presence of "minimally effective states" - which varies from country to country - there are mostly competitive democracies⁵. Spanish diplomats have rightly described Latin America as the "most Euro-compatible region in the world"⁶.

However, the Global South is a polysemantic concept, meaning that it can signify whatever one wants it to signify. As such, it lends itself to confusion, but it can also be used as part of strategic narratives because the category overlooks the enormous economic growth that several of its alleged members have experienced in recent decades and the deplorable performance of others, as well as underestimating the presence of very different political regimes and the dissimilar quality of governance that they present.

Nor does the label provide much precision about the geopolitical orientation of its members, which may even be opposite. In order to overcome the contradictions, including the geographical one -many of its members are located on the equator, for example India, Egypt or Mexico- some give it the simple connotation of a "political fact" that confirms the emergence of countries that, among their supposed common characteristics, have been colonies or targets of imperialism from the North⁷, a view more of the past than of the future. However, all of this is not exactly new for Latin America. Stewart and Huggins thus argue that:

"One of the many tragedies of the Cold War was the tendency of the United States, to especially treat the so-called *third world* as an undifferentiated terrain for zero-sum superpower competition, rather than engaging with individual nations on their own terms, as actors with their own distinctive identities, interests and motivations"⁸.

⁵ Murillo, M., Levitsky, S. and Brinks, D. (2021). *The Law and the Trap in Latin America*. Buenos Aires, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, p. 9.

⁶ José Manuel Albares, Minister for Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation of the Government of Spain.

⁷ Ferrero-Turrión, R. (2024). The Rise of the Global South Demands a New Consensus [online]. Routledge, 217, pp. 122-134.

⁸ Patrick, S. and Huggins, A. (2023). The Term "Global South" Is Surging. It Should Be Retired [online]. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. [Accessed

Of course, an acceptance of the concept has been evident in international forums where the “Global South” claims to feel represented, notably at the so-called BRICS summits, which are attended by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, plus six new members and other invited guests. Without being overtly anti-Western, the rhetoric points to elements of “fairness”, “balance” and the development of home-grown financial instruments to compete with the US dollar as a global currency⁹. Recently, Indonesia, which has the largest population and economy in Southeast Asia, became the tenth full member of the BRICS. Jakarta said in a statement that its accession to the group marks a commitment to “create a global structure that is more inclusive and fair”¹⁰. There would be nothing negative about this if countries such as China and Russia, whose actions tend to challenge the rule-based world order, such as the militarisation of disputed islands in the South China Sea and the invasion of Ukraine, were not part of this group, along with the backing of all kinds of dictatorships. In the case of Latin America, in Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua.

Some authors warn that, in a way, a non-aligned movement is taking shape behind the Global South, similar to the one that gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s with little significance, as there were clear winners and losers at the end of the Cold War¹¹. In other words, the problem of internal coherence is reborn. It can therefore be inferred that there is little reason to ensure that such an inconsistent bloc is any more successful today than it was in the past.

“The nations of the Global South do not share a common ideology, have a wide variety of internal institutions and enjoy dissimilar levels of political freedom and economic development. Some lean towards the democratic Western powers,

on: 2025]. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/08/the-term-global-south-is-surging-it-should-be-retired?lang=en>

⁹ BRICS. (2024). *XVI BRICS Summit. Kazan Declaration: Strengthening multilateralism for just global development and security* [online]. BRICS. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://cdn.brics-russia2024.ru/upload/docs/Kazan_Declaration_FINAL.pdf?1729693488349783

¹⁰ Deutsche Welle. (2025). Indonesia officially becomes full member of BRICS bloc [online]. *Deutsche Welle*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/indonesia-officially-becomes-full-member-of-brics-bloc/a-71233628>

¹¹ Gaddis, J. L. (2011). *Nueva historia de la guerra fría*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

others towards the authoritarian Eastern powers. And while many poorer countries may hope to play one side against the other to gain benefits from both, they show no sign of pursuing a coherent collective strategy designed to benefit all of them.”¹².

2. Back to the West

In the current panorama of Latin America, where there is a renewed presence of extra-continental powers (which are those that, due to history, culture or geographical position, have no direct connection with the region, such as China, Russia or Iran)¹³, the idea of convincing some countries that they are part of the so-called “Global South” is very effective when it comes to improving their relative position, whether in terms of securing access to strategic resources or exploiting traditional antagonisms, especially with the United States. Because the interests of these actors transcends trade and investment, the idea of using Latin America as yet another battleground to gain greater geopolitical influence is attractive.

This situation has been facilitated by specific commercial, diplomatic, scientific and military initiatives by Beijing and Moscow, and to a lesser extent Tehran, towards the rest of the world¹⁴, but also by the perception that the United States and Europe, i.e. the Global West, have turned their backs on regions such as Latin America and Africa, leaving a power vacuum¹⁵.

¹² Friedberg, A. L. (2023). A World of Blocs [online]. *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, The Marshall Papers, p. 11. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/world-blocs>

¹³ Toro, J. P. (2023). Las potencias extracontinentales en América Latina, *Política Exterior*, 214, p. 50.

¹⁴ Russia and China have joined similar positions on the creation of international alliances, leaving behind a history of rivalry and conflict. See: Fong, Clara and Mizland, Lindsay. (2024). *China and Russia: Exploring Ties Between Two Authoritarian Powers* [online]. Council on Foreign Relations. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-russia-relationship-xi-putin-taiwan-ukraine>

¹⁵ Islam, S. (2024). *Islam, S. (2024). How to gain influence and credibility in a complex world* [online]. Real Instituto Elcano. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ari50-2024-islam-europe-globalsouth-influence-credibility-complex-world.pdf>

Because Latin America is not a monolithic region, it is true that extra-continental powers in the Global East have found Latin American allies willing to share political agendas and not just economic benefits. In the case of the People's Republic of China, this would be reflected in its open support for the most anti-Western governments of all or those subject to US economic sanctions and diplomatic criticism from democratic European countries. Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua have shown themselves to be the most interested in calling for a world without hegemonies or globalisation without values. As Ellis argues:

"China offers options to authoritarian regimes under pressure from the West for their undemocratic behaviour, thereby extending their time in office, and "short-circuiting" the cycle by which such regimes have historically been driven from power by virtue of the corruption and economic chaos they produced"¹⁶.

An attitude shared by Russia, whose role in Latin America is often undervalued due to its limited diplomatic resources, almost non-existent economic footprint and declining role as a supplier of military equipment. Nevertheless, Moscow has displayed a willingness to show its flag by increasing naval missions to the Caribbean and providing assistance to troubled partners, which creates two challenges in the short term. As Ortiz warns:

"On one hand, Russia will continue to promote authoritarianism, seeking to replicate the criminal state model it has so painstakingly helped to build in Venezuela and Nicaragua. On the other hand, it will strive to turn the region into a hostile space for the US and Europe by supporting actors with anti-Western sentiments, similar to what it does in the Middle East and Africa"¹⁷.

¹⁶ Ellis, E. (2024). Tendencias e impactos estratégicos del compromiso de la República Popular China en América Latina. In: Vera, P. and Ortiz, R. (coord.) (2024). *América Latina en la nueva geopolítica global*. Lima, Centro de Estudios Estratégicos del Ejército del Perú, William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies and Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College, p. 100.

¹⁷ Ortiz, R. (2024). La estrategia rusa para América Latina después de la guerra de Ucrania. In: Vera, P. and Ortiz, R. (coord.) (2024). *América Latina en la nueva geopolítica global*. Lima, Centro de Estudios Estratégicos del Ejército del Perú, William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies and Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College, p. 100.

However, the intensification of conflicts in the international arena, where the global East is acting in an increasingly coordinated fashion, is helping to clarify the picture and unmask relations for political and strategic purposes. Democratic societies across the world have been more openly supportive of Ukraine, whether in South America, Asia-Pacific or Eastern Europe¹⁸. However, these are the decisive moments where simple economic interests or geopolitical expediency are not enough to establish loyalties in times of definitions¹⁹.

When it comes to factors predicting behaviour, in the end it is “fundamental values and institutions, including beliefs in freedom of expression, personal choice and the degree to which democratic institutions are practised and perceived as legitimate”²⁰. A study by the Elcano Royal Institute showed that, despite China’s strong economic penetration in recent decades, it is far from being a dominant force in the region, especially when investment, import-export and foreign direct investment are added together. In the case of Mexico and Central America, they would turn towards the United States in all areas, including military and human (migration), while South America would be more “European” in all but trade²¹.

However, when looking at concrete data, it is clear that the idea of being a part of the Global South is inconsistent in practice for Latin America. To demonstrate this point, Table 1 displays three areas where clear diplomatic, economic and military realities may be established: The first assessed UN General Assembly votes on divisive issues such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the conflict between Israel and Hamas in 2024, and

¹⁸ On the contrary, authoritarian states in the region have granted Russia their unreserved support. See, for example, Solar, C. (2023). Is Russia’s War in Ukraine Aiding the Survival of the Venezuelan Regime? Sanctioned and Isolated States Pull Together [online]. *The RUSI Journal*, 168(1-2), pp. 50-60. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2023.2195751>

¹⁹ See this point in Schenoni, L., Leiva, D. and Carvalho, T. (2024). The Ukraine War and the Limits of Latin American Fence-Sitting [online]. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 43, pp. 300-304. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.13574>

²⁰ Foa, R. et al. (2022). *A World Divided: Russia, China and the West* [online]. Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.90281>.

²¹ Malamud, C., Ruiz, J. J. and Talvi, E. (eds.). (2023). *Why does Latin America matter?* Real Instituto Elcano, Informe 32, p. 107.

Venezuela’s political crisis following the 2024 presidential elections. The second surveyed priority trading partners using UN trade and development data from 2023. For the third, military trade information was gathered, as the purchase of weapons systems involves a prior political relationship, according to the database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. In addition, participation in joint military exercises was surveyed on the basis of open sources. Regarding military exercises, it was logged whether nations carried out these manoeuvres with US Southern Command forces. In the case of Mexico and Cuba, their participation in exercises with the Northern Command was considered.

Scope	Diplomatic			Economic		Military	
	Ukraine	Israel-Hamas	Venezuela	Business partner	Foreign investment	Supplier	Exercises
Argentina	✔	✘	✔	Brazil	US	US	US
Bolivia	✘	✘	✘	Brazil	China	China	-
Brazil	✔	✔	✘	China	US	US	US
Colombia	✔	✔	✘	US	US	US	US
Costa Rica	✔	✔	✔	US	US	US	US
Chile	✔	✔	✔	China	Canada	US	US
Cuba	✘	✔	-	Canada	Venezuela	Russia	-
Ecuador	✔	✘	✔	US	US	US	US
El Salvador	✔	✔	✔	US	US	US	US
Guatemala	✔	✘	✔	US	US	US	US
Honduras	✔	✔	✘	US	US	US	US
Mexico	✔	✔	Absent	US	US	US	US
Nicaragua	✘	✔	-	US	Venezuela	Russia	-
Paraguay	✔	✘	✔	Argentina	Brazil	US	US
Panama	✔	✘	✔	China	US	US	US
Peru	✔	✔	✔	China	US	US	US
Dom. Rep.	✔	✘	✔	US	US	US	US
Uruguay	✔	✘	✔	Brazil	US	US	US
Venezuela	-	-	Absent	India	China	Iran	-

Table 1. Diplomatic, economic and military relations between Latin American countries.

Diplomatic sources : 1) **Aggression against Ukraine: Resolution /RES/ES11/1 adopted by the General Assembly.** Available at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3959039?ln=es> 2) **Advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the legal consequences arising from Israel's policies and practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and from the illegality of Israel's continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory: Resolution A/RES/ES-10/24 adopted by the General Assembly.** Available at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4061432?ln=es3> 3) **Voting at the Organisation of American States to demand that the Venezuelan government hand over the voting records of the 28 July 2024 elections.** *Note:* Venezuela cannot vote in the UN General Assembly because of it is in arrears in the payment of its financial contributions. Available at: <https://www.un.org/es/ga/about/art19.shtml>.

Economic sources : 1) **Main trading partner,** available at: <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/CountryProfile/en-GB/index.html> 2) **Main individual foreign investor (data not provided by the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela since 2022).** Available at: <https://www.bcr.gov.ar/Pdfs/PublicacionesEstadisticas/informe-inversion-extranjera-directa-4TRIM-2023.pdf>; <https://www.investchile.gob.cl/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/FDI-Report-eng-2023.pdf>; https://www.banrep.gov.co/sites/default/files/nota_de_prensa_inversion_directa.pdf; <https://mundominero.com.ec/analisis-inversion-extranjera-ecuador-2023/>; <https://banguat.gob.gt/page/ied-ano-2023>; www.mic.gov.py/empresarios-brasilenos-exploran-opportunidades-de-inversion-en-paraguay/#:~:text=Seg%C3%BAAn%20datos%20del%20Banco%20Central,inversiones%20destinadas%20a%20empresas%20maquiladoras; <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/economia/inec-inversion-extranjera-directa-en-panama-sube-35-en-2023-y-cae-para-la-cepal-un-22-FJ9795799>; www.investinperu.pe/es/invertir/inversion-extranjera/inversion-extranjera-directa#:~:text=Reino%20Unido%2C%20Espa%C3%B1a%2C%20Chile%20y,saldo%20a%20diciembre%20de%202023; [https://www.bancentral.gov.do/a/d/5862-economia-dominicana-registra-expansion-interanual-de-24--en-enerodiciembre-de-2023#:~:text=Durante%20el%20a%C3%B1o%202023%20se,mismo%20per%C3%ADodo%20del%20a%C3%B1o%20anterior.&text=La%20inversi%C3%B3n%20extranjera%20directa%20\(IED,interanual%20de%20alrededor%20de%209.2%20%25](https://www.bancentral.gov.do/a/d/5862-economia-dominicana-registra-expansion-interanual-de-24--en-enerodiciembre-de-2023#:~:text=Durante%20el%20a%C3%B1o%202023%20se,mismo%20per%C3%ADodo%20del%20a%C3%B1o%20anterior.&text=La%20inversi%C3%B3n%20extranjera%20directa%20(IED,interanual%20de%20alrededor%20de%209.2%20%25); <https://www.uruguayxxi.gub.uy/uploads/informacion/92e8b10ff2b8d5d4a88d7d32940396f359007a2e.pdf>; <https://www.bcn.gob.ni/divulgacion-prensa/bcn-presenta-informe-sobre-la-evoluci%C3%B3n-de-la-inversi%C3%B3n-extranjera-directa-al>; <https://repositorio.cepal.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/ab168ebe-f0f3-43a5-b927-6dd8f4314a4b/content>.

Military sources: **Main arms supplier,** available at: <https://armstransfers.sipri.org/ArmsTransfer/CSVResult>. Conducts joint military exercises with the US Southern Command: <https://www.southcom.mil/>.

Given the above, it is very difficult to claim that Latin American countries are fully committed to the so-called Global South when their diplomatic, economic and security orientations have a strong US inclination. This does not stop presidents such as Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva from suggesting that "the global South is becoming an inescapable part of the solution to

the major crises afflicting the planet”²²; Chile’s Gabriel Boric from Chile from adding that “we need a united voice from Latin America; we need more joint work from the global South”²³, and Colombia’s Gustavo Petro and Peru’s Dina Boluarte from invoking the concept in an attempt to situate themselves in the world. Even veteran Brazilian minister and current Lula’s chief diplomatic advisor, Celso Amorim, claimed that, when assuming the first presidency in 2003, that Brazil had a definite ‘southern’ approach to the ‘global south’ when the concept was not yet commonly used.

It may therefore be agreed that the concept is a slogan that if it no longer obeyed at the geographical level (China and India are in the northern hemisphere), neither does it obey the diplomatic, political and security realities of the countries. It therefore has an obvious political purpose, especially for those who seek to position themselves as part of it, because it does not function as an accurate description of the world²⁴. Comfort suggests that decision-makers use the concept with caution:

“Although many Western policymakers think they know better than to treat the non-Western world as an unvariegated whole, they should use the phrase “global South” with particular care. Specific dynamics within and among the countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America will shape their political futures more than their identity as a group. The West must see these states as they are, not fall for the fallacy that they operate geopolitically as a single entity”²⁵.

²² Office of the President of the Republic of Brazil. (2024). Lula: Development cannot be the privilege of a few [online]. *The Office of the President of the Republic of Brazil*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/planalto/es/ultimas-noticias/2024/02/lula-desenvolvimento-nao-pode-continuar-sendo-privilegio-de-poucos>

²³ Government of Chile. (2022). President Gabriel Boric Font addresses the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly [online]. *Press Office of the Presidency of Chile*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://prensa.presidencia.cl/comunicado.aspx?id=201143>

²⁴ Nye Jr, J. (2023). What is the Global South? [online]. *Project Syndicate*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/global-south-is-a-misleading-term-by-joseph-s-nye-2023-11/spanish>

²⁵ Comfort, E. (2024). The Trouble with the “Global South” [online]. *Foreign Affairs*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/trouble-global-south>

3. Recovering ground

If some Latin American countries wish to stop being “relegated”, as has been proposed²⁶, and to acquire a certain degree of prominence based on their economic performance, their availability of critical raw materials or their maritime projection, they have a better chance of doing so if they manage to escape the conceptual trap of the Global South and assume that they are closer to the Global West than they think, given that this is where their interests lie, but also their shared values, including respect for international norms. That is to say, they must recognise, and make known, where they are actually located on the geopolitical spectrum and not where they pretend to be.

In an era of competition and conflict between great powers, seeking to be neutral about who one trades with, who one buys arms from, or which international forums one becomes a member of, is becoming increasingly difficult. Embracing partners that share only an incomplete level of development, colonial pasts or are revisionist powers is no guarantee of equity and justice either. If Latin American countries have any acumen, they should identify the actors both inside and outside the region for whom these concepts of the global south or non-alignment are functional, in order to maximise their influence and who, at the same time, question the United States and Europe by painting them as decadent.

In turn, it would be appropriate for the global West to understand that, in the race to attract more countries into its orbit, it is necessary to debunk concepts that lend themselves to use by its rivals by contrasting them with data²⁷. In doing so, they enhance the chances of survival of democracies, better ensure access to critical resources, and gain more security. It is therefore desirable to continue to develop incentives that demonstrate that there are greater benefits outside than within the global south, such as infrastructure building initiatives such as the EU’s Global Gateway and the G7’s Build Back Better World.

In the same vein, the agreement reached between the EU and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR, which includes Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay), after two decades of

²⁶ Lagos, R., Castañeda, J., and Aguilar, H. (2022). *La nueva soledad de América Latina*. Debate.

²⁷ Patrick, S. and Huggins, A. *Op. cit.*

negotiations, is the sort of concrete measure that can bring Latin American countries closer to their historical partners.

Contrary to predictions, before taking office, the incoming administration of Donald J. Trump made important gestures to signal its interest in the region, such as swiftly announcing the names of future ambassadors to Argentina, Mexico, Colombia and Chile, possibly the quickest nominations in living memory. Officials with extensive experience in Latin America were also appointed to important positions, such as Secretary of State Marco Rubio and State Department Special Envoy Mauricio Claver-Carone, both of Cuban descent.

The latter may be the first indication that the US will seek to contain Chinese influence in the region, along with that of Russia and Iran, and draw nearer to the countries in its orbit, even extending the trade war against Beijing to the Western hemisphere. From now on, Trump has a potential partner in South America in the libertarian Javier Milei, the Argentine president who, in just one year in office, has restored his country's relations with Washington, Brussels and Israel. Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele is another possibility, but for Central America. Also general elections will be held in Chile in 2025 and, if the centre-right wins, a new rapprochement could take place.

Latin America faces many internal challenges, from the expansion of organised crime to low economic growth rates. The political fragmentation reflected in the ineffectiveness of its regional institutions is also inauspicious. However, the hope that it will be able to distance itself much longer from the current geopolitical competition is not the same as a positioning strategy. If one assumes that it is just "a place where very diverse people must coexist and thrive"²⁸, then the question is where it is most likely to manage that coexistence and prosperity. Closer to open societies and economies, which share a common core and have already travelled on the road to development, or joining of forces with a motley crew of nations whose "global south" brand serves to camouflage pretended leaderships, geographical inconsistencies and sow confusion. Latin America is closer to the West in practice, and it is time for it to take over and take its place in a positive way in a riskier world where alliances are key, something that the global East sometimes seems to better comprehend.

²⁸ Granés, C. *Delirio americano. Una historia cultural y política de América Latina*. Bogotá: Penguin Random House, p. 517.

Chapter Eight

Redefining Spain-Africa relations: for a sustainable and fair future and shared development between Spain and Africa

José Segura Clavell

Abstract

Africa is at a turning point in its history and faces a series of complex challenges and trends that shape its geopolitical, economic, social and governance landscape. In a turbulent and constantly changing world, it is attracting the attention of major global powers and becoming a geopolitical epicenter.

In 2025, the African continent faces a series of structural and contextual challenges that require immediate attention, from security and governance to economic development and climate change.

Within this dynamic and changing scenario, Spain has the opportunity and responsibility to define its own policy towards Africa, based on mutual respect, cooperation and shared benefit. We must stop seeing Africa as an object of intervention and start treating its representatives as diverse and equal partners in building a fairer and more sustainable world order.

Keywords

Africa, Geopolitics, Security, Development, Governance, Sustainability, Natural Resources.

1. Introduction

The following considerations are derived from the daily readings conducted by the public diplomacy institution, Casa África, of news generated in different national and international media in several languages (Spanish, English, French, Portuguese), and which are compiled in the daily newsletter that it emails free of charge to almost a thousand subscribers. Based on this news monitoring, every week I prepare a series of articles that are published in print and online media, both in the Canary Islands and the rest of Spain, which reflect the news trends and current events on the African continent from the point of view of the media covering it.

Although Casa África is neither a think tank nor an academic centre, much of its work is based on the proven research of think tanks, universities and analysts who devote their time and efforts to gaining a better knowledge and understanding of events on the African continent. I have taken the liberty of attaching a series of articles written by me as coda to this text, of interest in my opinion, since they are related to the issues dealt with in this chapter. They were published in the second half of this year and are reproduced below as an appendix.

Casa África is a public consortium based in the autonomous community of the Canary Islands. It was created in 2006 and its work may be summarised by the motto "Africa and Spain, ever closer". The reading of the article entitled "Setting the course of Casa África" (published on 8 November 2024) seeks to familiarise the general public with the guidelines that define the work carried out by Casa África. These lines are defined in the Strategic Plan of Casa África, a document approved by its Governing Council on 19 December 2024 in consensus with civil society, institutions and experts on the basis of a public consultation process that will guide Casa África's actions until 2028.

Africa is at a turning point in its history. It faces a number of complex challenges and trends that shape its geopolitical, economic, social and governance landscape. Political instability, economic crises, armed conflicts, the legacy of colonialism and social disparities are some of the obstacles that the continent must overcome to achieve sustainable and inclusive development. The climate crisis has further aggravated the situation and has a negative impact on human security and development on the continent.

In a turbulent and ever-changing world, Africa is emerging as a geopolitical epicentre, attracting the attention of the world's major powers. This has been seen all too often in this 2024, with consistent gestures that denote an evident growing interest due to a combination of factors that range from its economic growth to the abundance of strategic natural resources, the demographic boom of a young population, and the continent's growing influence in global affairs.

Within this dynamic and changing scenario, Spain has the opportunity and the responsibility to define its own policy towards Africa based on mutual respect, cooperation and shared benefit. To achieve this, it is essential to understand the complexities of the continent, to listen to African voices, and to build a strong and lasting relationship that benefits both sides.

In this regard, our country presented its new strategy for Africa in the Council of Ministers on 17 September 2024 under the title "Spain-Africa 2025-2028. Working together through a strategic relationship". It is an ambitious document that proposes a hundred lines of action grouped into five strategic objectives: boosting a relationship that facilitates joint action; advancing towards a sustainable African development that focuses on young people; connecting societies and economies in Africa, Spain and the world; protection, ensuring the security of populations; and living together in open societies with solid and inclusive institutions. The importance of this strategy is reflected in the fact that the Prime Minister himself, Pedro Sánchez, was present at its public presentation on 5 December 2024, together with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the European Union, and Cooperation, José Manuel Albares, and other Spanish individuals linked to foreign policy in Africa, including yours truly.

In 2025, the African continent faces a number of structural and contextual challenges that require immediate attention. From security and governance to economic development and climate change, Africa is affected by problems that also have global repercussions.

One example is the threat of jihadism, which remains latent and is projected to expand significantly towards coastal countries along the Gulf of Guinea. Political instability in the Sahel countries (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso), marked by a series of coups

d'état and the weakening of cooperation mechanisms such as ECOWAS, is also aggravating regional tensions. Persistent armed conflicts in Sudan, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel continue to wreak havoc, while the protracted crisis in Libya adds fuel to insecurity in a vast area.

Overcoming these and similar challenges, and taking advantage of opportunities will depend on the ability of African countries to take control of their own destiny, promote regional cooperation, build strong and fair institutions, and invest in human development, innovation and sustainability.

The international community must play a supportive role in this process by respecting the sovereignty of African countries and promoting equitable and mutually beneficial relations. We must stop seeing Africa as an object of intervention and start treating its representatives as diverse and equal partners in building a fairer and more sustainable world order.

Additionally, it is important to analyse the evolution of Spanish Africanism and to outline guidelines for future action.

2. New colonialism

Africa is undoubtedly a recognised key continent within the global strategic landscape for the opportunities it presents in terms of economic growth, energy wealth, vast mineral and water reserves, extensive fertile land, demographic development and cultural richness¹. This strategic orientation is however also influenced by instability, terrorism, organised crime, and other threats to the stability and development of the continent and its environment. That is, external interventions in Africa are often driven by these geopolitical and economic interests while African countries face persistent poverty, inequality and dependence on the export of raw materials².

¹ OECD. (2024). *Africa's Development Dynamics 2024: Skills, Jobs and Productivity* [online]. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/df06c7a4-en>

² WEF (2023). *Why Africa will become a prominent player in global geopolitics* [online]. World Economic Forum. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/07/why-africa-will-become-a-prominent-player-in-global-geopolitics/>

This “resource curse”³ continues to be a reality and the continent’s wealth mainly benefits external actors⁴. Overseas competition for Africa’s resources also results in support for authoritarian regimes that serve foreign interests, the instrumentalisation of international bodies to legitimise military interventions, and the imposition of economic policies that perpetuate dependency⁵.

The growing influence of global powers such as China and Russia on the continent challenges the traditional hegemony of the West, especially France with regard to its former colonies, and means that Africa is at a geopolitical crossroads. The war in Ukraine, for example, has further highlighted this dynamic, with African countries showing a reluctance to automatically align themselves with the West, leading to criticism and embarrassment⁶.

Although Africa’s future depends -to some extent- on these external geostrategic interests, it should not be guided by them but by its own objectives. The term “new colonialism” in Africa refers to increasing foreign influence in its political and economic affairs, the exploitation of natural resources, and instances of actions detrimental to the continent’s sustainable development⁷. External actors, including the EU and Spain, must be allies and not repeat the mistakes of colonialism, nor the models of cooperation and investment that have

³ Sachs, J. D. and Warner, A. M. (1995). *Natural Resource Abundance and Economic Growth* [online]. National Bureau of Economic Research. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w5398>

⁴ Arezki, R. et al. (2024) The import channel of the resource curse [online] *World Bank blogs*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/developmenttalk/the-import-channel-of-the-resource-curse>

⁵ Alaminos, M. Á. and Marquina, A. (2022). AFRICA: Competencia y sustitución en un entorno estratégico de rivalidad [online]. *Revista UNISCI*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.unisci.es/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/UNISCIDP60-1ALAMINOS-MARQ.pdf>

⁶ UNDP. (2022). *The impact of the war in Ukraine on sustainable development in Africa* [online]. Regional Bureau for Africa UNDP. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/africa/publications/impact-war-ukraine-sustainable-development-africa>

⁷ Obikwelu, I. J., Messina, G.-M. and Odumegwu, A. C. (2023). The Effects of Neocolonialism [online]. *Pan African Journal of Governance and Development*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/pajgd/article/view/260278> and Whelan, O. (2022). Neocolonialism: The Remnants of Foreign Exploitation in Africa [online]. *The Science Survey*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://thesciencesurvey.com/editorial/2023/07/21/neocolonialism-the-remnants-of-foreign-exploitation-in-africa/>

already proven to be limited in terms of governance, security and the daily lives of citizens in Africa. Africa can no longer be treated as a puppet continent, the stage of power struggles, and without a voice on the international stage.

3. A new diplomacy

For centuries, diplomacy has been key to shaping international relations, facilitating peaceful negotiations and conflict resolution, and fostering global cooperation. However, in today's world, diplomacy faces new trends and challenges that are redefining its future. Likewise, the rise of nationalism and populist movements, and even the use of digital and technological tools, are boosting the transformation of diplomacy, forcing it to adapt and evolve⁸.

At the same time, multilateralism is being challenged globally for its ineffectiveness in conflict resolution, by nationalist movements⁹, and by slow progress in addressing the climate crisis¹⁰. It is increasingly obvious that global cooperation frameworks have not kept pace with this evolution and that their toolbox, rules and approaches must be updated.

While the stated intention of international organisations and global powers is often to promote peace, democracy and development, the reality is that their actions have often had negative consequences, exacerbating instability and perpetuating the continent's dependency. The UN Security Council -with no permanent seats for African countries- makes decisions on military interventions and sanctions that often have devastating consequences

⁸ Diplo. (2024). *Digital geopolitics: new environment for diplomatic activities* [online]. Diplo Foundation. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.diplomacy.edu/topics/digital-diplomacy/#geopolitical-and-geo-economic-environment-for-diplomatic-activities>

⁹ Diplomacia.org (2024a). *¿Cómo impacta el populismo en la diplomacia internacional?* [online]. Diplomacia.org. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://diplomacia.org/blog/como-impacta-el-populismo-en-la-diplomacia-internacional>

¹⁰ Diplomacia.org (2024b). *Los desafíos de la diplomacia climática en el contexto del cambio climático global* [online]. Diplomacia.org. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://diplomacia.org/blog/los-desafios-de-la-diplomacia-climatica-en-el-contexto-del-cambio-climatico-global>

for the civilian population¹¹. Lack of adequate funding for peace operations and post-conflict rebuilding, as well as inefficiency and bureaucracy, limit the effectiveness of these interventions^{12 13}.

Moreover, the international community is criticised for applying double standards in its interventions in Africa, acting more forcefully when its interests are at stake and being indifferent to human rights violations and humanitarian crises when these do not affect them directly. Selective condemnation of coups, the imposition of economic sanctions that affect civilian populations, and lack of support for genuine African-led development initiatives have generated mistrust and resentment. France, in particular, must abandon the *Françafrique* policy, characterised by military interventionism, support for authoritarian regimes, and the perpetuation of economic dependence¹⁴. France's disproportionate influence on the decisions of international bodies such as ECOWAS and the UN also creates mistrust and limits the sovereignty of African countries.

As far as the European Union is concerned, a recent CIDOB report criticises the three strategies implemented by the EU in the Sahel since 2011 for their securitarian approach, which has been ineffective and has worsened the situation. The report identifies key problems as: the securitisation of safety, migration and climate change; the negative effects of this securitarian approach; internal tensions within the EU; and the gap between rhetoric and practice.

The report argues that securitisation has led to a simplification of the causes of instability, prioritising military responses over political and development solutions. Migration and climate policies have created tensions and reduced local economic opportunities. Moreover, the EU's internal dynamics and lack of local participation have affected the effectiveness of its strategies. The report

¹¹ United Nations. (2024). *África merece ser miembro permanente del Consejo de Seguridad* [online]. UN. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2024/08/1531956>

¹² United Nations. (S. f.). *Financiación de las operaciones de mantenimiento de la paz*. [online]. UN. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/es/how-we-are-funded>

¹³ United Nations. (S. f.). *La transición de las operaciones de paz* [online]. UN. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/es/transitioning-peace-operations-0>

¹⁴ Saldaña, E. (2023). *¿Qué es la Francáfrica?* [online]. *The World Order*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://elordenmundial.com/que-es-francafrica/>

concludes that the EU should adopt a less securitarian approach and focus more on the root causes of instability by taking into consideration local knowledge and promoting a more reciprocal pragmatism. Indeed, top-down approaches where there is no true participation of civil society and community actors in decision-making that affects Africans must become a thing of the past, as they also contribute to the disjuncture between European strategies and ground realities, and to European irrelevance in Africa.

The AU itself advocates international cooperation that respects the sovereignty of African countries and promotes the equitable and beneficial development for all parties involved. It also emphasises the importance of strengthening African institutions and further promoting regional integration to resist new forms of neo-colonialism¹⁵.

Therefore, it seems necessary to reiterate the obvious: partnerships with the continent must always be based on respect and in-depth knowledge of Africa without harming African unity, self-determination and freedom for Africans. Europe must stop imposing its own solutions and agendas and start listening to and learning from African voices. The diversity of perspectives and experiences on the continent offers a rich source of knowledge and wisdom to address global challenges. It is crucial to support African leadership in the search for home-grown and global solutions, and to promote intercultural dialogue based on mutual respect and learning.

4. Africa and Spain: a new differentiated and grounded model

Spain, within the framework of the EU -but also with its own voice- aspires to be one of those actors in the rapprochement between Europe and Africa, well aware not only of what it can contribute to Africa, but also of all that the continent has to offer the country. Africa is our neighbour and in many respects we are inextricably linked: there is a mutual dependence and a less complex historical relationship than in other bilateral relations of European and African nations. These facts make the Africa-Spain bond a strategic partnership on both shores.

Within this configuration, it is essential to reiterate the fact that Casa África is located in the Canary Islands for logistical and

¹⁵ African Union. (2015). Our Aspirations for the Africa We Want [online]. *Agenda 2063*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://au.int/agenda2063/aspirations>

social reasons and that the Canary Islands can play a central role in this Spain-Africa bond. The archipelago is a community with a privileged relationship with the African continent, being part of the latter's western Atlantic coast. The Canary Islands are part of the Macaronesian region (Cape Verde, Madeira, the Azores and the Canary Islands) and are located in the maritime environment of West Africa, at the exit of the Gulf of Guinea and close to countries such as Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal and Equatorial Guinea, with which it has long-standing relations of all kinds. Aware of the importance of this connection, two decades ago, the government of the autonomous community of the Canary Islands created a directorate general dedicated to its relations with the African continent, a decision that is also a commitment to look towards Africa and to innovate through measures such as training and artistic programmes, educational experiences and trade agreements that bring us closer together.

If Spain is to play a central role in building a fairer world and act as a bridge between Africa and Europe, becoming a trusted partner and friend of the continent, it needs to know much more about Africa and to access that knowledge through the academic, cultural and other types of production taking place on the African continent. It must take a critical stance against the simplistic narrative of internal complexities and promote a discourse of its own that acknowledges the diversity of perspectives and Africa's capacity to define its future.

This new relationship must recognise the colonial legacy and commitment to historical justice, although Spain, unlike other European powers, has had a limited colonial presence in Africa, mainly in Western Sahara and Equatorial Guinea. This offers Spain the opportunity to take a leading role in the restitution of cultural property looted during the colonial era and in supporting reparation processes for the damage caused.

The model of collaboration - or partnership - with Africa must always be based on respect and mutual benefit. This may be achieved by aligning with the international commitments made by both Spain and African nations, such as the *United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*¹⁶, or even the objectives

¹⁶ United Nations. (2015). *Agenda 2030: Sustainable Development Goals*. [online]. UN. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/es/>

of the *African Union's Agenda 2063*¹⁷, the AU's master plan for sustainable development and economic growth on the continent.

4.1. Peace and security

The security scenario in sub-Saharan Africa is characterised by a complex web of internal conflicts and regional tensions that have, in some cases, become even more internationalised in recent years as well as complicated from a geopolitical perspective. Three main areas -the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region- exemplify the security challenges facing the continent, exacerbated by the growing involvement of external actors, the erosion of democratic governance, and the exploitation of natural resources.

In the Sahel, the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of Western actors has been filled by Russia, whose influence is being consolidated through the now-termed Africa Corps (formerly the Wagner group). The emergence of a military bloc made up of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali after their respective break with ECOWAS reflects a shift towards anti-Western policies initially very much focused against their former colony and, until a few months ago, primary partner: France. This situation is compounded by the persistent presence of jihadist groups that, adapting to local dynamics, have strengthened their ties with affected communities, making counterinsurgency efforts more difficult.

As mentioned above, jihadism remains the main threat in many parts of the African continent and especially in the Sahel. Indeed, there is little discussion of how the security crisis in this part of the world threatens to spill over to the coastal nations along the Gulf of Guinea: Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. In these areas, jihadist groups are exploiting a series of structural weaknesses, frustrations of all kinds and resentments against governments that do not always respond to their citizens' grievances to the latter's satisfaction, in order to recruit young people into their ranks.

While analysts usually refer to and analyse the western part of the Sahel (Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso) together, the eastern

¹⁷ African Union, *op. cit.*

part of the Sahel is now home to one of the world's most intense conflicts, that of Sudan. The civil war in Sudan, which began in April 2023, has triggered an unprecedented security and humanitarian crisis with devastating repercussions at both national and regional levels. The fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has displaced millions of people, led to famines and unleashed a wave of atrocities, especially in the Darfur region. Neighbouring countries, such as Chad and South Sudan, are under extraordinary pressure from the massive influx of refugees and economic instability resulting from the conflict.

The international nature of this confrontation further aggravates the situation. The RSF is supported to a great degree by the United Arab Emirates, among others, while Egypt supports the SAF to a lesser extent. At the same time, the involvement of armed groups from Chad and South Sudan introduces cross-border dynamics that threaten to spread the conflict beyond Sudanese borders. This involvement of external actors not only perpetuates the war, but also complicates diplomatic efforts to establish a ceasefire. This is compounded by internal fragmentation on both sides, consisting of various factions with fluctuating loyalties, which makes negotiation difficult and increases the risk of prolonging the conflict.

All these factors mean that the short-term prospects for peace are bleak and Sudan is on the brink of total collapse, with significant regional implications. The stability of Chad and South Sudan is at stake, and the continuation of the war puts at risk not only the integrity of the Sudanese state, but also the security of the Horn of Africa as a whole. The international community faces the challenge of redoubling its efforts to push for a peace agreement, at the same time, mobilising humanitarian resources to meet the growing needs of the affected population.

In the Horn of Africa, the escalating conflict in Sudan underlines the deep internal fractures and their regional impact. In parallel, agreements such as the one signed between Ethiopia and Somaliland add to the tension. This memorandum, which grants Ethiopia maritime access in exchange for support for Somaliland's independence, threatens the stability of Somalia, whose territorial integrity is threatened by these strategic alliances.

For its part, the Great Lakes region faces a significant deterioration in relations between the Democratic Republic of Congo

(DRC) and Rwanda. Rwanda's support for the M23 rebel group has intensified fighting, generating massive displacement and undermining peace efforts. The withdrawal of UN peacekeepers in the DRC, in addition to the deployment of SADC troops, reveals the difficulties of coordinating effective international responses amid growing geopolitical rivalry.

Taken together, these conflicts highlight not only the fragile nature of the security of African states, but also the global trend towards declining effective multilateralism and respect for international humanitarian law. The combination of internal factors, such as weak social contracts, and external factors such as the intervention of foreign powers, shapes a security landscape in which stability seems increasingly distant.

Spain can advocate for the increased participation of African countries in international forums and the reform of institutions such as the UN Security Council to ensure fairer representation and a level playing field for all. Within this context, multipolarity and the expansion of partners on the African continent should not be seen as a threat, but as an opportunity to diversify partnerships and promote a multilateral approach in our relations with Africa.

In terms of security, and in both general and specific cases, the Western perspective conceives of Africa, and especially the Sahel, as a peripheral and problematic area that threatens Europe's security. The Sahel has especially become an epicentre of jihadism, with armed groups operating in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger on a large scale. The inability of states in the region to contain the jihadist threat, despite support from France and other countries, has generated instability and prompted coups d'état.

Instead of prioritising military security and replicating the French model of direct military intervention, Spain may adopt an approach of promoting peace, human security and conflict prevention by addressing the root causes of poverty, inequality, social exclusion and environmental degradation. It can also prioritise support for peace and security initiatives led by African actors, such as the African Union and sub-regional organisations. This would involve boosting African capabilities in areas such as mediation, conflict resolution and the development of effective and responsible security forces. Supporting transitional justice processes in post-conflict countries, promoting reconciliation, truth, justice and reparations, is another

avenue. Spain can contribute to the development and strengthening of early warning mechanisms at the regional and continental level by sharing its experience and providing technical and financial support.

4.2. Governance

Political instability and coups d'état are a constant in many African countries. Fragile institutions, corruption and lack of transparency weaken democracy and the rule of law. While progress has been made as regards democratisation since the 1990s, with the opening of multi-party politics and the alternation of power in some countries, the reality is that the "façade" of the Western democratic model is often copied without an actual deep transformation¹⁸ ¹⁹. Western pressure to hold elections periodically, sometimes in adverse contexts, can be counterproductive. Citizen participation and the building of strong institutions are essential for effective and legitimate governance. There is a divorce between the political and economic elites and African societies which must be taken into account when supporting certain regimes that are not considered legitimate by their populations.

Growing citizen awareness and social mobilisation, as demonstrated by protests and movements across the continent, are driving the demand for greater transparency, inclusive growth, accountability and social justice. Academics and civil society in Africa play a crucial role in transforming the harmful dynamics that continue to plague the continent. Although they are constrained by numerous factors, such as the lack of resources, government repression, internal fragmentation and the influence of external actors, their work is critical to promoting positive change on the continent.

Governance in Africa faces challenges such as conflict and distrust of institutions: 21 countries, representing 47.9% of the African population, display lower levels of governance than in

¹⁸ Mateos, O. (2018). África Subsahariana: democratización, a pesar de todo [online]. In: CIDOB (2018). *Anuario Internacional CIDOB 2018*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/africa-subshariana-democratizacion-pesar-de-todo>

¹⁹ Pérez, Á. (2004). Democracia en África Subsahariana [online]. *Grupo de Estudios Estratégicos*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <http://www.gees.org/articulos/democracia-en-africa-subshariana>

2014. On the other hand, 33 countries, covering 52.1% of the continent's population, have made progress in this decade. These are the findings of the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) 2024²⁰. With international support and cooperation, there is potential for significant progress, and Spain must continue to collaborate in strengthening African institutions. This may include the training of civil servants and providing support for administrative decentralisation, but it is crucial that this is done together with civil society. These organisations already play a leading role in promoting democracy, human rights and sustainable development on the continent, however they face challenges such as government repression and lack of resources²¹.

4.3. Sustainable economic development

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Africa has experienced the second highest economic growth rate in the world, second only to Asia. According to the United Nations, Africa's economic growth will remain moderate after gradually decelerating between 2021 and 2023. However, recent efforts to stabilise the economy are expected to start bearing fruit from the second half of 2024 onwards, especially in some of the larger economies. Economic activity on the continent is expected to grow from a sluggish 3% in 2024 to 3.2% in 2025²².

However, the region also faces a number of development challenges, including extreme poverty, which affects around 466 million Africans, according to the World Bank²³. In recent times, increased conflict and violence across the region has stifled eco-

²⁰ Mo Ibrahim Foundation. (2024). *Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG)* [online]. Mo Ibrahim Foundation. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/our-research/iiag>

²¹ Lecumberri, B. (2024). *Gobernar bien: los conflictos y la desconfianza en las instituciones empañan los progresos de África* [online]. *El País*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://elpais.com/planeta-futuro/2024-10-23/gobernar-bien-los-conflictos-y-la-desconfianza-en-las-instituciones-empanan-los-progresos-de-africa.html>

²² United Nations. (2024). *Trade and Development Report 2024. Rethinking development in the age of discontent* [online]. UN. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/tdr2024_en.pdf

²³ World Bank (2024a). *Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report Pathways Out of the Polycrisis* [online]. World Bank. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/poverty-prosperity-and-planet>

conomic activity and climate shocks have exacerbated this fragility. The recent polycrisis, which includes climate issues, the Covid-19 pandemic and conflicts, has accelerated the increase in debt, keeping the region at a high risk of debt overhang. One cannot look away from the growing external debt of many African countries, especially to private creditors (not to China, as the media would have it), which poses a threat to their economic stability. Reliance on high-interest loans can lead to a spiral of indebtedness that further limits governments' ability to invest in development and meet the needs of their populations.

Despite these challenges, Africa is also experiencing positive trends. The growing youth population represents a tremendous potential for development, with a dynamic and entrepreneurial workforce²⁴.

The AU, through its Agenda 2063, is promoting economic development, self-sufficiency and economic independence. One of the most important recent initiatives is the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), in force since 2019. This represents a great opportunity for the continent - and also for Spain - with a market of 1.3 billion people and a GDP of more than 2.7 trillion euros. Supporting Africa's own economic governance is a priority for fostering mutually beneficial relations.

Europe must also abandon unfavourable trade practices that perpetuate Africa's economic dependence. Monocultures such as the cultivation of rice in Senegal and Mauritania increase vulnerability to global market fluctuations²⁵. It is an example of the colonial legacy which demonstrates that there is still some way to go in Africa's quest for economic diversification and thus greater economic independence.

Furthermore, there is a need to promote fair trade agreements, facilitate access to European markets for African products, and invest in local capacity building to add value to raw materials. Spain can support this process through knowledge and technology

²⁴ World Bank. (2024b). *Africa's pulse. An analysis of issues shaping Africa's economic future* [online]. World Bank. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/baea7aea-da11-45e8-82ec-101ac5f1e6ab/content>

²⁵ Aldekoa, X., Borràs, E. and Aragó, L. (2024). A thousand rice canoes [online]. *La Vanguardia*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20240818/9874934/mil-cayucos-arroz.html>

transfer and increase funding for climate change adaptation projects in Africa, supporting communities that are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. For example, it can provide know-how in the fields of renewable energy, sustainable natural resource management, practices that safeguard biodiversity, ecosystems and the livelihoods of local communities.

The expansion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is opening up other opportunities for education, innovation and economic development. In this area, special attention is paid to the opportunities and challenges for African countries within the global context. The region is undergoing an accelerated digital transformation that, if properly managed, can improve economic competitiveness, facilitate social development and enhance regional integration. However, disparities in access to technology, poor infrastructure and regulatory challenges remain major obstacles.

According to the *GSMA Mobile Economy Report 2024*, the number of mobile Internet users reached 600 million in 2022, and this figure is expected to continue to grow to 800 million by 2025. This increase is mainly driven by smartphone adoption and the expansion of 4G and 5G coverage in key nations such as South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Egypt²⁶.

Spain, with its expertise in telecommunications, fintech, renewable energy and digital health, has opportunities for investment and collaboration, and can even act as a bridge between Africa and Europe to make the continent a partner in innovation and sustainable development. To maximise these opportunities, it is essential to address infrastructure challenges, establish sound regulatory frameworks, and foster inclusive and sustainable economic growth in the coming decades.

4.4. Inclusive social development

Socially, Africa is characterised by great cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as a rapidly growing young population. Inequality, poverty and lack of access to basic services such as education and health are major challenges. The legacy of colonialism continues to affect society, from the imposition of languages and educational

²⁶ GSMA (2024). *GSMA Mobile Economy Report 2024* [online]. GSMA. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-economy/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/260224-The-Mobile-Economy-2024.pdf>

models to the persistence of mentalities and power structures. Neo-colonialism perpetuates dependency and restricts the ability of African countries to take control of their own destiny. Building a more just, equitable and inclusive society is crucial for human development and the well-being of the population.

Spain can take advantage of its cultural diversity to build bridges of understanding with Africa, promoting intercultural dialogue and cooperation in education, culture and the arts. It can also support artistic and cultural creation in Africa by encouraging the exchange of experiences and collaboration between artists from both continents.

It should be remembered that, until the end of the 20th century, the dominant perspective in the field of African studies within Spanish academia was Eurocentric and imperialist, largely inherited from the Franco era. During Franco's regime, the Institute of African Studies (IDEA), created in 1945, became the main promoter of knowledge about Africa in Spain. However, IDEA's vision was marked by colonialism and paternalism, thus projecting a distorted image of African realities. This perspective was reinforced by the scant attention paid by Spanish academia to African history for most of the 20th century, in contrast to other European countries with a greater colonial presence on the continent.

From the 1980s onwards, with the arrival of democracy and the rise of post-colonial theories, there was a paradigm shift in Spanish Africanism. New research centres and groups of historians -deemed "pioneers"- emerged and began to question the Eurocentric view of Africa's past. These researchers focused on recovering the voice of the continent's own inhabitants using new methodologies and sources, such as oral history.

In the 21st century, interest in African history in Spain has continued to grow. Increased academic attention, with the creation of specific Master's degrees on the continent, has contributed to training a new generation of Africanist historians. Despite progress, African history remains a minority field within Spanish academia and there is still a great need for more institutional support, funding and integration with other research networks in order to consolidate its place in Spanish historiography²⁷.

²⁷ Cuadrado Bolaños, Jara, and Pablo Arconada Ledesma. «La Historia de África en España. ¿Hacia nuevos campos de investigación?». *HISPANIA NOVA. Primera Revista de Historia Contemporánea on-line en castellano. Segunda Época* 1 (2023): 47-67

Knowledge should therefore be a central aspect of Spain's strategy with Africa and should include promoting the teaching of African languages in Spain, as is done at Casa África with Wolof and Bambara.

4.5. The teaching of Spanish

Spanish, one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, is becoming increasingly important in sub-Saharan Africa, a region marked by its cultural, linguistic and economic diversity. Although Spanish has not had a historically predominant role in this region, as is the case with English or French, it is growing in relevance due to educational, diplomatic and commercial factors.

Teaching Spanish in Africa has become a key tool for opening up new opportunities. With more than 580 million speakers worldwide, Spanish is the second most spoken language by number of native speakers and the third most spoken language globally on the Internet. Spain has developed a renewed strategy to promote the teaching of Spanish in Africa and recognises the potential of the language as a cultural and economic bridge. This strategy focuses on boosting educational and cultural cooperation, promoting Spanish language learning and improving the quality of teaching. The initiative includes the opening of new schools, the training of teachers and the creation of teaching materials adapted to local needs.

One of the main drivers of the growth of Spanish in sub-Saharan Africa is its inclusion in the educational systems of several countries. Institutions such as Instituto Cervantes or the Directorate General for Spanish in the World, of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Union and Cooperation, and alliances with local governments have promoted the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language in a numerous countries.

Spanish is not only an educational and cultural tool, but also a strategic asset in foreign relations, as it facilitates communication and understanding in diplomatic, commercial and cultural spheres. The promotion of Spanish in Africa strengthens ties between Spain and African countries by creating an environment conducive to dialogue and collaboration in various fields, from economics to science and technology. It is also an asset in the integration processes of newly arrived African individuals in Spain.

A number of institutions and organisations work alongside the Instituto Cervantes, with a network of centres around the world, in key nations such as Morocco, Senegal and Egypt. The Instituto Cervantes does not limit itself to Spanish courses in the process of expanding to other regions, but also holds cultural activities aimed at bringing societies closer together.

The Directorate General for Spanish in the World was created in 2021 and is attached to the State Secretariat for Ibero-America and the Caribbean and Spanish in the World. Since its creation, it has been a central element of Spain's foreign policy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has underlined the importance of Spanish as a strategic cornerstone for strengthening international relations and promoting Spanish culture and economy in the international arena. Its work includes promoting Spanish in regions where it is not an official language, boosting Spanish as a factor of economic growth and international competitiveness, especially in the context of digitalisation and the knowledge economy, and consolidating Spanish as a language of prestige in diplomatic and international relations. The creation of this Directorate General reflects Spain's commitment to promoting its language and culture while recognising Spanish as a key tool for development and cultural cooperation.

The Spanish Agency of International Cooperation for Development (AECID) is another key player promoting Spanish in Africa, thanks to the funding of teacher training programmes and scholarships for teaching assistants, as well as other actions carried out in collaboration with the Instituto Cervantes.

Finally, Casa África focuses on providing support to the afore-said organisations and on organising the Africa-Spain meetings of Hispanic scholars, as well as bringing out the second edition of a monograph on the status of Spanish language teaching in sub-Saharan Africa, a research project that will be published in 2025 and will reveal impactful data on the growth of Spanish language teaching in the neighbouring continent. The first publication of this kind was brought out in 2015. It was coordinated by the Spanish Embassy in Kenya, the Instituto Cervantes and Casa África, and was carried out in collaboration with AECID and Spanish embassies in Africa. The first edition of this study revealed that almost 1.5 million people study Spanish in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the second edition promises to update and expand this data by providing a detailed overview of the progress and challenges of Spanish language teaching in the region.

4.6. Migration

Far from the image of a mass exodus to Europe that is sought to be portrayed by some political parties and other interest groups, the reality is that the majority of African migrants (51.6%) move to other countries within the continent. While Europe is a significant destination for African migrants (27% of those leaving the continent), it is crucial to note that most of them are regular migrants, which contradicts the narrative of irregular arrivals en masse constantly used by the far right. It is also true that irregular migratory routes, whether to Europe or to the Gulf countries, present considerable dangers: migrants face violence from smugglers, harsh travel conditions, the risk of becoming victims of trafficking and labour exploitation, and mistreatment by some authorities.

The African-born population represents 15.6 % of the total number of foreign-born people living in Spain and, of them, Moroccans represent over 73% of the total number of individuals from Africa, well above Senegalese (6.4%) or Algerians (5.1%)²⁸. Recent studies confirm that the primary profile of the migrant arriving in Spain is female and Latin American, as explained by organisations such as the Por Causa foundation. Yet it is also true that 2024 has been the year with the highest number of irregular migrants arriving at the Canary Islands by sea.

According to EFE data, in 2024, the islands were the main entry route for irregular migrants to Spain for the fifth consecutive year, the Canary Islands route setting unprecedented records. At the start of 2025, the Spanish daily *El País* placed the number of people arriving on the islands during the previous year at 45,328. The EFE agency also pointed out that, despite being at record highs, the Canary Islands route is still far from the Mediterranean history (62,034 arrivals until November in the central Mediterranean and 63,935 in the eastern Mediterranean). The International Organisation for Migration estimates that almost 1,400 people died or went missing attempting to reach Spain by boat or canoe. However,

²⁸ INE (2024). *Estadística Continua de Población (ECP). 01/04/2024. Datos provisionales* [online]. Instituto Nacional de Estadística. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://ine.es/dyngs/INEbase/es/operacion.htm?c=Estadistica_C&cid=1254736177095&menu=ultiDatos&idp=1254735572981

Caminando Fronteras places the figure at 10,457 victims, which means that twenty-eight lives are lost at sea every day on the world's most dangerous route for this type of human movement.

Intra-African migratory movements remain in the majority and, driven by the search for economic opportunities, are concentrated in countries such as South Africa, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire. The most important migration routes to the neighbouring continent are in West and East Africa, where two-way flows are evident, reflecting the temporary nature of their work.

Spain, as part of Europe's southern border, becomes a transit territory for many African migrants seeking to reach countries such as France or Britain, where language can facilitate integration. African immigration to Spain has increased in recent decades, driven mainly by the Moroccan community. Factors such as the visa waiver in the past and the high visa issuance rate today explain this trend. It is important to note that migration can also have positive effects for African countries, such as remittances, the acquisition of new skills and knowledge by returning migrants, and the creation of transnational labour and support networks.

Migration presents a number of challenges for both African countries and their citizens, such as the loss of human capital (brain drain) and economic destabilisation in the countries of origin. While remittances sent by migrants can contribute to their countries' economies, they can also generate economic imbalances. For example, the departure of Senegalese and Mauritanian fishermen due to competition from European boats negatively affects the local economy and generates tensions in coastal communities.

In any case, migration is a long-standing phenomenon that is part of our past, present and, inexorably, future. They should not be characterised as a problem, nor should they push, as a primary response, for the detention of irregular migration for any other reason than the migrants' own safety.

With regard to the treatment of African migrations in Spain, in addition to the urgent need to change discourses and narratives linking them to problems, massive invasions and conflict, we must also point to examples of countries that have implemented successful migration policies and have demonstrated that migration may be an opportunity. These examples are based on the premise that effective migration management

requires an approach that considers the needs of both the receiving country and migrants.

Experiences to be considered and replicated may include the US Diversity Immigrant Visa or Green Card programme, the Canadian strategy to attract migrants, projects aimed at recruiting *Gastarbeiter* or “guest workers” in Germany, or French policies aimed at increasing its international prestige in areas such as the military (with the Foreign Legion), sports and culture. Since 2010, the Campus France mobility programme has facilitated the selective immigration of young university students, making France the first non-English-speaking country to grant study visas. On the negative side, one may consider the example of Japan, which has traditionally not been in favour of immigration, which has affected the progressive ageing of its society, or the Brexit campaign which relied on hate narratives that portrayed immigration as a threat to the security and well-being of the British²⁹.

According to the Spanish Observatory on Racism and Xenophobia, job and educational discrimination of the foreign population in Spain is costing it 17 billion euros, equivalent to 1.3% of GDP. It points out that not only does discrimination profoundly affect the individuals concerned, but also deprives the country of important economic and social potential. By not taking full advantage of the talent and skills of the foreign population, we are missing out on opportunities for growth and innovation that could benefit all of Spanish society³⁰.

The issue of unaccompanied children and adolescents arriving in the Canary Islands, whose swift and effective referral to the other Spanish autonomous communities has been a historical demand of the archipelago, deserves an entirely separate chapter dedicated to it. This demand has become more pressing in recent times, following a spike in arrivals to the islands by sea which

²⁹ Komenan, D. (2021). Destino Schengen [en línea]. *Mundo Negro*. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://mundonegro.es/destino-schengen/>

³⁰ Observatorio del racismo y xenofobia. (2024). *Informe OBERAXE* [online]. Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.inclusion.gob.es/w/el-impacto-economico-de-la-discriminacion-laboral-y-educativa-hacia-la-poblacion-extranjera-en-espana-es-de-17.000-millones-de-euros-un-1-3-del-pib>

has left almost 5,500 children and young people in the care of the Canary Islands administration.

4.7. Artificial intelligence and disinformation

Within the current context, two other areas deserve special attention: artificial intelligence and disinformation. Although disinformation is not a new phenomenon, combined with AI, it has the potential to change both the multilateralism agenda and hitherto familiar power structures.

Indeed, artificial intelligence is already transforming geopolitics, with countries investing significantly in its development to boost their military, economic and social power. States that lead in AI research and development gain significant advantages and influence global economic systems, military capabilities and technological infrastructures. This competition for AI supremacy is redefining alliances and power structures, as well as becoming a key element in contemporary global power struggles. In developing countries, especially in Africa, the adoption of AI may offer significant opportunities for economic growth and improved quality of life, but it also poses unique challenges in terms of infrastructure and access to technology.

Artificial intelligence has become a key topic for diplomatic negotiations as countries and international organisations seek to establish global norms and governance frameworks. Diplomats are negotiating treaties and agreements that address the ethical, security and privacy challenges posed by AI. At national, regional and international levels, regulatory frameworks are being drawn up to maximise the benefits of AI and minimise its risks. International organisations such as the United Nations are increasingly including AI on their agendas and promoting discussions to define its acceptable uses, mitigate its risks, and encourage international cooperation for its development³¹.

³¹ UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation. (2019). *The age of digital interdependence: report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation* [online]. New York, UN. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/DigitalCooperation-report-for%20web.pdf>; United Nations (2024): *Resolution 78/265. Harnessing the opportunities of secure and reliable artificial intelligence systems for sustainable development. General Assembly, 63rd plenary meeting*. New York, UN; United Nations (2024): *Global Digital Compact: rev. 1* [online]. UN. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/global-digital-compact>;

These negotiations are of great relevance in Africa as the continent seeks to balance technological development with the protection of its resources and the sovereignty of its nations. It is also important to note that the data infrastructure in Africa requires significant development. Today, the entire continent has fewer data centres than the Netherlands, which is a clear indicator of the deep digital divide. Due to this lack of infrastructure, African countries are forced to store their data abroad, mainly in Europe and North America, and increasingly in China. This practice not only raises serious security and privacy concerns, but also severely limits Africa's ability to harness its own data to drive economic growth and foster innovation³².

The ethical challenges posed by Artificial Intelligence include questions of fairness, accountability and transparency. AI systems make decisions that may have a significant impact on individuals and communities, raising concerns about discrimination and pre-existing biases. The ethical development of AI is therefore a key issue on the international agenda, with ongoing efforts to create standards to ensure that AI systems operate fairly and without unintended harmful consequences.

European Parliament (2022): *Decision (EU) 2022/2481 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 establishing the Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030* [online]. OJ L 323, 19.12.2022, p. 4-26. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/26514cb9-7f40-11ed-9887-01aa75ed71a1>; European Parliament. (2022). *European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade*. European Union; European Commission. (2021). *2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade* [online]. European Union [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/9fc32029-7af3-4ea2-8b7a-4cd283e8e89e_en?filename=cellar_12e835e2-81af-11eb-9ac9-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02_DOC_1.pdf&prefLang=es European Union. (2024). *Ley de Inteligencia Artificial de la Unión Europea* [online]. European Union [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/es/> council of the European Commission. (2023). *European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade 2023/C 23/01*. [online]. European Union [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AJOC_2023_023_R_0001; European Commission (.S. f.). *Global Gateway* [online]. European Union [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: EU-Africa: Global Gateway Investment Package - European Commission (europa.eu)

³² Kurbalija, J. (2024). *Digital sovereignty for Africa?* [Key lecture] [online]. International Affairs Forum. [Accessed on: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.ia-forum.org/Files/YUHEQT.pdf>

For developing countries, and especially in Africa, it is crucial that these standards consider the rights and needs of their populations and prevent AI from reproducing existing discrimination. It is worth recalling in this context that the ethics and governance of artificial intelligence are dominated by Western thinking. Given that AI is largely developed by countries in the northern hemisphere, discussions on AI governance and ethics still lack important voices from the global South. This also means that there are valuable approaches to AI ethics and governance that are not represented and may be overlooked.

Disinformation also presents several significant challenges to diplomacy, as it may distort public perception and international relations, making it difficult to make informed decisions and build trust between nations. The spreading of fake news and manipulation of information can exacerbate tensions, create misunderstandings and undermine diplomatic efforts to resolve conflicts and foster global cooperation. Moreover, the speed and scope of disinformation in the digital age forces diplomats to adapt quickly and develop effective strategies to counter these threats and protect the integrity of international communications.

The proliferation of fake news and disinformation campaigns is often driven by professional external actors through AI, and the international community must be clear that, manipulation of information can have deadly consequences especially in countries in conflict, as disinformation is used to generate instability in fragile environments, fuel armed clashes, and jeopardise even the national security of countries.

Disinformation is also a challenge for peacetime governance in African nations, as it may influence electoral outcomes, delegitimise democratic processes and erode public trust in state institutions and the media. Moreover, if it occurs within a context where democracy has been set back by the manipulation of electoral processes, the extension of military mandates, malpractices, corruption and institutional weakness, it can widen social divisions, endanger human rights, and negatively affect public assets such as healthcare and the economy. It should also be taken into account that, in recent years, the information scenario has acquired a chaotic nature due to the high volume of people who have no knowledge of the communication phenomenon - mostly in terms of techniques and ethical responsibility - who send and forward messages through social networks without verifying whether they

are true or not, which can affect the actions, morals or reputation of any person, government or country.

Effective digital cooperation requires boosting collaborative work, despite current tensions, and laying the foundations for an inclusive digital economy and society. It requires policies and investments that enable people to use technology to build better lives and a more peaceful and trusting world. Moreover, it is crucial that multilateralism -or a better model- includes multiple actors, not only governments, but also a much more diverse range of actors such as civil society, academics, technologists, and the private sector. A great many more diverse voices must be included in these discussions, especially from developing countries and traditionally marginalised groups.

4.8. Prospects for energy development in Africa

Currently, over 600 million people in Africa have no access to electricity and almost 970 million have no access to clean cooking fuels. This leads to a dependence on traditional biomass, which systematically exacerbates public health problems and limits socio-economic development. Moreover, Africa is already facing more severe climate change than other regions, with extreme weather events, water stress and reduced food production, which in turn contribute to increased migration and regional instability.

In theory, the International Energy Agency's *2022 Africa Energy Outlook* outlines the desirable Sustainable Africa Scenario (SAS), which portrays a utopian future where Africa achieves all of its energy-related goals, including universal access to modern energy services by 2030 and full implementation of the continent's climate commitments.

Realistically, however, this would require a significant increase in investment in clean energy and strong leadership from African governments.

Objectively, Africa has 60% of the world's best solar resources, but only 1% of global installed solar power capacity. Its projection would mean that solar energy would become the most competitive energy source for the continent by 2030. Achieving universal access to electricity in Africa requires connecting 90 million people per year by 2030, a rate three times higher than today. The most feasible solutions include the expansion of national grids, as well as stand-alone solar systems and mini-grids in rural areas.

Energy efficiency is a key parameter for moderating demand growth and keeping costs affordable. Efficient energy use can reduce electricity demand and relieve pressure on existing infrastructure. From an industrial perspective, Africa will not be able to grow and will struggle to industrialise its economy; energy demand will increase in sectors such as agriculture, transport and manufacturing. Without electrification of agriculture, for example, it is impossible to increase productivity or create industrial sectors to process raw agricultural products.

There is a clear need for increased investment in Africa's energy sector, which is estimated to require more than \$190 billion annually by 2030. Two thirds of this investment should be directed towards clean energy. Investment in energy infrastructure is not only essential to boost electrification, but also to strengthen energy security and reduce dependence on fossil fuel imports.

Africa must dramatically increase its investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency in order to meet its development goals and combat climate change. Growth opportunities, especially in solar energy and green hydrogen, can transform the continent by modernising it and enabling the generation of downstream industries, but this will require the continued support of international institutions and a strong local policy framework.

The reality is that energy development in Africa is a key priority for both the UN SDGs and the EU's external policies. Africa has abundant and diversified energy resources, including vast fossil fuel reserves, high wind and solar potential, as well as significant hydropower resources. However, as has been said before and as we would like to consciously reiterate, more than 600 million people lack access to electricity, based on data from the African Union and the International Energy Agency. While it is true that investments in renewable energy have increased in recent decades, it is also true that they represent only a fraction of the total potential.

It should be noted that Spain, with its privileged geographical position and political relations with countries in West and North Africa, is in a position to contribute to a proactive approach supporting energy infrastructures that guarantee sustainability and promote the very energy agency we are referring to.

Along this line of reasoning, it is necessary to highlight the value of the Global Gateway European Union programme, promoted by the European Commission and the EU High Representative. It

is envisaged as a new European strategy to boost smart, clean and secure links in digital, energy and transport sectors, as well as to enhance health, education and research systems and, on a complementary basis, targeting highly ambitious goals such as the ecological transition, the digitalisation of society, or greater cooperation for development.

Examples include the agreements signed between the EU and various African countries, such as the one between the EU and Mauritania in June 2023 launching the affordable, clean and green electricity programme. It identifies energy access as a strategic priority for Mauritania, a country with a low overall rate of electricity access (48%) and significant inequality in terms of electricity access between urban areas (82%) and rural areas (6%), high production costs that are largely due to dependence on fossil fuels, an underdeveloped electricity grid, and the challenging integration of renewables into the national grid.

It is also worth highlighting the agreement signed in late-2024 by Jozef Sikela, European Commissioner for International Partnerships, and the Mauritanian government, which focuses on priority funding areas such as green hydrogen and economic growth, health and social protection, and migration management. Commissioner Sikela perceived the agreement as a sign that the EU is delivering on its promises quickly and effectively, and that it goes beyond simple financial commitments to build strong and mutually beneficial partnerships as a basis to be built upon by African countries in order to promote inclusive development, boost social cohesion and stability, and stimulate sustainable growth.

There are several examples of bilateral energy relations between African and European countries, but one that employs Global Gateway funding is the Green Hydrogen Strategy and Roadmap for Kenya. In it, the EU commits significant financial amounts in grants to fund public and private industries in green hydrogen in Kenya, with the consequent upstream development of its renewable energy industry. This will in turn lead to the consolidation of sustainable agricultural value chains for climate resilience and environmental protection.

These and similar considerations related to climate change, the African electricity gap, and early warning and awareness-raising systems that are essential for climate-related disaster prevention have been discussed in some of the attached articles, and are

among the key concerns in my reflections on the present and future of the African continent and its development.

The war in Ukraine has made evident the importance of Europe for the supply of cereals and grains from the African continent, but it has also made it clear that Africa is positioning itself as the place the entire world is looking to today: a space that may become not only Europe's energy lifeline, but also an constitute opportunity to reevaluate our country's geostrategic role.

5. Conclusions

The relationship between Spain and Africa is at a turning point and marked by the opportunity to establish a partnership based on historical justice, mutual respect and shared benefit. Spain can play a key role as a bridge, promoting an approach that moves away from past models of intervention and prioritises genuine and equitable cooperation, addressing shared priorities such as governance, security, sustainable development, migration management and the digital revolution.

The untold story of Africa's economic potential¹

“The media narratives surrounding the African economy are a highly important factor that unfortunately contributes to the business community's reluctance to invest and open up markets in our neighbouring continent”.

May 2024

The African Development Bank (AfDB) released its annual monitoring report on the African economy at the end of May 2024. In such a complex and polarised global context, with enormous crises unfolding all over the world, the overall results for the African continent are positive and, dare I add, hopeful: The outlook for Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is positive, with a projected growth of 3.7% in 2024 and 4.3% in 2025.

In terms of GDP growth, Africa is doing very well, second only to Asia, with ten African countries among the twenty fastest growing economies in the world. As many as seventeen African

¹ Published in Kiosco Insular, eldiario.es and Canarias 7

countries will witness their economies grow by more than 5% this year and twenty-four are expected to exceed 5% growth by 2025. However, according to the heads of this pan-African financial institution, these figures are still not enough to eradicate poverty and inequality on the continent. To do so, they add, an estimated steady growth at “7-10% per year for the next 40 years to break out of the vicious circle of poverty” would be required. This means that much remains to be done, such as providing electricity to the nearly 600 million Africans who still live without it. This is an issue of fundamental importance, essential for development and which will not only make it possible to provide energy to Africa, but also supply European countries with energy shortages.

Reading this article and the harsh reality of these figures, which, despite being positive, are still far from sufficient, has made me contemplate the importance of raising awareness of the economic potential of the African continent in our country. We have a steadily growing market of 1.3 billion people, where the middle class is steadily growing and, with it, their purchasing power and demand for goods and services.

Having said that, what is stopping our companies from deciding to invest in the continent? I am convinced that there is a crucial factor, and that is the scarcity and biased nature of the economic information that we receive of the African continent. And this is what I'd like to talk about today, following a report by an African media organisation that specialises in studying the image and narratives of Africa, both within the continent itself and around the world. It is called *Africa No Filter* and one of its heads was invited by Casa África a few months ago to our IV Africa-Spain Meeting of Journalists, organised jointly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Madrid.

The work of these journalists is possibly the first in-depth study of economic journalism related to the African continent. And the results are striking, because they point to the perpetuating of stereotypes in economic affairs much like general news: much more negative than positive, oversimplification of the continent (in this case, almost always focused on Nigeria and South Africa, the two most economically powerful countries) and always in terms of what foreign powers (China, Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom and France) seek, extract or pursue for their own benefit. Indeed, 70% of economic reporting on Africa

in the international media is dominated by references to these foreign powers.

Creativity and talent are often ignored in business reporting (any success is attributed to technology and not to the people behind it, if they are African), there is little focus on youth and women, and more than half of business reporting focuses on laws and government regulations, and less on the African companies themselves, their successes or innovations. The spectacular news of the launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has been unnoticed by the international media, and the predominant focus of international media is on foreign direct investment (FDI), which perpetuates the image of dependence and the need to rely on the outside world.

Thus, based on the aforesaid analysis, it is essential to not only to call for more balanced economic information on the African continent, but it may also be useful to suggest approaches and concerns, because there is a wealth of data that is likely to surprise not only readers, but also journalists themselves. Let me list a few:

- Africa's youth population is increasingly more educated and the fastest growing workforce in the world. This largely young population is doing all it can to receive an education.
- According to surveys, most citizens in Africa are willing to pay more taxes to fund training programmes for their youth.
- Three quarters of African youth in education have stated in surveys that they want to start their own business in the next five years. What's more, the continent has the highest percentage of adult entrepreneurs in the world.
- Internet searches are also a highly significant indicator: eight of the top ten nations worldwide with the highest number of searches for the term "women's entrepreneurship" are in Africa. Similarly, eight of the ten countries in the world where the term "business" was searched in 2021 were African. And when searching for the term "entrepreneurship", six African countries are within the global top ten.
- Six of the ten fastest growing economies in the world are African.
- The continent is currently home to the most dynamic mobile phone and telecommunications market in the world. It is also

the world's largest user of mobile banking (Spain's Bizum service has been operating for several years in many African countries) and the fastest growing fintech market.

- In the field of computer programming, Africa currently has the fastest growing community of developers in the world. At the same time, the tech startup ecosystem is also the most dynamic, and after the Middle East, the fastest growing market for the video games sector.
- Vehicle sales and purchases have had the most proportional growth, with an increasing demand for passenger mobility.
- Africa already has over 400 companies with annual revenues in excess of \$1 billion.
- It is beginning to take advantage of the African Continental Free Trade Area, which is expected to boost trade between African nations by more than 52% from 2025 onwards. This is an essential key to considering investments in the continent, with the prospect of access to the world's largest trading market and an economy of 1.3 billion people.
- Lastly, a reference to current affairs. Just this week, for example, something extremely important has happened in South Africa, the most industrialised country on the continent. For the first time since the end of Apartheid, Nelson Mandela's party, the African National Congress, (the final results are not available at the time of writing) appears to have lost the absolute majority it has held for so many years. In order to continue governing, it will have to enter into coalitions with other parties, and this also has economic consequences, both positive (i.e. if controls are increased, authorities' self-demand also increases...) or negative.

Many more such figures and statistics may be listed which prove, as I have said, that in Africa, we really do have a neighbour with enormous potential. It is essential that institutional figures strive to raise awareness, but it is even more important, in my opinion, that the media make an effort to approach Africa from an unbiased perspective and shed light on the many events that are taking place and their economic aspects. If we fail to do so, we must remember that others are already doing it. And in our case, from Spain and specifically from the Canary Islands, we are in a privileged position to attempt to do so.

Synthesis

Africa, with a projected GDP growth of 3.7% in 2024 and 4.3% in 2025, ranks as the second fastest growing region globally after Asia. Ten African countries are among the twenty fastest growing economies in the world, and twenty-four countries are expected to exceed 5% growth by 2025. However, to eradicate poverty, the continent would need to grow by 7-10% per year for several decades.

Despite this potential, Africa faces structural problems such as lack of access to electricity for 600 million people and a media narrative that perpetuates negative stereotypes. Only 30% of economic reporting on Africa highlights its domestic achievements; the rest is focused on foreign powers and their interests. This bias restricts the perception of Africa as a viable economic partner.

However, the data are promising: Africa has the fastest growing and most educated youth population in the world, with a strong drive towards entrepreneurship. It is a leader in mobile banking, technology startups and video game development, as well as hosting four hundred companies that generate over one billion dollars annually. The African Continental Free Trade Area, which will boost intra-African trade by 52% by 2025, reinforces its attraction as the world's largest emerging market.

Given its proximity and opportunities, Spain remains in a privileged position to take advantage of this potential, as long as it overcomes prejudices and opts for an informed and strategic vision.

Africa's electricity gap²

"Limited electricity generation capacity is possibly the biggest development challenge faced by a fast-growing continent."

June 2024

The other day, diving into our routine monitoring of news from the continent at Casa África (called the *Africa Dossier*, sent to all subscribers in their mailboxes every working day) I was stunned by a fact: Heathrow Airport (London) alone consumes more energy than an entire African country such as Sierra Leone, with around 8.5 million inhabitants.

² Published in Kiosco Insular, eldiario.es and Canarias 7

I have already spoken on other occasions about the African continent's energy potential for the world, but today I wanted to draw attention to one of Africa's most urgent needs and which explains, to a great extent, the enormous wealth gap that separates it from the rest of the world: electricity generation.

Any discussion regarding Africa and development today includes the need to improve its electricity generation capacity. Without electricity there can be no development, no job creation, and no prosperity. The reality today is that the so-called development gap between the African continent and the rest of the world, in electrical terms, has taken on such colossal dimensions that, rather than a gap, it has become a chasm.

On this planet, three out of four people without access to electricity live in the African continent. These are approximately 600 million individuals (of a population of 1.3 billion), 98% of whom are in the so-called Sub-Saharan Africa. In Europe (450 million inhabitants), all citizens have access to electricity.

The comparison with the rest of the world is devastating: while Africa is home to 18% of the world's current population, it only consumes 6% of the global energy generated. Another comparative figure: with the exception of South Africa (the most "electrified" country), energy consumption per African individual is only 180 kilowatt hours (kWh). The average consumption in the EU is 6500 kWh and in the US, 13,000 kWh. In other words, an American person consumes on average 72 times more energy than an African person, and a European, 36 times more.

Major energy development plans have already been drawn up for the African continent, but one wonders whether the grand announcements of multilateral institutions, with grandiose names of cooperation projects, will actually be put into practice.

Just one example: the other day, the International Energy Agency warned that only 12% of the commitments enthusiastically announced by all countries at the last COP28 to promote renewable energies have been fulfilled.

Much work remains to be done in Africa and the outlook is not always optimistic: demographics are advancing relentlessly and sometimes at a faster pace than may be provided for by commissioning new electricity infrastructure. This also means that available systems are unable to cope with the increased demand.

It poses a daunting challenge: for example, in Nigeria alone, between January 2010 and June 2022, there were 222 partial or total grid collapses, what we call here an energy “zero”. In South Africa (note that I’ve mentioned the two economic powerhouses on the continent, Nigeria and South Africa, just to give an idea of the challenge faced), people regularly live with power cuts (called load shedding), sometimes for 2, 3, 4, 8 or even 12 hours a day.

Unless 24-hour stable electricity supply is guaranteed, investors will be wary of investing in factories. So remember when you hear about the need to industrialise the African continent, that the first challenge to be met is to ensure that the continent has stable electricity systems that are capable of fulfilling the demand. The lack of a good electricity system across the continent explains why two thirds of the population is forced to cook with charcoal or wood, with all the attendant pollution and health-related implications.

As we can see, this is a crucial issue for the development of Africa, a continent of paradoxes from an energy point of view. The first is the “resource curse” itself. How can it be that the richest continent in terms of natural resources is also the continent with the lowest energy capacity?

Secondly, faced with this energy chasm, and within the framework of global commitments to decarbonisation in order to mitigate the effects of climate change, developed countries are disinclined to develop infrastructures exploiting Africa’s large oil and gas reserves, rather attempting to encourage new clean energy projects.

It does have a certain logic, since the effort required must be collective and worldwide, but I think that a great deal of empathy is needed: How can we ask African countries, which are most directly affected by climate change, to not exploit raw materials that can bring wealth, development and the ability to generate electricity to themselves? How can we justify this hypocrisy when we continue to obtain the energy sources powering our industries from the continent?

Kenya’s President, William Ruto (precisely one of the African countries that is the most firmly committed to the development of renewables), penned an article the other day in which he summed up the damage caused by the climate emergency in a single sentence: “My own country, Kenya, has just emerged from its longest drought on record, only to suffer devastating floods”. Ruto’s article discussed

climate change and subsequently reflected on the burden of foreign debt on African countries, but that is another article in itself.

What he also sought to say was that, in addition to being empathetic and understanding the need for a certain exception in African cases, it is essential that these major commitments announced for Africa take into account energy as the highest priority. For example, the Global Gateway, EU's grand geopolitical plan, has the concept of "accelerating the green transition" as one of its priorities for cooperation with Africa (150 billion euros in total). Other powers, in their geopolitical strategy, have committed large sums of money to electrification (the US, for example, pledged \$7 billion in financial support for energy development in a plan called Power Africa).

International consultants such as McKinsey already estimate the investment required to provide electricity to the continent over the next twenty-five years at around USD 400 billion. The African Union itself, the African Development Bank and the World Bank are aware of the importance of this matter, and rank it the highest in the list of requirements.

There is especially a need for isolated electricity systems, based on renewable energies, because given the length and breadth of the continent, it is impossible to build an electricity grid connecting the entire continent. And in this regard, we must remember that the Canary Islands specialises in and is a global example of development.

Cooperation in this area is essential, as I have already mentioned on several occasions in other articles, to promote renewable energies and to make Africa a great *hub* for green hydrogen, yet all of this revenue generated by natural resources in the continent must go hand in hand with helping and ensuring that all benefits boost the electrification of the continent. It is an essential recipe for job creation and therefore a decisive factor for young Africans to look forward to the possibility of entrepreneurship and a future in their own countries.

Synthesis

Lack of access to electricity in Africa poses one of the biggest obstacles to its development. With 600 million people without electricity, the continent is home to 75% of the world's energy poor. On average, an African individual consumes 180 kWh per year compared to 6500 kWh for a European or 13000 kWh for an

American person. This “electricity gap” not only limits economic growth, but also perpetuates poverty, dependence on polluting fuels and lack of opportunities.

International electrification plans are progressing slowly: only 12% of global commitments for renewable energies have been met. Moreover, energy development in Africa faces two paradoxes: firstly, it is the richest continent in terms of natural resources, but the least electrified; and secondly, restrictions on exploiting fossil fuels imposed by developed countries that are themselves still dependent on fossil fuels.

To close this gap, decentralised electricity systems based on renewable energy and investments estimated at USD 400 billion over twenty-five years are needed. Prioritising electrification would not only boost employment and entrepreneurship, but also enable young Africans to build a future in their own countries.

Africa, climate change and early warnings ³

“Seventy per cent of all deaths from extreme weather events within the last 20 years have occurred in the poorest countries, which still have too few and insufficient early warning systems to respond to major natural disasters”.

June 2024

The floods in Kenya or Côte d’Ivoire in June 2024 have once again highlighted the devastating impact of climate change-related phenomena in Africa. In Kenya, more than 200 people lost their lives, thousands were displaced, and almost 2,000 schools were destroyed. The country’s entire educational system had to be shut down and experts have concluded that the economic impact will be felt for years to come. In Côte d’Ivoire, it is heartbreaking to witness the collapse of buildings and infrastructure and to watch, for yet another year, how the deluge on cities like Abidjan claims lives, overwhelms us and destroys parts of the city.

The cruellest thing about this phenomenon in Kenya is that the rains came in mid-April as a blessing, a miracle. These were the first heavy rains after five years of severe droughts which were also due to climate change. But this was terrible, torrential rainfall that washed away entire neighbourhoods of villages

³ Published in Kiosco Insular, eldiario.es and Canarias 7

and towns in the region. The same happened in Côte d'Ivoire, a country that was in the media spotlight this spring when unusually heavy rains associated with the *El Niño* weather phenomenon in December last year and subsequent droughts now being interrupted by new heavy rains, have resulted in poor cocoa harvests and rising prices for our very own luxury good, chocolate.

The severity of these extreme events highlights not only the region's vulnerability, but also the urgent need to improve climate conditions monitoring infrastructure, something that I have discussed previously, and which continues to be one of Africa's sorely felt needs and is still worryingly lacking.

The lack of weather stations in Africa prevents accurate and timely forecasting, exacerbating the consequences of natural disasters and limiting the ability of governments and communities to prepare and respond effectively.

Investment in early warning systems is urgently required. In addition to the tragic loss of life, it is worth noting that a recent World Bank study argued that investing \$1 billion in early warning systems would help to prevent \$35 billion in losses every year. The information provided by these systems helps to prepare populations and infrastructure for extreme weather events.

The reality is challenging, as demonstrated by numerous data: firstly, that 60% of all Africans do not have access to early warning systems, the lowest rate of any region in the world. Secondly, that over the last fifty years, around 70% of all deaths from climate-related disasters have occurred in the world's 46 poorest countries. Most of the countries on this list are in Africa. And thirdly, that extreme weather events related to climate change have made such risks fifteen times more deadly in Africa, South Asia, South and Central America and small island states, than in the rest of the world, i.e. in rich countries.

As a more concrete example, a study published in the journal *Nature* highlighted the "disproportionate" toll paid by Africa in terms of the impact of extreme weather events: between 2000 and 2022, the continent had more severe floods and deaths than Europe and North America combined, and there were several shameful comparisons, such as the one pointing out that while a hundred people died in North America from Hurricane Ida

(where residents were warned before it hit), Cyclone Idai killed over thousand people in Mozambique and Malawi, as it caught the local population by surprise. Both were extreme phenomena with certain similarities, with winds in excess of 200 kilometres per hour.

Preparedness and coordinated responses to these phenomena are essential if we are to avoid casualties and major economic losses. Their implementation is simply a matter of investment and management: multi-level hydro-meteorological systems, which allow immediate monitoring, forecasting and prediction, are highly effective in providing detailed forecasts of extreme events up to six hours in advance. Six hours that may be immensely useful in the event of any extreme phenomenon.

The problem is the glaring gap on the African continent, which also constitutes another development chasm compared to the countries of the global North: according to data from 2022, there were as many as 636 weather radar stations covering 20 million square kilometres and 1.1 billion inhabitants between Europe and the United States. In 2023, there were only 37 stations covering 30 million square kilometres and 1.3 billion inhabitants in Africa. And half of the African weather stations do not provide data as accurately as European and North American stations do.

In recent years, we have seen how the United Nations and the African Union have been taking steps to improve in this field, as they are aware of its positive impact. In 2022, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched *Early Warnings for All*, a global initiative to bring early warning systems to everyone on Earth by 2027. The following year, a specialised plan for Africa, the Early Warnings for All Action Plan for Africa, was unveiled in Nairobi.

The information that has been slowly gathered shows that steps are indeed being taken. For example, the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) recently endorsed a roadmap to accelerate and scale up the implementation of the EW4All initiative, but also called for greater cooperation to truly achieve the goal of ensuring that all countries have effective hazard systems in place in just three years.

“To establish robust early warning systems, the international community and governments must provide them with greater political and strategic support, and commit to significant investments

in infrastructure, technology and training,” said WMO president Abdulla Al Mandous in his closing speech at a meeting in Geneva (Switzerland).

Among EU states, Denmark, for example, also declared recently that it would invest five million euros as collaboration within in the framework of EW4All to establish early warning services in five African countries: Niger, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.

I have long felt that this is a potential collaboration where Spain could be of great use to the African continent. As a matter of fact, back in 2020, Casa África launched the proposal to gradually establish an Ibero-African network of climate change offices that would improve the capacity to generate early warnings and facilitate teamwork. Spain’s know-how and technology is well known globally, therefore we can be of great use in a subject that we are aware is of great interest to our neighbouring nations. Once again, I believe that such a partnership would not benefit just our African neighbours, but given that we are a part of their neighbourhood, Spain is also experiencing a climate change that recognises no borders. These initiatives therefore can only make life better for all of us.

Synthesis

Climate change is exacerbating extreme events in Africa, such as the recent floods in Kenya and Côte d’Ivoire, which left hundreds dead and thousands displaced. This climate vulnerability is compounded by the lack of early warning systems which would save lives and mitigate damage.

In Africa, 60% of the population does not have access to early warnings, the lowest rate in the world. This is in contrast to regions such as Europe and the United States, which have advanced monitoring and response systems. While Cyclone Idai in Mozambique caused over 1,000 deaths, Hurricane Ida in North America had a much smaller toll thanks to advance warnings.

Investing in hydrometeorological systems could transform this reality. A World Bank study estimates that \$1 billion spent on this infrastructure would prevent losses of \$35 billion per year. However, there are only 37 weather radar stations in Africa, compared to 636 in Europe and the United States.

The UN's global initiative, Early Warnings for All, seeks to ensure effective systems worldwide by 2027, with a dedicated plan for Africa. Countries such as Denmark have already announced investments to implement these technologies in African nations, but further international cooperation is needed.

Boosting early warning systems in Africa would not only save lives on the continent, but would also benefit all nations, as climate change is a threat without borders. Initiatives such as the proposed Ibero-African network of climate change offices highlight the importance of global collaboration in this urgent cause.

Looking south⁴

"At a complex time in geopolitical relations, marked by issues such as war and climate change, it is necessary to pay more attention than ever to the events taking place in the Sahel and Africa.

June 2024

In a world as turbulent as the one we live in, geopolitics has returned to the front pages of the newspapers with the events in Gaza, the possible consequences of the US or French elections, or, in terms of Spain, the recent visit of Felipe VI to the Baltic States, with special support and recognition for the Spanish military units currently serving there, all within the context of the tensions with Russia on Europe's eastern border.

While there is much discussion regarding the implications of these issues on our lives, and we look beyond our borders for answers, what remains unchanged and is still surprising, is the continued lack of interest in the African continent displayed by both the public and experts, coupled with an enormous ignorance of the continent's increasing geopolitical importance. For these reasons, let's talk today about three issues that, from a geopolitical perspective, have not been paid the attention and reflection they deserve.

First of all, I would like to recall that jihadism remains a major threat in many parts of the African continent and especially in the Sahel. In fact, there is almost no mention of how the security crisis in this part of the world is spreading to the coastal countries along the Gulf of Guinea: Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire and

⁴ Published in Kiosco Insular, eldiario.es and Canarias 7

Ghana. As is often the case in Africa, jihadist groups are exploiting structural weaknesses, frustrations of all kinds and resentments against governments that do not always respond to their citizens' grievances to the latter's satisfaction, in order to recruit young people into their ranks.

I recently read an article by Óscar Guijarro re-published by the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE) entitled "The expansion of jihadism from the Sahel to the coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea" which I found extremely interesting, especially for Spain. These coastal nations, which appear more stable politically than the Sahel countries, have huge socio-economic inequalities and divides in various areas (poor north versus a richer south), as well as religious differences that jihadist groups exploit in order to consolidate their influence. The strategic location of these countries and the presence of nature reserves that are used both as resource and refuge facilitate the expansion of jihadism and organised crime, including arms and drug trafficking. While it is true that the European Union is providing support to address the jihadist threat and that the countries concerned have adopted military and cross-border security measures, I believe that at the very least more attention needs to be paid to this part of the world. Awareness of the significant penetration of jihadist movements in Africa and their impact on global geopolitics should be a priority. Thousands of people are killed and displaced in West Africa as a result of violence of all kinds, and we cannot be oblivious to it.

An acquaintance of Casa África, Lori-Anne Thérroux-Bénoni, a senior fellow at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), spoke to the UN Security Council on this issue in January.

Ms Thérroux-Bénoni urged the international community to not ignore the Sahel and reminded them that counter-terrorism strategies must acknowledge the deep regional connections that make it easier for extremist groups to recruit, raise funds and manage their logistics across several countries. She stated that the current situation in the region was the worst possible scenario of violent extremism, coups d'état and setbacks in regional integration, and called for international responses.

The ISS continues to remind us that the stability of West Africa is of great importance to the global community for numerous

reasons, some linked to socio-economic opportunities and development, others to terrorist threats, organised crime and the illegal trafficking of everything from drugs and arms to people. With regard to governance, Ms Théroux-Bénoni said that we must assist in creating the conditions that make coups d'état and political instability less likely.

Another issue that I believe has not been explored enough is what some analysts have already dubbed the "new Russianism". In his articles published in the IIEE, the geopolitical analyst, Col. Ignacio Fuente Cobo, uses this term to refer to Russia's neo-colonial project to expand its influence in Africa, especially in the Sahel region.

While we focus on Ukraine and Europe's eastern flank, we fail to fully comprehend Russia's strategy of boosting its presence in Africa. One only need glance at articles on the Sahel to realise that the country is finding allies among the area's leaders, and a population that prefers Russian aid to the assistance traditionally extended by France for example, in solving its problems. Col. Fuente Cobo speaks of an alternative multipolar world order, whose reinforcement is evident, and of Russia's interest in appropriating natural resources and evading Western sanctions.

Indeed, Russia has shown enormous skill in exploiting shortcomings in European cooperation in the Sahel and has managed to gain a strong foothold in some countries, notably through the former Wagner (now Africa Corps) Group and military cooperation. The loss of European influence in the area should be of concern and guide us when designing our policy for the region, which I believe should always be based on mutual respect, attentively listening to our African partners and friends, and a mutually beneficial partnership that banishes paternalism and, especially, geopolitical double standards which have discredited the West in the eyes of many countries and which are now more critical than ever of our decision-making in the global arena.

I would like to conclude with one of the many reasons why we depend on the African continent and should pay greater attention to it: the presence of critical minerals that are a key component of the global energy and digital transition, a topic that Mar Hidalgo García has also discussed in her publications for the IIEE. Europe is not the only power that has its sights on Africa in this regard. We are competing with other nations such as the United States, Russia, India, Japan and Australia.

China, for example, has an established presence in Africa, something it has achieved with a long-term strategy that remains unchanged regardless of the government in power, and which it has backed with more than just words. I believe it would be interesting to modify the migration-based perspective that appears to dominate the EU's Africa strategy and to look beyond it, in order to establish strategic partnerships and implement infrastructures to negotiate access to African mineral resources, for example.

Many authors and analysts have spent considerable time reflecting on the geopolitical implications of the ongoing changes in our neighbouring countries and seeking formulas and strategies to help us boost and improve our relations. What is perhaps not sufficiently stated, apart from emphasising that we must look to our southern neighbours and care about what happens to them, is that understanding and cooperating with them is the only way to make progress and ensure a Europe that retains its relevance in the world. An equal partnership based on mutual respect and a shared future is essential. For the good of all.

Synthesis

Within a global context of geopolitical tensions, the Sahel and the rest of the African continent demand our attention. Climate change, armed conflicts and economic and social challenges in the region have direct implications for Europe, including Spain.

The advance of jihadism in Africa, especially in the Sahel, is one of the main threats today. These groups have exploited structural inequalities and socio-economic divisions to expand into the coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea, such as Benin, Togo and Ghana. According to experts, their presence is linked to illegal trafficking, political instability and violent extremism, problems that affect not only Africa but also the rest of the world.

Moreover, the 'new Russianism' and Russia's growing influence in Africa, especially through groups such as Wagner (now Africa Corps), indicate a strategic challenge for Europe. Within a context where China and other powers are consolidating their presence on the continent, Europe cannot afford to lose any more ground. There is a need for greater collaboration with Africa based on

mutual respect, moving away from paternalistic attitudes and seeking to establish partnerships that benefit all parties.

Finally, the global energy and digital transition will take place via Africa. The continent is rich in the critical minerals that are required for this transformation. Competing with China, the United States, and other nations entails a change of focus: Europe must move beyond migration to must focus on building strategic relationships that foster shared development.

In short, looking south means understanding that Europe's destiny is inextricably linked to that of Africa. Stability, development and cooperation in this common neighbourhood are essential if we are to ensure a sustainable and relevant future for both regions.

Education and development in Africa⁵

"The structural economic changes required by Africa are entirely dependent on education, on the virtuous circle that emerges only when young people attain high-level qualifications".

September 2024

The year was 1992 and in the midst of the US campaign, Bill Clinton had not yet surpassed George Bush in vote forecasts, given that the latter's popularity was to a great extent due to what his voters considered his foreign policy successes: the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War, which left Americans with the all-powerful feeling that they had responded quickly to the invasion of Kuwait and crushed Saddam Hussein.

To bring the election discourse in line with Bill Clinton's best interests, one of his chief strategists, a man named James Carville, coined the famous phrase now oft-repeated in numerous different contexts: *It's the economy, stupid!*

This phrase came to mind this week, when Casa África and the Spanish Confederation of Business Organisations (CEOE) jointly organised the presentation of *African Dynamics 2024* at our headquarters in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and in Madrid. This macroeconomic reference report which is prepared by the African

⁵ Published in Kiosco Insular, eldiario.es and Canarias 7

Union and the OECD Development Centre, is perhaps the most detailed economic snapshot of the neighbouring continent every year. The only difference is that, with what we have learned this week, the phrase should be *It's the education, stupid!*

These days, when Africa is only mentioned when talking of migration, and when media attention is wholly focused on the issue of the arrival of minors to the Canary Islands, we have sought to understand how to deal with the underlying structural causes of the situation today, which is that numerous Africans are eager to emigrate and seek a better life in Europe, given the lack of opportunities in their native land.

And what this study has taught us is that education is a key factor when addressing solutions to the phenomenon of migration, and improving the situation in African countries: without high-level skills, there are no quality jobs. And without quality jobs, people who have managed to study and acquire high qualifications in Africa eventually emigrate because they are unable to work in their field of expertise: the well-known phenomenon of *brain drain*. The data is clear. 17% of all African-born university graduates were living outside Africa by 2020. 72% of them are in developed countries.

According to Federico Bonaglia, deputy director of the OECD Development Centre, education is the key issue. The African continent is in the midst of a demographic boom. This means that more and more young people are studying, but then are unable gain employment in a labour market where 82% of the economy is based on the informal sector, unskilled, poorly paid and, in short, vulnerable. The OECD's calculations shed light on what would be the impact if all youth on the continent were to be educated to the average level of young people in Western countries: Africa would grow by 154 trillion dollars (a colossal figure and which, according to the report, would multiply the entire continent's GDP in 2019 by 22.5).

These are the projections, but to make them real, enormous investments must be made by all African governments to link the efforts of educating their youth to the imperative of economic transformation. The reality today is that 80% of African youth aspire to have a highly skilled job, but only 8% are able to do so.

And reality, I insist, is implacable: the data always bring one's feet back to the ground. Despite a remarkable 4% growth in 2024, Africa is still unable to generate quality employment, as

job creation has taken place in sectors with low productivity, high vulnerability and low skills.

On the positive side, as Africa's population continues to grow and attain higher levels of education, an unprecedented pool of talent is being built on the continent, which will enable it to reap demographic dividends. Africa's working-age population (15-64 years) is expected to almost double by 2050, rising from 849 million in 2024 to 1,556 million. This increase will constitute 85% of the total global growth of the working age population.

Moreover, maintaining current enrolment rates, the number of young Africans completing upper secondary or tertiary education will increase significantly between 2020 and 2040, from 103 million to 240 million. In twenty years, the percentage of children completing primary school will also experience a significant jump. From the current 55%, it will extend to 75%, i.e. three of every four children.

Against this backdrop, the OECD's recommendations to African nations are to encourage and invest in digital, green and sector-specific skills: agriculture (adopting smart farming practices in East and Southern Africa, for example, triples the usual productivity); renewable energy (over the next ten years alone, implementing sustainable energy infrastructure policies could generate up to nine million jobs), waste management (a growth of 8.5% per year is expected for this sector) and the exploitation of critical minerals (70% of the world's cobalt is in Central Africa, for example).

This exhaustive work also highlights the sectors in which youth education should be focused. Spain's neighbour, West Africa, has enormous potential in terms of agriculture. And green shoots are already beginning to appear: the number of teachers of science subjects is increasing, or to put it more concretely, in a country such as Benin, the number of technical agriculture courses has tripled in just a few years.

In North Africa, for example, there is huge potential for renewable energy, and educational indicators are improving, but there is still a great deal of work to be done.

Here in the Canary Islands, we must keep a close eye on the economic and educational development of these regions. At Casa África, Bonaglia explained that he was highly aware of the migratory reality faced by the Canary Islands, and pointed out that for the OECD (which, it is worth remembering, is the international organisation that brings together the developed

countries, what we commonly call “the West”), “Casa África and the Canary Islands are a laboratory in which to view how Europe and Africa may work together and better”. Bonaglia highlighted the example of the *Tierra Firme* programme by which the government of the Canary Islands trains young people in Senegal in various subjects. These students are then brought to the archipelago to work within the framework of so-called “circular migration” projects.

Synthesis

The key to sustainable development in Africa lies in education. In a continent with a growing population and a youth that represents its greatest resource, access to quality education is the only way to transform its economies and to face its social and economic challenges.

Today, Africa faces an educational paradox: although more and more young people are entering higher education, the labour market does not offer them jobs commensurate with their education. This creates a vicious circle: 80% of African youth aspire to highly skilled jobs, but only 8% succeed in attaining them, fuelling the brain drain to developed countries. According to OECD data, by 2020, 17% of African university graduates were living outside the continent, 72% of which were in developed countries.

The African economy, with 82% of employment in the informal sector, cannot absorb this skilled population. However, the potential is enormous: if African youth were to reach the average educational levels of the youth in Western countries, the continent would grow by \$154 trillion, multiplying its GDP by 22.5.

To achieve this, Africa must invest in education linked to strategic sectors:

- Agriculture: Adapting to smart farming practices could triple productivity in regions such as the east and south of the continent.
- Renewable energy: this sector could generate up to nine million jobs in the next decade.

- Critical minerals: with 70% of the world's cobalt in Central Africa, its sustainable exploitation is essential for the global energy transition.
- Waste management: an annual growth of 8.5% is expected in this sector.

The report *African Dynamics 2024* highlights that by 2050, Africa's working-age population will almost double from 849 million to 1556 million. Moreover, school enrolment rates are on the rise: by 2040, 240 million young people will complete tertiary or secondary education, more than twice as many as in 2020.

Examples such as the *Tierra Firme* programme in Senegal, promoted by the Canary Islands, demonstrate how cooperation can foster local empowerment and generate mutual benefits through circular migration models.

Education is not only the pillar for tackling migration, but also the driver of structural change in Africa. If Europe is to establish an equitable and sustainable relationship with its neighbouring continent, it must prioritise educational investment and foster strategic partnerships that promote shared economic development. Africa is poised to be a key partner in the global future, and supporting its transformation is a responsibility and an opportunity for all.

Prevention, early warnings and raising public awareness⁶

"In the wake of the tragic and enormous DANA in Valencia and with the memory of Hurricane Delta in the Canary Islands, turning our gaze to Africa can help us understand the importance and necessity of technological deployment in order to avoid major tragedies.

October 2024

Still in shock and disbelief at the magnitude of the tragedy that occurred above all in Valencia, this deadly high-altitude isolated depression or DANA has brought back memories and reflections. The first is the memory of what the Canary Islands experienced during the tropical storm Delta in 2005, leading

⁶ Published in Kiosco Insular y eldiario.es

to the unfortunate death of just one person as well as a great deal of damage throughout the archipelago.

Other reflections have risen due to the issue of early warnings and the need for them, which we have made a key topic of the public diplomacy carried out by Casa África with our African neighbours. Only four months ago, in June of this year, I wrote an article which I called "Africa, climate change and early warnings" which I invite you to read today when, in the background, we hear the media declare the sad balance of what we had always known as the "cold drop" but is now called the "DANA".

I am not going to waste time discussing whether or not this latest DANA is due to climate change, but I do think it is essential to reflect on the fact that the global trend is clear: either we slow down global warming radically or the consequences will be terrible and more frequent.

So let me focus a little on Africa so that, with its data and requirements, it may serve as a mirror for us and highlight the importance of heeding warnings and predictions. Because, the underlying issue is, in my opinion, the following: only through excellent weather detection systems and a good early warning network, shall tragedies be avoided. Collective efforts must be focused on implementing effective systems that make obedience and respect for predictions and warnings unquestionable, both from administrations and citizens. Only in this way, I insist, will we be able to save lives in the face of these phenomena.

When talking of climate change, we often forget that its impact is not evenly distributed across the globe. Africa is one of the continents that has contributed the least to global greenhouse gas emissions, yet it is one of the regions that suffers the most from their consequences.

Extreme weather events, such as devastating droughts, floods and major cyclones, have become a constant phenomenon for many African nations. Here is the balance sheet for only the last two years, and there are undoubtedly some that have not been included:

- Libya: Storm Daniel (September 2023). 4700 confirmed dead, 8000 missing.
- West and Central Africa: floods (2024). 1500 dead and over a million displaced.

- Côte d'Ivoire: floods and landslides (June 2024). 20 dead.
- East Africa (Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia): flooding in the rainy season (April to June 2024). More than 350 dead and 2.4 million displaced.
- Mozambique and Malawi: Cyclone Freddy (March 2023). 679 dead in Malawi and 165 in Mozambique.
- Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo: floods (May 2024) 574 dead.
- Sudan: heavy rains (August 2024). 69 deaths. 490,000 people affected
- Southern Africa (Namibia and Zambia): drought. The worst in forty years

These events destroy crops, wipe out basic infrastructure, severely impact people's health and have economic repercussions that extend over generations. It is in this context that early warning systems, which make it possible to act in advance by preparing the population and the authorities to mitigate the effects of these phenomena, become a priority.

Climate change has manifested itself in Africa through a steady rise in temperatures, which severely affects health and livelihoods. With heat waves becoming more prolonged, the risk of heat-related illnesses is skyrocketing, and many vulnerable communities lack access to adequate health infrastructure to cope. Rainfall patterns are also changing, affecting agriculture and putting food security at risk, stretching the resilience of the most vulnerable populations to the limit.

Within this context, the implementation of early warning systems is crucial. It is here that Africa can teach us all a valuable lesson regarding the importance of these systems as an effective means to reduce the impact of extreme weather events on people. These systems enable communities to adequately prepare for natural disasters, take protective measures, and even evacuate risk areas. Every early warning is an opportunity to prevent tragedies and minimise human and material losses.

One of the most relevant efforts in this context is the Early Warnings for All Initiative (EW4All) launched by the United Nations, which seeks to ensure that all people are protected by early warning systems by 2027. Countries such as Côte d'Ivoire

have implemented a multi-sectoral risk management platform that enables meteorological departments, local authorities and relief agencies to work together to provide accurate and timely early warnings to the public. This approach not only increases the effectiveness of warnings but also promotes collaboration, which strengthens the resilience of communities. Additionally, in countries such as Mozambique which have been hard hit by Cyclones Idai and Kenneth (2019), community-based programmes have been implemented which involve citizens in emergency preparedness and response, thus increasing local knowledge on how to act in the event of a warning.

It should be noted that these initiatives are only baby steps in the implementation of early warning systems in Africa: it is crucial to increase investment in meteorological infrastructure, such as radar stations and communication systems. Furthermore, national meteorological and hydrological services require more financial as well as technical resources if they are to improve their ability to generate accurate forecasts and broadcast them in a timely manner.

There is a great deal of demand, as I wrote in last-June's article: according to 2022 data, there were as many as 636 weather radar stations to cover twenty million square kilometres between Europe and the United States, an area inhabited by 1.1 billion people. In 2023, there were only 37 stations covering 30 million square kilometres and 1.3 billion inhabitants in Africa. And half of the African weather stations do not provide data as accurately as European and North American stations do.

Another key aspect is coordination between governments, international organisations, communities and the private sector. Only through collective and well-structured action can an early warning network that really works and is accessible to all people be built. Adapting to climate change must be a priority item in the development policies of African countries. In other words, we must help to strengthen these systems by means of a joint international commitment. Let us not forget that in a globalised society everything is connected: the effects of climate change in one region also have consequences in other regions.

Every warning that goes unheeded, every prediction that is overlooked, is a missed opportunity to avert a tragedy. In this regard, it is not enough to have warning systems in place; it is equally

important to foster a culture of public awareness and obedience to the recommendations issued by the competent authorities.

While a day without school or a temporary restriction of movement may seem like a nuisance, its impact pales in comparison to the pain and devastation caused by the loss of human life. It is my humble hope that the African experiences that I have brought to you through this article will provide a valuable benchmark on the importance of early warning systems and public awareness of the threats posed by climate change. Only through collaboration and respect for weather alerts can we mitigate the impact of these phenomena and build more resilient societies.

Synthesis

Early warning systems are essential to prevent tragedies caused by extreme weather events, such as the recent high-altitude isolated depression (DANA) in Valencia. These systems permit early action, community preparedness and damage mitigation. Although one of the regions that contributes the least to climate change, Africa suffers severely from its consequences with droughts, cyclones and floods that have caused thousands of deaths and displacement in recent years.

The region has an inadequate weather infrastructure: there are only 37 radar stations for 30 million square kilometres and 1.3 billion inhabitants. However, initiatives such as Early Warnings for All seek to ensure that all people are protected by 2027. In addition to improving technology, it is essential to raise public awareness of weather alerts and recommendations.

Climate change affects the entire planet, and its impact on Africa underlines the need for global action to strengthen prevention systems and build resilience to climate hazards.

Setting the course of Casa África⁷

“We have opened up Casa África’s next Strategic Plan, which will set the course of this public diplomacy institution based in the Canary Islands, for the next three years, to participation by the consortium’s institutions, partners and society as a whole.

November 2024

⁷ Published in *Insular Kiosk*, eldiario.es and *Canarias 7*

At Casa África, we wanted to start the process of drafting our new Strategic Plan 2025-2027 hand in hand with civil society and all of its constituent institutions that collaborate with our organisation. This public participation process is essential to ensure that the plan reflects not only the institution's goals, but also the needs, concerns and contributions of those who are committed to boosting relations between Spain and Africa.

Thus, this plan is the result of an in-depth and collective analysis of the current context, identifying key opportunities and challenges within social, cultural, economic and diplomatic spheres. In doing so, we seek to shape a Casa África that is more open, inclusive and aligned with the priorities of both shores, reinforcing its role as a public diplomacy institute based in the Canary Islands, committed to the development of a solid and lasting Spanish-African relationship.

In the process of drawing up this strategy, we have conducted a thorough analysis of the social, economic, political and technological factors that may influence our operations. Via a PESTEL study (a method used by several companies and institutions to build their strategic planning by analysing the external context) and a review of key policies of bodies such as the UN, the African Union and the European Union, we have identified challenges and opportunities that guide our objectives.

This plan is supplemented by the Annual Action Plan 2025, an annual operational plan in which we set out the 33 programmes that will constitute the mainstays of our public, economic, cultural, digital and institutional diplomacy activities for the coming year. Our aim has been to ensure that these programmes reflect Casa África's transparency and ethical commitment, making open and participatory management a priority. And let me make it very clear: we do not act based on the impetus of current events or the whim of a specific initiative, rather we form a part of Spanish foreign policy, which means we seek to ensure that everything makes sense as a whole and is always in line with the Spanish State's strategy as regards Africa.

The document, I reiterate, is currently being drafted and is awaiting the completion of this public participation process as well as its subsequent review and approval by our trustees - the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Government of the Canary Islands and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria City Council - through our Governing Council).

One of the aspects of this joint work conducted by all members of the Casa África team that I am the most proud of is the organisation of this strategic plan around five thematic cornerstones. These will be the main focus of our activities, and at the same time provide a practical and realistic picture of the current situation of the African continent, and the prospective role that Spain may play in it:

1. **Geopolitics and governance:** Africa is today in the geostrategic spotlight of major powers due to its economic growth, abundance of resources and expected demographic expansion, positioning itself not only as a supplier, but also as a booming market. This interest seeks to consolidate economies and expand influence within a competitive global environment.

For the European Union and especially for Spain, Africa occupies a key place in security and development policy. Regional stability, migration management and environmental challenges have led the EU to boost its cooperation with Africa. In this regard, due to its proximity and historical ties, Spain has acted as a bridge, promoting a collaborative and in-depth approach to African needs.

At the same time, Africa faces critical challenges such as political instability and insecurity, which slow its progress and reveal the limitations of the current multilateral model. These obstacles highlight the urgent need to boost public diplomacy to build consensus and understanding.

It is of critical importance that Africa takes the lead in addressing its own challenges. The African Union and other regional bodies insist that Africans must be in charge of their solutions, rejecting the “new colonialism” of foreign powers. Institutions such as Casa África play a strategic role in promoting a relationship of respect and transparency, combating the disinformation that undermines confidence in African institutions and threatens democratic progress on the continent.

2. **Sustainable economic and social development:** While Africa has experienced significant economic growth, challenges such as extreme poverty and inequality persist. The African Union’s Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a roadmap towards inclusive development. Spain, which is committed to these goals, recognises that a prosperous Africa brings stability and opens up trade opportunities, diversifying both exports and investment in key sectors such as energy and infrastructure.

Emerging areas such as fintech, renewable energies and the blue economy offer important possibilities for collaboration between Africa and Spain, with a special role for the Canary Islands. Foreign investment, empowerment of African youth, and the transition to a circular and digital economy are key to achieving these goals.

3. Climate change and the energy transition: Africa faces severe effects of climate change, such as rising temperatures, desertification and extreme events that threaten food and social security. Spain is aware of these challenges and is committed to collaborating in climate change mitigation and sharing knowledge and resources to address the region's vulnerability. Human security is a priority issue in this partnership, in order to protect African communities from environmental crises.

Energy transition is another key area for cooperation between Spain and Africa. With great potential in renewable energies -solar, wind and green hydrogen- Africa is attracting investments that boost its development and decarbonisation. Spain, with its experience in clean energy, can provide knowledge that will boost key sectors such as green hydrogen and geothermal energy, thereby generating employment and strengthening Africa's role within the global climate agenda towards a secure and sustainable energy future.

4. Migration: Spain, a destination for many African migrants, addresses this challenge with policies that promote both integration and international cooperation. Beyond regulating flows, migration brings benefits: it fills job vacancies, improves productivity and enriches cultural diversity in Spain, highlighting migration as an opportunity for shared development.

Cooperation between Spain and Africa is crucial for sustainable and humane migration management, protecting the rights of migrants and their access to basic services in order to prevent exploitation and ensure dignified conditions. There is also a need to combat racism and xenophobia towards African migrants, promoting their full integration and the recognition of their contributions.

The Canary Islands, as a destination of one of the most active African migratory routes, promotes initiatives that address this phenomenon from all perspectives, seeking to increase public awareness of its causes and foster empathy to combat racism and xenophobia.

Equality and diversity: equality and diversity are key to inclusive development. Despite progress, women in Africa still face discrimination, gender-based violence and barriers to education and employment. Women empowerment is essential for social stability and economic growth on the continent. As part of its commitment to equality, Spain promotes initiatives to reduce these gaps and support women's rights both in Africa and in its own society.

Afro-descendant communities and interculturalism have enriched Spain, although problems of racism and discrimination towards these communities persist, underlining the need for inclusive policies. Another key area is support for the rights of the LGTBI+ community in Africa, where many people still face persecution. Spain's commitment to equality and diversity embraces all minorities, with the aim of building equitable societies free from discrimination, where everyone has the same opportunities to prosper.

In conclusion, I once again encourage you to participate, or at least, to take a closer look at this interesting process that we are launching. I have no doubt that it will prove to be an enriching experience at many levels: to understand our position in the world, to learn more about the African continent, and also just as importantly, to exercise a right, that of public participation in an institute funded by the taxes that are paid by all Spaniards.

Today, Casa África remains a unique institution within the framework of Spanish public diplomacy for its role in improving relations with sub-Saharan Africa, a role that has not been imitated as of yet by other public sector bodies. The more the public comprehends the role of this institution and the importance of the decision to locate it in the Canary Islands, when our neighbours are better informed of what we do, will undoubtedly bring us one step closer to achieving what our motto states: that Spain and Africa are increasingly closer.

BRICS, Trump, Global Gateway... Africa and the Canary Islands in the new geopolitics⁸

"At a time when all powers are seeking alliances with the continent, it makes perfect sense to reclaim and promote the strategic role that may be played by the Canary Islands".

November 2024

⁸ Published in Insular Kiosk, eldiario.es and Canarias 7

Global geopolitics are currently leading to changes that may be of enormous relevance in the coming years. Countries are still trying to gauge the scope of the change to be ushered in by Donald Trump's return to power in the United States. Given the demonstrable progress of the Americans in technological matters above all such as artificial intelligence, Russia and China, as well as the European Union, are making their moves in order to generate a network of strategic alliances that will not leave them on the sidelines of the global map.

It has been in the news recently that the Russians and Chinese are making a joint effort to further strengthen the BRICS+ partnership. This was made clear a few weeks ago in the Russian city of Kazan, where Vladimir Putin hosted the BRICS+ summit, a meeting that highlighted the growing importance of this bloc, which is very much to be reckoned with in the shaping of a new world order. Or at least this is what the initiative appears to indicate.

Originally founded by Brazil, Russia, India and China in 2009, and the addition of South Africa in 2010 (hence the acronym BRICS), the bloc has evolved significantly. At this year's summit, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Ethiopia joined as full members, expanding the group's influence. At the same time, representatives from three African countries also travelled to Kazan and were announced as new partners: Algeria, Nigeria and Uganda.

The size of the movement should not be underestimated: together the ten BRICS+ countries account for 35.6% of global GDP and 45% of the world's population. In comparison, it is worth recalling that the G7, which brings together the world's seven most advanced economies (the US, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United Kingdom) represents just over 30% of the global wealth and less than 10% of the population (the US, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the UK).

The founding of BRICS was justified as the need to create a bloc that could contribute to creating a more balanced and just world order, which called for South-South cooperation. The founding countries shared the vision of a multipolar world, with emerging economies playing a greater role. Now, in this sense, they are pursuing agreements to try to end the hegemony of the dollar in international transactions, or to create a new

development bank that would allow them to access affordable financing for their own projects. In short, to reference a new model of economic and financial cooperation that benefits its members.

Africa, with its wealth of natural resources and rapidly growing population, has become a key geopolitical actor. The BRICS invitation to new African partners tells us many things. It underlines the continent's strategic importance in this new world order. Russia and China, key members of the bloc, have established important trade and investment relations in Africa.

Russia, for example, has established strong alliances with the new military juntas in countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso, consolidating a strategy that it began testing a few years ago in the Central African Republic. And not just in the Sahel, it has cooperation agreements with 43 African countries. The presence of mercenaries from the former Wagner Group, now called Africa Corps, and the use of disinformation strategies are some of its most concerning elements, especially for Americans and Europeans.

As for the United States, although it is now conditioned by the foreign policy changes that may be implemented by Trump, it has been making significant investments for the development of the Lobito rail corridor, which will allow strategic minerals from the Democratic Republic of Congo to be transported to the sea via Angola.

And the European Union, perhaps still too caught up in its internal differences, is making slow progress towards being considered a real player. While it has become Africa's largest trading partner in recent years, as well as being the largest provider of foreign direct investment and development aid, it remains too closely linked to its colonial past. Its bid to be a key and privileged partner of Africa already has a name and a surname: the Global Gateway, a programme that at launch was seen as direct competition to China's *Belt and Road* (translated as the new Silk Road). For the time being, 150 billion euros of the 300 billion euros with which this European initiative was launched, are earmarked for Africa.

And the African continent, through the African Union, has its own plans, of course. Plans listed in its Agenda 2063 include boosting it as a single market (the African Continental Free Trade Area), as a single movement area, and also as a single digital space and

market. In September last year, it consolidated its presence at the G20, where it will be able to lobby as a united continent.

This is because it has become very clear that its wide range of partners and increasing interest as demonstrated by the rest of the world has its advantages. African nations are aware of this and they are also playing their cards: demanding a greater and consolidated presence in the UN Security Council, and reminding us that a diversity of partners is not only positive, but also necessary.

I believe that a highly interesting trend may be observed in this entire situation: the increased African presence among BRICS+ nations, for example, should not be interpreted as a hostile gesture towards Europe; on the contrary, it may help to soften Russian and Chinese stances as regards the long-term intentions of this great geopolitical bloc.

This document is being written at a time when Casa África has partnered with the Spanish Confederation of Business Organisations (CEOE) and the Government of the Canary Islands to hold IBAFCAN, the Ibero-African Business Forum, in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. It is the intention of the Canary Islands to present itself as a neutral and strategic space to bring together European (commencing with Spain and Portugal), African and Latin American entrepreneurs. This constitutes another practical step towards making the archipelago a true tri-continental bridge.

This forum comes at the right time, when the private sector is also looking more boldly towards the continent and understands that, looking beyond the unfortunately exaggerated stereotypes surrounding the migration phenomenon, there really is a market of immense potential in our neighbouring countries, with unique demographic prospects on the planet and a wealth of resources.

Personally, I have taken advantage of the invitation to inaugurate this forum by recalling all the opportunities that may be opened up by the European Union's Global Gateway for the Canary Islands, and I have informed the participants that within a few months we shall bring specialists from the European Commission to explain how we can participate in this ambitious plan for the development of the African continent.

It is essential that such meetings enable our business community to see and understand what has been brewing in the

geopolitical sphere for a few years now: that Africa is at the centre of everything, and that it is the place where everyone wants to be and should be. What is also important is that this vision should be sincere and honest, mutually beneficial, and highly conscious of the damage done to Africans by the long history of colonialism and exploitation of resources without attempts to improving the living conditions of the people.

I have read with hope in the news that, as a result of IBAFCAN, Spanish companies are looking to increase their number on the African continent within three or four years. Hopefully, this time such expectations will come to fruition. It is the role of institutions to facilitate this and to hold similar forums and initiatives where people can get to know each other, establish networks, build trust, and finally commit to the continent.

The criminal economy choking the Sahel⁹

“Jihadism survives in the Sahel thanks to the criminal economy. West Africa is already one of the most important cocaine routes in the world.

April 2024

In March 2024, the French navy intercepted a ship in the Gulf of Guinea with almost eleven tonnes of cocaine worth \$755 million, the largest seizure of the drug ever made in West Africa. Earlier on Monday, news agencies reported the seizure of another shipment of 1,000 kilos on board a truck in north-eastern Senegal, in the border area with Mali, another record for the country's *gendarmerie*.

The fact that a single ship carries almost eleven tonnes of the drug and that a few days later, there is another seizure of one tonne transported over land tells us many things, but mainly that the West African route is of enormous importance for international cocaine trafficking. Traffickers who smuggle the drugs from Latin America introduce the merchandise by plane or boat in West African countries (such as Guinea-Bissau, for example, a country full of islets with nooks and crannies along its coast), and then send it overland to the European continent, taking advantage of the geographical immensity and absence of military and police control in the Sahel, in collusion and direct collaboration, in known cases, with armed jihadist groups.

⁹ Published in eldiario.es, Canarias7 and in Kiosco Insular

In her book *Los grupos armados del Sahel* (Armed Groups in the Sahel), published by Casa África, the journalist and academic Beatriz Mesa presents us with a disturbing scenario of what she calls the “institutionalisation of the criminal economy in Mali”.

This country, she states, is a perfect example of what is now a global problem. With its porous borders and vast geography, Mali has become a archetypical example of the rise of predatory businesses that threaten to destabilise not only national economies but, potentially, world peace.

“Observers believe that international organised crime networks could provoke a new world war if they secure a foothold in the international market to the point of destabilising national economies”. This statement, taken from Mesa’s book, resonates with particular force when one considers the context of our African environment, which, as stated last week, is openly considered by the Department of National Security to be one of the main threats to our country.

The region has become a critical nexus for drug trafficking, with the west coast serving as the Atlantic gateway for cocaine from Latin America, and Mali as the desert gateway facilitating its arrival in Europe. Almost 25% of all cocaine exported to Europe by South American traffickers passes through this area, along the notorious “Highway A-10” connecting Africa and the Americas along the 10th parallel.

Within this picture, Mali stands out as the only state on the Atlantic side (albeit landlocked) that has so far lost control of drug trafficking. Armed groups in northern Mali are financially and logistically dependent on this business, which has led to the progressive institutionalisation of violence and the criminal economy. These topics have been studied in depth by this Spanish journalist and academic, whom we had the pleasure of listening to at Casa África just a fortnight ago.

The impact of this criminal business has changed many things, since we must remember that cocaine is as profitable, if not more so, than gold itself. Nomadic groups, for example, have found their main livelihood in sustaining this traffic: the traditional economy has given way to an informal and criminal economy, where smuggling and drug trafficking have become the main sources of income, especially in drought-stricken or low-yielding agricultural areas.

And it is not just cocaine; this phenomenon also includes the trafficking of petrol and, in the north, products subsidised by the Algerian government, such as milk, cereals, sugar and flour. As the author concludes, in a book that I strongly recommend as a reference work for scholars of the region, northern Mali has evolved from a nomadic territory to a space that hosts fugitives, political insurgents and criminal operators, both from within and abroad.

This view from the ground, beyond the consideration of jihadists as religious fundamentalists, reminds us that the threat posed by the Sahel to Spain should not be seen solely as a terrorist threat, but as part of a criminal economy that has become deeply rooted in the region and through the economic dynamics it generates, eventually controls it.

In view of the importance of this phenomenon, a thought comes to mind regarding the withdrawal of European military missions from the Sahel, an understandable response to the expulsion or withdrawal of our French ally from certain countries, and the anti-French and anti-Western sentiment emanating from the recent coups d'état in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

I believe the links between the criminal economy and jihadism highlight the importance of maintaining an active dialogue with these countries, with whom we must somehow build bridges, helping them to deal with something that they cannot successfully combat only by themselves (or with the Russians) as has been shown. Even though European military operations have been scaled back and relations remain strained, we must continue to engage in the search for diplomatic and strategic solutions, and strive to cooperate, in order to address the security challenges of the Sahel.

Many will agree with me that even from the most positive outlook, the results until now have been poor, because European missions have failed to meet the security challenges posed by jihadists. And if matters remain the same, we run the grave risk that the Sahel will geopolitically become "a theatre of second confrontation" of global power struggles (Russia-China against Western nations). This warning was already delivered by the EU's special representative for the Sahel, Emmanuela del Re, at Casa África a couple of years ago.

In view of this, and within an increasingly violent and complex scenario where the aforesaid criminal economy is playing an increasingly important role, we must reflect on what steps may

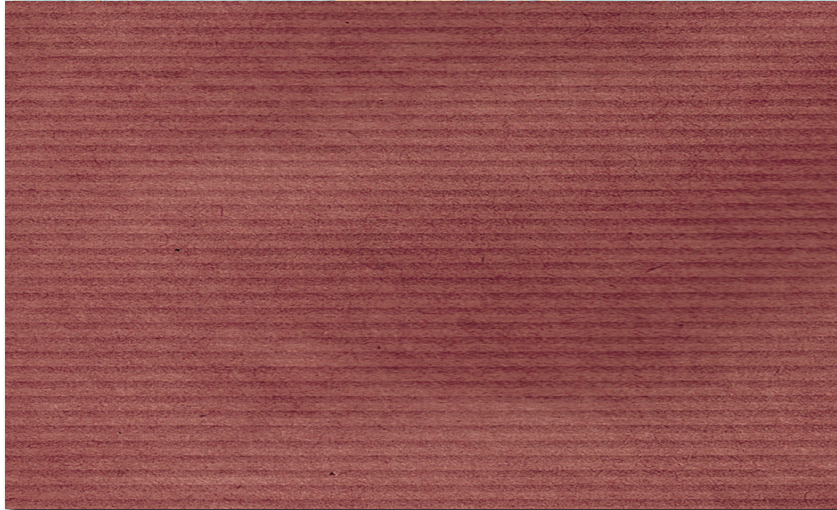
be taken by Spain and the European Union to regain the trust of and work with, the countries of the Sahel.

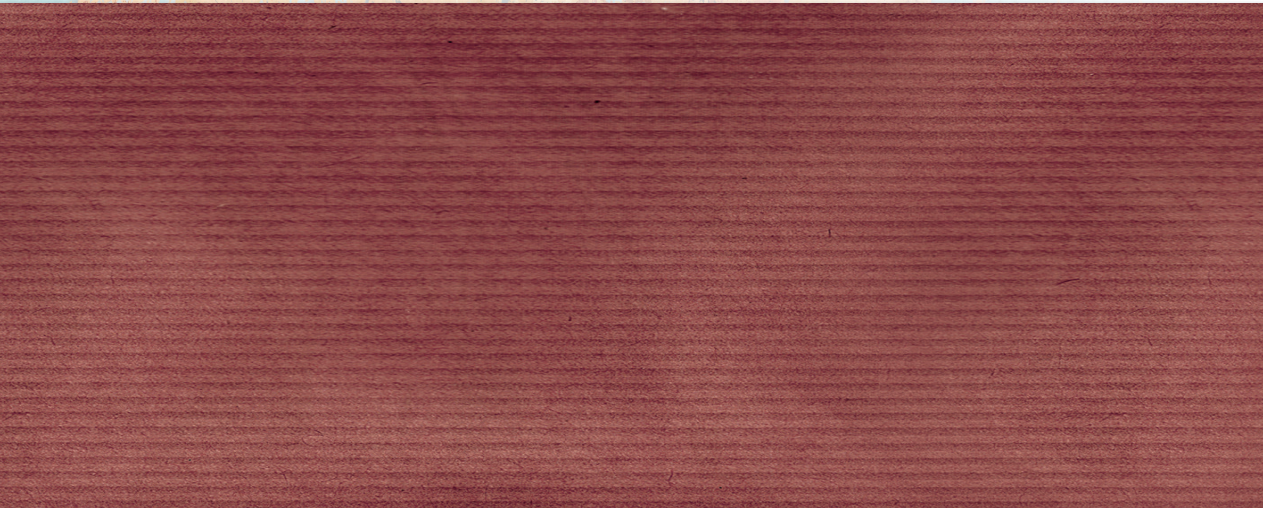
It is easy to suggest solutions in writing, but they remain mere words unless decisive steps are taken: placing the developmental perspective first, supporting industrial transformation, boosting the economy, creating jobs and providing opportunities for young people. But even this commencement requires that we first boost our existing contact, demonstrate empathy, and establish a joint dialogue on possible solutions for the region, and what roles we may play in them.

A stable and secure Sahel is crucial for millions of people in our immediate neighbourhood who are, as of now, highly vulnerable and exposed to enormous suffering. But it is also intrinsically linked to our own stability and security. For both of these reasons, we must remain committed to building strong and lasting relationships that benefit us all.

Members of the working group

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