



"War is what happens when language fails".  
Mark Twain

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought a happy ending to four long decades of Cold War. The incipient *Pax Americana* promised a Kantian world of generalised peace, a consequence of the triumph of the model of global governance based on liberal democracy. This has not been the case. Fleeing from open and generalised warfare between them, which would be a disaster of unimaginable proportions, the great powers, and others not so great, settle their disagreements in multiple armed conflicts through local actors of various kinds: tribes, rival factions, criminal cartels, radical political or religious movements, or mercenary companies. Proxy wars, proxy actors, proxies that avoid direct confrontation and dilute, if only fictionally, the responsibilities of those who sponsor them. These alternatives to a "large-scale" war unfortunately facilitate the proliferation of other wars. According to a United Nations report, "in 2016, the number of countries affected by violent conflict reached the highest level in nearly 30 years"<sup>1</sup>. Faced with this reality, the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, as a military *think tank*, produces a yearly *Geopolitical Panorama of Conflicts* in which it analyses some of them - it would be impossible to analyse them all - and thus provides its readers with a collection in which they can find, in one edition or another, the origins, causes, actors involved and prospects for the evolution of the many hotspots around the globe.

The recent G20 Summit in Rome in October 2021 has left a bittersweet taste in terms of the results achieved. While agreements were reached on tax harmonisation and extending the vaccination campaign to countries lagging behind, they were less promising in the fight against global warming. On this last point, the 26th Climate Change Conference, COP26, which followed in Glasgow, also failed to produce any noteworthy decisions. In both meetings, the absence of Presidents Xi and Putin considerably lowered expectations of a convincing outcome. The persistence with which the two great giants, China and the United States, maintain a collision course in their confrontation poses a highly worrying global scenario. When the collaboration of all world actors is so necessary

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations: A new era of conflict and violence. Available at: <https://www.un.org/es/un75/new-era-conflict-and-violence> Accessed on 10 December 2021.

to manage shared challenges, such as global warming, transnational terrorism, massive migratory movements, renewed proliferation, both conventional and nuclear, or pandemics, the attitude of the main powers is rather confrontational. This *Great Power Competition* is dragging the other medium and small powers into a dynamic of growing tensions in all domains: commercial, economic, technological, cultural, ideological, geopolitical... and also military.

Conflict, in its more traditional version of armed confrontation, is a component of the broader concept of unrest. And so it coexists with trade disputes, religious or ideological rivalries, the struggle for technological hegemony, cyber attacks, the arms race, domination of outer space, etc. In other words, an intense, permanent and indiscriminate conflict in the grey zone, with all the means at the disposal of each and every international actor, state or non-state<sup>2</sup>, in which the category of friend or ally is blurred, especially in cyberspace<sup>3</sup>.

Therefore, in addition to armed conflicts, which are the usual subject of the *Geopolitical Overview of Conflicts*, we have added on this occasion the analysis of highly tense scenarios that could lead to military confrontation (the world looks with concern at the Asia-Pacific region) and factors that could aggravate existing disputes, such as the diversity of religious beliefs in the Middle East.

Looking out to the distant waters of the seas of China highlights the growing naval power of the People's Republic, which is determined to become the absolute master of that arena and has established a comprehensive integrated network of anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities. This expanding naval force is merely the spearhead of China's military bet, complemented by equally modernised land and air forces, a steadily growing nuclear arsenal, a significant presence in outer space and enormous offensive and defensive capabilities in cyberspace. This powerful military tool adds to the commercial, economic, technological and cultural power of the "empire of the centre". The Western presence in these seas, mainly that of the United States, warns of a possible risk of escalation which, although not sought by any of the actors present in the region,

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<sup>2</sup> For further details, please consult: DACOBA CERVIÑO, Francisco José. *Conflictivity in the 21st century: the big players up the ante*. IEEE Analysis Paper 30/2021. Available at: [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2021/DIEEEA30\\_2021\\_FRADAC\\_Conflictivid\\_ad.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA30_2021_FRADAC_Conflictivid_ad.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> "Una vuelta de tuerca al caso de espionaje de EEUU a Merkel implica a Dinamarca", *El Confidencial* (31 May 2021). Available at: [https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2021-05-31/una-vuelta-de-tuerca-de-al-caso-de-espionaje-de-eeuu-a-alemania-implica-a-dinamarca\\_3108303/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2021-05-31/una-vuelta-de-tuerca-de-al-caso-de-espionaje-de-eeuu-a-alemania-implica-a-dinamarca_3108303/)

cannot be ruled out, even as a simple and undesired consequence of an error or out-of-control situation. There is no shortage of recent examples of incidents between Chinese and Western military units in the region<sup>4</sup>.



**Figure 1. China holds assault drills near Taiwan after “provocations”.** Source. Euronews. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2021/08/18/us-china-taiwan-security>

Among the numerous disputes over the control of islands and archipelagos, natural or artificial, in addition to the hotspots of Tibet, Kashmir, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, North Korea, Malacca, etc., the most worrying element on the regional chessboard in the Western Pacific is undoubtedly Taiwan. It is already clear that the so-called “one country, two systems” model lacks any credibility after the repression of the protests in Hong Kong, and has been definitively abandoned by current President Xi as well, leaving no other option to achieve the desired and proclaimed Chinese territorial integrity than the annexation of the “beautiful” island<sup>5</sup> either through political negotiation mechanisms, a distant possibility at present, or by military means, an option that is also difficult to imagine, but not entirely out of the question.

<sup>4</sup> “US submarine hits ‘object’ while underwater in South China Sea”, *Al Jazeera* (8 October 2021). Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/8/us-submarine-hits-object-while-underwater-in-south-china-sea>

<sup>5</sup> ‘The PLA will resolutely defeat anyone attempting to separate Taiwan from China and safeguard national unity at all costs’. The People’s Republic of China’s White Paper on National Defence in the New Era 2019. Available at: <https://www.dsn.gob.es/en/actualidad/sala-prensa/libro-blanco-rep%C3%BAblica-popular-china-sobre-defensa-nacional-nueva-era-2019>

We round off our focus on the Indian Ocean with an analysis of the incipient civil war in Myanmar following the February 2021 coup d'état that ended the flimsy democracy in the former Burma. The absence of the US leaves the field wide open for Beijing's penetration and influence. Through Myanmar, and from the neighbouring Chinese region of Yunnan, the New Silk Road seeks access to the sea west of the Strait of Malacca in order to avoid the risk of closure of this narrow passage that most Chinese exports pass through, as well as the resources desperately needed by the Asian giant to maintain activity and progress and thus preserve the legitimacy of the Communist Party. The hope is that the efforts of the major regional association, ASEAN, to stabilise the situation and avoid collapse will succeed, a scenario that is also of convenience to China.

Other hotspots on the western Pacific Rim are on the Korean peninsula, where attempts to reach some kind of agreement with the North Korean president over his nuclear arsenal have failed. Japan continues to reorganise and strengthen its armed forces. ASEAN member states fear that the confrontation between the two giants will force them to side with one of them and, consequently, against the other. Australia, after happy years of smooth diplomatic and trade relations with China, has signed the controversial AUKUS military and technology cooperation agreement with the United States and the United Kingdom, provoking an angry reaction from Beijing. And in the Indian Ocean, recent events in Afghanistan will lead to a repositioning of all neighbouring powers, large and medium-sized. The position of India, which is also a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with the US, Japan and Australia, will be worthy of particular attention.

Closer to home, our neighbourhood is rife with conflict and unrest. In the long-simmering Middle East, religious differences do not explain everything, but the analysis of this factor goes a long way towards understanding the dynamics in the region and the reasons for the many active and simmering conflicts. The specific case of Yemen does not give rise to good expectations for a solution, quite the contrary. The country controls the vital passage through the Bab-el-Mandeb strait to the east, which makes it a battleground between the major global and regional powers. The warring factions (government forces, rebels and separatists) are strongly backed by geographically close actors in what is a clear example of proxy wars, which are so common, year after year, in our Panoramas.

The cases analysed do not represent the totality of conflicts in and around the Middle East. The Syrian war is far from reaching a peaceful outcome. It remains to be

seen how the situation in Iraq will develop after the US withdrawal. In Iran, a new conservative president, who needs to find a way out of the extremely difficult situation the country has been going through since the US pulled out of the 2015 nuclear deal, has begun his term in office. To make matters worse for the Iranian leadership, the Abraham Accords<sup>6</sup> are resulting in a realignment of the vicinity, including Israel, in order to push Tehran into a corner. Lebanon, unfortunately, is sliding down a slope of political decay and institutional crisis that can only lead to fragmentation and, ultimately, a new civil war.



Figure 2. Photograph Atlantic Council. Source. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>

There is no active armed conflict in the Black Sea... for the time being. It is not China, of course, that is disputing regional hegemony with the Western countries, led by the United States, but Russia. Or rather, in these waters, the collision course is between NATO and Russia. The precedent of the unilateral annexation of Crimea in 2014 is very much present in this complex scenario. Turkey (which controls the straits connecting this sea to the Mediterranean), Bulgaria and Romania belong to NATO and Georgia would like to, as would Ukraine, all of which makes for a very demanding scenario for Russia. China, although not through *hard power*, does have commercial interests in this region through the trade corridors that cross the Caucasus and that open the door, yet again, to

<sup>6</sup> PRIEGO, Alberto. *Israel's new policy towards the Persian Gulf*. IEEE Opinion Paper 147/2020. Available at: [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2020/DIEEEO147\\_2020ALBPRI\\_Abraham.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEEO147_2020ALBPRI_Abraham.pdf)

European markets. The Black Sea is a large inland lake whose shores are mostly owned by NATO countries, much to Russia's displeasure.

In the heart of Europe, the border between Belarus and Poland is becoming tense as a result of the former's use of migrants seeking access to the European Union to put pressure on and divert international attention from President Lukashenko's domestic problems. In Ukraine, there are concerns about the apparent build-up of Russian troops in the vicinity of the Donbass<sup>7</sup>. The Balkans have yet to heal the wounds of the 1990s. The intention of the Bosnian Serb side<sup>8</sup> to disassociate itself from the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, agreed in Dayton 1995, has reopened a simmering conflict in addition to the frozen case of Kosovo. Difficulties in EU integration for countries that have not yet done so, especially Serbia, open the door wide to Russian influence and Chinese penetration.



**Figure 3. Golpe de Estado en Mali.** Source. Euronews. Available at: <https://es.euronews.com/2021/05/25/golpe-de-estado-en-mali>

For Europe, and certainly for Spain, the evolution of the situation in the Sahel is, and will continue to be, a source of deep concern. The outlook is not optimistic here either. The

<sup>7</sup> "Satellite images show new Russian military buildup near Ukraine", *Politico* (11 November 2021). Available at: <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/11/01/satellite-russia-ukraine-military-518337>

<sup>8</sup> "Las maniobras rusas en apoyo de los serbios ponen a Bosnia al borde del precipicio", *ABC* (3 November 2021). Available at: [https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-maniobras-rusas-apoyo-serbios-ponen-bosnia-borde-precipicio-202111030108\\_noticia.html](https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-maniobras-rusas-apoyo-serbios-ponen-bosnia-borde-precipicio-202111030108_noticia.html)

"perfect storm" is not letting up: institutional and governance weaknesses (two coups in Mali in less than a year), illicit trafficking of all kinds, extreme weather phenomena, increasing terrorist activity and, to top it all, the effects of the pandemic. The EU's efforts, led by France, are not enough to stabilise the region and usher in progress that is as necessary as it is unlikely. The latter circumstance leaves the way open for the arrival of other powers: China, Russia (Wagner private military company<sup>9</sup>), Turkey, Israel, the Emirates, etc. Not only the Sahel but the entire region, the so-called "southern flank", will undoubtedly be a key element of discussion in the elaboration of the new Strategic Concept of the Atlantic Alliance that is expected to be presented and approved at the summit to be held in Madrid at the end of June 2022. It remains to be seen whether the Mediterranean allies' call for NATO to also look south, a 360-degree approach, will not once again be pushed to the back burner in the face of the persistent priority on the eastern flank.

In the nearby Maghreb, the struggle for regional hegemony between Morocco and Algeria is intensifying and has even led to the breakdown of diplomatic relations and clashes near the shared border. The rearmament undertaken by both countries will only increase tensions throughout the region. The Libyan war hopes that recent agreements and elections in December 2021 will mark the beginning of the end of the fighting. Finally, the emergence of significant natural gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean basin has triggered disputes that have even pitted elements of the navies of NATO allies such as France, Greece and Turkey against each other<sup>10</sup>.

Without completely leaving the Sahelian strip in the Horn of Africa, the conflict between the government in Addis Ababa and the rebel province of Tigray has already turned into a serious humanitarian crisis, dashed the hopes that the election of President Abiy Ahmed had raised, not only in Ethiopia, and threatens to destabilise the entire region, which is already highly volatile. Only the unanimity of all external actors, both neighbours and global powers, in preserving this stability allows for reasonable expectations of a solution that, in any case, seems neither easy nor immediate.

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<sup>9</sup> "Crise au Mali: l'intervention de mercenaires russes pour remplacer les troupes françaises divise", *BBC* (4 October 2021). Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-58790498>

<sup>10</sup> "Grèce - Turquie: escalade des tensions en Méditerranée orientale", *France24* (1 de septiembre de 2020). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKo9vpEN74c>



These are the conflicts we have included in the next edition of the *Geopolitical Overview of Conflicts 2021*, which you will have in your hands in the coming weeks. There are many more missing, which we will address on future occasions, or which we have discussed in recent issues. All of them are available on the website of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies<sup>11</sup>. We hope they will be of interest to you.

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<sup>11</sup> Available at: [www.ieeee.es](http://www.ieeee.es)