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Brigadier General Francisco José Dacoba Cerviño
Director of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies

Presentation of the IEEE Journal issue 20

Welcome to the latest, the 20th, issue of the Spanish Institute of Strategic Studies (IEEE) Journal. The war in Ukraine and its immediate and long-term consequences condition international relations and exacerbate regional and global power dynamics. We therefore considered it to be important for our Journal to include an article focusing on this conflict. A group of analysts offer us an interesting paper on President Putin's speeches throughout 2021, seeking to identify his main ideas and communication strategy in the months leading up to the invasion that finally took place on 24 February 2022.

The People's Republic of China is one of the major players that is contributing most strongly to the reconfiguration of global power balances. Its growing presence in Africa and the Mediterranean basin raises concerns in the European Union and tensions in the Atlantic Alliance. Anass Gouyez Allal of Ibn Tofail University in Kenitra explains how Chinese penetration, whether through *soft power* procedures or more assertive initiatives, is seen by the countries of the region as an opportunity rather than a threat. Beijing's ambitions also extend to the South Pacific, where the great power struggle between the two giants, China and the United States, is being played out. In this regard, Mario Díez Martínez wonders whether the pact between China and the Solomon Islands will be a turning point in this struggle. Not far from there, Southeast Asia is witnessing an unusual boom in methamphetamine trafficking, to the detriment of other more common drugs in the region, which is the subject of Guillermo Moya Barba's analysis.

The United States, which in just a couple of decades had become a global hegemonic power following the collapse of the Soviet Union, could not remain indifferent to China's strength and the extension of its presence across the globe, as well as the commercial, technological and geopolitical challenge it presents. In this issue, Esteban Vidal Pérez provides an explanation of the US turn towards the Indo-Pacific, which was initiated by the White House during previous terms of office. He does so from

the perspective of neoclassical realism and concludes that US elites perceived the rise of China as a threat to their country's dominance and hegemony in the international order.

We complete this issue with three other papers. Ana Gallarín López assesses the impact that the European Union's sub-Saharan strategy has had on her training operation for the Malian Armed Forces, EUTM-Mali. José María Martínez Cortés addresses the impact that new technologies, among other factors, are having on military operations, more specifically on operations in outer space. Finally, Eduardo Zamarripa Martínez analyses the role of nuclear weapons in international relations and asks whether their hypothetical elimination would favour a more peaceful world scenario or whether, on the contrary, this circumstance would increase the number of possible conflicts.

We hope you enjoy the content of this issue.

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Impact of the European Union training mission on the Malian crisis

Abstract

As a regional actor seeking to increase its presence and position in international crisis management, the European Union is committed to reforming the Malian defence sector by instructing, training and advising its troops. However, the deep political crisis, internal conflicts and citizens' growing loss of confidence in their institutions, together with the rise of jihadism, have been a major stumbling block for European troops who, since the beginning of operations, have witnessed an overall worsening of the situation in the country. After nine years of intervention, it is time to objectively analyse quantifiable indicators to assess the impact of the strategy chosen by the European Union in its EUTM-Mali operation. The results obtained will form the basis for developing responses that are better adapted to the realities of the Malian conflict.

Keywords

Mali, governance crisis, jihadist terrorism, European intervention, defence system reform.

Cite this article:

Introduction

The state of Mali, located in the troubled Sahel region, is still ten years into the process of seeking peace in order to rebuild its damaged economic, social and political structures. The main obstacles identified by the international community, in this case the European Union, include the marked absence of a security system capable of guaranteeing the implementation of the economic, social and political growth programmes that the Malian state so badly needs.

The country's legitimate security system, consisting mainly of the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa), must be consolidated as the main body responsible for the protection of the people and their institutions. State armed forces, in close cooperation with various civilian agencies and with the support of the European Union, play a key role in stabilising the country and contributing to a peaceful and effective democratic transition.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the impact of the European response to Mali's crisis of governance and state destructuring, carried out through the reform of the country's defence system. Specifically, it will discuss the EUTM-Mali mission, which aims to train, coach and advise the Malian armed forces in order to strengthen security in the region and contribute to the recovery of the country's overall stability.

Almost a decade after the launch of EUTM-Mali in 2013, has the European Union's action through the EUTM-Mali mission been effective in bringing about defence sector reform that contributes to the restructuring of governance and stability in the country?

Despite the longevity of the European mission and the amount of information published in different specialised media, institutional sources and official bodies such as the European Council, the official website of the United Nations or the Spanish Ministry of Defence on the Malian case, no quantifiable data on the results of EUTM-Mali have been published. There are no records that allow us to assess the degree of achievement of the strategic objectives set by EUTM-Mali in its different areas of intervention in order to be able to truly assess the mission's impact on defence sector reform and on the country's governance crisis. The only available references can be found on the official EUTM-Mali website, which offers a very generic view of the achievements and shortcomings of the European intervention. Therefore, there is a gap that will be filled by the data provided in this document.

In addition to the main objective of determining the impact of the EU's defence strategy on the Malian crisis, three specific objectives have been set that will define the research structure and shape its development. These objectives are: understanding the impact of the EUTM-Mali mission on the development of the FAMa; assessing the degree of fulfilment of the strategic objectives on which the EUTM-Mali mission is built; and identifying possible alternative courses of action in which the EU could invest its efforts more effectively in order to contribute to the reform of the Malian defence system and the country's democratic transition.

In order to achieve the objectives described above, data from different open official sources have been collected and analysed. This analysis has made it possible to select a series of quantifiable indicators to measure the degree of achievement of the strategic objectives established for the mission.

The conflict in Mali: internal dynamics and foreign intervention

Mali is in a situation of constant tension due to the difficult coexistence between the various social groups in its territory. The heterogeneity of Malian society, with more than ten known ethnic groups[1] inhabiting the country, can be perceived in the marked differences between their lifestyles, which sometimes present totally opposing positions that can lead to conflicts of interest (Expósito Guisado, 2020). This social diversity was negatively affected by the borders drawn at the Berlin Conference more than 130 years ago, in which tribes, clans of the same ethnic group and populations were divided. These borders responded to the interests of the colonisers, without respecting the idiosyncrasies of the region, and as a result, these North African countries found it difficult to control their territory and extensive borders that sometimes include inhospitable areas, such as the Sahara desert in the case of Mali (Gil-Casares *et al.*, 2015: 18).

Some of the forced ethnic divisions led to nationalist movements such as the Tuareg[2], a trend that in the following years would provoke protests and uprisings against state action that would hinder the country's governability. In 2011, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), the main precursor of the Tuareg movement, began the insurrections that would later lead to clashes and military actions across large parts of the country (Ramos, 2020). In the following nine years, Mali experienced three coups d'état and two failed attempts, revealing a marked crisis of governance and political instability in the face of the government's difficulties in managing internal conflicts between the different ethnic societies.

On the other hand, there was a rise and expansion of jihadist terrorist groups, including Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) —an affiliate of al-Qaeda in Mali and West Africa— and of the Islamic State in central and eastern Mali. Several of these jihadist groups, such as Ansar Ad-Din (Helpers of the Religion), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), supported the MNLA in the early days of the rebellion by helping to conquer the northern region of Mali. These groups subsequently took advantage of

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1 The Bambara and Malinké make up around half of the Malian population, followed by the Peulh or Fulani with 14.7 per cent, the Songhai (11.6 per cent), the Tuareg (7.7 per cent). Maure, Soninké (10.8 per cent), Senoufo (10.5 per cent), Minianka. Dogon (8.9 percent), among others. (Minority Rights Group International. 2019).

2 The Tuareg or Imuhars are of Berber or Amazigh descent, white, traditionally nomadic Saharan desert people whose origins are in North Africa. Its population is mainly spread over five African countries: Algeria, Libya, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, although there are also residual populations in Nigeria and Senegal (Martín-Peñato, M., 2013: 2).

the crisis and chaos generated by secessionism to absorb the Tuareg independence movement in order to promote a jihad, controlled from the shadows by Al Qaeda, which would allow them to exercise religious and political control over the country (Expósito Guisado: 2020, 6).

Similarly, there were inter-community clashes between the Peulh and Dogon ethnic groups who, by using their own self-defence militias[3], were involved in various conflicts in the regions most affected by terrorist action. These clashes contributed to growing instability and represented a major stumbling block for the inefficient Malian armed forces in exercising control over their territory.

The unsustainability of the situation and lack of state control led the Malian government to request military support from France, which managed to contain the advance of jihadism with Operation *Serval*. Other international organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union subsequently approved the creation of multilateral operations in the Sahel area and specifically in Mali.

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is currently the last of the international executive missions deployed in Mali. The European Union has two Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions: *European Training Mission Mali* (EUTM-Mali) and *European Union Capacity Building Mission (*EUCAP Sahel Mali)[4].

May and June 2015 saw the delayed signing of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali after several arduous negotiations. This agreement, signed in Bamako on 15 May 2015 between the Malian government and pro-government rebel movements in the Azawad region in the north of the country, and subsequently by the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA)[5], refers to the implementation of a national reconciliation process that respects territorial integrity and takes into account ethnic and cultural diversity, as well as specific geographical and socio-economic characteristics. All this by implementing a system of governance coherent with the geohistorical and sociocultural reality of the northern regions, based on transparency of management, respect for human rights, justice and the fight against impunity; also taking into account the importance of the fight against terrorism, and transnational crime and organised crime[6].

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3 Ramos, 'The situation with the self-defence militias has turned into a brutal and increasingly violent conflict, mostly involving the Fulani and Dogon-Donzo, ethnic groups living in central Mali' 2020:6.

4 Diplomatic Information Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation (April 2022). *Country fact sheet: Republic of Mali.* https://www.exteriores.gob.es/Documents/FichasPais/MALI_FICHA%20PAIS.pdf

5 Alliance of armed groups including *Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA), *Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad* (HCUA), and part of *Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad* (MAA-CMA) (Díez Alcalde, 2015: 2).

6 United Nations. (2015). *Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali resulting from the Algiers Process,* preamble Microsoft Word - ML_150620_Accord pour la paix et la reconciliation au Mali _Issu du Processus d'Alger_FR-tr.docx (un.org)

However, only five years later, on 18 August 2020, the fourth coup d'état in Mali's history was to take place (Cifuentes, 2021: 6-7), after which the transition period would begin, stipulated with a maximum duration of 18 months starting on 25 September 2020 (Cifuentes, 2021: 8). However, on 24 May 2021 the transition would be cut short again after the capture of the president, exposing the inconsistency of the transition process and the future of the nation (Proto, 2021, 25 May).

Proposals by the new transitional government to postpone elections, extending the transitional period to a total of five and a half years, would be in direct conflict with the agreement reached with ECOWAS on 15 September 2020 and the Transitional Charter commitment[7]. These events led to international sanctions imposed by ECOWAS on 9 January 2022[8].

More recently, during the ECOWAS ordinary session held on 3 July 2022 in Accra[9], ECOWAS member country heads of state addressed the path and progress needed for the return to constitutional order in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea after their respective coups d'état. The main breakthroughs include the agreement to reduce the transition period in Mali to 24 months as of 1 July, as well as the approval of lifting most sanctions imposed on 9 January (Summers, 2022).

The European Union in Mali. EUTM-Mali

Following the outbreak of the crisis, the President of the Republic of Mali sent a letter to the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on 24 December 2012 requesting the deployment of an EU military training mission in Mali. Accordingly, Council Decision 2013/34/CFSP[10] of 13 January 2013 was adopted, setting out the structure and objectives of the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali. On 8 February 2013, the first European soldiers thus arrived in Bamako and on 18 February, Council Decision 2013/87/CFSP[11] was

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7 Council of the European Union. (4 February 2022). Press release 75/22, Mali: EU adopts targeted sanctions against five individuals. Available at: Mali: EU adopts targeted sanctions against five people (europa.eu)

8 Council of the European Union. (4 February 2022). Press release 75/22, Mali: EU adopts targeted sanctions against five individuals. Available at: Mali: EU adopts targeted sanctions against five people (europa.eu)

9 Department of National Security of the Government of Spain. (Accra, 3 July 2022). Summary of the ECOWAS ordinary session. Available at: CEDAEO - ORDINARY SESSION | DSN

10 Council of the European Union. Decision 2013/34/CFSP of 17 January 2013 on a European Union military mission to contribute to the training of the Malian Armed Forces (EUTM Mali). https://www.boe.es/doue/2013/014/L00019-00021.pdf

11 Council of the European Union. Decision 2013/87/CFSP of 18 February 2013 on the launch of a European Union military mission to contribute to the training of the Malian Armed Forces (EUTM Mali), https://www.boe.es/doue/2013/046/L00027-00027.pdf

adopted, officially launching EUTM-Mali, which was immediately activated from Brussels. Finally, on 20 February 2013, the mission started in Bamako[12].

Operation *European Union Training Mission Mali (EUTM-Mali*) is, as its name suggests, a training mission whose objective is to transform the Malian Armed Forces into an effective and reliable security provider for the Malian people by advising and training its troops. The scope of EUTM-Mali does not include combat operations[13], as set out in the Status of Forces Agreement or Status of Mission Agreement[14].

The Status of Forces is the legal framework of the operation and defines the main aspects governing actions, limitations and conditions affecting deployed troops. This document defines, among other aspects, the use of the host state's infrastructures and means. As well as the regime for the operation of forces on Malian territory, and limitations on the use of force.

With almost 700 soldiers, EUTM-Mali is composed of military personnel from 25 European countries, including 22 EU members and three non-member states. EU member countries include Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. The three non-EU European countries are Georgia, Moldova and Montenegro[15].

EUTM-Mali has evolved in four main areas over the course of its five mandates[16]: staff numbers, budget, geographical responsibility for action and cooperation with other regional and international organisations. No mention is made of the possibility of direct provision of material means.

During the mission's first mandate in 2013, EUTM-Mali had around 200 military personnel deployed and a budget of €12.3 million, figures that have multiplied to almost 700 European soldiers and €133.7 million approved in the fifth and last mandate to date[17].

In terms of territorial responsibility, there has been a notable evolution in that EUTM-Mali's area of action has increased from the south (first mandate), extending

12 Defence Staff. *Deployments and Operations. EUTM MALI, EU's military mission in Mali.* Available at: https://emad.defensa.gob.es/operaciones/operaciones-en-el-exterior/43-UE-EUTM-Mali/index.html

13 EUTM Mali shall not be involved in combat operations. Council of the European Union DECISION 2013/178/CFSP of 25 February 2013. Article 1, Scope and definitions.

14 Council of the European Union. DECISION 2013/178/CFSP of 25 February 2013 on the signing and conclusion of the Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Mali on the status in the Republic of Mali of the European Union military mission to contribute to the training of the Malian Armed Forces (EUTM Mali) *L00001-00006.pdf (boe.es)

15 European Union Training Mission (n.d.). Mali, *EUTM Mali. Factsheet.* Available at: https://eutmmali.eu/factsheet/

16 EUTM-Mali (n.d.). *Mandates.* https://eutmmali.eu/mandates/

17 EUTM-Mali (n.d.). *Mandates.*

to the south bank of the Niger River, including the cities of Timbuktu and Gao (third mandate), to encompass Mali as a whole and other surrounding areas (fifth mandate).

Finally, with regard to cooperation with other regional entities, since the adoption of the third mandate, support for the G5 Sahel mission has begun in the framework of activities with the Malian Armed Forces. Cooperation which, following the strategic review prior to the approval of the fifth mandate, was considerably strengthened, focusing on training and interoperability between state actors and international forces.

With the adoption of the Fifth Mandate in March 2020 and following a strategic review process, the Council of the EU decided to extend the mandate of the European Union Training Mission in Mali until 18 May 2024, setting the following strategic objectives:

'-To contribute to the improvement of the capabilities of the Malian Armed Forces under the control of the political authorities.

-Consolidate the improvements achieved since 2013.

-Contribute to the political stabilisation and improvement of the security situation in Mali through support for the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement.

-Support the restoration of state control and the rule of law throughout Mali.

-Support G5 Sahel, through the consolidation and improvement of the operational capabilities of its Joint Force, strengthening regional cooperation to address common security threats, especially terrorism and illegal trafficking, especially of human beings[18]'.

Overall, the mission has provided training for more than 15,000 Malian military personnel[19] which, taking into account the size of its armed forces[20], represents 71 percent of its total registered strength in 2019[21], reflecting the scale and scope of the mission.

18 DEFENCE STAFF (n.d.). *Deployments and Operations. EUTM MALI, EU's military mission in Mali, mandates.* Available at: https://emad.defensa.gob.es/operaciones/operaciones-en-el-exterior/43-UE-EUTM-Mali/index.html

19 EUTM-Mali (n.d.). *Factsheet.* Available at: 20220113_Fact-Sheet-EUTM-sans-elections-22FEB_ENG.pdf (eutmmali.eu)

20 21.000 registered personnel in 2019. World Data Bank (2019). Information from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). Available at: Armed forces personnel, total | Data (worldbank.org)

21 World Data Bank with information from the IISS. Available at: Armed forces personnel, total | Data (worldbank.org)

EUTM-Mali findings on the Malian crisis. Indicators

An initial general analysis of EUTM-Mali's mandates confirms the progressive need not only to extend the duration of the mission, which has now been running for nine years since its inception in 2013, but also to increase the number of human and financial resources, responsibilities and territorial areas of action. In addition, there is a perceived need to strengthen cooperation with other regional and international forces[22], suggesting a lack of improvement in the security situation, as more and more intervention is required to achieve the objectives.

Despite having contributed through training and advisory programmes to improving the capabilities of the Malian Armed Forces, these advances have made no tangible contribution to the political stabilisation of Mali, which, as discussed above, has continued to suffer from government coups and internal revolts, and the responsibilities, personnel and budget allocated to EUTM-Mali need to be expanded. Nor has it been possible to maintain effective state control in northern parts of the country, despite the re-establishment of control lost after the 2012 revolutions perpetrated by the Tuaregs and the advance of terrorism with the action of France and its anti-terrorist operation.

Considerable progress has been made in cooperation with the G5 Sahel by increasing EUTM-Mali's capabilities and areas of operation during the mission's recent mandates, contributing to strengthening regional cooperation to address common transnational threats, especially terrorism[23].

After this overview, a more complete and quantifiable analysis will be made of the degree of compliance with each of the proposed objectives, using the five selected indicators. Based on the analysis of these data, and using the five strategic objectives established for EUTM-Mali as a reference, each of the proposed specific objectives can be addressed.

The following are the indicators selected:

– Evolution of the FAMa. Number of troops and defence spending in relation to GDP.

– Security situation.

– Corruption index.

– Human rights abuses and violations at the hands of the FAMa.

– Situation and development of terrorism in Mali.

22 COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. (23 March 2020). Press reléase, 174/20. EUTM Mali: *Council extends training mission with broadened mandate and increased budget.* Document available at: EUTM Mali: Council extends the training mission with broadened mandate and increased budget (europa.eu)

23 EUTM-Mali (n.a.). *Mandates.* https://eutmmali.eu/mandates/

Evolution of the FAMa. Troop strength and defence spending as a share of GDP

Evaluation of EUTM-Mali as a training mission aimed at training and mentoring FAMa should start with a review of the status of the FAMa themselves in order to assess the level of progress of the first of the strategic objectives set by their mandates: 'to contribute to the improvement of the capabilities of the Malian Armed Forces under the control of the political authorities'[24].

Truly responsive Armed Forces require, first and foremost, having sufficient personnel to train to carry out the mandated missions in a satisfactory manner. For this reason, the evolution of the number of troops in the FAMa before and during the development of EUTM Mali will be reviewed.

The comparative evolution in the number of troops forming the FAMa and the Spanish Armed Forces is shown below for a better understanding of the data provided. It is highly relevant to note that despite a four-fold increase in the total number of FAMa troops since 1985, they still fall far short of the numbers in Spain (more than nine times higher in total) despite being twice the size of the European state. However, there has been a clear and mostly stable upward trend since EUTM Mali began, having increased the number of its armed forces by more than 160 per cent from 7,800 troops in 2012 at the outbreak of the crisis to a total of 21,000 in 2019.
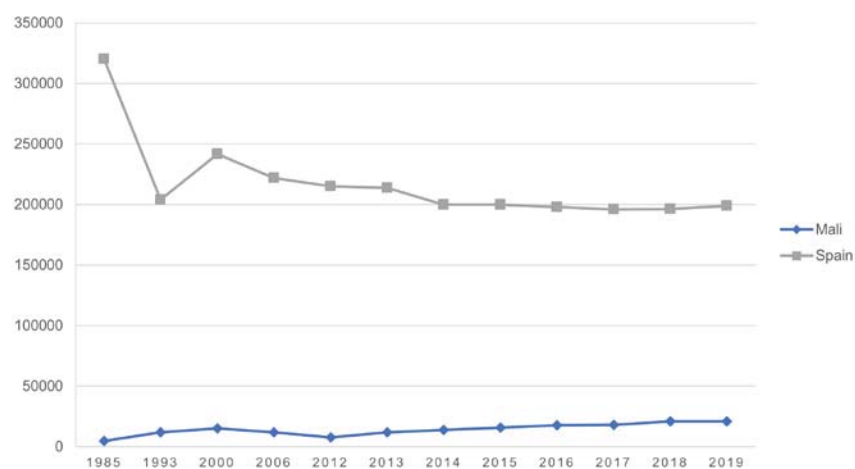
Figure I. Evolution in the number of troops of the Armed Forces Spain vs Mali[25]. Source: Prepared by author[26].

Furthermore, it is relevant to review the trend in the percentage of central government spending on defence (see Figure II), in order to verify the government's

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24 Defence Staff (n.d.). Deployments and Operations. EUTM MALI, EU's military mission in Mali, EUTM-Mali mission.

25 Column x: Years Beginning In 1985 To 2019; Column Y: Number of Troops.

26 World Data Bank with information from the IISS. Available at: Armed Forces Personnel, Total | Data (worldbank.org)

awareness of a competitive investment in its security system, among other aspects. In the case of Mali, a downward trend is observed until the outbreak of the crisis in 2012, where the graph reverses the direction of growth to start a sharp upward trend until stagnating from 2017 onwards.

The change in the state's GDP must also be taken into account. Lack of economic growth will limit the development of other areas that depend on state coffers due to the scarcity of economic resources with which to acquire social, political and, of course, military means, as well as to develop the necessary infrastructures for their management. In the case of Mali, GDP growth suffered a deep dip coinciding with the 2012 crisis, from which it quickly recovered with the temporary stabilisation of the state and the intervention of international organisations. In subsequent years, however, the downward trend can be seen to continue, despite the government's increased military spending. Despite a blip in 2020, presumably due to the global crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic[27], it is worth noting that military spending continues its upward trend without disruption. These developments may portend future underfunding to sustain the marked trend in defence spending. Or instead, a neglect of investment in other areas of society in favour of defence.
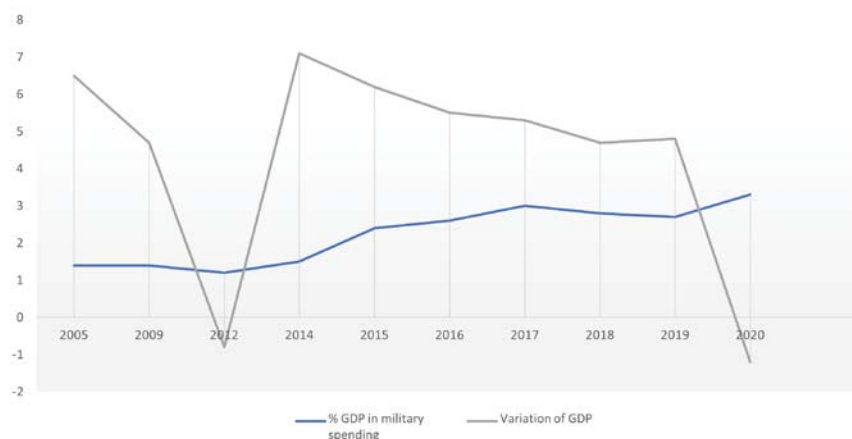
Figure II. Evolution of GDP vs. % of GDP spent on military expenditure of the Malian government.
Source: Prepared by author.

Therefore, it can be considered that so far and since the beginning of the European mission, both economic and human investment in defence have maintained generally upward trends, but that they could be limited by the country's overall low development,

27 Data from several countries are compared in 2020, with similar results of steep drops in annual GDP data: Spain -11.3%; Italy -9%; France -7.8% India -6.6%; USA -2.8%. These data reflect an overall decline in GDP data, attributable to the effects of the global crisis following the impact of COVID-19. Data available at: https://datosmacro.expansion.com/pib/

28 X-axis: time measurement, starting in 2005 until 2020; Y-axis: percentage of GDP.

29 World Data Bank with information from the IISS and the EXPANSIÓN consultation portal. All information available: Military expenditure (% of GDP) - Mali | Data (worldbank.org) and Mali GDP 2021 | datosmacro.com (expansion.com)

as reflected in its annual GDP variation. Security sector reform efforts could thus be increasingly undermined, without social support or future budgets.

This growth in defence spending will not be sustainable or acceptable to society if economic growth (GDP) does not keep pace, as state budgets could become unbalanced and other sectors of society neglected. The mismatch between development and defence spending may provoke an increase in anti-government revolts and foster rejection of the FAMa, thus moving away from EUTM-Mali's objectives of effective reform of the state's security system.

Security Situation

Having reviewed the state of its armed forces, it is now time to analyse the overall situation in the country, in order to assess the degree to which the strategic objectives to address the restructuring of the state have been met. Specifically, this section will study the effect of EUTM-Mali on aspects of general security perceptions in the country, with reference to the mission's third strategic objective: 'contribute to the political stabilisation and improvement of the security situation in Mali through support for the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement'[30].

To this end, the state of perceived security that can be assigned to the state of Mali will be assessed on the basis of a series of sub-indicators, such as the militarisation of the state, access to weapons by society, the number of reported homicides and internal conflicts, and society's perception of the insecurity generated by the armed forces. A comparative analysis will also be made of the variation of these indicators over time, reviewing the state of these indicators in 2013 when EUTM Mali was launched and their evolution after nine years of mission until 2022.

These indicators are rated from 0 to 5, with 0 attributed to factors considered as not contributing to the existing situation of violence and 5 as highly contributing. We can thus observe, firstly, that in 2013 the overall figure stood at 2.4 points, while in 2022 this value reached 2.9, an overall worsening of the perceived security situation in the country.

Aspects with the highest recorded increases included the rise in terrorist activities and especially the presence of internal conflicts, followed by perceived criminality in society and central government spending on military activities. On the latter point, it should be noted that defence spending has undergone significant increases since 2013, rising by 45 per cent to 2020. However, the evolution of the country's GDP has not been consistent with this expenditure, as discussed in previous sections, falling from a variation of 7 per cent to as low as -1.2 per cent[31].

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30 Defence Staff (n.d.). Deployments and Operations. EUTM MALI, EU's military mission in Mali, EUTM-Mali mission.

31 See figure II.

In terms of aspects that have improved during this period, funds allocated to peacekeeping missions are particularly noteworthy. This figure is determined on the basis of country contributions against the annual assessment of the peacekeeping mission budget over an average of three years[32].

Factors with the highest ratings in both periods are the perceived insecurity of the State's security forces and Armed Forces[33], and political instability[34]. Both indices have been rated with the highest attributable score, denoting the lack of progress perceived by expert analysts in these areas. Other factors with extremely high values in both periods are the number of homicides and access to weapons by the civilian population.

These indicators clearly show that no significant progress has been made during these years of international action. On the contrary, setbacks have been detected in some of the most important areas when assessing the state of the country's security. Given these data, reflection is required on real results in terms of Malian society's perception of the situation of growing insecurity in their state, remembering that it is the citizens who are the target of the effort to reform the security system in order to guarantee the country's real stability.
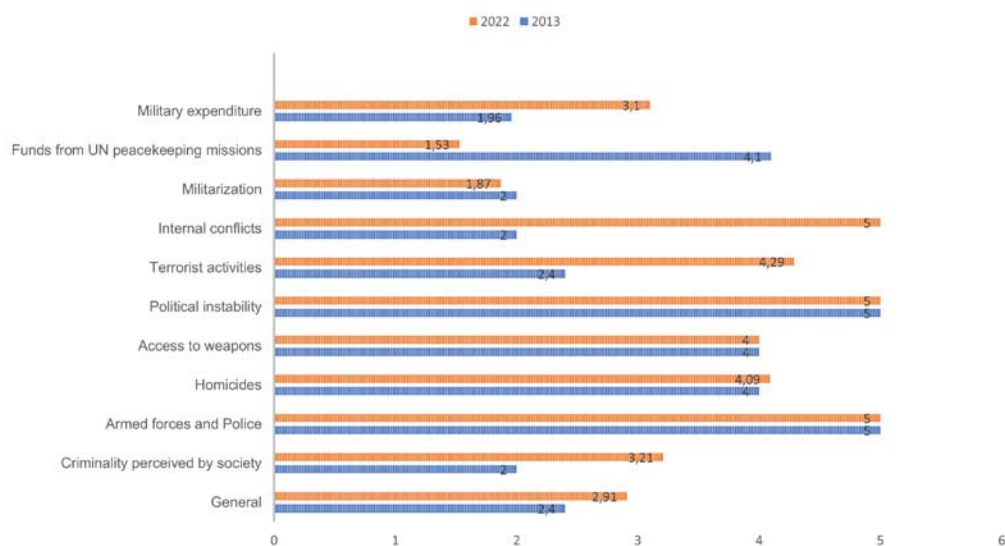
Figure III. Main indicators of the security situation. Source: prepared by author.

32 United Nations Committee on Contributions. How We Are Funded, source: Institute for Economics and Peace, as published on the website Vision of Humanity *Mali. Global Peace Index*. https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/

33 Referring to the perception of national security forces, as opposed to local militias, as a contributing factor to insecurity in the country, source: United Nations, *Crime Trends and the Operations of Criminal Justice Systems*, as published on the website Vision of Humanity *Mali. Global Peace Index* https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/

34 Qualitative assessment of political instability within the country, addressing the degree to which political institutions are sufficiently stable to meet the needs of its citizens, businesses and foreign investors, Political Instability, source: The Economist Intelligence Unit, as published on the website Vision of Humanity *Mali. Global Peace Index.* https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/

35 Vision of Humanity. *Global indexes*. See: Global indexes - Vision of Humanity

Corruption

Continuing with the analysis of aspects related to Mali's general stability, and bearing in mind that political instability has been rated with the highest score in the index presented in the previous section, it is worth looking at another highly relevant indicator: the state of corruption in the country.

According to the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), published annually by Transparency International[36], the level of corruption attributed to Mali has seen a rise in perceived levels of corruption in its public sector compared to reports issued in previous years. This index scores 180 countries and territories based on expert and business owner perceptions of their level of corruption[37] from 0 (high levels of perceived corruption) to 100 (very low levels of perceived corruption).

This index shows Mali's progressive fall before the crisis broke out, from 78th place in the world corruption ranking in 2003 to 118th place in 2011. In subsequent years the drop became more pronounced, bringing the country down to 127th place in 2013, before stabilisation was achieved and the peace accords were signed, resulting in a considerable improvement that brought the country up to 95th place in the table. However, political instability and the loss of confidence in the recovery of the state by the dubious Malian leadership led to a gradual decline from which the country has not recovered to date, despite international action. In the last report issued in 2021, Mali was ranked 136th, with the country with the highest levels of corruption among those assessed at 180th place in the table.
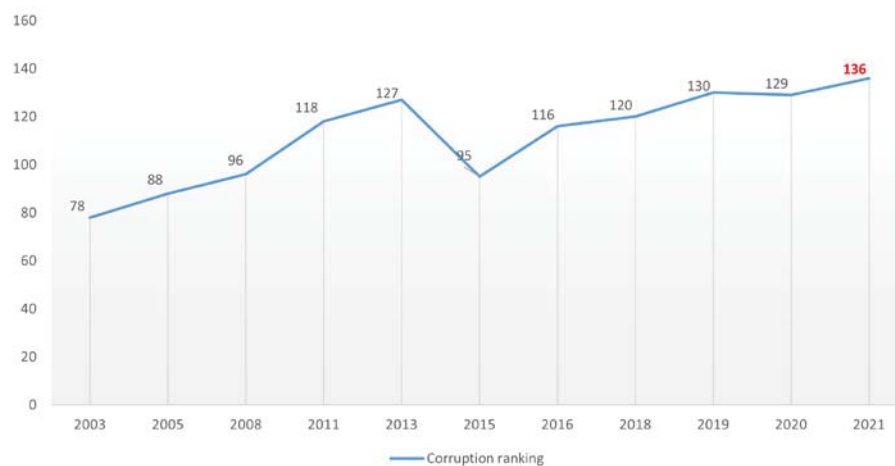
Figure IV. Corruption perception index in Mali[38]. Source: Prepared by author[39].

36 Transparency International (TI) is an international, non-governmental, non-partisan, non-profit organisation, which since its founding in 1993 has been dedicated to fighting corruption at national and international level by analysing and disseminating data and reports on the level of corruption in countries.

37 Transparency International Spain. (2021). *CPI 2021.* Available at: Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)

38 Column x: time starting from 2003 to 2021; column y: corruption ranking, rated from 1 to 180.

39 Expansión. (2021). datosmacro.com. See: https://datosmacro.expansion.com/estado/indice-percepcion -corrupcion/mali/

These records cast a shadow over EUTM Mali's results and doubt on the effectiveness of the approach and actions employed to achieve the first and fourth of the mission's strategic objectives, respectively: 'contribute to the political stabilisation' and 'support the restoration of state control and the rule of law throughout Mali'.

Thus, the evolution of the mission throughout its various mandates is not yielding results that translate into direct or indirect improvements on public bodies or the government in the area of corruption. This also refers to the third EUTM-Mali objective: 'Contribute to the political stabilisation and improvement of the security situation in Mali through support for the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement'. These results show that a credible consistency in the fight against corruption and impunity, established as one of the principles included in the Agreement, is not being achieved.

Transparency of the state in general must be one of the foundations on which to build the pillars for the reconstruction of a competent armed forces capable of responding to various internal and external threats such as terrorism. Mistrust of state security resources promotes the need to resort to other non-state armed or terrorist groups, which are increasingly present throughout the territory as an alternative to inefficient government action. This decentralisation of security promotes instability, unregulated internal clashes and actions outside the principles of the rule of law, making it difficult for the state to recover. Government support and a public system that underpins the activities of its armies at all levels in a clear and transparent manner is therefore indispensable to restore public confidence in the state's armed forces.

Human rights abuses and violations at the hands of the FAMa

To verify the degree of achievement of the fourth objective: 'support the restoration of state control and the rule of law throughout Mali', the number of reported attacks and violations attributed to the Malian Armed Forces will be reviewed, as such actions are considered incompatible with the concept of the rule of law.

The precarious situation in which the FAMa find themselves, in many cases, has led to the development of conduct and behaviour that is far from the principles of respect for human rights promoted by EUTM-Mali. Determining factors such as infrastructure, manpower and economic resources in general stand out as the main shortcomings in the Malian ranks. In turn, the proliferation of internal clashes and ethnic strife, coupled with low morale among troops witnessing the unstoppable advance of armed groups and jihadist terrorism towards the centre of the country, have fuelled other forms of violence and the proliferation of attitudes among soldiers that are far from the code of conduct that any defender of order and the rule of law should display.

As a direct consequence, serious violations of applicable IHL have been reported during the course of the non-international armed conflict in Mali by FAMa components. These abuses and violations have been detected and reported by international bodies such as the United Nations through MINUSMA, human rights organisations such as

Amnesty International, and other experts appointed by the United Nations, such as its independent expert[40].

According to data provided in the UN Secretary-General's periodic report on the situation in Mali to the Security Council[41], MINUSMA reported 34 cases of human rights violations and abuses in 2016. Among the cases, it highlights ill-treatment committed by the FAMa against 6 detainees and highlights, although without concrete data, that the national forces appeared to be responsible for an increasing number of cases that violated human rights.

In subsequent years the situation worsened, with 129 rapes and abuses reported in 2018, with FAMa as the protagonists in 18 cases, accounting for 14 per cent of the total. In 2021, this trend continues to rise, as reflected in the report presented in June[42], where 422 cases of human rights violations and abuses were reported, 92 at the hands of the FAMa, or 26 per cent.

In the latest of these reports, submitted on 2 June 2022[43], MINUSMA documented 684 human rights violations and abuses, 218 more than in the previous reporting period. The FAMa were identified as the perpetrators in 173 cases, accounting for 25 per cent of the total and placing the national forces as the second force responsible for these actions, behind only radical and extremist groups.
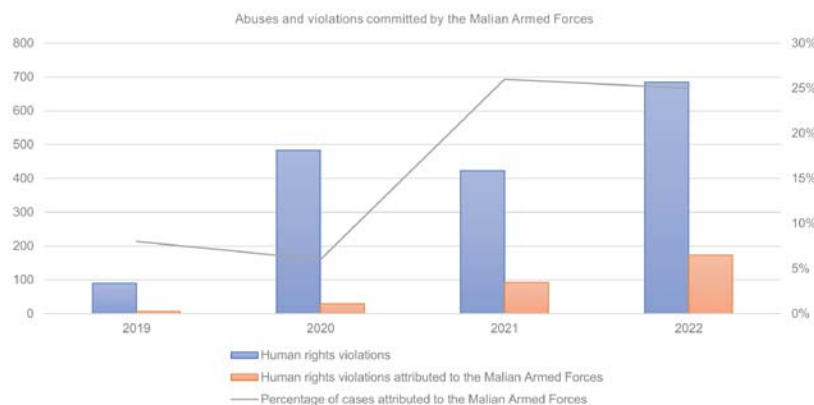
Figure V. Abuses and violations committed by FAMa in relation to total abuses and violations reported in Mali together with the evolution of the percentage it represents. Source: Prepared by author[44].

40 Mr Alioune Tine, UN Independent Expert on the human rights situation in Mali since 1 May 2018. His main mission is to assist the Government of Mali in its actions to promote and protect human rights and in the implementation of the recommendations made in Council resolutions, as well as to issue reports reflecting the situation of the observance of Human Rights in the country, United Nations: https://www.ohchr.org/es/special-procedures/ie-mali

41 UN Secretary-General. (28 March 2016). Report S/2016/281, Situation in Mali.

42 UN Secretary-General. (1 June 2021). Report S/2021/519, Situation in Mali. Available at: *https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/es/content/informes-del-secretario-general-al-consejo-de-seguridad-en-2021*

43 UN Secretary-General. (2 June 2022). Report S/2022/446, Situation in Mali. Available at: N2236097.pdf (un.org)

44 United Nations Security Council. (2022). Reports of the UN Secretary-General. Available at: Secretary-General reports to the Security Council in 2022| UN SECURITY COUNCIL (un.org)

Despite EUTM-Mali's actions in terms of training and advice, it can be argued that the overall human rights preparedness and knowledge of the FAMa has not been sufficient or at least effective in contributing to the reduction of violations committed by its components.

Another factor contributing to this rise in the percentage of violations or abuses committed by state forces can be attributed to the ineffectiveness of the country's judicial system, resulting from a state with no established public bodies working on the basis of the principles of the rule of law. A fundamental principle in the definition of rule of law is observance of laws, to which all persons, entities and institutions are subject, and specifies that there must be a system that ensures respect for the law, equality before the law and accountability[45].

According to data provided by the UN independent expert, little progress has been made at judicial level to re-establish the rule of law in Mali. Most perpetrators of human rights and international humanitarian law abuses and violations remain unpunished. This impunity observed by the independent expert is due to insufficient budget allocation, limited resource mobilisation, lack of staff, lack of security guarantees for holding acts, and the sometimes questionable independence of the judiciary.

Impunity, as defined by the United Nations, can be understood as 'the impossibility, de jure or de facto, of bringing the perpetrators of violations to account —whether in criminal, civil, administrative or disciplinary proceedings—since they are not subject to any inquiry that might lead to their being accused'[46]. Consequently, this lack of criminal responsibility is a breach of states' obligations to investigate, prosecute and punish. The investigation of these violations leads to the subsequent adoption of appropriate measures against the perpetrators so that those suspected of criminal responsibility are prosecuted, tried and sentenced to appropriate penalties, thus respecting the premises of the aforementioned concept of the rule of law[47].

The fight against impunity is therefore essential if the Malian people are to regain confidence in their institutions and their armed forces; it represents one of the indispensable pillars to ensure the establishment of a credible rule of law on which to rebuild all public state bodies, including the defence sector. However, according to the independent expert, several serious violations attributed to the Malian Defence and Security Forces remain unpunished to date, including, given their nature, extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions of civilians. This impunity goes directly against the general commitments established by the Algiers Agreement, which reaffirms there

45 UN Secretary-General. (3 August 2004). The rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies. Available at: https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/es/what-is-the-rule-of-law/

46 United Nations Commission on Human Rights. (8 February 2005). Updated Set of Principles for the protection and promotion of human rights through action to combat impunity. Available at: http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/impu/impuppos.html

47 United Nations Commission on Human Rights. (8 February 2005). Updated Set of Principles for the protection and promotion of human rights through action to combat impunity.

be 'no amnesty for the authors of war crimes, crimes against humanity and serious violations of human rights'[48].

As far as this study is concerned, FAMa impunity relates directly to the third EUTM-Mali objective: 'contribute to the political stabilisation and improvement of the security situation in Mali through support for the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement'[78]. It is thus clear that no improvement is being achieved in the fight against impunity as a result of the actions undertaken by EUTM-Mali, whose advisory and training work in this area is not producing satisfactory results.

As far as EUTM-Mali is concerned, action on the judicial system is limited. This important factor with such a strong impact on impunity affecting state bodies cannot be improved without the support and involvement of other national organisations and institutions with greater competence in this field. This leaves a clear gap in the European training mission's ability to contribute to the restoration of the rule of law in terms of accountability. It can therefore be argued that the fourth objective of the fifth mandate, 'support the restoration of state control and the rule of law throughout Mali'[78], will be difficult to achieve in this way.

Terrorism situation

Terrorism in Mali has consolidate its position as a major contributor to the destabilisation of the country and has exposed the state's failure to effectively provide security for its citizens. Studying the impact of this scourge will make it possible to determine the extent to which the fifth and last of the EUTM-Mali objectives has been achieved: 'support G5 Sahel, through the consolidation and improvement of the operational capabilities of its Joint Force, strengthening regional cooperation to address common security threats, especially terrorism'[78], as well as reemphasising the first of these objectives: 'to contribute to the improvement of the capabilities of the Malian Armed Forces under the control of the political authorities'[49].

Despite one-off tactical successes by international forces and governments in the Sahel, data on terrorism in the country since the mission began in 2013 have registered the highest levels of terrorist activity on record, with an overall upward trend continuing throughout (Summers, 2022). These isolated achievements include the selective elimination of important jihadist leaders, including Abdelmalek Droukdel (leader of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), Abu Walid al-Saharoui (leader of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, IS-GS) and Abu al-Maghrebi (religious leader of JNIM) (Fuente Cobo, 2022: 8-9).

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48 United Nations. (2015). Agreement for peace and reconciliation in Mali resulting from the Algiers process, Section I: Principles, commitments and foundations for a sustainable resolution of the conflict, Article 1.

49 Defence Staff. (n.d.). Deployments and Operations. EUTM MALI, EU's military mission in Mali, EUTM-Mali mission.

If we compare data on the number of deaths and the total number of incidents classified as terrorist since the mission began, figures are not encouraging as there has been a clear increase in all the factors mentioned (see Figure VI). The most significant data is the rise in the number of casualties recorded (574 in 2021 compared to 42 in 2013), as well as the number of incidents reported (333 in 2021 compared to 31 in 2013) showing how the level of violence used in attacks has escalated, as well as the frequency[50].
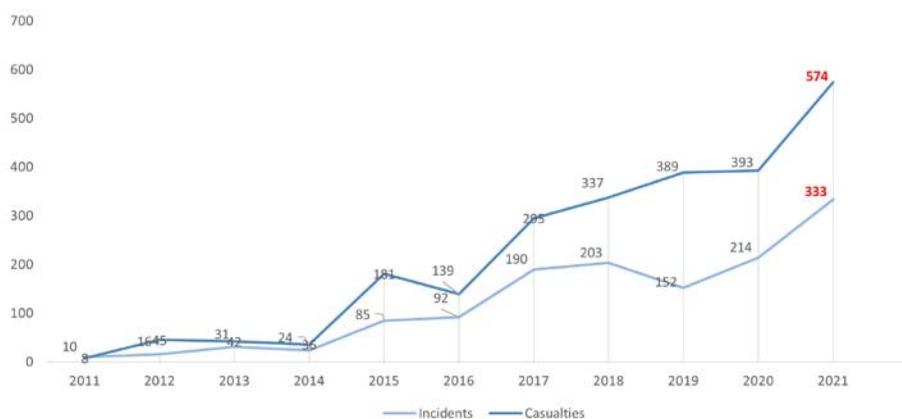

Figure VI. Comparison of the evolution of the number of attacks and victims in the period between 2011 and 2021.
Source: Prepared by author[51].

The above data are part of the *Global Terrorism Index* (GTI), which is based on four indicators: deaths, incidents, injuries and property damage caused by actions considered to be terrorist in origin. The GTI is the result of a comprehensive study by The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP)[52] that analyses the impact of terrorism in 163 countries, covering 99.7 per cent of the world's population. The IEP uses data from *Terrorism Tracker* and other sources to assign a composite value to countries based on the impact of terrorism in each country. An ordinal ranking is then extracted to compare the values obtained on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 indicates that there is no impact of terrorism and 10 represents the highest value attributable to terrorism for this indicator[53].

50 Vision of Humanity. (2021). Global Terrorist Index. Available at: https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/#/

51 Vision of Humanity. (2021). Global indexes. Available at: Global indexes - Vision of Humanity: Global Terrorism Index | Countries most impacted by terrorism (visionofhumanity.org)

52 The IEP is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit think tank dedicated to shifting the world's focus to peace as a positive, achievable, and tangible measure of human well-being and progress. It develops conceptual frameworks to define peacefulness; metrics for measuring peace; and uncovering the relationships between factors such as business, peace and prosperity. Institute for Economics & Peace. *Global Terrorism Index 2022. Measuring the impact of terrorism.* https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GTI-2022-web-09062022.pdf

53 Vision of Humanity. (2021). Global Terrorist Index. https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/#/

According to the GTI, Mali was ranked 19th out of 163 countries in 2013, but a sharp increase in the number of attacks as well as a rising number of victims, pushed the country to number 7 in the 2021 ranking, indicating that terrorism is clearly worse in the country. With regard to the most recent data, collected up to June 2022, the upward trend continues, with the worst figures recorded in recent years in the country being reported for the first half of 2022.
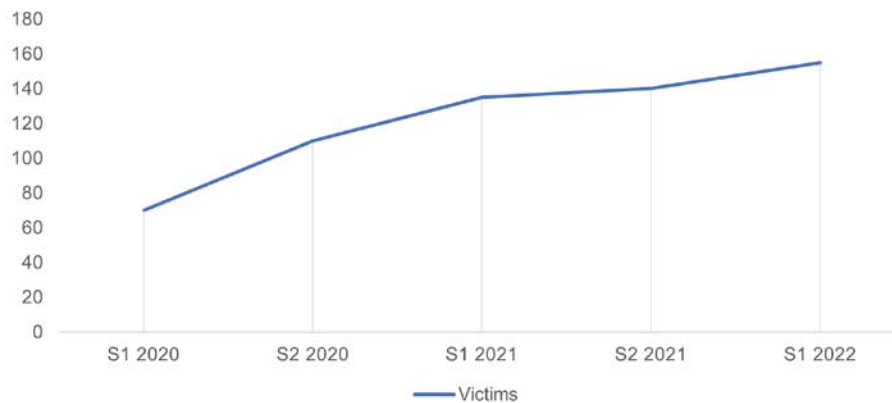

Figure VII. Six-monthly trend in fatalities. Attacks recorded from January 2020 to June 2022[54].
Source: Prepared by author[55].

A review of the evolution of the incidence of terrorism in the country shows that, despite international efforts, the situation has worsened since the beginning of EUTM-Mali. Heterogeneity and internal conflict in Malian society has provided an important breeding ground for the more radical branches of Islamism. These extremist groups have seen their opportunity to spread their ideas amidst the desperation of a population determined to promote change in power structures through popular uprisings and all manner of violent actions (Expósito Guisado, 2020).

On the other hand, the Malian government's ability to control its own territory is becoming less effective as it moves up into the inhospitable northern territories, where territorial control is supplanted by the various armed groups. Jihadist groups, located mainly in the north and interior of the country, have exerted greater influence over the nomadic populations that operate in these areas, facilitating their expansion and making it more difficult for national forces to control and monitor them.

Based on the data provided, it has not been possible to mitigate the situation in terms of terrorism control. However, with the training and capacity building offered by EUTM, the EU has contributed by providing the necessary technical and logistical support to help improve the capabilities of FAMa components, which has a direct impact on transforming the security system, although not with the desired results.

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54 x-axis: time demarcation by semesters; y-axis: number of fatalities.

55 SUMMERS, Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo, Actividad yihadista en el Magreb y el Sahel, junio 2022. (2022). Available at: https://observatorioterrorismo.com/analisis/actividad-yihadista-en-el-magreb-y-el-sahel-junio-2022/

Finally, we will review the second objective set for EUTM-Mali, not specifically reviewed with these indicators, but which will be analysed based on results obtained after reviewing the indicators: 'consolidate the improvements achieved since 2013'[56].

In 2013, Operation *Serval* brought stability back to northern Mali and regained government control over territories seized by the MNLA-led insurgency and some terrorist groups. The number of attacks and casualties thus decreased between 2013 and 2014, as can be seen in Figure VI, despite a marked increase from 2014 onwards.

In terms of respect for the rule of law in the country, looking at the data reported by the CPI reflected in graph four, the same trend is observed, falling in 2013 after the international intervention to historic lows since 2008 and then regaining its upward trend, even increasing progressively to date.

Likewise, a similar situation is observed with regard to economic growth in the country, measured through the variation in GDP, whose value begins to recover after the crisis until 2014, at which point records begin a continued overall decline until reaching historic lows in 2020, as can be seen in graph two.

It can therefore be stated that the improvements set in 2013, the target set by the EUTM, have not been maintained, but rather a one-off stabilisation followed by a progressive deterioration until the present day.

Assessing the impact of EUTM Mali on the crisis

A review of the objectives set after analysing data provided allows us to answer the question that opened this analysis: Have the actions undertaken by the European Union through the EUTM-Mali mission been effective in bringing about defence sector reform that contributes to the restructuring of governance and stability in the country?

The evolution of EUTM mandates over the years reflects a certain adaptability, showing flexibility but slowness in response. Despite the significant modifications implemented, they take too long to become effective, and changes have to wait for the renewal and ratification of the next mandate (after an average of 2 years) to be implemented. All this sums up the European response as adequately adaptive, albeit unresponsive and limited.

The first two objectives set for this paper have also been successfully addressed. The first sought to understand the impact of EUTM-Mali on the development of FAMa. We reviewed data provided by the indicators on the evolution of the FAMa in terms of their number of troops and defence spending in relation to GDP; and also the

56 Defence Staff. (n.d.). Deployments and Operations. EUTM MALI, EU's military mission in Mali, EUTM-Mali mission.

number of abuses and human rights violations committed by the FAMa. These two indicators intended to show the general state of both the human resources available and the economic means allocated to defence, as well as the degree of compliance with the basic rules of conduct that characterise the rule of law, especially the observance of human rights and compliance with IHL.

In the case of the FAMa, since the mission began, both the number of troops and investment in defence have followed an upward trend, signifying a greater involvement of the Malian government in allocating budgets and increasing the number of personnel, both important shortcomings detected before the start of the EUTM. However, this increase has not meant a significant increase in military presence in neglected areas of the north, where terrorist groups continue to swell their ranks.

With regard to increased spending, the problem of underinvestment in other sectors of Malian society remains. Prioritising state budgets to the defence sector directly affects the confidence of citizens, who perceive that their government's military spending is rising despite declining GDP growth, reducing the possibility of reforms in sectors and social infrastructures that are increasingly in need.

With regard to the observance of human rights, the significant shortcomings identified by the UN experts have made this area one of the cornerstones of the training programmes proposed since the beginning of the mission. However, the FAMa is operating in a precarious situation, marked by a shortage of both human and material resources to which the EUTM cannot contribute, as it is outside the scope of both its mandates and the status of forces, where there is no mention of the possibility of contributing in this area. Malian soldiers are therefore sometimes forced to resort to desperate, disproportionate and unjust measures as their only weapon against terrorism and insubordination. Moreover, the difficulty and lack of training and means to detect, identify and deal with an asymmetric threat that finds shelter among the civilian population encourages indiscriminate actions against the civilian population.

We must also not forget that the country's ethnic problem has an undeniable influence on the violent actions carried out by its military, which in many cases are reinforced by existing ethnic prejudices against certain minorities.

The numbers of abuses at the hands of the FAMa recorded are alarming, showing a clear increase in interventions by state forces against a civilian population that is increasingly distrustful of government action. As a direct consequence, many citizens are forced to seek security providers from other non-governmental armed groups, in many cases jihadist.

Continuing with the second of the proposed specific objectives, an analysis of the results of the intervention by reviewing selected indicators, the root cause of the Malian crisis can be established. This is based on three pillars: the ethnic identity problem caused by the current border lines; the political and governance situation in the country; and the spread of jihadist terrorism.

By implementing its integrated crisis management strategy, the European Union has opted for a combined strategy with two courses of action: civilian through EUCAP Sahel Mali and military with EUTM-Mali. This is a sound approach to tackling a deep and multi-sectoral crisis such as the case of Mali. However, by focusing the response on the military aspect, the EUTM has proved to be markedly insufficient and limited in addressing real security system reform in a state of Mali's characteristics.

Firstly, the origin of the conflict was the crisis initiated in the north by the Tuareg ethnic group who, separated by the demarcation of borders as a result of the division of Africa by the West, demanded autonomy and recognition of their identity. The political context in which the conflict unfolded is directly linked to the real problem that hampers the development of the African country, its government. Marred by mistrust and insecurity and its manifest inability to manage the Azawad crisis, the Tuareg advance fuelled revolts in the upper echelons of the Malian defence sector, which would initiate a series of coups d'état that would destroy the credibility of successive governments in the eyes of their citizens and the international community.

The weak political system has resulted in a continued disregard for the basic principles that govern the rule of law. Among the most outstanding violations are the impartiality of justice, the observance of human rights —as corroborated by the data provided by the violations committed by state armed forces personnel—, impunity for crimes and corruption among institutions.

According to records, all of these factors have experienced no observable improvements since the training mission began, which precisely included 'contribute to the political stabilisation' in its strategic objectives, when there have been five coups or coup attempts in the country; 'support for the implementation of the Algiers Peace Agreement' when the main fundamental principles established by the agreement have not been respected; or 'support the restoration of state control and the rule of law throughout Mali' when corruption rates continue to rise and human rights violations continue to increase.

The proliferation of jihadism is the third pillar sustaining the crisis in Mali. Increased intensity and frequency of attacks, increasingly focused on areas of interest to Bamako, and the mimicry of its members, who are difficult to identify among the civilian population, maintain the growing pressure on a government that lacks credibility and the means to deal with the threat. Moreover, scarce resources are being spent on curbing this scourge, without addressing other important issues, such as restoring the rule of law and getting back on the democratic path.

It is noteworthy that Mali's ruling military junta, composed of high-ranking military officers, focuses its efforts on defence issues as if it were exclusively a war, emphasising the strategic factor over other aspects that concern the state. This has been evidenced by data on both the increase in the number of FAMa troops (a rise of 160 per cent since the beginning of the crisis) and the percentage of GDP allocated to military spending by the Malian government, which, despite the negative growth of its GDP, has continued to increase every year.

On the other hand, progress in justice, considered by the United Nations as one of the fundamental factors in recovering and guaranteeing the rule of law, has been scarce. This fact is confirmed by the percentage of violations committed by the FAMa, which has risen from 8 percent to 25 percent in recent years, and which moreover, according to the same sources, remain mostly unpunished.

In short, without a government that supports and drives the development of all sectors of society in the same direction, it will lack guidance and unity of decision and action, which will eventually, due to the tension applied in opposite directions, end up disintegrating it. Mali has an urgent need to restore the people's confidence in their leadership, their identity and their unity. A guide that is in turn a legitimate guarantor of security, preventing the proliferation of violent and uncontrolled alternatives that emerge outside the principles of the rule of law. This guide must also be governed by the acceptance of the differences that make up Malian society, representing them and looking after their real interests.

All in all, it can be said that EUTM-Mali has failed to bring about improvements in Mali's security system, largely due to the absence of a government that supports effective reform, observance of the fundamental principles of the rule of law, the development of its military infrastructure, and the training of its soldiers. The European approach, however, is undoubtedly correct as the education and training of the military must be the basis for ensuring the effective grassroots development of the military based on the principles established and learned in the training academies that will then govern the behaviour of companies in their operations.

Future strategies for EU action in Mali

Finally, in light of the results obtained, the third and last objective is to identify possible alternative courses of action in which the EU could invest its efforts more effectively in order to contribute to the reform of the Malian defence system and the country's democratic transition.

Several courses of action have been identified, depending on the causes of the conflict, which should take different directions in order to unblock the deadlocked Malian crisis. In the case of the Azawad crisis, the problem must be tackled as set out in the Algiers agreements, through the real and effective recognition of this region with its characteristics and differences, but within Mali's territory. The central government's presence in these areas must be much clearer, showing its support and above all its commitment to the security of its citizens. Recruitment and the creation of relevant bases in the north would help to show this commitment and allow the people to defend their territories from within government ranks, thus increasing people's commitment and confidence in state support and strengthening the central government.

As already highlighted, the training of Malian troops is considered a sound strategy, although the possibility of initiating other types of actions that go beyond training

and have a direct impact on improving the living conditions of the soldiers should be considered. They would also facilitate the acquisition of infrastructure and means to conduct combat actions with greater guarantees of success. This shortage of resources identified in the Malian ranks could be significantly mitigated if the European contribution were not limited to training, but were also part of the intervention, supporting Malian actions with personnel and material.

In coordination with EUCAP Sahel Mali, the problem of impunity enjoyed by the FAMa must be further monitored as any training and reform of defence structures is insufficient without ensuring exemplary and reliable compliance with the criminal code by legitimate defenders of state security.

The solution to the governance crisis is the most difficult goal to achieve as it implies a commitment by the current military junta to give way to a democratic system, losing the power it holds. This problem, from a security perspective, can only be addressed by strengthening security arrangements which, when the time comes, will allow free and secure elections to be held. Beyond this, comprehensive reform of the political system will have to be addressed from other sectors in a coordinated and joint manner, between civilian and military actors. All this in collaboration with both Mali's political representatives and the international community, especially states with greater regional influence, such as ECOWAS members.

In short, Europe must redefine its strategy, strengthening actions that tackle the root cause of the conflict from a local approach, involving the Malian people more in each of the areas of intervention and ensuring the representation of minorities in government institutions and security bodies. In the same way, reforms in all social sectors must be undertaken by fostering the support and trust of citizens as a whole in their institutions.

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The Indo-Pacific turn in US foreign policy: a neoclassical realist approach to geopolitics

Abstract

This article seeks to develop a geopolitical explanation for the Indo-Pacific shift in US foreign policy. To do so, it draws on the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism and its different levels of analysis. It focuses on the interactions between systemic pressures and perceptions of the US elite from a spatial point of view. Mental geographic maps are the analytical tool used for this purpose because they help to understand how US statesmen perceive the international geopolitical environment and how they respond to external pressures. The article asks what role these mental maps have played in the new geopolitical orientation of US foreign policy. The answer to this question is that the US elite has understood China's rise through its mental geographic maps, which has led it to see China as a threat to the US international position. The study uses a qualitative methodology to test this hypothesis, by reviewing the available literature on neoclassical realism and geopolitics, and the contributions of foreign policy advisors and official statements by US institutions and decision-makers.

Keywords

Introduction

The most immediate antecedents of the importance of the Indo-Pacific region in US foreign policy can be traced to the end of the first term of President Barack Obama's administration. However, during Donald Trump's presidency, and especially throughout Joseph Biden's presidency, this region of the world has acquired strategic importance for US foreign policy. The rise of China is the main reason for this shift in US foreign action as it is perceived as a strategic threat.

Different realist authors have analysed the future of Sino-American relations from different perspectives. Henry Kissinger, for example, approaches these relations from the perspective of classical realism and pays special attention to the balance of power between these two countries (2016: 230-237). John Mearsheimer, for his part, studies these relations from the perspective of defensive neorealism by analysing the challenge that the rise of China represents for the international position of the US (2014: 368 *et seq.*)

In contrast, the main objective of this research is to develop a geopolitical explanation of the Indo-Pacific shift in US foreign policy through studying American statesmen's perception of the international reality. To carry out this task, neoclassical realism is adopted as a theoretical framework, thereby providing the conceptual system with which to analyse the interactions between system and unit variables, and more specifically the relationship between China's rise and American statesmen's perception of this phenomenon. Geopolitics is therefore the instrument through which to examine these interactions from a spatial perspective.

The question to be answered is the following: What role have the US elite's mental geographic maps played in the orientation of US foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific region? The hypothesis put forward in response to this question posits that the US elite has interpreted China's increasing national capabilities through their own mental geographic maps. This has led them to seeing the rise of China as a strategic threat to the US position in the international power structure. As a consequence, the US has oriented its foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific region to contain the rise of China.

To test the above hypothesis, a qualitative methodology is used that draws on the literature of neoclassical realist authors, especially those that pay attention to the intervening variable of the perception of reality in their explanation of foreign policy. This methodology is combined with the use of mental geographic maps as an analytical concept to address the spatial dimension of American statesmen's perception of reality. The available literature in cognitive geography and geopolitics is used to clarify this concept and how it is used to test the hypothesis. Furthermore, to elucidate the mental geographic maps of US leaders, case studies of government advisors are analysed, especially the works of the authors who have had the greatest impact on US foreign policy in strategic terms. In addition to these works, we also use official documents from the main decision-making bodies and public statements by the country's leaders.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism with its conceptual system is presented. The variables considered and the interactions between them are discussed. The following section clarifies the way in which geopolitics is understood and used in this research, as well as the concept of the mental geographic map that is applied and the geographic scales used. This is followed by the rise of China is addressed. Subsequently, the mental geographic map that shapes the geopolitical vision of American statesmen is elucidated to explain how the rise of China has been interpreted in geopolitical terms and the Indo-Pacific orientation that US foreign policy has acquired.

Systemic pressures and perceptions of reality

The formation and development of neoclassical realism has not been absent of intellectual controversy, which has made its status in the discipline of International Relations a matter of debate. It has received mixed reviews (Rathbun, 2008; Romanova, 2012; Quinn, 2013; Wohlforth, 2015; Narizny, 2017, 2018; Sears, 2017; Streltsov and Lukin, 2017; Smith, 2018; Konyshev, 2020). However, this has not prevented it from being consolidated within the discipline, with important contributions from different authors (Ripsman *et al.*, 2016; Gelot and Welz, 2018; Taliaferro *et al.*, 2018; Smith, 2019; Meibauer *et al.*, 2021).

The theoretical matrix of neoclassical realism is Kenneth Waltz's (1959) neorealism, along with the three levels of analysis consisting of the first, second and third images, corresponding respectively to the level of the individual, the state and the international system. To this effect, like neorealism (Waltz, 1979), neoclassical realism considers the system level to be decisive in explaining the behaviour of states in the international sphere. However, unlike neorealism, it integrates factors belonging to the first and second image into its analysis.

The focus of neoclassical realism is on the interaction between external stimuli and the intervening variables in the first and second images to explain the link between system constraints and state behaviour. In this way, the intervening variables at the domestic level filter the systemic variables of the international environment. In any case, it is the system-level variables that have a dominant role in their analyses. This means that complex domestic policy processes operate as a transmission belt for external forces (Schweller, 2004a: 164). States' domestic situations explain why they react differently to similar opportunities and systemic pressures (Schweller, 2004b). For this reason, it can be said that foreign policy is ultimately the product of an amalgamation of the systemic, state and individual levels (Schmidt, 2005).

Neoclassical realism analyses include a wide variety of different intervening variables from the first and second image (Ripsman *et al.*, 2016: 61-79; Götz, 2021). Of interest in this research are the interactions of external stimuli, in this case the rise of China, with first-image variables, such as cognitive filters that affect how American leaders process information and perceive reality (Hadfield-Amkhan, 2010; Kitchen, 2010;

He, 2017; Meibauer, 2020). These filters are made up of values, beliefs and images that affect how statesmen understand and interact with the outside world. Its role is to assist foreign policy decision-makers in processing information. These filters vary from person to person, which explains why each leader reacts differently to the same challenges and opportunities (Khong, 1992; Larson, 1985; Renshon and Larson, 2003; Farnham, 1997; Ripsman *et al.*, 2016: 62). This intervening variable is used here via the analytical concept of the mental geographic map to elucidate how US statesmen perceive international geopolitical reality, and how they thereby interpret the rise of China and their country's international position in relation to this rising power. In other words, the aim is to shed light from a spatial perspective on how US elites perceive the international balance of power in relation to the rise of China and how this has impacted on US foreign policy (Taliaferro, 2004; Friedberg, 1988; Wohlforth, 1993).

Foreign policy is made by people organised in governments and bureaucracies (Schweller, 2006: 47), which is why they are likely to reach different conclusions in relation to the interests at stake at any given time (Kitchen, 2010: 135-136). This makes it particularly important to analyse their vision of the international scene, for which mental geographic maps are an appropriate analytical tool. Moreover, the pressures of the international system do not interact mechanically with unit-level factors, but are filtered by the human factor such that the ideas that organise rulers' perceptions mediate this interaction and condition the final response to these pressures (Christensen, 1997: 68; Rose, 1998: 147; Zakaria, 2000: 52).

Geopolitical codes, mental geographic maps and geographic scales

This section addresses the compatibility between neoclassical realism and geopolitics, and the way in which the latter is understood is clarified. This is important because it affects the way in which the analytical concept of a mental geographic map is defined and applied.

Realist theories are based on a number of geopolitical assumptions that have rarely been made explicit (Haslam, 2002: 162-182; Gökmen, 2010; Dalby, 2013). However, the views of realist authors differ in their understanding of geopolitics. In this regard, Hans Morgenthau, for example, considers it a pseudoscience (1963: 213), while John Mearsheimer integrates it into his analysis by considering the geographical location of the state in the projection of its power in certain regions (2014). This view is shared by the authors of neoclassical realism (Meibauer *et al.*, 2021). Realist authors generally tend to conceive of geopolitics in systemic terms, whereas in this study it is conceived at both international and domestic scales (Giblin 1985).

On the other hand, the important divergences there are between specialists in relation to the object, method and foundations of geopolitics are not negligible (Cairo, 1993: 32; Dodds, 2005: 27-34). For this reason, it is necessary to speak of geopolitics in the plural, as there are different definitions (Mamadouh, 1998) that respond to divergent

worldviews (Dodds and Atkinson, 2003). The various existing schools of geopolitical thought account for this reality, including classical geopolitics, neoclassical geopolitics, critics of neoclassical geopolitics, Marxist political geography, radical geopolitics and critical geopolitics (Parker, 2015; Kuus, 2017; Criekemans, 2022). Apart from these differences, geopolitics is considered here to be the study of how political phenomena play out in the geographical environment, and how this affects the organisation of space (Kristof, 1960; Lacoste, 1985; Dalby, 2004: 234).

Geopolitics is conceived here in strategic terms because it is based on geography, which is strategic knowledge (Lacoste, 1977). Given that the focus is on US foreign policy, geopolitics is also understood as the study of the external spatial relations of states in the organisation of international space (East and Moodie, 1956: 23). In addition to this, geopolitics is considered an instrument that allows us to focus spatially on social phenomena to elucidate the geopolitical logic they obey (Grabowsky, 1933).

In contrast to the authors of critical geopolitics, who consider geopolitics as a set of discursive practices (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995: 47; Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992), in this study it is understood as a set of practices embedded in war, foreign policy and diplomacy that are manifested in the way space is organised. There are, then, no purely spatial processes that precede, influence or even determine the social and political processes that develop on them (Cairo, 1993: 60). Space is a constructed social reality that implies, contains and conceals social relations, as well as reflecting power relations because they are the result of social superstructures like the state. Space is thereby ordered according to the specific requirements of these structures (Lefebvre, 2013: 139, 141). Physical geography only limits the possible configurations of space.

Decisions made by statesmen in the organisation of space in areas such as military, diplomatic and foreign policy reflect a country's prevailing geopolitical practices. These form, let's say, geopolitical codes that constitute a particular form of reasoning based on a set of political-geographical assumptions about the security of the state or a group of states, and about potential threats and possible responses. State elites develop these codes through their everyday geopolitical spatial planning practice. To this effect, each country has its own geopolitical codes that are conditioned both by the geographical position it occupies and by its position in the international power structure, all of which also condition the geographical scales (local, regional and global) on which it operates (Taylor, 1988: 22-23, 1990: 13; Cairo, 1993: 40-42; Gaddis, 2005: ix; Rae, 2007: 19-20; Flint and Taylor, 2018: 51-52; Flint, 2022: 50-54).

National capabilities and geographic position both play a role in defining national interest and its geopolitical scope. Both factors condition the state's strategic relations on the international stage. In this way, state interactions with other international actors take the form of a series of geopolitical codes that contribute to shaping the perception that state elites have of international reality, which crystallises in a mental geographical map that defines their national vision or image (Boulding, 1959).

To this end, statesmen develop a set of ideas or beliefs based on material factors that are shaped by their perception of national capabilities (Christensen, 1997: 68; Rose,

1998: 147; Zakaria, 2000: 147; Wohlforth, 1993: 26-28), and consequently of state's position in the international power structure. These ideas also include the existing spatial relations between states according to their position in this structure, i.e., the relations between the central spots, where international power is concentrated, and the peripheral ones. Here the focus is on American statesmen's perceptions of China's growing national capabilities and how this affects the organisation of the international system and the US position in it.

Mental geographic maps are a simplification of reality that helps to take decisions. They are a mental structure made up of a set of beliefs and ideas that filter information from the geographical environment, allowing it to be organised in a more or less coherent way (Holsti, 2006: 34; Henrikson, 1980). Mental geographic maps are therefore spatial frames of reference that affect how policymakers understand reality and define a situation. Mental maps help the individual or group to make their diagnosis and assessment of problems, which ultimately conditions the possible policies that can be adopted (Moreland and Levine, 1992; Vertzberger, 2002; Sylvan and Voss, 1998). Mental maps are therefore a variable that intervenes in the representation of reality by interacting with systemic pressures in the definition of external threats and possible state responses.

Although mental geographic maps are an analytical concept with little theoretical development (Vinha, 2011, 2012, 2019), they are useful for elucidating the worldview of the American elite. There are different procedures to clarify what these mind maps are like. Alan Henrikson approaches his study by analysing the ideas present in public speeches, diplomatic notes, cartographic annexes, etc., and the behavioural patterns of foreign policymakers on their official visits (1980: 508-512). In this research, we analyse the contributions of the government advisors who have had the greatest impact on the definition of the broad strategic lines of US foreign policy, and the official documents that define the strategic doctrine and international vision of American leaders in their public statements. This is combined with the study of external actions and relations with other countries.

Elucidating the mental maps of the American ruling elite can clarify the degree of importance of different places and spatially represent the relationships between different actors on the international stage. They are a simplified image of a complex reality, thereby helping to define foreign policy, which is the policy that projects the vision that a country, in this case the US, has of its place in the world, its national interest and how to defend it, all of which guides the conduct of the state's foreign action (Morin and Paquin, 2018: 3).

Last, it should be noted that the levels of spatial analysis used correspond to the levels of conceptualisation that neoclassical realism establishes with the interactions between the first and third images. The interrelationships between these levels are examined (Lacoste, 1985: 48). Mental geographic maps thus correspond to a large-scale level of spatial analysis by focusing on the individuals who make up the US elite, while at the same time corresponding to the level of conceptualisation of the first image. Given that US foreign policy is the object of study, the other level of

analysis is the small scale, such that the spatial set of reference is both the US and the international system. This is a level of spatial analysis that corresponds to the levels of conceptualisation of the second and third images.

The US vis-à-vis China's rise

At the end of the Cold War, the US was at the height of its power (Bush and Scowcroft, 1998: 564). The disappearance of its main antagonist on the international stage opened the world to the expansion of US influence, and with it the incorporation of the countries of the former socialist camp into the *New World Order* enunciated by President George H. W. Bush. In this context, the US could reorganise the international system and hold a dominant position during the 1990s in the absence of any rival that posed a serious threat to its primacy.

Despite the seismic gap between the Chinese economy and the US economy in terms of gross domestic product, and even more so in military terms, during the 1990s some realist analysts advocated adopting a strategy of containment of China. China's high economic growth rates and social potential made it, in the eyes of some authors, a colossus with feet of clay and thus a potential threat. While most of these analyses were produced from 1995 onwards (Krauthammer, 1995; Rachman, 1995; Segal, 1996; Brzezinski, 1998), a time when there was a clear distancing between the US and China - especially as a result of the diplomatic crisis resulting from Chinese hostilities towards Taiwan in the wake of the first democratic elections on the island - what is perhaps the first wake-up call on the need to orient US foreign policy towards the Western Pacific can be detected as early as 1993. It was Denny Roy's (1993) view, at least, that China's rapid economic growth would lead it to adopt a more aggressive foreign policy, which would affect stability in the region because its increased national capabilities would translate into greater military power, pushing Japan to expand its military forces and creating a security crisis. China would thereby have the means to seize resource-rich areas, control sea lanes, disrupt trade flows, annex Taiwan, and unleash all manner of coercive measures on its neighbours, from conquest and annexation to various forms of intimidation.

There is no doubt that the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, with the introduction of free market elements, laid the foundations for the subsequent surge of the Chinese economy. Double-digit annual economic growth rates are proof of this. However, the starting point of the Chinese economy was far removed from the US, due to the catastrophic material and social consequences of the experiences of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Irrespective, it can be said that China began a process of accelerated economic development of its productive forces, which led to a progressive increase in its national capacities. None of this went unnoticed by some analysts due to the potential threats to the US in the long term.

Nevertheless, US foreign policy towards China remained within the guidelines established during the administration of President Richard Nixon, when diplomatic

relations between the two countries were resumed. This policy was marked by economic and trade cooperation, driven by the conviction that it would help China evolve politically towards liberal democracy through changes in its economic organisation (Ikenberry 2011: 342-348; Zoellick, 2005). US foreign policy maintained a liberal approach to China for decades, including during the presidencies of George Bush senior, William Clinton and George Bush junior (Tovar, 2021: 112). Indeed, it was this approach that enables China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001.

Subsequent US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq reoriented foreign policy towards the Middle East, which in the view of some realist authors was a strategic mistake that diverted American power away from its national interest (Walt, 2011, 2018). These conflicts contributed to weakening the international position of the US, while the Chinese ruling elite saw this as the beginning of a process of reorganisation of the system that could make it evolve towards a multipolar scenario (Kissinger, 2012: 517). But above all, they interpreted the new situation as a strategic opportunity to make decisive progress in their internal development to reduce their economic distance from the US (Hu, 2018: 174-177). This view was reinforced by the 2008 global financial crisis and made explicit by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, who warned that China was in danger of being left behind if it did not seize this opportunity (Masayuki, 2009: 62-63).

While the US was trapped in Afghanistan and Iraq, China, thanks to its new WTO membership, gained access to international markets through foreign investment and growing manufacturing exports. China thereby gained prominence in the world economy by growing its exports at an average annual rate of 22% until 2011, allowing it to double exports almost every three years. Access to global value chains was fundamental for China's definitive take-off, increasing its share in world trade to more than 13% of the total (Jorrín, 2021).

China became the world's factory through its manufacturing industry, which allowed it to accumulate growing economic wealth with its balance of trade surpluses from exports. Evidence of this is that foreign trade accounted for 64.47% of the Chinese economy's GDP in 2006 (The World Bank, undated). Although, as has been mentioned, China showed high growth rates during the first half of the 1990s thanks to liberalising reforms, it was not until the twenty-first century that its accumulated wealth took a significant quantitative leap. In this regard, it went from a GDP of $1.33 trillion in 2001 to accumulating a wealth of $4.57 trillion in 2008, when the global financial crisis erupted (Textor, 2022). In this way, China began to significantly narrow its economic gap with the US, which did not go unnoticed by American statesmen.

In addition to buoyant economic growth, China also increased its military power, which was manifested in the modernisation of its armed forces and the development of an assertive foreign policy in the China Sea from 2007 onwards (Chubb, 2021). This led to increasing incidents not only with neighbouring countries but also with the US, whose presence in the region is intended to guarantee the international principle of free navigation. A clear example of this is the incident with the US Navy ship *Impeccable* in 2009.

China's increasing aggressiveness in the international sphere has been linked to its growing domestic capabilities (Friedberg, 2015), which has contributed to changing the perception that US analysts and statesmen have of China as a threat to the US. This view has been reinforced by China's 130% increase in military investment over the past decade, reaching a total expenditure of $250 billion in 2018 alone, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2020). According to some estimates, the annual increase in the military budget was 7% until 2020. This has made it the world's second-largest defence investor with $270 billion in 2021 (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022: 255). This has been accompanied by an expansion of its naval forces that has tripled in size in just two decades (Department of the Navy, 2020: 4), leading to the construction of new aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships, destroyers, surveillance ships, nuclear submarines, etc. (Chouza and Torralba, 2019; Vidal, 2022).

American statesmen have not overlooked China's military build-up, which has affected their view of the country. In this way, China's rise to power has operated as a systemic pressure on the US that has interacted with American leaders' perceptions of this process. This perception is articulated through the mental geographic maps of foreign policymakers as they have filtered pressure from China, which helps to understand the Indo-Pacific shift and the adoption of a strategy aimed at containing this rising power.

Shaping the mental geographic map of the US elite

As discussed above, the configuration of mental geographic maps depends on the geographical location of the state and its position in the international power structure. In the case of the US, it has a very favourable geographical position, as there are no other major powers in the region that would make it fear external invasion. This has provided it with considerable levels of security, coupled with the fact that most of the other major powers are located in Eurasia, which has kept the main threats away from its borders. This location has enabled the US to keep its productive base intact during the recent military conflicts in which it has been involved.

Physical geography is undoubtedly a very important factor in defining the US elite's perspective of the international scene, but this would paint an incomplete picture without also considering the pre-eminent position of the US in the international system. In this respect, the mental geographic map that organises US foreign policy was defined during the course of the Second World War, and reflects the perspective of the power position achieved by the US at that time. This had an impact on the way US statesmen began to perceive and understand international reality as a result of the broadening of the geographical scope of US interests.

In the late nineteenth century, Alfred T. Mahan conceptualised the US as a maritime power due to its geographic location by facilitating the development of its external action in a maritime sense (2000). However, Halford J. Mackinder's contribution

to geopolitical thinking was decisive in shaping the mental geographic map of the American elite (1904, 1996). This is because his work reflects the perspective of an established maritime power, such as Great Britain at the beginning of the 20th century, proving to be very functional in explaining US interests in the world in spatial terms.

Mackinder conceptualised history as a constant struggle between maritime and continental powers determined by the disposition of emerging lands. From this assumption, Mackinder developed a geopolitical perspective on historical processes, leading him to formulate his theory of the geographical pivot of history, which he later called the *heartland*[1]. According to this theory, the heart of Eurasia is a vast area that cannot be encircled from the sea or completely invaded, making it a strategic zone insofar as its control allows for the control of world politics. Mackinder himself summed up this view by stating the following: "He who rules Eastern Europe rules the heartland: he who rules the heartland rules the world-island: he who rules the world-island rules the world" (1996: 106).
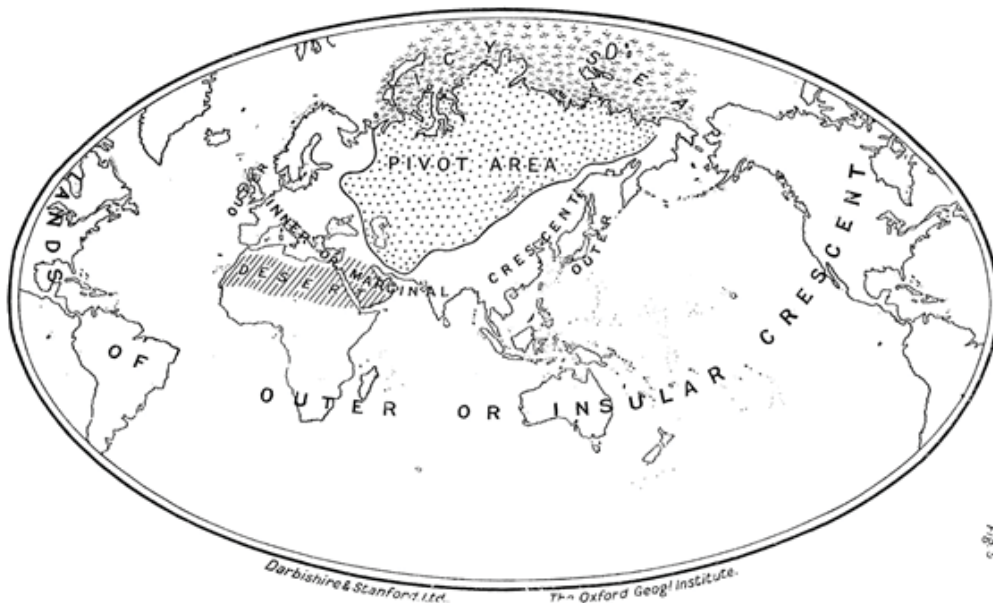
Map 1. Map of the pivot area reflecting Mackinder's mental geographic map (1904: 435).

In Mackinder's view, the foreign policy of a maritime power like Britain should be aimed at preventing a continental power from gaining control of the Eurasian *heartland* and thus achieving hegemony in the island world. This scenario would pose a serious threat to the interests and security of the British Empire, as it would have ample resources to build a fleet, allowing it to compete for control of the oceans, and eventually achieve world hegemony. During the 20th century, the state that really constituted a potential threat from this geopolitical perspective was Russia, and this remained the case for the US after the Cold War began.

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1 It should be noted that the geographical extension of the *heartland* or pivot area varied throughout Mackinder's work.

The configuration of this mental geographical map outlined by Mackinder is based on the physical morphology of the earth. In this regard Mackinder stated, "There is an ocean which covers nine-twelfths of the globe; there is a continent —the world island— which covers two-twelfths of the globe; and there are many smaller islands, of which North America and South America are, for all practical purposes, two of, which together cover the remaining one-twelfth" (1996: 46-47). This vision of the world's geographic space laid the foundations for the subsequent conceptual development of the US as a maritime power, and above all for the delineation of the mental geographic map from which US foreign policy would be articulated after World War II[2].

The adaptation of Mackinder's geopolitical model to US foreign policy was carried out by Nicholas Spykman in 1942. To this effect, and building on Mackinder's contribution, Spykman outlined US strategy in the world. This task was carried out in line with the approaches underlying Mackinder's geopolitical vision, i.e., the influence of physical geography on historical events. In this respect, Spykman infers the foreign policy of states from the characteristics of their geomorphology (1938a, 1938b). In his view, physical geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy, being the most stable of all of them (Spykman, 1938b: 29). US international strategy must therefore adjust to the physical reality imposed by geography, which ultimately establishes a maritime perspective due to its geographical position.

Spykman, in contrast to Mackinder, saw the decisive region in world politics not as the *heartland* but as the *rim land*, i.e. the strip of land extending from north-western Europe through the Middle East and South Asia to the far east of the Eurasian continent. Control of this vast geographic region spanning the edges of Eurasia is crucial to control the world, which led him to state the following: "He who controls the rim land governs Eurasia: he who governs Eurasia controls the destinies of the world" (Spykman, 1944a: 43). This intermediate zone between the *heartland* and the insular crescent, together with the islands surrounding the continents, is the crucial geopolitical region of the planet, since historically it is the area where the greatest conflicts between maritime and continental powers have taken place, making its control decisive for exercising a dominant role on the international scene[3].

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2 Mackinder's geopolitical vision was outlined in his lecture to the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1904, and later developed in his aforementioned *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, first published in 1919.

3 Alfred T. Mahan came to a similar conclusion as Mackinder and Spykman by identifying the area between the 30th and 40th parallels north latitude as the geographical area where instability is concentrated, as a space contested by different states on the axis of conflict articulated between the north, within the Eurasian continent, and the south, from the edges and outside the world island (1900: 21 *et seq.*)

Map 2. The world according to Spykman (Gray, 1988a: 8).

Spykman concluded that the best way to ensure US security is to prevent one state or alliance of states from dominating the Old World (Eurasia, Africa, Australia and the islands off the coasts of these continents). To achieve this goal, a balance of power policy is deployed in these regions based on the alliance with weak states to counteract any possible state with hegemonic aspirations (Spykman, 1944b; Nijman, 1994a; Parker, 2015: 114-115). Foreign policy must therefore focus on the *rimland*, i.e. the Eurasian littoral from northwest Europe to Southeast Asia and East Asia via the Middle East and South Asia, to prevent any other power from controlling this strategic area (Nijman, 1994b).
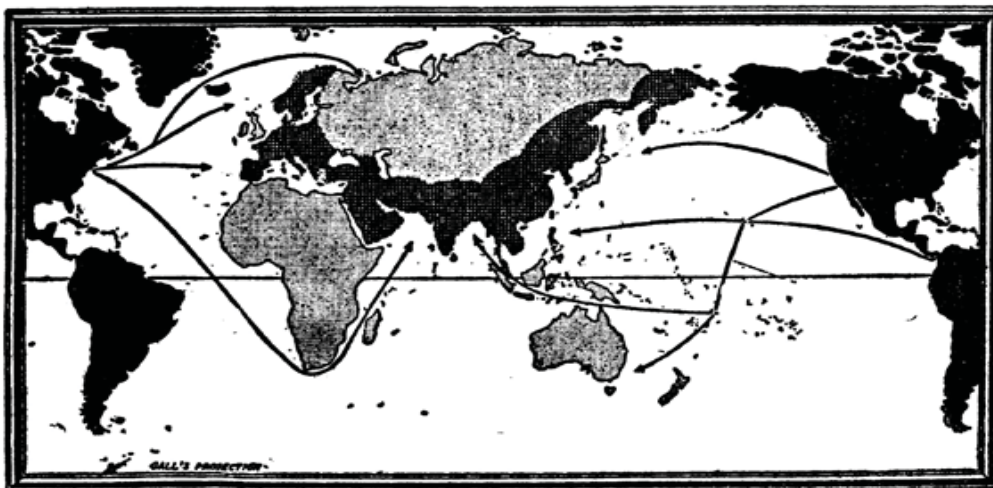
Map 3. Old World encirclement and rimland (Spykman, 1944b: 177).

Spykman's geopolitical vision reflects a regionalist perspective insofar as it underlines the importance of particular places on the global geopolitical stage, and thus the significance of the role of regional actors or power centres in regional developments across the world. This perspective has been developed by different authors who have

outlined the mental geographic map of the US elite, including George Kennan when referring to areas where military-industrial power is concentrated (1954: 66; Nijman and Ó Tuathail, 1994: 137); Saul B. Cohen and his notion of the *shatter belt* (1963, 1982); and Zbigniew Brzezinski and his concept of the *linchpin state* (1986). According to this regionalist approach, there are areas of special strategic importance for US security and interests, such that US foreign policy should be oriented towards maintaining the balance of power and focus on these regions, which are mainly concentrated in the *rimland*[4].

The containment policy outlined at the time by George Kennan (X, 1946) follows the basic approach set out by Spykman, aimed at preventing one state or alliance of states from taking control of the Eurasian continent. In this case, containment was directed towards the Soviet Union. From this geopolitical theory, it was inferred that there were a number of strategic geographic points along the Eurasian periphery that should remain outside Soviet control. These were places of critical importance to the US, and were concentrated in the *shatter belt* around the periphery of the USSR. The intention was to prevent this power from gaining access to the sea via the Indian Ocean or the Mediterranean (Sloan, 1988: 131; Kennan, 1967; Gaddis, 2005: 24-52; Ó Tuathail, 1994; O'Sullivan, 1994). This strategic approach was implemented by establishing a network of alliances with different countries across the *rimland* to deter Soviet expansion. In any case, the implementation of the containment policy reflects the importance and influence of certain geopolitical theories in shaping the perceptions and actions of foreign policymakers, which is embodied in maps that reflect US statesmen's views of the international environment (Sloan, 1988: 134).

The influence of mental geographic maps on the Indo-Pacific shift in US foreign policy

The influence of mental geographic maps on the Indo-Pacific orientation of US foreign policy cannot be explained without reference to the historical background and geopolitical determinants of this shift.

The disintegration of the USSR and the end of the Cold War created a new international scenario in which US foreign policy during the 1990s, and particularly during William Clinton's presidency, was aimed at reorganising the governance of the world economy through international bodies and the establishment of regulatory standards. In this regard, both domestically and internationally the US focused its attention on economic issues, which did not prevent the geopolitical paradigm that articulates the US elite's mental geographic map from being updated to make it useful in

4 The regionalist point of view contrasts with the globalist approach of authors such as Colin S. Gray (1988a, 1988b) and Ray S. Cline (1980), who understand security in fundamentally military terms, and who consider that the US has a global responsibility in international affairs, sucg that its foreign policy must also be developed on a global scale, beyond the *rimland*.

the new international context, as Zbigniew Brzezinski's (1998) work proves. Although there was no immediate adversary to contain, from 1995 onwards analysts began to point to the potential threat posed by a China engaged in a process of accelerated economic development (Krauthammer, 1995; Rachman, 1995; Segal, 1996).

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq focused US foreign policy in the Middle East, and helped divert attention from China. Despite this, during President Barack Obama's first term, the US began to reorient its foreign policy towards the Western Pacific, and to adopt a more realistic approach to its relations with China. Although this took time to be reflected in US foreign policy, President Obama signalled his intentions early on in his term by calling himself the first Pacific president (Allen 2009). This, together with the views of some of his advisors on the rise of China, led to the search for a new strategy that would allow the US to manage the challenges of an increasingly relevant region (Tovar, 2021: 93).

Thus, in 2011, coinciding with the withdrawal of troops deployed in Iraq, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly stated the new strategic direction of the US when she spoke of the shift to the Pacific (2011). This meant increasing the US presence in the Western Pacific, and revitalising the alliance system in this region. The adoption of this strategic approach was also combined with the withdrawal of troops from the European arena. This policy soon showed its limitations, fading into the background when new conflicts and strategic priorities emerged, and following the departure from government of those who defended its implementation (Tovar, 2021: 94).

The Pacific orientation began to materialise in US foreign policy under Donald Trump's administration, thus ceasing to be an intention but a visible reality within the framework of the new structural trends of a changing international system. The hardening of policy towards China, especially in the areas of trade, technology and security, with increasing tensions between the two powers, was embodied in the strategic national security doctrine. In 2017, the US considered for the first time in decades that the rivalry between the major powers constituted the most important challenge to US security and the international system (The White House, 2017: 2-3).

The geopolitical determinants of the Indo-Pacific orientation of US foreign policy include the rise of Chinese capabilities and the growing importance of East Asia as a new geographic centre of global power. On the other hand, there are domestic US geopolitical factors that have also made the Pacific region more important. In this respect, the US West Coast accounts for most of the country's international trade. Proof of this is that California is the leading importer of goods worth more than $470 billion in 2021, with a GDP of $3.35 trillion, representing more than 14% of US GDP and making it the fifth-largest economy in the world (Hughes, 2021; Koop, 2022), while being the most populous state in the Union.

The orientation of foreign policy towards the Pacific has been both the result of changes in the international system due to the rise of China, and the economic importance of this region for the US. This has combined, in turn, with the mental geographic maps of the US elite, such that the interpretation of international reality

has led American leaders to consider Russia a regional power (Yoo, 2014) that is no longer the main threat to the US at a strategic level (The White House, 2022a). China, having increased its national capabilities and broadened the geographic scope of its interests with a growing presence in the Indo-Pacific, however, poses a serious threat to the US position in the international system. Indeed, American statesmen have concluded that China can become a regional hegemonic power and deny the US access to the East Asian region. China's assertive foreign policy in the South and East China Sea to assert its territorial rights over these waters, coupled with its desire to become a maritime power (Holmes and Yoshihara, 2008; Chan, 2022), would confirm this view. All this explains why the US has defined China as the only competitor with the potential to combine its economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to pose a sustained challenge to the established international system, which has justified the need to reorient its foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific (Biden, 2021: 8). This is much so that the 2022 national security strategy not only reaffirms this perception of China, but also underlines that China has both the will to change the rules governing the international system to its own advantage, and increasingly the capacity to achieve this goal (The White House, 2022a).

The geopolitical logic of the containment strategy that drives US foreign policy still has a clear correspondence with the mental geographic maps delineated since the Second World War. In this case, it is a question of containing a power that controls around 18,000 km of continental coastline along the western Pacific (Wang and Aubrey 1987), and whose economic and military development means that it projects its influence and growing power over neighbouring countries and surrounding waters. In fact, most of China's population and its productive fabric are located near the coast (Li *et al.*, 2018), an area that corresponds to a considerable part of the Eurasian *rim land*. China's combined national capabilities and geographic location make it a threat, especially if it develops the means to deny the US access to this region.

All the above is part of the Old World encirclement logic prescribed by Spykman, aimed at preventing one state or alliance of states from controlling the *rim land*. This mental map has led US leaders to believe that China's rise may lead to control of the Eurasian *rim land*, and thus control of the Old World. The latter would allow China to develop a navy capable of dominating the oceans and thus project its power and influence over Oceania and especially Africa, a continent where it has developed a growing presence in recent decades (Shepard, 2019; Sun, 2017; Kim, 2017; Lee, 2017). In this way, China would displace the US and achieve world hegemony.

The above reasoning is manifested in US actions in international spatial planning through different measures taken in the Indo-Pacific region to contain China, and in various public statements by US government agencies. The approach adopted by American statesmen, which in some ways evokes some of the practices of Cold War containment policy, is regionalist in character insofar as the focus is primarily on the *rim land*, while the actions taken are not limited to increasing the US military presence in the Western Pacific (Nijman 1994c). While the relocation of an increasing amount of military assets to this area is significant (Zhou, 2021), this is combined with various

diplomatic, economic and political initiatives by which the US seeks to geopolitically limit China's scope for action.

The strengthening of the US presence in the Western Pacific is linked to the US policy of diplomatic alliances with a number of China's neighbours. This is the case of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which includes India, Japan, Australia and the US, in addition to Vietnam, South Korea and New Zealand in the so-called QUAD plus. This space serves as a forum for dialogue in the field of strategic security, largely in response to concerns about China's rise among these countries.

Another security initiative, also aimed at containing China, is AUKUS. This trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK and the US announced in September 2021 has the Indo-Pacific as its geographical area of action. As the US ambassador to Australia, Caroline Kennedy, stated at the time, the purpose of this pact is to deter any Chinese aggression in the region (Hurst, 2022).

While the above initiatives have a strategic and military dimension, the US has also developed forms of civilian cooperation with other countries that have strengthened its influence in the Indian Ocean region. This is the case with the I2U2 group, which includes India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the US, but also envisages the possible future addition of other countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Its scope extends to joint investments in energy, water, transport, health, food security, etc. (The White House, 2022b).

There are also the bilateral relations that the US maintains with different states in the Indo-Pacific region, which sometimes take the form of security partnerships or strategic alliances. Indeed, most of these relations have their origins in the Cold War and include traditional allies such as the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea and Japan. It is also worth noting the US commitment to Taiwan's security under the *Taiwan Relations Act*, as well as the marked improvement in relations with Vietnam in recent years, which has resulted in growing military cooperation (Tu and Nguyen 2019).

Furthermore, from 2007 onwards, the maritime strategy that articulates the projection of US naval power (U.S. Navy *et al.*, 2007; Department of the Navy, 2015) acquired a new character, becoming increasingly focused on controlling the oceans against potential rival powers. In 2020, this strategy explicitly included China as a rival power and the main and most pressing long-term strategic threat to the US, requiring it to prepare its naval forces to deter and successfully compete with China (Department of the Navy, 2020). This has meant that the US navy is no longer conceived solely as a police force dedicated to combating threats from non-state actors, but as a force aimed at combating the navies of rival countries such as China (Till, 2007; Yoshihara and Holmes, 2018: 251-255), which explains why 60% of its forces have been deployed to the Indo-Pacific region (Department of the Navy, 2020: iv).

Last, there is the Indo-Pacific strategy enunciated by the White House in early 2022. While US naval strategic doctrine is aimed at deterring and countering China's growing presence in the Indo-Pacific, the strategy put forward by President Joseph Biden's administration defines the US as an Indo-Pacific power, due to the economic

and national security interests that the US concentrates in this region. But even more important is the fact that this strategy is clearly defined in geographical terms by specifying the area over which the US projects its external action. This includes Northeast and Southeast Asia, South Asia and Oceania (The White House, 2022c: 5).

Likewise, the strategy defined by the Biden administration is not limited to the military sphere, but also includes other areas such as diplomacy, with the reinforcement and modernisation of US alliances in the region, and also the strengthening of regional organisations and new partnerships with other countries. The strategy mentions the states with which it intends to deepen existing relations. First, there are the countries with which the US has a regional alliance treaty, such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Thailand. And then there are the countries with which the US wants to strengthen its relationship, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam and the remaining Pacific island states. It is also important to underline the strategic importance of the partnership with India in the South Asian context. To this can be added in the political arena the support of international law, especially with regard to free maritime and air navigation, which is specified in relation to the area of the South and East China Sea (The White House, 2022c: 8-9, 16).

The updating of the American elite's mental geographic maps in the new international context reflects the role they play in conditioning the US response to China's rise and thus the Indo-Pacific orientation of its foreign policy of containing China.

Conclusions

The mental geographic maps of the American elite have played an important role in their perception of international reality. These maps are not designed in a vacuum, but are based on a number of material factors such as the geographic location of the US and its position in the international power structure. These maps thus constitute the frame of reference that American statesmen use to interpret international relations. The works of various academics and government advisors such as Spykman, Kennan, Cohen and Brzezinski attest to this. The mental maps that these authors have helped to shape have served as a frame of reference for the design of the main strategic lines of US foreign policy. As a consequence, US external action was aimed at preventing the emergence of a hegemonic power in Eurasia, which made the Eurasian *rim land* a decisive factor in the Soviet Union's containment policy.

While the end of the Cold War created a scenario in which the US had no serious rival to contend with, the evolution of the international system completely changed this situation as China increased its domestic capabilities and the geopolitical importance of the Far East region grew.

China's economic growth, the modernisation of its armed forces, the geographical expansion of its national interests and the development of an assertive policy in the South China Sea have operated as an external pressure on the US. The mental

geographic maps of the American elite have filtered this pressure, which has meant that China has begun to be seen as a threat to the US's international standing. This, in turn, has served to confirm that the policy adopted with China during the Nixon administration was a mistake in failing to transform the country into a liberal democracy through trade cooperation and, more generally, through economic interdependence via its integration into international organisations such as the WTO.

The mental geographic maps of American leaders have conditioned the response to China's rise by perceiving it as a growing threat, which has been embodied in the Indo-Pacific orientation of US foreign policy. To this effect, the general approach of US strategy has not departed from that of the Cold War and thus from the map outlined by Spykman. The US strategic approach remains unchanged with regard to the relevance assigned to the Eurasian *rim land* in its foreign policy, which has translated into a foreign policy whose main objective is to contain the rise of China to prevent it from becoming a regionally hegemonic power capable of blocking US access to the Far East. If China were not contained, it would increase its power not only in East Asia but also in the Indian Ocean and the Eurasian continent as a whole, eventually allowing it to dominate the seas and thus expand its influence and power globally. Such a scenario would create favourable conditions for displacing the US to become the world's leading power.

China's containment policy has made the Indo-Pacific region central to US foreign policy, which is reflected not only in the military sphere but also in the political, diplomatic and economic spheres with the re-launching of US relations with different countries in the region that can collaborate in its containment strategy. Examples include AUKUS and QUAD, and the strengthening of US partnerships and strategic alliances with countries in the Western Pacific. All of this is aimed at countering Chinese influence through the support of its neighbours and, on the other hand, increasing US influence and presence in this region of the world, which has led American leaders to define the US as an Indo-Pacific power.

Although a geopolitical theory such as Spykman's has been instrumental in shaping the perceptions of American statesmen, and thus defining US strategic preferences to ensure its security and position in the international system, its function for practical purposes is to operate as a frame of reference in dealing with changes in the international sphere. To this effect, the *rim land* theory constitutes a filter for systemic pressures, which conditions the country's possible responses on the international stage. It thereby establishes a specific logic in US foreign policy that is inherent in the geopolitical codes of the American elite, which is consistent with its political-geographical assumptions about its security and about potential threats and possible responses to them.

Irrespective, the mental geographic maps of American statesmen allow us to understand not only the current international behaviour of the US but also the geostrategic importance of certain areas of the planet for US foreign policy, as is currently the case with the Indo-Pacific region, which directly influences the way in which its leaders interpret the rise of China. In parallel, the mind maps inform the future evolution of US foreign policy by setting the strategic framework within which China's containment will unfold.

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The South Pacific chessboard: geostrategic competition through the Sino-Solomon Islands security pact

Abstract

In this article, I will attempt to define the geostrategic chessboard of the South Pacific in the context of power competition. To do so, I will delimit it to a set of countries that share a number of unique characteristics; I will examine the role played by each actor in this scenario, with an emphasis on the strategic interests and policies they have pursued in line with this competition. Finally, I will review the events that have triggered a new power competition in the South Pacific, arguing that the China-Solomon Islands security pact may be a turning point in the competition between the region's existing powers and what the implications and responses are.

Keywords

Cite this article:

Introduction

The signing of the China-Solomon Islands security pact in April 2023 has rekindled the flames of competition between great powers in a region that, as discussed below, is unique in the world. In recent years, the US and China have engaged in a great power competition that is essential for defining the policies of not only these two actors, but also those of their partners and third parties involved. For example, the pressure currently being exerted by Washington to gain allies in its technology war against Beijing; or the principle of a single China, vital for accessing Chinese resources. Although the South Pacific has not attracted as much attention as the Indo-Pacific, the uniqueness of these micro-states enhances national policies regarding this new competition. In other words, the small size of these states contrasts with their ability to put national issues on the agenda of the powers, as in the case of the security pact.

With this in mind, this article will attempt to define the geostrategic chessboard of the South Pacific, with an emphasis on its geographical delimitation, the strategic interests of the actors and the relevant events that shape the region's present and future security architecture. For this purpose, I have structured the article in four blocks:

The first is the delimitation of the geostrategic chessboard of the South Pacific. In this block, I outline a historical overview of geostrategic competition in the Pacific, differentiating the South Pacific from the more usual Asia-Pacific scenario, and proposing a number of unique features that support my decision. In the second section, I analyse in more depth the particularities of the Pacific Island Countries (PICs), where I identify which of the PICs are most relevant in this scenario and their position on the chessboard. In the third, I provide a detailed analysis of the four major powers involved in the region: The US, China, Australia and New Zealand. In the fourth and final block, I look at whether the China-Solomon Islands security pact could be a turning point in the region.

Delineation of the geostrategic chessboard

In order to define the South Pacific as a geostrategic chessboard, one must first understand where it is located. Conceptually, it is the term 'Indo-Pacific' that is gaining popularity due to its analytical power and geopolitical implications. While this article does not aim to explore the implications of this concept and its geopolitical use, its definition is of great importance.

The Indo-Pacific is home to 60% of the world's population and has established itself in recent decades as the world's most dynamic region (International Monetary Fund, 2018). This dynamism has allowed the region's countries to enjoy economic and military growth that has enabled them to resist US influence more effectively. In other

words, given Asia's increasing relative weight, it is more difficult for foreign powers such as the US to articulate effective containment. Part of these dynamics have been dubbed the *Asianisation of Asia*[1].

Delimiting the board

That the Indo-Pacific is the world's most dynamic region (International Monetary Fund, 2018) and that its economic growth has somehow emancipated the geopolitical decisions of its 'players' offers some clues about the chessboard we are trying to define: the South Pacific. It is made up of the following sovereign states: Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Nauru, New Zealand (NZ), Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. There are also freely associated states, such as the Northern Mariana Islands with the US, and Niue or the Cook Islands with New Zealand. Table I shows that it does not appear to be a set of countries characterised by economic dynamism.

Country	PIB_{2019}	$PIBpc_{2019}$	$\left(\frac{X_{Ch}+I_{Ch}}{X+I}\right)_{2010}$	$\left(\frac{X_{Ch}+I_{Ch}}{X+I}\right)_{2019}$	$\Delta\left(\frac{X_{Ch}+I_{Ch}}{X+I}\right)$	Current Recognition	Year of Recognition
Australia	1491025	58781	0,202	0,322	59%	P.R.C.	1972
NZ	200743	40315	0,092	0,220	140%	P.R.C.	1972
PNG	24720	2817	0,099	0,228	131%	P.R.C.	1976
Fiji	5223	5869	0,053	0,104	96%	P.R.C.	1975
Solomon Islands	1534	2290	0,404	0,465	15%	P.R.C.	2019
Samoa	887	4503	0,536	0,177	-67%	P.R.C.	1976
Vanuatu	870	2900	0,168	0,206	22%	P.R.C.	1982
Tonga	486	4653	0,054	0,132	146%	P.R.C.	1998
F.S.M.	332	2921	0,029	0,120	311%	P.R.C.	1989
Palaos	266	14755	0,019	0,144	640%	R.O.C.	1994
Marshall Islands	212	3613	0,174	0,190	10%	R.O.C.	1998
Kiribati	196	1665	0,093	0,122	31%	P.R.C.	2019
Nauru	90	8326	n.d.	0,010	n.d.	R.O.C.	1980
Tuvalu	43	4455	0,097	0,206	112%	R.O.C.	1979

Table I. Prepared by author based on data from the World Bank and The Growth Lab at Harvard University. Data have been taken for 2019 as it is the last year of pre-pandemic economic normality. Key: X, Total exports; I, Total imports; Xch, exports to China; Ich, imports from China.

The South Pacific has a number of internal characteristics that differentiate it from the broader Indo-Pacific or Asia-Pacific vision, and which, in my view, make it worthy of its own strategic study. Four characteristics that make this board unique can be highlighted: first, the heterogeneity in tangible terms of these states; second, their homogeneity in intangible terms; third, their uniqueness in economic and geographic terms; and fourth, their special sensitivity to the effects of climate change.

First, South Pacific countries as a whole are very heterogeneous in tangible or real terms. In demographic terms the difference is abysmal. Australia has more than 25 million inhabitants, while Niue has only 1,600. In terms of development, Australia and New Zealand are two of the most developed countries in the world in terms of

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1 (*) Italics added by the author.

GDP per capita, while the PICs are at the bottom of this list. Finally, there is a wide disparity in terms of natural resource reserves. On the one hand, Australia is a primary export power and, together with some PIC countries such as Papua New Guinea and Fiji, enjoys great natural wealth. On the other, most PICs are net importers and resource-poor. Access to fishing banks is worth mentioning. However, competition for fisheries in PICs is fierce and difficult for their economies to exploit.

Second, homogeneity in intangible or cultural terms. Australia and New Zealand share a set of beliefs with the PICs, mainly in their defence of Western values. In fact, the PICs include some of the world's youngest democracies. They also have strong Christian traditions, which is of utmost importance for their relationship with China.

Third, the uniqueness of these states. Most PICs are micro-states, which in itself infers a number of peculiarities to their economies, i.e. importing economies by definition and highly dependent on foreign humanitarian aid. PICs are also weak, poor and internally divided. These problems are usually derived from the artificial nature of their states. Even countries with highly hierarchical organisations such as the Kingdom of Tonga, which is a de facto absolute monarchy, are sensitive to political instability (Henderson and Reilly, 2003). Another factor is geography, as PICs typically have a very small land area but large maritime territories. For example, Kiribati's land area is only 726 square kilometres, but its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) expands over 2.5 million square kilometres, an area similar to that of India.

And fourthly, the sensitivity of PICs to climate change; this has been identified as one of the critical challenges for the Pacific as a whole. The unique vulnerability of PICs to climate change is determined by their geography, the fragility of their economic structures and demographics, and the interactions between these factors (Kumar *et al.*, 2020). I will develop this factor further below.

In conclusion, the region has a number of unique characteristics that allow its geostrategic setting to be isolated from the rest of Asia for further analysis. Especially since the PICs are unique and very different from the regional powers.

Pacific Island Countries

I have previously listed a series of characteristics that allow me to analyse the South Pacific as a geostrategic scenario of its own, and I will now delve deeper into this region at spatial, diplomatic, cultural, strategic and climatic levels. Finally, I will analyse the position of the most significant regional actors.

Spatially, we are accustomed to using the concept of Oceania, with a particularly geographical connotation, to designate the island continent of Australia. On the other hand, the South Pacific concept has a broader character. In contrast to the more monolithic definition of Oceania, this allows us to easily incorporate territories of other powers in the region and understand more ambiguous territorial dynamics. Even so, the territorial delimitation of Oceania is of paramount importance as it allows us to segregate

actors by territorial zones with some form of traditional Western influence. The territorial breakdown of Oceania is divided into three sub-regions: Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. Melanesia contains the majority of the region's land area and population, as well as extensive mineral and forest resources. Politically, most of Melanesia is inherently unstable given its ethnic fragmentation. Papua New Guinea (PNG) is the most important actor in this sub-region and Australia its representative protector. Polynesia, on the other hand, is characterised by being made up of micro-states, containing some of the world's smallest states such as Tuvalu, the world's smallest independent country with a population of ten thousand people. New Zealand is traditionally an influential player in Polynesia; in fact, Auckland is often called the largest Polynesian city in the world (Yang, 2009). Finally, Micronesia is historically linked to the US and is home to some of the US flag territories in the Pacific such as Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands.

At diplomatic level, PICs are wary of new Western strategic concepts, especially the 'Indo-Pacific' mentioned above. Samoa's prime minister highlighted in a speech the "real risk of privileging the Indian over the Pacific" (Sailele Malielegaoi, 2018). PICs have developed ideas such as *Blue Pacific* with the aim of acting homogeneously in the face of different challenges in the region (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2017). In fact, in recent years, PICs have participated en bloc in the international arena. Just as there is now a call for more strategic autonomy in Europe, it will come as a surprise to learn that this idea had already been developed further in the PICs. Meg Taylor, secretary general of the Pacific Islands Forum, went so far as to argue in 2017 that she hoped to see PICs "exercising greater strategic autonomy" (M. Taylor, 2017).

On a cultural level, I have previously mentioned the strong Christian traditions of the PICs, this may act as a brake on Chinese influence in two ways: the inherent opposition to communism derived from Christian values, and the fear of losing religious freedom (Yang, 2009).

At strategic level, although PICs have not historically been the scene of clear geostrategic competition, there are exceptions. For example, in the 1980s it briefly attracted the interest of the USSR and Libya as part of the Cold War (Hayward-Jones 2013). The Soviet case is interesting, as it can feel like *déjà vu* for the Americans and the Chinese question. In March 1987, the first Soviet Foreign Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, visited Australia. He asserted that Moscow had "no intention of penetrating the region, no bad intentions or hidden agendas" and that it was "only interested in commercial and diplomatic relations" (Langdon, 1988). The PICs already tried to exploit trade with the Soviets back then and this is exactly what is happening today. Different aspirants, same policies.

Finally, it is worth noting the impact of climate change on PICs, which I have already discussed. This is one of the key motivators in PIC decision-making, now and in the future. PIC leaders' concern about the consequences is palpable. For example, in 2021, Tuvalu's foreign minister gave a climate change awareness speech with Pacific Ocean water up to his knees (Handley, 2021). Their concern is not in vain, as PIC economies face catastrophic costs due to climate change. According to a study by the Asian Development Bank (2013), it is estimated that, under the business-as-usual scenario, climate change

could cost between 2.2 and 3.5% of Pacific island countries' annual GDP by 2050, and 12.7% by 2100 (Asian Development Bank, 2013). The agricultural sector was specifically identified as one of the most vulnerable, contributing 5.4% of annual GDP loss by 2100 under the high emissions scenario. The main problem for PICs is that their cost of adapting to climate change is significantly higher in relative GDP terms than that of larger countries, a phenomenon known as indivisibility in economics. For example, for the construction of a coastal protection structure, the unit cost per capita in PICs will be substantially higher than in larger countries with larger populations (Kumar *et al.*, 2020).

Following this overview of ideas, I will now briefly present the position of the most relevant actors on the South Pacific chessboard: Fiji and Papua New Guinea.

Fiji

Fiji is the fourth-largest economy in the South Pacific and is of undoubted strategic value to China. Fiji's strategic value is based on its privileged location in the centre of the South Pacific, making it a regional hub for communications and diplomatic relations. Through its location, Fiji plays a key role in PICs' international relations at regional and international level (Tarte, 2021).

Fiji's relationship with China has strengthened over the past decade, making it one of the largest recipients of Chinese aid in the region. It has been a classic arena of competition between regional powers, especially between Australia and New Zealand (Yang, 2011). This shift in foreign policy cannot be understood without the international isolation following the 2006 coup d'état.

In December 2006, Voreqe Bainimarama staged a coup d'état, Fiji's third since independence in 1970. The coup caused some international discomfort, especially with the 2009 abrogation of Fiji's constitution and the postponement of new elections for five years. The abrogation triggered Fiji's unprecedented suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in May 2009 and its subsequent suspension from the Commonwealth in December.

In the aftermath of the coup, various statements can be found by the Fijian regime about alleged Chinese support for Fiji. For example, Prime Minister Banimarama stated in 2009 that the Chinese authorities were "very sympathetic and understand what's happening here, [...] that we need to do things in our own way" (Komai, 2015). Subsequently, Fiji's foreign minister stressed: "Fiji will not forget that when other countries were quick to condemn us following the events of 1987, 2000, 2006, China and other friends in Asia demonstrated a more understanding and sensitive approach"[2] (Fiji Government, 2008).

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2 The original note reads: «Fiji will not forget that when other countries were quick to condemn us following the events of 1987, 2000, 2006, China and other friends in Asia demonstrated a more understanding and sensitive approach to events in Fiji».

This coup was the catalyst for Fiji's new foreign policy, initiated in 2010, the so-called *Look North Policy* (Tarte, 2021). This aimed at diversifying its diplomatic relations, especially with new economic partners (Fry and Tarte 2015). Several steps were taken, including joining the Non-Aligned Movement and announcing the opening of new embassies in South Korea, Indonesia, Brazil and South Africa. And of course, the improvement of relations with China. Their main motivation was to fill the gap left by their traditional donors, such as Australia and New Zealand, after the coup (Fry and Tarte 2015). Predictably, Fiji's prime minister described the relationship with China as "a fundamental part of our government's *Look North Policy* [and] crucial to Fiji's economic development" (Kubuabola, 2015).

The turning point in this relationship came in November 2014, when Chinese President Xi Jinping paid of two-day visit to Fiji. During his visit, he met with other PIC leaders to discuss key issues in the region; this was not his first time in the country, having visited in 2009 when he was still China's vice-president. This visit was interpreted as clear support for the Bainimarama government, causing Western dismay. During his visit, Xi Jinping set out a plan to intensify engagement with the PICs based on five diplomatic priorities: the first was to engage in a strategic partnership; second, to enhance bilateral trade; third, to deepen economic cooperation through the 21ST-Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative; fourth, to expand people-to-people exchanges; and fifth, to enhance multilateral cooperation through the PIF (Meick, 2018). The relationship between Fiji and China took a qualitative leap forward following Xi Jinping's visit. It acquired the rank of *Strategic Partnership of Mutual Respect and Cooperation*, a nomenclature that, according to the Chinese authorities, emphases the long-term nature of the relationship (Xinhua, 2022).

Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a country rich in natural and mineral resources, producing a wide range of primary commodities, including crude oil, natural gas, timber, cocoa, coffee, palm oil, gold, copper, silver, nickel and cobalt (Avalos *et al.*, 2015). However, the country's orography, regulatory framework and infrastructure deficit make it difficult to exploit. This is why PNG is directly aligned with China's strategic interests; its entry into the BRI in June 2018 is a highly anticipated event.

Australia has been its traditional protector for the past decades, making it difficult for China to emerge as the winner of the competition in the country. Its late entry into the BRI indicates that Chinese investment and infrastructure projects are not likely to be driven by clear geopolitical objectives (O'Dowd, 2021). Even so, figures indicate the country's economic importance to Beijing. In 2020, just three BRI projects in PNG alone total US$4.46 billion. These are: the *High Priority Economic Roads Project*; the *Goroka Town Water Supply Upgrade Project*; and the *PNG-China Integrated Agriculture Industrial Park* (Smith and Wesley-Smith, 2021). Outside the BRI framework, but with Chinese investment, the $1.4 billion Ramu nickel mine project stands out (O'Dowd, 2021).

Given the magnitude of these projects, regional powers have expressed concern about PNG's financial stability. These criticisms tend to focus exclusively on the level of PIC debt to China. In 2020, Papua New Guinea's debt level stood at 47.1% of GDP (World Bank, 2022). In some cases, such as Tonga, with 49.4% debt to GDP in 2016 (World Bank, 2022b), it may pose a real threat to its smaller economy, but cases such as PNG and Fiji are much more complex. Indeed, PNG's debt risks are more linked to ineffective national policies than to the nature of Chinese loans (O'Dowd, 2021). It debt level may not be ideal; there is no universal consensus on what percentage indicates sustainable or unsustainable debt accumulation (Roubini, 2001). However, in the case of a debt crisis at home, it is more likely to be caused by domestic negligence than by Beijing's hidden strategy.

Like the other PICs, PNG has an infrastructure deficit that the BRI can alleviate. It will depend on PNG's management whether the potential of the BRI is detrimental or beneficial to its economy, however much it may pain traditional humanitarian aid benefactors. Even with the potential of the BRI in the country, Chinese investment may aggravate the problems of corruption, public sector mismanagement and poor governance in PNG by offering less transparent funding opportunities.

In sum, PNG's internal needs are explicitly taken up with those of Beijing, which is a valuable asset for the BRI. Although Chinese moves are characterised by market dynamics rather than geostrategic competition, PNG's characteristics make it the true *jackpot*[3] in the South Pacific. As such, it would be logical to expect strategic moves across the archipelago in the coming decade.

The powers

Having delimited the chessboard and the role of the PICs, I now turn to the position of the four powers most involved in the region. On the one hand, the United States and China, with the great power competition that has transferred new friction to the area, and on the other, Australia and New Zealand, which, although not great powers, their large size in comparison to the PICs and their historical commitment in the region make it essential to study them. For this analysis, I focus on the historical evolution of each power's foreign policy, its strategic interests and a series of key events that have shaped its posture. I also use the Chinese issue as a point in common with other powers' policies to facilitate comparison and evolution.

United States

At the end of World War II, the US emerged as the hegemonic power in the Pacific, including of course the board that concerns us, the South Pacific. During the Cold

3 (*) Italics added by author.

War, Washington designed a security structure for the region; in turn, it experienced how as Asia developed, it transformed the structure that had been created from Washington with it. US presence in the Pacific has gone from undisputed hegemony to decline and neglect, and now to a new awakening of interest in this vast territory.

In order to understand the current US position and the launch of new policies to counter China, it is essential to take a historical look at *Pacific Policy*. In the midst of the Cold War, Washington was determined to lead the first world and thus began bilateral relations with Asian countries in order to close its bloc of influence in the Asia-Pacific. To this end, it shaped the Pacific security architecture with its classic allies. In 1951, the US signed a number of bilateral treaties with various Asia-Pacific countries, see: the Mutual Security Treaty (MST) with Japan; the Mutual Defence Treaty with the Philippines; and the Australia-New Zealand-United States agreement (ANZUS). The network of alliances was later expanded to include South Korea in 1953; Taiwan in 1954, abrogated after the normalisation of US- China relations; and Thailand in 1962, with the Rusk-Thanat communiqué (Stuart and Tow, 1995). The result was the 'San Francisco System', as they were all signed in San Francisco.

The South Pacific, on the other hand, has always had a special character from the US point of view. Dwight D. Eisenhower called it the "Great American Lake" in 1954, in a manner similar to the South American *backyard* . However, the United States expressed commercial and security interests in the region dating back to 1825 (Stuart and Tow 1995).

Although the South Pacific has not been an arena of geostrategic competition between the US and the USSR, with a few rare exceptions, part of the US rapprochement towards the PICs was initially framed as a policy of *strategic denial* aimed at thwarting Soviet efforts to establish a naval presence in the region (Henderson and Reilly, 2003). As we approach the end of the Cold War, major changes are taking place in the South Pacific. This transformation is driven by several factors, of which I highlight three: the spread of anti-nuclear sentiment; the trend towards more resilient defence policies; and the penetration of external powers.

– First, anti-nuclear sentiment has been one of the most important factors in the estrangement between the United States and New Zealand. In the 1970s, New Zealand banned ships or aircraft capable of carrying nuclear weapons from entering its territory. This is diametrically opposed to official US policy, i.e., not to identify whether a ship has nuclear weapons or not. Within this trend, China rushed to sign the *South Pacific Nuclear Treaty* in 1987, securing a tactical victory by aligning itself with classic US allies.

– Second, greater resilience in allied defence policies. As we will see later when we look in depth at the position of Australia and New Zealand, since the 1980s there has been a (growing) trend towards more self-reliant defence policies. This was prompted by the Nixon Doctrine in 1969, which urged the Allies not to expect an automatic commitment of American forces to come to their aid.

– Third, the penetration of powers. During the Cold War, in the constant balance of power between the US and USSR, many PICs identified with the Western bloc and resisted Soviet influence. Nevertheless, some wanted to take advantage of trade with the Soviets far from falling into ideological spheres.

– Finally, with the collapse of the USSR and the consequent absence of a systemic rival, the existence of the *San Francisco System* no longer makes sense for the US. As Asia-Pacific has become the centre of world trade, ideological conflicts have been pushed into the background (Stuart and Tow, 1995). Also, their commitments on the periphery were expensive and without sufficient compensation. Public statements by the Bush and Clinton administrations claiming that they would maintain a military presence in the region is a good indicator of a regressive US trend in Asia-Pacific (Stuart and Tow, 1995).

Throughout the 2000s we can observe a total abandonment of the region. Although the turning point in the trend is the *Pivot to Asia*, there are important precedents. In 2011, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the US was in competition with China in the Pacific. Hillary's words are quite illustrative: "Let's put aside the moral, humanitarian and do-good side of what we believe in, and let's just talk straight realpolitik. We are in a competition with China" (Hayward-Jones, 2013).

It was not until 2012 that Obama officially launched the *Pivot to Asia*. This redefined US foreign strategy, putting the focus on the centre of the global production process. It was understood that this strategy needed economic institutions and the back up of military presence to endow it with credibility. That is why the *Trans-Pacific Partnership* (TPP) was created in 2016 and the US Navy's Seventh Fleet gained prominence. This strategic shift was short-lived. Encouraged by anti-globalisation movements and protectionist policies, Donald Trump pulled out of the agreement in 2017 (Solís, 2017). During his administration, the US toughened its stance on China, embarking on its biggest trade war to date. This is how the United States ultimately lost influence on the Pacific chessboard. In order to reverse this process, agreements such as AUKUS or the *Quad* have proliferated in recent years (Shoebridge, 2021; Kutty and Basura n.d.), which, contrary to the trend, are more geopolitical than geo-economic in nature. It is now time for Washington to fill this geo-economic vacuum through the *Indo Pacific Economic Framework* (IPEF).

During his trip to Asia, Joe Biden announced the launch of the IPEF. Participants include classic allies such as Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea, as well as other Southeast Asian states such as Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. As usual, Taiwan does not participate as a result of the famous US strategic ambiguity. The IPEF, along with previous initiatives such as Barack Obama's TPP, Donald Trump's *Blue Dot Network* (BDN)[4], or the 'Build

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4 Translation proposed by the author.

Back Better World' (B3W)[5], was born with the clear purpose of offering alternatives to the BRI. Unsurprisingly, the IPEF and the BRI share a common essence, providing funding for major infrastructure in peripheral countries. However, the IPEF presents itself in the same way as the BRI, but with more robust and attractive standards, rules and principles than the opacity and *rule of men* offered by China as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon rule of law. According to the White House, the IPEF's objective is to confront

> «21st century economic challenges ranging from setting the rules of the road for the digital economy, to ensuring secure and resilient supply chains, to helping make the kinds of major investments necessary in clean energy infrastructure and the clean energy transition, to raising standards for transparency, fair taxation, and anti-corruption» (Forough, 2022).

Despite US intentions, the IPEF faces several challenges before it even begins its journey. First, the very purpose of the IPEF overlaps with the BDN and B3W, both of which failed to come to fruition. Second, the Biden administration is already finding difficulties financing its *Green New Deal* energy transition[6], so the political strength needed to provide credible funding for these projects is at least in doubt —for a more in-depth view (Galvin and Healy, 2020)—. Third, weak US social cohesion and anti-globalist sentiment in the Trump era may discourage the administration from engaging economically beyond its borders.

China

For most of its modern history, the People's Republic of China has been a poor and isolated country, thus conditioning its external relations. After decades of sustained and high economic growth following Deng Xiaoping's economic reform, the inescapable size of the Chinese economy forced it to rethink its position vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Beijing's foreign policy has therefore been adapting to its long-term development strategy.

In order to analyse the relevance of China's presence in the South Pacific, it is important to take a brief look at its foreign policy. This analysis focuses on the evolution of Chinese foreign policy, first by presenting the various conceptual manoeuvres on Chinese development; and second, applying these concepts directly to the South Pacific, through military modernisation, diplomatic competition with Taiwan and the instruments it uses in the region.

As far as conceptual development is concerned, it is short and simple. Beijing has always liked short and concise slogans, and despite the complexity of its policies they

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5 Translation proposed by the author.

6 Translation proposed by the author.

can easily be summarised in different slogans over time. Since the reform era, China's foreign policy had been characterised by a 'low profile'[7]. Summed up in Deng Xiaoping's well-known phrase: "Hide your strength, bide your time, never take the lead"[8], this policy advocated that China should steer clear of diplomatic friction arising from great power competition. Since 2003, China's foreign policy has been based on 'peaceful rise'[9], or since 2004, 'peaceful development'[10]. Consequently, we can exemplify this transformation in the South Pacific with two cases: the modernisation of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and diplomatic competition with Taiwan.

– - First, China's military doctrine in the Pacific is intimately linked to the modernisation of its navy. This modernisation was carried out under Hu Jintao, with the aim of training the naval force in 'far sea' operations[11], and thus improving its ability to project beyond its shores (Li, 2009). Renewal of the navy began in 1988 when Admiral Liu Huaqing published a study on how future maritime security conditions could be optimised through the concepts of island chains and the waters around them.

According to this doctrine, there are three island chains. The 'first island chain'[12] consisting of Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines; by 2010, the PLAN should be able to move freely in open waters up to this chain. Then, the 'second island chain'[13], which includes Guam along with the Kuril Islands, the Mariana Islands, the Caroline Islands of Micronesia and Papua New Guinea. And the 'third island chain' that runs virtually from pole to pole, from the Aleutian Islands in the Bering Sea to Antarctica (Lanteigne, 2012).

The waters between the first island chain and the second make up the Mediterranean Seas. And from the second island chain to the rest of the Pacific

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7 Concept to refer to Deng Xiaoping's *low profile diplomacy*.

8 This is the 韬光养晦 ('tao guang yang hui') concept. Transliteration from Chinese by the author. The translation of the quote comes from Osvaldo Rosales, in *El sueño chino*: Cómo se ve China a sí misma y cómo nos equivocamos los occidentales al interpretarla, Mexico, Argentina and Barcelona, Siglo XXI Editores/Anthropos, United Nations and ECLAC, pp. 85 (e-book version).

9 English translation of the Chinese term 和平崛起 or 'heping jueqi'. With few exceptions, transliterations and translations from Chinese into English are by the author.

10 English translation of the Chinese term 和平发展, or 'heping fazhan'.

11 Translation of the Chinese term 远海作战 or 'yuanhai zuozhan'. In English it is called *Blue Water*.

12 Chinese transliteration of the concept (第一岛链) is 'diyi daolian'. The translation has been extracted from this article from the digital edition of *Política exterior* magazine, 'Taiwán y el mar del Sur de China' by Josep Piqué, published on 1 September 2022. https://www.politicaexterior.com/taiwan-y-el-mar-del-sur-de-china/ [last accessed: 10 November 2022].

13 Refers to 第二岛链, transliterated as follows: 'di'er daolian'. Translation of the author's term. The translation has been extracted from this article from the digital edition of *Política exterior* magazine, 'Taiwán y el mar del Sur de China' by Josep Piqué, published on 1 September 2022. https://www.politicaexterior.com/taiwan-y-el-mar-del-sur-de-china/ [last accessed: 10 November 2022].

are far seas, and this is where the South Pacific is located. Following the proposed timetable, the PLAN is expected to be able to operate in the Mediterranean seas as early as 2025 and in the coastal seas by 2050 (Lanteigne, 2012).

US policy-makers are particularly concerned by the use of this strategy. This 'chain island strategy' is specially designed to work in symbiosis with an 'anti-access' and 'area denial' strategy, A2/AD in NATO terminology or 'fan jieru' *(反介入)* for Beijing. This quest to increase and maintain China's security bubble requires a complex web of surface-to-sea, surface-to-air and ballistic missile networks and intelligence gathering elements for their proper use. Ultimately, this would imply an increased Chinese naval presence in the Western Pacific to tacitly remove the US military from the region, or at least make it more difficult for the United States to operate freely on that side of the ocean (Ross, 2009).

In short, Beijing is executing its own Monroe Doctrine, by which it intends to drive the Americans out of the Pacific just as they drove the European powers out of South America in the 18TH century.

However, despite the introduction of naval air capability, the PLAN remains far from ready for a protracted conflict in such a vast space. An example of this could be seen in the difficulties experienced by the PLAN in participating in the international anti-piracy coalition off the coast of Somalia (Lanteigne, 2012). Given that China has no safe havens in the Indian Ocean, long-range operations off the African coast are particularly complex. In contrast, the US and its Diego Garcia base allows for a much faster and more efficient projection capacity in the Indian Ocean. An increased military presence in the South Pacific would face the same problems today.

– Second, diplomatic competition with Taiwan. At the turn of the millennium, China began to become more involved in diplomatic issues beyond its borders, for example, in some countries' recognition of Taiwan. This proactivity in the diplomatic arena coincides with the gradual abandonment of 'low-profile' diplomacy and the adoption of 'peaceful rise'. In 2000, 29 countries recognised Taiwan rather than mainland China (Harwit, 2000), of which the majority were Pacific states. At that time, Taiwan's recognition did not come at as high a price as it does now, i.e., giving up China's vast economic resources. Giving up on China was only within the reach of underdeveloped countries, with virtually no insertion in global value chains, of which China is a cornerstone. According to I. Taylor (2002) '[The countries recognising Taiwan] have only one thing in common: they are all extremely small geographically, or economically impoverished. In reality, most of them are both'. It was in the early 2000s that China and Taiwan engaged in a diplomatic competition for recognition within the PICs. Both used what is known as 'cheque diplomacy'[14], by which they gained

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14 In Chinese: 支票簿外交; transliterated: 'zhipiaobu waijiao'.

(or maintained) recognition from different PICs. This diplomacy consisted of establishing diplomatic relations on the basis of economic aid such as donations or low-interest credits (Lanteigne 2012).

'Cheque diplomacy' is aligned with one of Beijing's main instruments for reaching out to the periphery: humanitarian aid. This can take various forms, including loans at below-market interest rates, debt relief or direct grants. Aid is unconditional, it is granted without any expectation of policy change by the aid beneficiary. This is known as the *no strings attached policy*. According to the *White Paper on Foreign Aid* published in 2011, 'China never uses foreign aid as a means to interfere in recipient countries' internal affairs or seek political privileges for itself' (Information Office of the State Council The People's Republic of China, 2011). This makes it particularly attractive for countries that are far from resembling Western democracies, such as the PICs. However, traditional donor powers such as Australia and New Zealand have noted that the effectiveness of their donations in influencing PIC policy has declined.

During this period several PICs pivoted their recognition to China, not without controversy. This competition would not end until 2008 when the Nationalist Party of Taiwan[15] returned to power after eight years in opposition. The new President Ma Ying-jeou began a campaign to resume good relations with China in contrast to his predecessor, Chen Shui-bian. As a precedent of good faith, a tacit diplomatic truce was established. To mark this diplomatic truce, both Taiwan and China promised that they would not try to persuade states that already recognised the other to change their recognition (Hayward-Jones 2013). In recent years, however, the Pacific has witnessed new shifts in recognition that reignite diplomatic competition in the region. The case of Kiribati, and especially the Solomon Islands in 2019, show not only that the truce is over, but that the competition is no longer fair. PICs that continue to recognise the People's Republic of China are finding it increasingly difficult to renounce PRC resources.

This competition can be interpreted as a test of China's growing economic power in the diplomatic arena. The main reason is the powerful trade-off of PIC recognition for a relatively low price. Although PICs are small and poor, they are for the most part sovereign states, and as such enjoy voting rights in supranational organisations such as the UN. Furthermore, taking away some of Taiwan's few remaining allies directly challenges its sovereignty, which is particularly attractive to Beijing. In other words, China's South Pacific gamble pays good dividends and is relatively cheap.

Australia

After the United States gradually left the Pacific at the end of the Cold War, both Australia and New Zealand were destined to fill the vacuum. Australia, the largest

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15 国民党 or 'Guomindang'.

economic power in the region, took it for granted that the Pacific islands would orbit around it. In fact, Australia has always perceived PICs in the same way as the US perceives South America as its 'environment of interest' (Varrall, 2021). Given that power competition is the *sine qua non* of understanding the Pacific chessboard, it is essential to understand the relationship between Australia and the new regional power, China.

Relations between Beijing and Canberra have historically been virtuous. Its geographical proximity makes Australia a natural economic partner for China. This relationship is mutual. Australia benefited from the processes of fragmentation and delocalisation of its productive activity to China. As China's economy gained momentum, interdependence became ever stronger.

Despite the inseparable economic ties between Beijing and Canberra, geostrategic tensions have eroded their diplomatic relations in recent years. In line with this, Australia has toughened its stance on China's presence in the Pacific. According to Graham (2018) 'Canberra is increasingly concerned about Beijing's intensified interest in the Pacific islands, including efforts to sway political elites and targeted pursuit of transportation infrastructure projects in locations across Melanesia' (Graham, 2018). This attitude is based on two pillars: the recognition of China as a strategic threat at various levels; and a deep understanding of the region, grasping the unique characteristics of the PICs (Varrall, 2021).

This hardening of the Australian position is easily observable through the various *White Papers* produced by the Australian government. Initially, the 2003 *Foreign Affairs and Trade White Paper* described China as an economic opportunity, with an emphasis on developing bilateral relations (Australian Government, 2003). It was not until 2013 that the *Defence White Paper* of the same year stated: '[China is] a major power with hostile intentions'. That document already foresaw the possibility of the establishment of Chinese military bases 'in its immediate neighbourhood [,] from which it could project power against us' (Australian Government, 2013). Finally, although China is not explicitly named, the statement in the 2016 *Defence White Paper* is revealing: 'newly powerful countries want greater influence and to challenge some of the rules in the global architecture established some 70 years ago [...] leading to uncertainty and tension' (Australian Government, 2016).

Accordingly, Australia defines its concerns about China's growing influence in the region in a number of ways, of which I highlight the following. First, the security of its national economy; second, the nature of PIC debt; third, the effectiveness of its humanitarian aid as a source of power; fourth, the rise of corruption; and fifth, the strategic military threat.

Firstly, economic security. The Australian and Chinese economies share a mutual interdependence, with Beijing being Canberra's largest trading partner since 2009 (The Growth Lab at Harvard University, 2022). Interdependence in industrial sectors such as mining, and in the service sector such as education and tourism, stands out (Varrall, 2021). Australia is therefore particularly sensitive to sanctions with 'Chinese

characteristics'; the country experienced this first-hand in 2019, when ports in northeast China blocked or slowed down Australian coal exports (Walker, 2019). There is a long history of such Chinese policies on bilateral trade with countries with which it shares a conflict of interest. For example, increased tariffs on Mongolian imports after the Dalai Lama's visit there in 2016; the suspension of Philippine banana imports after attempts to arrest Chinese fishermen in Philippine waters in 2012; or the cut in imports of Norwegian salmon after Chinese political activist Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010 (Varrall, 2021).

Secondly, the nature of debt has sparked much debate. Australia fears that an increase in the region's debt to China could increase its leverage. In this case, there are several PIC countries with GDP debt ratios that place them in a position of debt distress, being particularly vulnerable to external pressures. These include Kiribati, Marshall Islands, FSM, Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu. However, as Fox and Dornan (2018) point out, half of these countries do not recognise the People's Republic of China and maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan. In other words, they do not have access to financial resources from mainland China (Fox and Dornan, 2018).

Thirdly, Australia is a major donor of humanitarian aid in the Pacific. The traditional policy with regard to this type of aid was based on the principles of cross-compliance. By offering alternatives to this aid, China has undermined Australia's potential power to change certain PIC policies. For example, Chinese funding to Fiji has discouraged Australian efforts to pressure Fiji's military government to reinstall democracy after the 2006 coup d'état.

Fourthly, there are concerns about the relationship between Chinese presence and corruption. Evidence has been found of growing local corruption around Chinese projects in Africa. In this case, there is no direct economic impact, although there has been an impact on local norms and institutions. Such impact does not occur with other donors like the World Bank (Isaksson and Kotsadam, 2016).

Finally, and fifthly, the strategic military threat, an issue that has become particularly relevant. This threat is based on a *possible* qualitative leap in the Chinese navy's capabilities to project power against Australia and its allies. For Canberra, the associated consequences are unacceptable. These include: less time to respond to potential hostilities, motivating increased defence spending as a deterrent, reducing Australia's ability to exercise freedom of movement, and generating political polarisation within its borders (Wallis and Batley, 2020).

In response to the maintenance of its strategic interests, Australia has begun to articulate a series of mechanisms to secure its interests in the South Pacific. This ideology eventually crystallised in the 2018 phased policy. This set of laws brought forward by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison aims to prevent foreign powers from gaining influence, especially in the South Pacific (Synergia Foundation, 2019). The Australian government has sought to disassociate the *Step-up Policy* from a traditional geostrategic movement. Instead, three fundamental pillars are identified in

its policy: economic growth, peer-to-peer relations[16], and cross-cutting security (Wallis and Batley, 2020).

In conclusion, Australia enjoys a privileged position in the South Pacific game; it knows its position on the board well. Through strong political will, it has been able to identify its interests and develop policies accordingly. Moreover, it has both the economic and natural resources to provide the capacity for such political will. Finally, it has a fundamental tool at its disposal, namely media control. Media outlets with the most coverage of the Pacific are Australian[17]. With this soft power, Canberra has the ability to influence fragmented Pacific societies more directly than China.

New Zealand

New Zealand is a minor player on the international stage. However, given that the South Pacific board is mainly made up of micro-states, it can exert considerable influence there. In other words, although it is not a power, it can act as one (Lati Lati, 2021). This is why it is worth studying its position on the board. Given its smaller weight, New Zealand's relationship with the Pacific is similar to Australia's, albeit on a smaller scale.

With respect to its relationship with China, New Zealand's trajectory is, as might be expected, similar to that of Australia. China's arrival in the South Pacific was initially celebrated by New Zealand. This new player was the most immediate way to counter Russia. A good example of the complexity of the system and the inherent difficulty of devising strategies to rebalance power in the region. In addition, New Zealand was the first OECD member country to sign a free trade agreement with China (Lati Lati, 2021); and as for Canberra, China is Wellington's largest trading partner, with annual exports valued at $10.7 billion, about 28% of the total (The Growth Lab at Harvard University, 2022).

However, China's growing influence over PICs forced New Zealand to rethink its strategy. While New Zealand acknowledges that 'China is deeply integrated into the rules-based order', it believes that it has 'not consistently adopted the governance and rules championed by the order's traditional leaders' (New Zealand Government, 2018), and is therefore concerned about its rise. As previously mentioned, there are several scenarios for this rise. For example, China may not have any intention of challenging US hegemony, but its growing influence generates friction with the IRBO, of which New Zealand is an architect (Lati Lati, 2021). Ultimately, no matter which scenario we find ourselves in, New Zealand is not comfortable with any of them.

Thus, following in the footsteps of the Australian *step up policy* , New Zealand launched the *Pacific Reset* in March 2018. This reset represents a critical shift in New

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16 With PICs.

17 See Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) or Fairfax Media.

Zealand's view of the South Pacific chessboard, which entails major funding[18] and involves a rethink of diplomatic activities with its neighbours. In other words, the *reset* would imply a qualitative leap in the amount of investments, and a change in the diplomatic model, from donor-recipient to bilateral relations (Lati Lati, 2021).

It is important to note that this 'reset' shares certain characteristics with the *Step Up Policy*, but also differs in key respects. For example, similar to Canberra's strategic awareness, Prime Minister Winston Peters has expressed his concern for the Pacific. In his own words:

> "[The Pacific] has also become an increasingly contested strategic space, no longer neglected by Great Power ambition, and so Pacific Island leaders have more options. This is creating a high degree of *strategic anxiety*[19]".

On the other hand, in contrast to Australia's strategy, New Zealand has opted for ambiguity towards China. In fact, Peters has categorically denied that the *Reset* was designed "specifically to counter China" (Peters, 2018). Interestingly, this may suggest that Wellington feels *strategic anxiety* for other actors such as the US, Australia or Japan. This is obviously illogical.

All in all, the *Pacific Reset* represents New Zealand's acknowledgement of its negligence in the region. PIC loyalty to the regional architects was taken for granted for too long. In fact, the PIF (Pacific Island Forum) was formed specifically for the purpose of giving PICs greater autonomy from regional powers, including New Zealand (Lati Lati, 2021).

Ultimately, New Zealand's main characteristic that distinguishes it from other regional actors is that it considers itself to be a Moral Foreign Policy Driven Actor[20] (Lati Lati, 2021). This vision of itself allows it to clothe its ambitions in grandiloquence. As Peters points out:

> "New Zealand's view is that we must be respectful of Pacific Island countries' and clear wish to manage their own international relations while at the same time retain New Zealand's traditional emphasis on human rights, the rule of law, transparency, good governance and the promotion of democracy" (Peters, 2018).

This moral superiority makes humanitarian aid New Zealand's greatest source of power. And like Australia, this aid is conditional, putting New Zealand at a disadvantage.

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18 Funding through the *Official Development Assistance Fund* of 714.2 million New Zealand dollars, about 430 million euros.

19 Italics added to stress the importance of the concept.

20 Translation proposed by the author.

The Solomon Islands-China security pact has been a turning point for New Zealand. It has catalysed government concerns and forced the current prime minister, Jacinta Arden, to take a tougher stance. Arden met with Biden on 1 June as part of his Pacific trip. In its efforts to rejoin the Pacific board, the US is rewriting relations with its partners, and New Zealand is obviously a natural ally. In a joint statement, Biden and Arden said:

> "The United States and New Zealand share a concern that the establishment of a persistent military presence in the Pacific by a state that does not share our values or security interests would fundamentally alter the strategic balance of the region and pose national-security concerns to both our countries" (Fildes, 2022).

In conclusion, the evolution of New Zealand's South Pacific policy has followed in the footsteps of its *big brother*[21]*,* Australia. Despite their differences, they share a strategic awareness of the region that has been key to their policy-making. However, that New Zealand sees itself as a *Moral Actor* puts it in an extremely complex position. In contrast to the more bellicose Australia, Wellington must now balance between maintaining a friendly trade relationship with China and dealing with the possible militarisation of the region, all the while promoting democratic values among *reluctant* PICs.

South Pacific security pact, a turning point?

Geostrategic competition

Over the past decades, China's presence in the South Pacific has been the subject of much debate in academia as to whether or not there is geostrategic competition in the region. While the general discussion on this issue revolved around a purely economic interest on Beijing's part, the security pact with the Solomon Islands may crystallise the change in trend that has been observed over the last few years. Next, we will look at the classic arguments against the strategic approach; and in contrast, we will examine the pact itself and its implications.

To begin with, the arguments against this geostrategic approach are fourfold: the prioritisation of the Chinese agenda; Western neglect; the uniqueness of the PICs; and the context of diplomatic competition with Taiwan.

First, the South Pacific should not be high on the Chinese agenda. Beijing is facing too many foreign policy challenges. It must maintain good relations with the EU and the US, its main markets; relieve territorial tensions on the South China Sea with Japan and other Southeast Asian countries; this has recently been compounded by

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21 (*) Italics added by the author.

the handling of relations with Russia in the context of the Ukraine war. Add domestic problems to the equation and it is hard to believe that geostrategic competition for PICs is high on Beijing's agenda (Hayward-Jones, 2013).

Second, Western neglect. China's arrival in the Pacific is perceived as filling a 'vacuum' left by Western powers. Since the end of the Cold War, the US and its allies have taken for granted the loyalty of Pacific countries, the so-called *Pacific loyalty*, and have progressively decreased the resources allocated to the region. After the collapse of the USSR, there was no longer a systemic rival to compete with, so since 1990 the US Pacific fleet has been halved (Henderson and Reilly, 2003). This progressive abandonment of the region by the United States has converted China into a regional power by default (Y. Zhang, 2007).

Third, the uniqueness of PICs. As noted above, the PICs share a number of unique characteristics that make them a differentiable board from the Asia-Pacific. With regard to geostrategic competition, PICs are too poor and too isolated to be assigned any relevant strategic value. For Wesley-Smith (2010), it is important that 'none of the island states are located close to the strategic sea lanes that serve the bulk of China's energy and commodities trade or, for that matter, to other important trans-Pacific maritime trade or military routes' (Wesley-Smith and Porter, 2010).

And finally, in fourth place, diplomatic competition with Taiwan. Over the past two decades, China's main thrust in the region has been directed at diplomatic rivalry with Taiwan. Despite a diplomatic truce in 2008, the region has experienced a revival in the competition in recent years, with major changes in recognition in 2019, such as Kiribati and the Solomon Islands.

So far, the general consensus is for China's purely economic interest in the region, disregarding geostrategic analysis. For example, Zhang (2007) argues that contrary to the popular line, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that China has a clear and well-coordinated strategy to fill the power vacuum in the Pacific (Y. Zhang, 2007). Yang (2009) also argues that the South Pacific should be a low priority region for Beijing in strategic terms (Yang, 2009). Or finally Hayward-Jones (2013), who insists that 'a geostrategic paradigm obscures a better understanding of both the benefits and drawbacks of China's [activities]. In that regard, it is important to be clear about the difference between normal economic competition and competition for strategic influence derived from diplomatic, defence and aid links' (Hayward-Jones, 2013).

In contrast, some arguments advocate that China's presence in the South Pacific is aligned with geostrategic interests. This line of argument is more diffuse, and in academic debate of previous decades focuses on China's ambition to become a major power. For example, Henderson and Reilly (2003) argue that 'China is not just filling a political vacuum created by Western neglect. It is incorporating the Pacific islands into its broader quest to become a major Asia-Pacific power' (Henderson and Reilly, 2003).

However, the evolution of actors' behaviour and the events that have unfolded in recent years indicate at the very least a change in trend in favour of this geostrategic approach.

The agreement

In April 2022, the Solomon Islands and China signed the security pact that is intended to be a turning point in the South Pacific security architecture. Although the official documents are not available, several conclusions can be drawn from the March leak. But first, it is important to put the situation in the Solomon Islands into context, and why the trend change mentioned above has materialised in these islands.

Key events that led to this pact are closely related to the revival of China's diplomatic competition with Taiwan. Consequently, this competition has been, and is currently, Beijing's main method of approaching the islands.
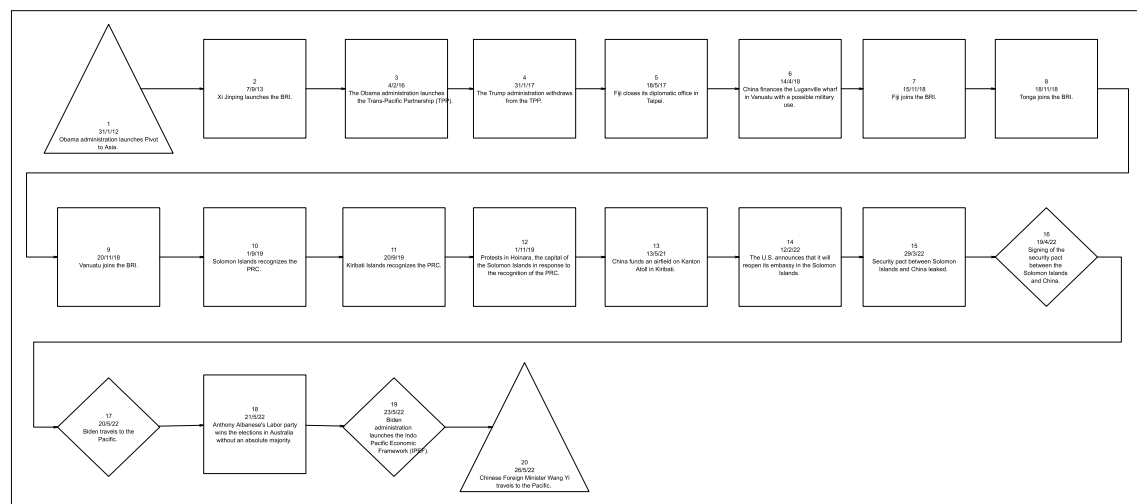

Illustration 1. Prepared by the author. Diagram of events leading up to the signing of the pact. Triangles indicate beginning and end, diamonds indicate key events, and squares indicate common events.

Such a continuation of events starts in September 2019, when Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare formalised relations with the People's Republic of China. At the time, the Solomon Islands was one of the few countries, mostly in the Pacific, that maintained relations with Taiwan. In return, this declaration was accompanied by a substantial increase in Chinese financial aid to the islands. In light of this, Tsai Ing-Wen, President of Taiwan, said: "We sincerely regret and strongly condemn [the Solomon Islands] government's decision to establish diplomatic relations with China" (Walden, Dziedzic, and Wasuka, 2021).

Subsequently, in November 2021, protests erupted in the Solomon Islands' capital, Honiara. The mobilisation began in the archipelago's most populous province of Malaita, encouraged by the province's president Daniel Suidani, who made public his rejection of the change in diplomatic recognition.

These protests led to violent altercations and deliberate attacks on Chinese-owned businesses. Indeed, one of the arguments underpinning China's growing engagement in the South Pacific is the protection of its diaspora (Yang, 2009). So these disturbances have been key to the signing of the pact. However, this is not the first time this has happened. On 18 April 2006, riots broke out in Hoinara, unrelated to the recognition

of Taiwan. Again, several Chinese businesses were burnt down. In that year, after visiting the islands, Lu Weixiong, director of Overseas Chinese Affairs of Guangdong Province titled his internal report as 'Who is to blame for the cases of resentment against the Overseas Chinese' (Yang, 2009). It is worth noting that such events are recurrent in the Pacific, and 1998 saw major disturbances in Indonesia with bloody consequences (Henderson and Reilly, 2003).

Regarding this attack on Chinese interests, Sogavare's statements clarify how important they have been in the development of the pact. Sogavare states:

> "Some countries and their publics may not take kindly to one country protecting infrastructure built by another country [...] But such an attitude makes us uncomfortable. We watched Chinatown burned to ashes and attempted vandalism of the Pacific Games infrastructure ... from our perspective any infrastructure built must be protected" (Dziedzic and Seselja, 2022).

Although the Solomon Island has a security cooperation agreement with Australia currently in place, the government doubts its effectiveness in protecting capital outside its interests. Still, on 29 March, Sogavare defended both the deal with Australia and China in the name of "diversification". Sogavare stated: "I would like to make it abundantly clear that the Solomon Islands' security arrangement with Australia remains in place, intact", "It is clear we need to diversify the country's relationship with other partners. What is wrong with that?" (Walden, Dziedzic, and Wasuka, 2021).

Paradoxically, it was the Solomon Islands' recognition of the Beijing government that triggered the protests that challenged Sogavare's rule, and it was ultimately this sense of insecurity that encouraged his government to enter into new security arrangements. In this sense, China has been both a cause and a consequence of the pact.

With regard to the features of the pact, assuming a certain consistency and credibility in the leak, a number of key points can be drawn from the text (Brady 2022). First, the Solomon Islands will be able to call on the Chinese People's Armed Police (PAP) for assistance in maintaining social order or fighting natural disasters; second, the Solomon Islands would allow logistical stops by Chinese military vessels in its ports; and third, China will be able to use its police force to protect its fellow citizens and Chinese property.

Although the pact does not explicitly mention any kind of military symbiosis, the PAP may set a precedent for the future. The PAP is the paramilitary force of the Chinese Communist Party, whose main mission is to maintain internal stability in China. Its functions include: being the first line of defence against natural disasters in mainland China; providing security for government buildings; and the arduous task of maintaining order in regions with complex security problems for Beijing such as Xinjiang and Tibet. Moreover, this is not the first time that the PAP could work outside national borders. Cases such as the fight against terrorism in Tajikistan or Afghanistan have already served as precedents (Kim, 2022).

The shift in Solomon's recognition towards China comes as a result of Taipei's inability to offer a real alternative in economic terms to Chinese aid. PICs have a serious infrastructure deficit, and financial support for their proper development is essential for them. A report by the Solomon Islands Congress ruled: "36 years of diplomatic relationship clearly illustrates that Taiwan will do nothing substantial in infrastructure development to support Solomon Islands' economic growth, [...]. The Solomon Islands should not rely on Taiwan's assistance" (D. Zhang, 2019).

Implications

Disputing Taiwan's international legitimacy is undoubtedly one of the strategic objectives of China's increased involvement in the Pacific. However, the implications of this agreement go beyond gaining influence in the UN.

As early as 1989, Biddick (1989) argued that 'in the long term, the PRC is likely to play a larger role as a Pacific maritime power, raising new questions for region of traditional Western influence'. In other words, even before the collapse of the USSR, there were fears that China would become a dominant presence in the region. However, in 2007 Zhang (2007) maintained that there was insufficient evidence to assert or refute that Chinese diplomacy in the Pacific was aimed at undermining Pacific Island countries' relations with the region's dominant powers and challenging US leadership in the Asia-Pacific in the long term (Y. Zhang, 2007). This is due to the consequences that a military escalation in the South Pacific would have for both China and the hegemonic powers in the region.

Such a military escalation would crystallise through a possible military base that Western analysts so often preach. Although the current focus is on the Solomon Islands, the debate over the consequences of a Chinese military base in the Pacific is more far-reaching. Referring to the case of Vanuatu in 2018, Charles Edel believes that once one base is installed, others will follow. This would allow the PLAN to block access to the region by the US and its allies, directly affecting Australian security (Wroe, 2018).

On the other hand, in this case a base in the Solomon Islands would be extremely costly for China. Maintaining supply chains from the Chinese mainland would be too complex and would divert the PLAN from its primary objective, naval supremacy in the South China Sea. Despite military modernisation in recent decades, the PLAN remains far from ready to engage in a protracted conflict in the vast South Pacific.

An example of this could be seen in the difficulties experienced by the PLAN in participating in the international anti-piracy coalition off the coast of Somalia (Lanteigne 2012). Given that China has no safe havens in the Indian Ocean, long-range operations off the African coast are particularly complex. In contrast, the US and its Diego Garcia base allows it a much faster and more efficient projection capability in the Indian Ocean. An increased naval presence in the South Pacific, even with a hypothetical base, would face the same problems today.

Moreover, China has not yet established any bases in the Pacific and Wang Yi has denied that there is any intention to build one in the Solomon Islands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Despite China's refusal, competition in the Pacific will eventually demand such enclaves. As Guillermo Pulido (2021) wrote, '[in the future] China could seize territories on islands in the Pacific or the Indian Ocean to turn them into missile bastions from which to radiate power', he continues, 'This is the usual mode of warfare in the Pacific, just as Japan did before World War II'.

In conclusion, the Solomon Islands security pact can be seen as part of China's Pacific strategy; as a measure to safeguard its direct economic interests, or as a moral obligation to protect its diaspora. Despite the different approaches and doubts about its 'short term' consequences, it is undeniable that this event has at least provided an incentive to follow the region more closely.

Responses to the pact

The Solomon Islands pact has reignited the power race, and the region has seen two visits at the highest diplomatic level in less than a month.

On 26 May, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi arrived in the Solomon Islands as part of his South Pacific tour. This was the first official visit of that rank since the two countries formalised diplomatic relations two years ago. It is accompanied by two key documents, the *China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision* [22] and the *China-Pacific Islands Countries Five-Year Plan on Common Development* [23] which aim to draw the PICs into a broad multilateral compact. However, the PICs are reluctant to enter into such multilateral pacts (*The Phuket News*, 2022).

Even so, Wang Yi affirmed that China will firmly support the Solomon Islands in protecting its national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity, maintaining domestic solidarity and unity, accelerating the country's development and revitalisation. For his part, Solomon Islands Foreign Minister Jeremiah Manele has reaffirmed his adherence to the *One-China Principle* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). All of these fits with China's natural approach to the Periphery. As a *reward*, the two countries have reached agreement on the construction of 'flagship projects' within the framework of the BRI, as well as a more favoured country policy with 0% tariffs for Solomon Islands exports to China. Certainly a deal they could not refuse.

At almost the same time, on 20 May Joe Biden landed in Seoul as part of his Asian tour to reaffirm his alliances in the Indo-Pacific. Although he only visited South Korea

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22 Translation proposed by the author.

23 Translation proposed by the author.

and Japan, during his trip he announced the launch of the IPEF, which I discuss below. The IPEF essentially presents itself as an alternative to the BRI, and may be the star mechanism with which to compete economically with China in the South Pacific.

Conclusions

The South Pacific board is a unique space in the world in terms of both its problems and opportunities. After the vacuum left by Western powers at the end of the Cold War, the region has had to face major challenges such as underdevelopment and climate change on its own. To circumvent these challenges, PIC leaders have resorted to a high degree of strategic flexibility in accepting Chinese resources for their own benefit. During the early 2000s, China's presence was almost entirely explained by its diplomatic competition with Taiwan, which many authors have used as an argument to disprove a possible geostrategic competition in the South Pacific. However, a change in trend can be observed since the creation of the BRI. China's hunger for resources and the high profitability of its involvement with PICs accelerated its participation in the region, and with it Western concerns. The security pact has set a valuable precedent for China and its potential consequences may revolutionise the security sphere of powers such as Australia and New Zealand.

In conclusion, regional competition in the Pacific is set to intensify. In line with Chinese interests, we may soon see geostrategic moves around Fiji or Papua New Guinea.

Although China's domestic problems may cause it to lose momentum, it has already established itself as the alternative to traditional Western neglect. For its part, if the US wants to contain China, it needs to become more active on regional boards again. However, initiatives need backing, funding and future credibility, which the IPEF has not yet demonstrated vis-à-vis the BRI.

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A Semiotic Approach to Putin's Speeches for Effective Diplomacy

Abstract

Following the approaches of the Semiotics of Culture Group, this article addresses the conflict that has escalated between Russia and the West following the invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, three speeches by President Vladimir Putin given in 2021 are analysed to describe how the universe of meaning in which Russia is to be positioned in the world and vis-à-vis its adversaries is configured. In this respect, the analysis focuses on the main isotopies of Putin's discourse, his narrative structure and enunciative strategies. From this basis, it highlights the main oppositions between Russian and Western culture and the reasons that prevent a friendly and constructive dialogue at the present time. It concludes by looking to the future and arguing how a more effective diplomatic relationship between Russia and Europe could be fostered.

Keywords

Semiotics of culture, Discourse analysis, Russia, The West, Future.

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Introduction

This research aims to offer an alternative view of the Ukrainian war and observes, from a semiotic point of view, the relations between Europe and Russia. We chose this methodology because of its usefulness for the social sciences, given that we live in worlds of meanings and the semiotic gaze allows us to appreciate how meaning is constructed in the cultural universes in which we are immersed. In this case, as developed below, we will take three speeches by Vladimir Putin as the object of study, focusing on identifying their main isotopies, the narrative structure upon which his proposals are based, and the way in which the image of an *other* is constructed, against which not only Russia's own identity but also that of the Russian people is configured. Our conclusions do not bypass the political-economic confrontation triggered by the invasion of Ukraine, but rather respond to the question of how to deal with such phenomena by considering the cultural and communicative level, two fundamental dimensions for the future rethinking of a possible diplomatic relationship. In this regard, we believe that some proposals suggested by European leaders —such as, for example, the idea that Ukraine should cede occupied territory to Russia— do nothing to solve the problem we have identified, do not present a solid foundation for improved relations with Russia in the future, and may even aggravate the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine in the medium and long terms.

The intention to carry out this work emerged after reading the article "Putin on Democracy", by Olesya Zakharova (2021)[1], in which the author analyses how the Russian president reformulates and redefines concepts such as "democracy", "freedom" and "human rights", replacing them with other terms such as "identity" and "patriotism". With this contribution as the basis, the idea arose to analyse different discourses reflecting how Vladimir Putin has achieved the configuration of a well-defined universe of meaning around his conception of Russia. The texts chosen for this work were the Valdai Club Conference, hereafter referred to as Valdai (21 October 2021)[2]; the speech at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs addressed to its diplomatic corps, hereafter referred to as MID - the acronym for ministry in Russian (18 November 2021)[3]; and the annual press conference, which will be referred to as the press conference (22 December 2021)[4]. The reason for this choice was the temporal proximity between the three and their

1 Zakharova, O. (2021). Putin on democracy. In: *Ridde Russia* [online]. [Accessed: 1 December 2021]. Available at: https://ridl.io/en/putin-on-democracy/

2 Kremlin. (2021). Valdai Discussion Club meeting. In *Kremlin* [online]. [Accessed: 15 January 2022]. Available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66975

3 Kremlin. (2021). Expanded meeting of the Foreign Ministry Board. In *Kremlin* [online]. [Accessed: 15 January 2022]. Available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67123

4 Kremlin. (2021). Vladimir Putin's annual news conference. In *Kremlin* [online]. [Accessed: 15 January 2022]. Available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67438

thematic heterogeneity. We believe the latter idea, heterogeneity, is essential for a more complete description of the semiosphere to which we refer[5].

The invasion of Ukraine, an explosive moment?

For months before 24 February 2022, when Vladimir Putin ordered the launch of a "special military operation" on Ukrainian territory, Russian troops and tanks were stationed on the border between Russia and the Donbass region. US intelligence services warned of an imminent invasion, but many international analysts considered this possibility unlikely. In the case of Spain, former Foreign Minister José Manuel García Margallo argued on a radio talk show that a conflict between Russia and NATO was practically impossible, although he did not entirely rule it out, because it would lead to an unprecedented war scenario involving up to four nuclear powers: Russia, the US, the UK and France[6]. He was also interviewed on television and said that we should not be overly concerned about the chances of an armed conflict breaking out in Ukraine, let alone one involving US troops: "I think, from a cautious point of view, that there could be missile attacks from Belarus or Crimea. [...] I think there will be little likelihood of armed conflict. [...] If there is conflict, it would be another World War III; I also believe that there will not be a bellicose confrontation between ground troops"[7]. But on 25 February everything changed: the improbable became a fact when Russian troops began advancing towards Kiev with the aim, in the words of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, of protecting the Russian population settled in Ukraine and "denazifying" the country[8]. Since then, hundreds of editorials —in an exercise of hindsight— have focused on Putin's unexpected decision.

Regardless of these *ex-post* assessments, we could define Russia's invasion of Ukraine in terms of cultural semiotics as an *explosive moment*, a concept coined by Yuri Lotman to explain historical processes that occur in an unpredictable and disruptive way

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5 It should also be noted that the original speeches were in Russian. In this article, we will use the Kremlin's English translation. The Spanish quotations we refer to are our own translation.

6 Aimar Bretos. (15 February 2022). *Speech by former minister Margallo on Cadena Ser's radio programme 'Hora 25'.* [Twitter]. [Accessed: 20 February 2022]. Available at: https://twitter.com/AimarBretos/status/1493554961350905862

7 Telemadrid. (2022). Margallo rules out war in Ukraine: "We should have little to worry about". *www.Telemadrid.es* [online video]. 14 February 2022. [Accessed: 1 March 2022]. Available at: https://www.telemadrid.es/programas/buenos-dias-madrid/Margallo-Ucrania-guerra-2-2423777607--20220214112645.html

8 Europapress. (2022). Lavrov insists on "demilitarising" and "liberating" Ukraine to prevent it from being a "tool" against Russia. *Europapress* [online]. [Accessed: 1 March 2022]. Available at: https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-lavrov-insiste-desmilitarizar-liberar-ucrania-evitar-sea-herramienta-contra-rusia-20220225121000.html

and inaugurate a phase of development characterised by unpredictability[9]. Looking back at how meaning was constructed around this potential conflict, we see that the dominant message in Europe was that "there will be no war". While it is true that the US had been warning of a Russian invasion of Ukraine since the end of 2021, it is also true that the Biden administration's credibility and international policy credentials were highly questioned at the time because of its disastrous withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan[10]. Since the start of 2022, the so-called "Ukraine crisis" had dominated the media's famous *agenda setting* both in our country and on the rest of the continent; a large proportion of the content of the news, information channels, talk shows and opinion columns revolved around this issue. Nonetheless, because it was seen as virtually impossible, there was generally a clear conviction that there would be no war. As of 19 January 2022, the US reinforced the argument that Russia's invasion was imminent, even though Ukraine's own president, Volodymyr Zelensky, assured that he had no information about an immediate invasion. On 21 February, after a previous ceasefire and an apparent withdrawal of some Russian troops, Putin recognised the independence of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions. Three days later, on 24 February, the Russian president announced a 'special military operation' and Russian troops attacked Ukraine.

Through this specific case, we see how the moment of explosion is produced: when a certain unexpected event involves a rupture or discontinuity in the causal logic of the story, thus giving rise to chance. This moment, explains Jorge Lozano (2018), is placed at the intersection between the past and the future in an almost timeless dimension, and one of its most important consequences is, as Lotman (1993) argues, the resemanticisation of memory. By this, Lotman is referring to the fact that a certain event, if we look at it from the future into the past, will not be perceived as a chance occurrence but rather as the only possible form of development. We see this initial bewilderment even after the invasion when, as writer and analyst Keith Gessen recounts, no one could believe what was happening but still dared to venture that the conflict would be a "blitzkrieg" or another Crimea:

> "Nobody thought things were on the right track, but none of the people I spoke to, some of them quite well connected, thought there was going to be an invasion. In fact, they thought Putin's was a strategy

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9 Explosive moments are in juxtaposition with what Lotman calls gradual processes, which occur when historical events unfold in an ongoing and gradual way that presupposes a predictable development (cf. Martín *et al.* 2021).

10 Furthermore, a similar concentration of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border took place in the spring of 2021. Below is an article that traces the chain of events leading up to the withdrawal: Lukin, O. (2021). Ukraine's entry would bring NATO more problems than solutions. *The World Order* [online]. [Accessed: 1 March 2022]. Available at: https://elordenmundial.com/la-entrada-de-ucrania-traeria-mas-problemas-que-soluciones-a-la-otan/

of *coercive diplomacy*[11]. US intelligence agencies that warned of a possible invasion were considered to be totally on the wrong track. I met with friends, listened to their reflections, analysed the *different possible scenarios*. Even in the event of an invasion, an unlikely scenario we all thought, we all agreed that it would end quickly. It would be like Crimea: a surgical operation, very precise, given Russia's overwhelming technological superiority. Putin's track record was always caution; the kind of person who never starts a battle he is not absolutely sure he will win. It would be terrible, but relatively painless. It was a mistake. *We all make mistakes*" (Gessen, 2022).

Similarly, we can see how, from the beginning of the invasion, we have been faced with a kind of mass hysteria that predicts that the worst is yet to come. In this regard, countless columns and news pieces have echoed the public's fear of World War III; interest in and the purchase of bunkers and bomb shelters has skyrocketed; and many have stockpiled reserves for fear of a possible global economic meltdown. The following are some examples:

El miedo a la pandemia cede paso a la fiebre por los refugios antibombas

Desde que Vladimir Putin invadió Ucrania, en Europa aumenta la ansiedad. Búnkeres, guías de supervivencia y pastillas de yodo se agotan con rapidez.

Illustration 1. Jason Horowitz, 2022.

El FMI advierte del golpe de la guerra en Ucrania para la recuperación económica global

El Fondo recorta cerca de un punto el crecimiento mundial este año y alerta de que el conflicto agrava el riesgo de retorno a una economía fragmentada en bloques geopolíticos

Illustration 2. Amanda Mars, 2022.

11 Italics are the authors'. We have sought to highlight the phrases or words from the Kremlin speeches that illustrate the descriptions we have outlined above. In this regard, this way of pointing out concepts will appear on several occasions in the quotations found in the body of the text and also in those highlighted in separate paragraphs with the full quotations. All italics are ours.

Illustration 3. El Periódico, 2022.

These headlines summarily show us how the development of the Ukrainian war is an event marked by unpredictability and, consequently, is a scenario open to a huge range of possible outcomes. To this effect, it is a major challenge for international diplomacy to know how to deal with this situation, especially in relation to Russia. For this reason, we consider it relevant to understand the country's position in this conflict and, in this endeavour, to pay attention to some of the speeches of its president, Vladimir Putin.

Approach to Putin's speeches

When we approach a text, one of the main elements we must pay attention to when analysing it are the reiterations and repetitions that occur on the semantic level, known in semiotics as *isotopies*. Their use is to enable the addressee to follow a certain reading path, and give them the opportunity to adapt their interpretation to the meaning with which the text was produced. This is not a guarantee that the message will be decoded as intended by the enunciator, but it does contribute to the coherence of the discourse. According to Umberto Eco's approach (cfr. 1994), a text is an artifice for producing its own model reader. In other words, a reader-type, in line with which the work is created and on which the empirical reader must make conjectures to access its different levels of meaning. This means that to interpret the meaning of a text, the empirical reader does not have to make assumptions about the intentions of the empirical author, but about the model author, i.e., the author who, as a textual strategy, tends to produce a certain model reader throughout the work (cf. Eco: 1989). In conflict situations like the one we are currently experiencing, however, analyses of Putin's speeches err on the side of attributing to his words an intentionality that justifies the monstrous image that is being constructed of him. In this respect, Eco himself warned against confusing the *model reader* with the *empirical reader*. The first term refers to the reader that the work itself foresees and creates through a set of textual strategies; the *empirical reader*, on the other hand, is the one who is not obligated to read a text in a certain way: "The empirical reader can read in many ways, and there is no law that forces him to read in one particular way, because he often uses the text as a container for his own passions, which can come from outside the text, or the text itself can casually arouse emotions" (Eco, 1996: 16).

Isotopes and reading routes

Under this consideration, we will now turn to Putin's speeches identified in the introduction, where a clear isotopy based on a highly contrasting relationship can be identified. This is between what we will call *Russia* and *Anti-Russia*, which in turn brings together many other thematic lines that fall within this first opposition.

This first great isotopy —based on the opposition between good, which corresponds to Russia, and evil, which corresponds to its enemies— is evidenced in the iteration of opposing semas that mark and define the discourse. Here we find the antagonism formed between Russia and the West, a bloc composed mainly, according to the enunciator, of Europe and the US. The latter country is blamed for a host of ills, but without being named or referred to directly. Within this all-encompassing opposition, we find several lines of meaning that mark the coherence of the texts. In this regard, there is the idea of "healthy conservatism"*(Valdai)* versus political correctness and moral deviation; that of national and sovereign states versus globalisation and global governance institutions; and that of the just harmonisation between the state and market —Putin gives China as an example— versus savage and inhuman capitalism.

Within the different thematic lines contained in the discourses, it is worth highlighting what we may call the *isotopy of values*, the *isotopy of reconceptualisation* and the *isotopy of geopolitics*.

Starting with the first, in the texts analysed Putin makes constant reference to conservative values as opposed to the deviant ones representative of the West. In a clear similarity, he goes as far as to speak in terms of "real values", "healthy conservatism" and "optimistic conservatism"*(Valdai)*, as opposed to the process of loss of values that is taking place in the West, which he accuses of abandoning traditional notions of the mother, the father, family and even gender, of putting political correctness above all else, and of wanting to spread and expand this ideology of self-proclaimed progress to other sovereign states. In this regard, following a question at the Valdai Club, the president states the following:

> "Do you know what the trick is? The trick is that of course there is a lot of diversity and every nation around the world is different. Still, something unites all people. After all, we are all people, and *we all want to live*[12]. *Life is of absolute value*. In my opinion, the same applies to *family as a value*, because what can be more important than *procreation*? Do we want to be or not to be? If we do not want to be, fine. You see, adoption is also a good and important thing, but to adopt a child someone *has to give birth*

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12 Once again, Putin's statements are an attempt to appropriate and re-signify Western concepts and terms. In this regard, listening to these first three sentences above, it is easy to recall the lyrics of the song *We are the World* by USA for Africa when it says: "When the world must come together as one / There are people dying / Oh, and it's time to lend a hand to life / The greatest gift of all".

> *to that child*. This is the *second universal value* that cannot be contested. I do not think that I need to list them all. You are all smart people here, and everyone understands this, including you. Yes, we do need to work together based on these shared, universal values" (Kremlin: *Valdai*, 2021).

What can be seen here is Putin's categorisation of the value system on behalf of Russia. Above all there is life, which has absolute value, and the value of procreation. These two notions are automatically contrasted with issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, the defence of LGBTI+ rights, the alleged indoctrination of children and, in short, with everything that the Russian president himself has stated "borders on a crime against humanity and is being done in the name and under the banner of progress"*(Valdai)*. A clear continuity can be seen here between the axis of the thematic line based on the importance of traditional values and the thematic line that we have called the *isotopy of reconceptualisation*. In his various speeches, Putin constantly criticises not only the proclaimed Western progress, but he also attacks his own country's revolutionary past, of which he is not only not proud, but which he pinpoints as the reason for many of the problems that today's Russia has, including the situation in Ukraine.

> "The advocates of so-called *'social progress'* believe they are introducing humanity to some kind of new and better consciousness. [...] It may come as a surprise to some people, but Russia has been there already. After the 1917 *revolution*, the Bolsheviks, relying on the dogmas of Marx and Engels, also said that they would change existing ways and customs and not just political and economic ones, but the very notion of *human morality* and the foundations of a healthy society. The destruction of age-old values, religion and relations between people, up to and including the *total rejection of family* (we had that, too), encouragement to inform on loved ones - all this was proclaimed progress and, by the way, was widely supported around the world back then and was quite fashionable, same as today. By the way, *the Bolsheviks were absolutely intolerant of opinions other than theirs*" (Valdai).

This attempt to redefine certain concepts, or rather to dispute them with the Western bloc, is illustrated in the idea of progress, civilisation, climate change and globalisation, drawing relationships of contiguity between the different concepts. Regarding the term "civilisation", Putin refers to it on many occasions by linking it to the enemy. He questions what is civilised about an economic system like the savage capitalism promoted by the West, which plunges many countries and millions of people into poverty and inequality. He also tries to underline its apparent contradictions: "Where are the humanitarian foundations of Western political thought? There seems to be nothing there, just idle chatter"*(Valdai)*. For his part, speaking on behalf of the Russian nation, he assures that they know where to stand: on the side of the poorest, helping them and promoting a market-harmonised welfare state —citing China as an example— not only in Russia but also in all those countries that are exploited by the West in the name of globalisation. In the same vein, there is also the issue of climate change. In this regard, Putin accuses Europe and the US of wanting to assume

the right to dictate the climate agenda on their own, when Russia is in an advanced position in terms of green transformation and digitalisation. Moreover, it accuses the West of being hypocritical not only in this area but also in the areas of immigration, the economy and globalisation, once again subjugating poor and developing countries.

Also very interesting is his repeated opposition between the concept of the sovereign state and its antagonist, globalisation, promoted by the US for its own interests to expand its economic system and cultural hegemony. Such is the seriousness of the issue that the Russian president argues that the reform of the constitution was necessary to redefine the country's foreign policy[13]:

> "Importantly, our Fundamental Law has now sealed such basic ideas and values as loyalty to the homeland, respect for our native tongue, history, culture and traditions of our predecessors. This is everything that unites our people around common ideals and determines the vector for the development of the sovereign, independent and peace loving Russian state, an active member of the international community" (Kremlin: MID, 2021).

In short, in all three texts analysed there is a constant reiteration that points to the evils brought about by the Western globalising offensive. He argues that only a strengthening of sovereign states can protect their citizens and stop this expropriation of one's own traditions and values vis-à-vis the values that someone, for their own reasons, has called "universal"*(Valdai)*. In this regard, he also points to the ineffectiveness of many global governance institutions as, in his view, the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated.

This brings us to the third line of meaning manifested in the speeches analysed, the *isotopy of geopolitics*, which we consider fundamental to understanding how Putin articulates the coherence of these texts and the defence of his ideas. This line of meaning re-establishes the constant opposition that defines Russia and its enemy and Putin does this by tracing a timeline. He repeatedly refers to the past to prove the unreliability of the word of Europe, the US and NATO; and he does so by taking advantage of a question on the Ukraine issue:

> "Consider what happened in the late 1980s - early 1990s [...], when everyone assured us that an eastward expansion of NATO infrastructure after the unification of Germany was totally out of the question. Russia could be absolutely sure of this, at the very least, so they said. But those were public statements. What happened in reality? *They lied*. And now they

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13 Along the same lines as the constitutional reform, under evaluation is a draft law that sets out and specifies what the Russian values are: Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. (2022). Обсуждение Основ государственной политики по сохранениюи укреплению традиционных российских духовно-нравственных ценностей приостановлено. *Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation* [online]. [Accessed: 1 March 2022]. Available at: https://culture.gov.ru/press/news/obsuzhdenie_osnov_gosudarstvennoy_politiki_po_sokhraneniyu_i_ukrepleniyu_traditsionnykh_rossiyskikh_/

challenge us to produce a document that actually said that". (Kremlin: *Valdai*, 2021).

Similarly, he uses historical references to point to the turning point in the geopolitical chessboard and the hitherto known world order, created by the Cold War. In this thematic line, the Russian president names a great many countries and blocs, making explicit who he aligns himself to: China, which he claims to defend and protect from Western interference and opportunism; and developing countries, Central Asian states, African states, Latin America and the Caribbean. Those he wants to continue to cooperate and build ties with are Belarus, India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. And those with whom he expresses unsatisfactory relations are Europe, the US and NATO. Notably, in these texts Putin insists on the idea that a new world order is taking shape after the decline of the West and that for the first time this is being done without a prior war, pointing out that it is a cultural dispute. This is how he returns to the main isotopies of his discourse: the defence of traditional values, sovereign states and even a pan-Russian cultural identity as a juxtaposition to Western debauchery, globalisation and opportunism towards the weakest countries and citizens.

> "This *transformation* is not a mechanical process and, in its own way, one might even say, is unparalleled. Arguably, political history has no examples of a stable world order being established without a big war and its outcomes as the basis, as was the case after World War II. So, we have a chance to create an extremely favourable precedent. The attempt to create it after the end of the Cold War on the basis of Western domination failed, as we see. The current state of international affairs is a product of that very failure, and we must learn from this" (Kremlin: *Valdai*, 2021).

As can be seen, the Russian president's speeches are built on the basis of the *US versus them* opposition. The *US* is associated with Russia, around whose axis all wholesome values and goodwill to defend developing countries revolve; while them is identified with the West, which is always linked with depravity, hypocrisy and opportunism.

Enunciative strategies and brands

Another important element in discourse analysis is to pay attention to enunciative strategies, since it is through enunciation that the speaker configures his own subjectivity; that is, the speaker constructs themselves as a subject differentiated from the rest and presents himself to the world (cfr. Benveniste: 1997). To this effect, when we look at Putin's statements, the way in which he establishes a relationship with his potential addressees is particularly relevant, as are the modifications that occur at the enunciative level depending on who his interlocutors are. For example, in the meeting with Russian diplomacy*(MID)*, Putin begins his speech by addressing Lavrov and his team of diplomats in the first-person singular to welcome them. However, from this point onwards, he adopts the first-person plural and the enunciator becomes an *inclusive*

we that encompasses both the speaker themselves and their interlocutors: "*Today, our agenda is focused* on the implementation of Russia's foreign policy and priority tasks for the future [...]". In this regard, he refers to the recent amendments to the constitution which have sealed ideas and values such as loyalty to the homeland, respect for the native language, history, culture and traditions that are intended to unite the Russian people and turn their country into a sovereign, independent, peace-loving state and an active member of the international community. On this basis, it establishes a set of obligations which it invites its diplomatic corps to assume: "The main thing is that *our foreign policy must continue to ensure the most comfortable and secure conditions for Russia's development*, solve ambitious *socio-economic tasks* and improve the *living standards of* our people". At this point, the form of discourse changes again. The enunciator disappears completely and is camouflaged in the third person: "Russia is committed...", "Russia is ready...", and so on. After these remarks emphasising Russia's commitment to international stability and peace and the fight against threats such as climate change, terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the speaker again adopts the first-person plural: "*Our proposal* to hold a summit of states [...] is in line with this principled approach". This demonstrates, in just a few sentences, the ease with which the speaker can adopt different positions in the same discourse.

As Benveniste (1997) argues, all discursive production can initially be regarded as subjective since it is the result of an individual appropriation of language by a particular speaker: "Language is organised in such a way that it allows each speaker to appropriate the entire language by designating himself as I" (ibid...: 183). Depending on how this *self* is presented, the enunciator will construct an image of himself before his interlocutor, whom he will try to affect in some way: "The enunciator uses language to influence the behaviour of the addressee in some way, and they have a battery of functions at their disposal for this purpose" (*ibid.*). Among these functions, Benveniste pinpoints interrogation, intimidation and assertion. In this regard, a speaker does not always represent himself in the same way. Depending on whom they are addressing, they will present themselves one way or another. This is perfectly reflected in the 2021 annual press conference. Journalist Petr Kozlov asks President Vladimir Putin about organisations that have been designated by the state as "undesirable" or "foreign agents" and asks his opinion on the concentration of power in a few hands:

> "*You often talk about history*, and you know it. Probably, you remember that each time power in Russia was concentrated in the hands of one person in the absence of active opposition, when Russia was in a state of active, acute confrontation with the West, ultimately this situation prompted a response which plunged the country into the abyss of wars and revolutions. *Do you not think that you*, possessing all the power, are now laying the foundation, perhaps, for such wars and revolutions?" (Kremlin: *Press conference*, 2021).

Putin, far from offering his personal opinion on the journalist's assessment, adopts the first-person plural and argues that Russia's adversaries have always tried to destroy the nation he represents from within: "First of all, speaking of history, as a reminder,

our opponents have been saying over the centuries that *Russia cannot be defeated***,** but *can only be destroyed from within*, which they successfully achieved during the First World War, or rather after it ended, and then in the 1990s when the Soviet Union was being dismantled from within". Having made this historical allusion, he then refers to the controversial decision to target organisations and media outlets as "foreign agents", justifying this on the basis of a law passed in the US, a nation widely regarded as "the beacon of democracy", but which in Putin's eyes is far less liberal than is continually claimed. In the words of the Russian leader, his country —unlike the US— does not prohibit the activities of entities like these: "We do not prohibit the work of these organisations; all we want is that organisations involved in domestic political activities in Russia clearly explain and disclose the sources of funding for their operations. They can keep doing what they are doing. *Our law is much more liberal".* On the basis of this enunciative strategy, he camouflages his opinion in an *US* and establishes a clear opposition between Russia and the US, which he sees as an external agent trying to destabilise his country internally and destroy it.

His reply to journalist Irada Zeinalova, whose question —as formulated— appears to be aligned with Russia's interests, is answered in the same vein: "For the last few weeks the world media has been feeding the tension, saying that the Russians are coming, that Russia plans to attack Ukraine and wants war. Serious people call you, you talk to them and explain our position, but they don't calm down. [...] Mr President, *what should we prepare for?"* The journalist establishes an opposition between certain foreign media and the Russian position, to which Putin responds by adopting the first person singular: "I'll try to give a short answer, but I'll have to start at the beginning". This brief introduction is followed by an explanation of the position Russia adopted towards the Soviet republics after the dissolution of the USSR:

> "*We even helped those new republics to get back on their feet, and we worked, were ready to work and are still working together with their governments, whatever their foreign policy priorities.* Suffice it to recall our relations with President [Viktor] Yushchenko and Prime Minister [Yulia] Tymoshenko, who indicated, like the current Ukrainian leadership, their absolutely pro-Western position. But *we worked with them anyway*" (Kremlin: Press conference, 2021).

He then goes on to reference a series of events that have taken place in Ukraine since 2014:

> "*But what happened in 2014? A bloody coup***,** people were killed and burned alive. I am not talking now about who was right and who was to blame. Obviously, Ukrainian citizens were rightfully indignant and displeased at what was happening in the country. The then president, Yanukovych, had agreed to everything. Three foreign ministers - of Poland, Germany and France - guaranteed the peaceful development of the situation and the peace process. I talked with the US president at that time at his initiative. He asked me to support this process as well. Everyone agreed but then a coup took place in a day or two [...]" (Kremlin: Press conference, *2021).*

On the basis of this argument, he points to the subsequent Ukrainian leadership as coup plotters and the Western countries that collaborated in the coup as responsible for the conflict that has broken out in Ukraine:

> "The Ukrainian authorities twice attempted to resolve the Donbass problem by force although we persuaded them not to do this. I personally persuaded Mr. Poroshenko: Anything but military operations! Yes, yes, he said and then resorted to force. What was the result? Encirclement, losses and the Minsk agreements. [...] *They adopted a law on indigenous people and announced that the Russian people who lived on this land, on their own land, were not indigenous*" (Kremlin: Press conference, 2021).

Once again, Putin elaborates a discourse in which the *us* versus *them* opposition prevails, with the particularity that in this case it is not about foreign agents trying to destroy Russia internally, but peripheral political movements trying to constitute an anti-Russian sentiment in areas where the majority of the population is Russian and where culturally this language has been the predominant one: "Russians and the Russian-speaking population are being expelled from their historical lands, that's what is happening [...]".

A very different answer was given to Chinese journalist Ao Li, who asked the Russian leader about how relations between China and Russia should be understood in the 21st century: "You recently held talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping via videoconference. You commented that Russia-China relations are a true example of cooperation between states in the 21st century. How should we interpret this description in today's difficult international environment?" To which Vladimir Putin, following the discursive form adopted in previous replies, responded in the first-person plural. Not in this case, however, to differentiate specifically from a *them*, but to emphasise the different levels of collaboration there are between the two countries:

> "In terms of the economy, [...] China is our biggest trade and economic partner with which we cooperate in many different fields. In terms of energy, *both China and Russia committed to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. [...] We continue to cooperate in nuclear energy, high technology and space - in almost every industry, including technology-intensive sectors. Our people-to-people cooperation includes* organising mutual years of youth exchanges, years of science, education, culture and so on. [...] *We cooperate on security* [...] *We cooperate in space and aviation [...] Ours is an overarching partnership of strategic nature* that has no precedents in history, at least not between Russia and China" (Kremlin: Press conference, 2021).

At the beginning the journalist adopts the first-person plural, probably to speak on behalf of the Chinese people: "How should we understand this description?" In this regard, Putin offers an answer that should be interpreted as being addressed not only to the journalists present there, but also to those on whose behalf the journalist is asking how relations between China and Russia should be understood, and to whom these statements will be sent through the news agency represented by this journalist.

Polyphony of voices

Last, it is worth highlighting some of the rhetorical figures that appear in the Russian leader's various speeches. In this respect, in discourse analysis, it is said that one of the main functions of introducing quotations, sayings and proverbs in a given discursive production is to introduce a voice other than that of the enunciator. This is not only to contribute to a polyphony of voices in the discourse, but also to reinforce the arguments of the speaker[14]. Throughout the text, the enunciator introduces different voices to support his discourse and introduce new issues. Among these constructions, there is abundant formulation of questions with their consequent answers. Consider the following example from the Valdai speech: "The question is where to move to, what to render, what to revise or adjust". To which he responds, "I am convinced that it is necessary to fight for real values". This formulation enables forms of competence that are often translated into a *duty and/or a can-do* to be proposed. Similarly, redefinitions of concepts are introduced. For example, when Putin asks what international law is, he answers, "You cannot demand that a state be involved in something to which it has not subscribed. This is called imposing one's will on other countries", thus taking the opportunity to once again delegitimise supranational bodies.

Other manipulation strategies can be seen in the presence of supposedly popular ideas or common knowledge resulting from current events. Via what Cicourel calls "reciprocity of perspectives in interpretative procedures", the enunciator assumes that "others see things and assign meaning to objects and events in the same way" (Cicourel in Lozano, 1982: 46). This idea is illustrated by the following quote from the COVID-19 *(Valdai)* pandemic: "The pandemic, which in theory was supposed to bring people together to fight a common mass threat, has become a divisive rather than a unifying factor". The voice introduced is entirely undefined and a supposedly general conception of the world is presented. Its intention is to formulate a premise to refute it and to influence the social and international divide by pointing out the lack of global cooperation.

In the first part of the Valdai Club speech, there is also an explicit quote from Martin Luther King: "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by their character". Putin reformulates the well-known quote and integrates it into his speech to create the opposite effect to that intended in its original use. Luther King was referring to the racism of his time and his struggle for racial equality. Putin, on the other hand, used it to point out how US society has become racist —in reverse, he claims— favouring racialised people over the rest. The quotation enters into a new dialogical relationship and allows for new meanings through the intermediary of the enunciator's own voice (cfr. Bakhtin in Lozano, 1982:149), thus offering the possibility of a new

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14 As Bakhtin argued, by introducing the word of the other into our discourse we confer on these words something of our own voice.

interpretation[15]: "One can use the words of another to express oneself through them, while showing that they are someone else's" (Lozano, 1982: 149).

We also underline the importance of the use of proverbs and sayings, not so much for their abundant presence —although this is also noteworthy— but for the part they play in the introductory formula of some of Putin's speeches, such as the one delivered in Valdai[16]. Two in particular are cited: a Chinese one ("God, save us from living in times of change") and a Russian one ("fight difficulties with the mind and dangers with experience"). The first saying sheds light on the text in several ways. He introduces it by saying that "in recent decades many have quoted a Chinese proverb", adding a further voice to his discourse that underpins the value and consistency of what follows. It is not only Putin who quotes the saying, but there are "many" who do so and thus share his idea. The saying refers to the dangers of sudden change. At the same time, the idea of traditionalism is introduced, linked to a product of popular culture such as the proverb, which by its mere utterance becomes a self-reference to the very culture it evokes, in this case Chinese and Russian. Putin then associates "times of change" with the idea of "crisis" and describes this concept by referring to its Chinese script, which consists of two ideograms meaning "danger" and "opportunity", respectively. Given that, according to him, "we are already living in times of change", it is a matter of making the target audience see that a time of possibilities is opening up and, therefore, it is a time of being able to change the structure of international governance. From here he adds to his discourse the Russian saying, "fight difficulties with the mind and dangers with experience", thereby establishing an obligation to heed experience in times of crisis. Russia has long experience in dealing with situations of change and social revolutions: "We in Russia, unfortunately, know this very well from our own experience". The experience the Russian president is speaking of is presented as interpreted history and referred to as "lessons from our difficult and sometimes tragic history". According to this approach, Russia has the competence to talk about how to deal with moments of social and cultural change because it has experienced them on several occasions. Likewise, by using the first-person plural, Putin takes ownership as the enunciator of the idea of Russia and presents his own conclusion as if it were that of the country as a whole.

Values and anti-values in Putin's speech

The nature of discourses like the ones we are referring to here, i.e., discourses that appeal to the addressee to take a position in favour of or against certain approaches, is

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15 This type of quotation, as explained in *Discourse Analysis* (Lozano *et al.*,1982), uses the words of the other person to express oneself. To this effect, while the enunciator can identify with the quote, they are not responsible for the quoted statement. Likewise, quotations of authority also serve to qualify the speaker enunciated and to attribute an attitude or a certain state of passion to them.

16 The fact that it begins with a saying indicates to the listener that what follows must be interpreted on the basis of what is implied in the saying. Otherwise, such a reference would not be introduced as a heading. Aside from situating the addressee with respect to what he or she is going to hear, the presence of this element at the beginning of the text gives cohesion to the discourse as a whole.

usually generated —as Paolo Fabbri (2018) argues— from the basis of an axiology. This obligates us to pay attention to how the values presented in Putin's interventions are articulated, what kind of hierarchical relations are established between them, and what values are presented as opposites. As Paolo Fabbri points out, the elements that make up the axiology of a given group cannot be analysed in isolation, but the hierarchy and syntagmatic relations established between them within a given discourse must be considered (cfr. Fabbri in Martin, 2018). Two societies may share the same set of values but differ in the way they structure their morals, behaviour or laws.

It is precisely on the basis of an axiological system that the narrative structure of a given story is configured and attempts to manipulate the subject into initiating a certain programme of action. That subject is sometimes the addressee himself, which is why it is so important to focus on this aspect when analysing a discourse, because it makes it easier to identify the strategies of persuasion and manipulation that are attempting to be exercised on the addressee of a given message. Taking this into consideration, we could affirm that behind every story there is always an axiology; that is, a system of values associated with the world that is represented. This structure can be seen very clearly in the case of Putin's speech to the Russia diplomatic team. He began by referring to the Basic Law, which contains the principles which, in his view, unite the Russian people, and on the basis of these elements, he established the objectives of his foreign policy:

– Securing the conditions for Russia's social and economic development.

– Developing constructive and mutually beneficial partnerships and relationships to address common challenges and threats.

– Upholding UN principles.

– Maintaining international peace and stability.

He then mentions two scenarios in which he considers diplomacy to be crucial: pandemics and climate change. In this regard, he calls for real cooperation between states to defeat the virus and meet the challenge of decarbonisation and improving energy efficiency. While he identifies both issues as global challenges, he points out that the role of its diplomats should be primarily to counter EU and US attempts to dictate what the global climate agenda should be. Under their approach, Russia has an advanced position in green transformation and digitalisation.

To defend Russia's position in the world, it calls on its diplomats to continue to strengthen ties with compatriots abroad to preserve the pan-Russian cultural identity, and to continue to create an atmosphere of friendship, security and cooperation with the post-Soviet space. In the same speech, he presents Russian diplomacy as a key element in the resolution of regional conflicts such as the crisis in Ukraine, or in the fight against international terrorism in countries like Afghanistan. In both cases, he accuses the "Western partners" of not doing a good job of mediation and of being unreliable. Putin also referred to the important work of Russian diplomats in building stable and lasting partnerships with other countries and regions of the world such as China, India, the Middle East, African states, Latin America, the Caribbean

and European countries. In this regard, while noting the importance for Russia of friendly relations with the EU, he acknowledges that relations with Europe are in great difficulty and accuses NATO, and especially the US, of breaking down dialogue mechanisms and bringing its military infrastructure closer to its borders. Putin ended his speech by thanking the diplomatic service for its work and pledging to improve its resources and working conditions since the heavy burden it carries is essential to fulfilling Russia's international goals.

This speech is illustrative of the attempts being made to persuade and manipulate Russian diplomats to follow a certain programme of action, all on the basis of the principles and values cited at the beginning of this speech. From there, the discourse develops on the basis of a structure that shapes a narrative in which Russian diplomats must undertake a series of duties to achieve the prosperity, peace and security that the Russian people deserve. To this end, it is seen as necessary to build alliances and overcome the obstacles posed by Russia's global adversaries. In Putin's words, this will benefit not only his own country, but humanity as a whole, by ensuring international peace and stability and fostering constructive relations that will benefit the parties involved. Translated into the potential model proposed by Greimas, this could be visualised as follows:

- TARGET: principles and values enshrined in the constitution.
- SUBJECT: diplomatic service.
- OBJECTIVE: social and economic development; peace and security, defence of state sovereignty; addressing common threats.
- TARGET: Russian people / humanity.
- ANCILLARY: China, India, African states, European countries, etc.
- OPPONENT: NATO/US/European Union.

It is precisely through this type of discourse that we can enter the universe of meaning on which Putin's ideas rest and understand how he —as an enunciator— seeks to situate Russia in today's world in confrontation with other types of universes of meaning, such as that of the Western world. From this point of view, their statements should not be analysed in a fragmentary way, but must form part of a whole on which the sense of the reality that is constructed rests and which shapes the facts presented in the texts referred to here. In the semiotics of culture, this whole is called the *semiosphere* and refers to the semiotic space that enables a given element of our reality to take on one meaning or another. This is not a superficial matter, since it leads us to interpret the *real* not as something alien to the texts, but precisely as a result of them. This is why it is so complex and difficult to determine the *truth of events* in a conflict situation such as the Ukrainian war because the events to which we refer only become meaningful when they are introduced into the world of the text[17]. From this

17 For semiotics, reality is configured in texts. While it does not deny the existence of empirical reality, the knowledge we have about the world is considered to be mediated by different systems of signification. Likewise, from a semiotic point of view, truth in discourse is not a representation

perspective, it is not reality that gives meaning to our language, but the other way around; and the meaning of things is not determined by their real essence, but by a certain language that organises reality according to certain codes, an axiology or a certain set of narratives. Semiotics, in principle, does not claim to prove whether or not the events recounted in a text are real, but to analyse their significance.

The construction of this universe of meaning and its accentuation in recent months, especially after the declaration of the invasion, has also modified its internal structure. All elements that can threaten or destabilise the power structure are considered *anti-culture*. In other words, they are intolerable. They are perceived as harmful to their own culture, as deviants, heretics, barbarians. A good example of how this works is the label of "foreign agent" with which various social organisations, media and even individuals have been labelled in the Russian Federation in recent years. Among other restrictions and controls, these organisations are obligated to communicate their categorisation as a foreign agent in every media communication. The official explanation for this singling out is that they represent ideas or interests of what the Russian government considers to be the enemy. As Putin notes in his speech, "Russian society should know what position someone takes or what they think about internal political processes or something else, but they should also know that they are financed from outside" (*Valdai*). Simple external influence or disagreement with the inner workings of the system makes them in Lotmanian terms what would be categorised as *anti-culture* (cfr. Lotman 1995: 70). This also happens with the opposition political parties, who are harassed and discredited by the power structure[18].

A more concrete description of what is considered deviant from Russian culture can be seen in the above-mentioned draft law on the Russian list of values: "dignity, the traditional family, patriotism, the priority of the spiritual over the material, historical memory, collectivism and the unity of the peoples of Russia". Anything contrary to these ideals could be qualified as *anti-culture*[19]. See, for example, "the cult of selfishness, the refusal to serve the homeland, the refusal to continue the values of procreation, the refusal to perceive Russia positively within historical parameters", among other points listed. The meaning of many of these ideals is flimsily described or specified, forcing

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of an external truth: the enunciator who tries to produce truth must be concerned with producing discourses that produce an effect of meaning, which we can call truth. This is what Greimas called *veridiction*.

18 On them rests the passion of *shame*. As defined by Yuri Lotman, shame is projected inwards, towards the self, unlike fear, which refers to the other, and is oriented towards the rejection of the treacherous within one's own system. Subjects labelled as foreign agents are thus publicly harassed and discredited.

19 The bill to which we refer points directly to the sources of this cultural deviation in complete coherence with Putin's speeches: The US and their allies, reforms in the area of culture without taking tradition etc. into consideration. These values are not only driven by the central power structure, but have also been gradually reconfigured over the years by reconceptualising ideas shared with the West, as mentioned in footnote 5 when referring to the article 'Putin on Democracy' by Olesya Zakharova. (2021).

the addressee to have to interpret what is meant, while at the same time making it possible for the legislator —given that it is still a draft law— to reformulate what is meant by these kinds of values and, therefore, how their transgression can be arbitrarily sanctioned.

This attitude has been reinforced since the beginning of the war. In the aftermath of the explosion, borders have become more pronounced and cultural differentiation has been established. Any demonstration against the invasion can be punishable by up to fifteen years in prison as the Russian authorities consider this to be "discrediting the Russian army". Likewise, any position other than the official one on the conflict is seen as disinformation. The position towards the Ukrainians has also changed. The official Russian discourse has come to distinguish between Ukrainians and Russians living in Ukraine. This same accentuation of the *us/them* dichotomy can be seen in Ukraine. For Ukrainians, Russians have gone from being described as "occupiers" to "orcs"[20], acquiring obvious popular characteristics related to anti-culture: they do not speak our language, they babble it; they are savages and have monstrous physical characteristics; they have invaded us and want to destroy our culture, and so on.

Russia as a global actor: An alternative to the West?

As we have seen, one of the main recurrent themes in Putin's discourse is the dichotomy he establishes between Russian culture and the Western world. To this effect, he shapes an image of Russia that contrasts with that of the West, which it points to as its enemy and as the source of many of the major problems and imbalances in the world today. It is the universal opposition *us versus them,* an opposition of the highest semioticity, which is fundamental for configuring the identity of any individual or collective subject: without an *other* there can be no self-awareness[21].

In this respect, there are many studies and disciplines that have dealt with otherness and all of them coincide in understanding this term as that which designates the

20 The following news from the Ukrainian media Ukrinform is an example of this phenomenon: UKRINFORM. (2021). Occupiers violate ceasefire seven times. *Ukrinform* [online]. [Accessed: 30 April 2022]. Available at: https://www.ukrinform.es/rubric-defense/3369296-ocupantes-violan-el-alto-el-fuego-en-siete-ocasiones.html ; UKRINFORM. (2021). Columns of Russian military equipment are heading from Simferopol to the Kherson region. *Ukrinform* [online]. [Accessed: 30 April 2022]. Available at: https://www.ukrinform.es/rubric-ato/3467401-columnas-de-equipo-militar-ruso-se-dirigen-desde-simferopol-hacia-la-region-de-jerson.html

21 This is noted by the different disciplines that deal with the social and cultural dimension of the human being, as Lotman stated when he referred to the construction of the Greek world in opposition to the world of the barbarians (cfr. Lotman, 1984). In Umberto Eco's words, "since to wage war one needs an enemy to fight, the ineluctable character of war corresponds to the ineluctability of the choice and construction of the enemy" (2016:19). In this sense, throughout the three texts analysed in this article Putin constructs the image of what he calls the West - consisting of the US, Europe, NATO and other global governance organisations, even though he is a member of them - as the enemy.

experiences of difference and the foreign (García Canclini, 2007). Among them is the characterisation of the enemy which, as Umberto Eco points out, often does not respond to a *real* threat, but to a threatening construction of the *other*: "From the beginning, we construct as enemies not so much those who are different and who threaten us directly (as would be the case of the barbarians), but those who someone has an interest in representing as threatening, even if they do not threaten us directly" (Eco, 2016: 8). To this, he adds that the *others*, as enemies, are not only those who are outside or are considered foreigners because of their remoteness, but also those who are among us and do not conform to certain customs, speak differently, have physical features that make them stand out from the rest of the social mass or have different culinary tastes. Think, for example, of the Jewish ghettos of Renaissance Venice (Sennett, 2014) or, more recently, of the misnamed second or third generation immigrants. In the same vein, when one looks at Vladimir Putin's speech one can see how he tries to single out the Ukrainian people themselves —and especially their rulers— among the *others*, despite the fact that Russia, in many cases, shares language, culture and kinship with them. Something similar is also happening with Europe, which it tries to equate —if not confuse— with the US, ignoring the fact that the cultural ties between the old continent and Russia are many and very strong.

In any process in which the *other* is constructed as the enemy, the *passion of fear*[22] is of primary importance, around which, as Lotman argued, *a priori* non-existent threats tend to be created (cf. Lotman, 2008). Likewise, fear also serves to camouflage the power of one side over another, making certain minorities perceived as a real danger that threatens the defenceless majorities:

> "To motivate its own irrational fear of an insignificant minority which is denied any possibility of defending itself, the social majority creates an absolutely mystified situation: that same minority is presented as mysteriously powerful [...]. But most personify themselves in the figure of a helpless child, tortured and killed at the hands of dangerous enemies" (Lotman, 2008: 24).

This same phenomenon is clearly reflected in the conflict in Ukraine. In Putin's words, Russia feels threatened by what it calls the "Kiev Regime", despite its military, economic and demographic inferiority, because of its harassment of the Russian population settled in Ukraine[23]. All of this is intended to point to the government of this country as a power that is promoting a Nazification process with the help of the West and NATO. To this is added the ongoing contempt for what it identifies as "Western culture", which it points to as the main cause of social disintegration and barbarism in its areas of influence. In opposition, Russia stands as the bearer of

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22 In the same way as the previous section referred to shame as the passion that is generated among us, within the same cultural semiosphere, fear corresponds to the them. We feel shame in relation to our fellow human beings and fear in relation to the other (cf. Lozano, 1979).

23 See section 2, Putin's statements on events in Ukraine in 2014.

true values, the defender of healthy conservatism, families and procreation. Likewise, in contrast to the globalist, opportunistic and selfish image of the West —which is accused of mistreating human lives in the name of unbridled capitalism, of being the champion of globalisation when it suits them and of building walls on its own borders— Russia presents itself as an international actor ready to help poor and developing countries, to carry out far-reaching humanitarian actions, to contribute to world peace and to fight injustice and the neo-Nazi threat.

On this basis, Putin advocates a model of international governance that does not revolve around the West and its globalist structures, but rather rests on the recognition of each state's national sovereignty. According to his approach, each country seems to be represented as a unique and homogeneous cultural entity, whose development corresponds to an internal mechanism of its own. However, contradictorily, within the same discourse it does not exclude the possibility that regional powers exist and that security spaces beyond the borders of a given country are conceived. In this regard, Putin argues that bordering countries, far from being guided by the deviant precepts of the West, should align themselves with Russia's interests to preserve pan-Russian cultural identity; in other words, Putin presents his country as a civilising force whose mission, among other objectives, is to expand the cultural model he represents vis-à-vis Western decline. In this way, the stability of the current world order is called into question and the rules of the game are being changed: "This kind of capitalism does not work", Putin goes as far as to say. In contrast, he praises and calls for collaboration with other actors such as China, India and Brazil, with whom he says he wants to "redistribute the balance of power to redistribute wealth among the poorest countries". However, when other actors such as Türkiye question Russia's position of power in structures such as the UN, the Russian president deflects attention by citing the equal importance of other states and defends the conservative option: "We must not hurry" (*Valdai*)[24].

However, this approach seems to have collapsed in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine. Economic and cultural sanctions by the West, international discredit for the failure of the initial purpose of the military intervention, evidence of systemic corruption in the Russian Federation, the lukewarm response of supposed allies such as China, and a long etcetera, have discredited the image that Russia claimed it wanted to represent in the world. After attempting to assert itself as a bastion of conservatism, it is responsible for initiating a completely unpredictable process in international relations. Not only has the hitherto existing international balance been upset, but Russia's internal structure has been reconfigured with respect to the accentuation of external threats. In other words, in terms of the semiotics of culture,

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24 It is worth noting here that, for the Russian president, any kind of transnational power structure - even the interpretation of international law - must be designed in accordance with the interests of its members. Although many structures such as the UN and the EU are based on the same idea, he criticises and delegitimises their existence because it is impossible for all parties in these structures to obey and coordinate. Paradoxically, it does consider NATO to be effective, pointing to it as a direct threat in security matters.

the universe of meaning constructed via Putin's discourses has been affected by the explosive process inaugurated with the invasion. Evidence of this is the increase and tightening of political repression and the cleansing of elites in the power structure. The reconfiguration of its own conception of external structure has begun to influence the reorganisation of its internal structure (cfr. Lotman 1993).

Ukraine vs. Russia / Russia vs. The West: oppositions accentuated in the wake of the war

To some extent, Putin's speech can be seen as the flip side of what has happened internally in Ukraine. Since independence in 1991, the country's various governments have tried to shape their own national discourse on the basis of their dissociation from Russia, with whom the Ukrainian people share many historical and cultural ties. Specifically, since 2014, following the Euromaidan revolution, this trend has been accentuated with various initiatives whose main objective is to differentiate the Ukrainian nation from Russian culture. A good example of this is the work carried out by the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance[25], which helped to create new national symbols and heroes characterised by their community's struggle for independence. There was also a focus on popularising the Ukrainian language vis-à-vis Russian, and programmes known as "decommunisation" and "de-Russification" were carried out. The way in which these projects were approached cast Russia as a "colonising" country and its culture as an "invader". This is another way that the characterisation of otherness took shape. The new narrative pointed to Russia as an alien culture under whose rule Ukraine had been a victim[26].

For its part, Russia's position on Ukraine is quite different. As Putin's article 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'[27] (2021) shows, Russia considers Ukraine as part of the same cultural universe. In this sense, the Ukrainian people would be part of the pan-Russian culture and those who disavow it would be considered contaminated by Western ideas[28].

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25 Lukin, O. (2021). How Ukraine is rewriting its history to distance itself from Russia. *The World Order* [online]. [Accessed: 15 March 2022]. Available at: https://elordenmundial.com/como-ucrania-esta-reescribiendo-su-historia-para-alejarse-de-rusia/

26 It is a reinterpretation of history based on current, in this case nationalist, needs. The events in Ukraine's history that separate it from Russia take on greater significance than those that unite it. It is thereby possible to appreciate Yuri Lotman's idea that culture itself establishes what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten. The recalling of the past by the Institute of National Remembrance functions as a text-forming mechanism for Ukraine's cultural and national development.

27 Kremlin. (2021). On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians. *Kremlin* [online]. [Accessed: 15 January 2022]. Available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181

28 Following Lotman's approach, it is not fear - a passion related to the enemy - that is at work here, but shame, a passion directed towards a member of the same community who has betrayed his own by tolerating and accepting the enemy.

On the other hand, Putin's speech feeds into numerous statements by European and US leaders that take for granted the opposition between Russia and the West, thus entrenching this division and transferring it to other spheres of our society, mainly through the media. Below are some examples from the Spanish press:

Illustration 4: Pablo Pardo, 2022.

Ilustration 5: ABC, 2022.

Illustration 6: Carlos de Barrón, 2022.

Ilustration 7: Maria Sahuquillo, 2021.

Given this conflict situation, the question arises as to the effectiveness of diplomatic services. As we have seen, Putin divides the world into the countries "that felt like winners after the Cold War" (*Valdai*) —identified primarily with the West— and the rest of the world. His view is that the former have tried to impose an international order of their own choosing through globalism and transnational bodies that do not respect national sovereignty. However, this system is in decline and "the international dominance of the West (...) is giving way to a diverse system", a multilateral one underpinned by the sovereignty of each nation-state. In this scenario, for Vladimir Putin there are neither allies nor enemies, but rather coincidence or not of national interests, and at the moment the interests of the EU do not coincide with those of Russia because they act in accordance with US interests. This does not mean that he denies dialogue with these actors, but he criticises their way of proceeding and their denial of the sovereignty of each nation-state[29].

The starting point for diplomacy must not only consider the possible Russian interests with which communication can be established, but also the terms on which it can take place. As already noted, for Putin the actors in the international space are the nation-states. Therefore, supranational bodies such as the EU and NATO are not valid interlocutors because they should not be able to impose themselves on a state; it is the government of a state must represent the interests of its citizens. In Putin's view, however, the Ukrainian government does not represent the interests of its

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29 Putin defends channels of communication with the West such as the UN, which he describes as 'of lasting value, at least for now'; and meetings with US President Joe Biden in 2021.

own people. This idea of unrepresented interests can be seen in this quote: "It seems that the Ukrainian people are not and will not be allowed to legally form bodies of power that represent their interests, and that people are even afraid to answer polls". For Putin, therefore, the Ukrainian government is not considered a valid interlocutor either. Consequently, aside from the problems of building communication between actors that Russia considers to be equitable, there is also an alleged problem of interests and trust. Putin invokes the problem of security in the form of the threat of NATO expansion, an issue that can hardly be guaranteed if the representative person "can be here one day and perhaps replaced the next". For him, changes in a democratic government pose a threat to the building of diplomatic relations, as they could lead to their resumption.

Russia and Europe: a necessary future

How can effective diplomatic communication to resolve a conflict be established despite the dichotomies that impede dialogue between two apparently antagonistic cultural spheres or universes?

History, from the point of view of the semiotics of culture, should not be seen solely as a concatenation of causal events[30]. As we pointed out in the first section, in explosive moments, chance dominates and the future is presented as a bundle of possibilities that are all equiprobable. It is precisely in this type of situation that the future, as the semiologist Jorge Lozano (2020) argues, becomes a period of history[31]. The latter is no longer perceived as the result of a causal logic, but as a space of unforeseen and unpredictable meanings and senses that opens the door to an infinity of modelling (dreamed future, desired future, possible future, feared future, etc.) which, in turn, would exert a performative effect on historical development. In this regard, and contrary to what the analyst Keith Gessen argues in his article in *The Guardian*, we believe that it is precisely at this moment that we should be concerned and ask ourselves about the future:

> "Someday, the war will end, and afterwards, though probably not as soon as one might hope for, the regime in Russia will have to change. There will be another opportunity to welcome Russia back into the concert of

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30 On numerous occasions, Vladimir Putin has pointed to invasion as the only possible option for resolving the conflict in Ukraine, as if this situation were the logical consequence of a series of misunderstandings between what he identifies as the 'West' and Russia. This position, however, would be questionable from Lotman's point of view, given that prior to what happens occurs it is one possibility among other equally probable ones - although it is presented as the only possible option once it has occurred.

31 In the words of Jorge Lozano, in this type of situation the future is presented as necessary, since far from being predictable or derived from a gradual process, it becomes a space full of meanings: https://gescsemiotica.com/futuro-necesario-jorge-lozano/

nations. Our job in the West will then be to do it differently than we did it in the post-Soviet period. But that is a task for the future. For now, with anguish and pain, we are still waiting and keeping our eye on the situation" (Gessen, 2022).

From this point of view, the current moment is a time of waiting. However, if we take Lotman's approach to the nature of explosive processes, this is precisely the moment to ask how to do things differently so as not to reach the apparent impasse into which the unexpected invasion of Ukraine has led. As we previously said, in this type of situation where chance dominates, the future takes on a performative value and can modify the course of events. In this regard, we consider the question of the future of relations with Russia to be more than pertinent, not so much from what is referred to as "the West", but from what we know today as Europe: What future relationship does Europe want to have with Russia? Is it a possible, wanted, desired future that Russia and Europe can be understood as one and the same cultural space? Depending on the answer to these questions, one diplomatic gamble or another will be taken. In the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, there has been much talk of diplomacy, mostly as an instrument to establish sanctions, settle scores or incite feelings of revenge or vengeance among society. In this respect, we believe that we must speak in a way that favours the restoration of trust between the different interlocutors. In Greimasian terms, it would be a matter of laying the foundations of a new *fiduciary pact* where the intervening parties are able to agree on a set of points that make constructive and friendly relations possible:

1. First of all, we believe that the dichotomy of West vs. Russia, which has been accentuated by the conflict in Ukraine, must be done away with. This opposition, which underpins many of Putin's speeches, presents the West as if it were monolithic and homogenous, unlike Russia. It also unites two culturally different continents under the same bloc. To this effect, we believe that there are stronger links between the Russian and the European universe of meaning. Accepting this definition of the West and it's a priori opposition to Russia means assuming that the chance of dialogue between the two sides is practically nil, given that such a dichotomy is based on a strong antagonism, both axiologically and in terms of international interests.

2. We believe that more should be said about the Europe-Russia relationship. While many discourses present only Putin (and not the Russian people) as the enemy, the question is: and after Putin, what? What is the hoped-for relationship with Russia? The fall of the USSR ushered in a period during which Russia has felt humiliated, despised and disregarded to the detriment of the interests of powers such as the Usco, whereas it could have been an opportunity to persuade and establish a relationship based on greater trust, cooperation and a break with the bloc politics established in the Cold War. Is it hoped that by Putin's overthrow this will be corrected?

3. We believe that cultural hybridisation and contamination is, as the semiotics of culture argues, part of the dynamics of any culture. Indeed, from a political point

of view, Europe can be seen as a hybrid model that came into being during the Cold War period. Let's take the so-called "social states" to illustrate the point. This state model, also called the Welfare State, could be interpreted as the result of a process of hybridisation between Liberalism and Communism. It is no coincidence that it emerged in European countries, the place of connection between the two universes of meaning. Its emergence, as theorists such as Rino Genovese (1995) argue, prevented the radicalisation of certain social conflicts in Europe during the Cold War period. In this regard, we believe that the dialogue between two apparently distant political subjects, which in reality share many of the same cultural elements, should once again be encouraged.

4.   Last, we believe that Russia and Europe are not only economically interdependent, but that from a cultural point of view they could be considered as part of the same semiosphere (literature, painting, dance, fashion, cinema, etc.). Although Vladimir Putin's discourse tries to establish a division between Russia and the West, we believe that European culture would not be fully understood without Russia's presence, and vice versa.

In this sense, we believe that it is necessary to sketch a future where the basis of diplomatic relations between Russia and Europe, far from accentuating their aversion, brings to the fore the cultural background they share with each other. It is characteristic of the dynamism of a culture to be open to the influence of external elements and to transform its internal structure through the incorporation of external elements. For this reason, and following Lotman's approach, we consider it wrong to try to rely on hermeticism. Cultural crises in general, and specifically the one that Russia has experienced over the last century, could be defined as "the dynamics of an immobile and rigid system" (Lotman, 2013:116). We believe that a return to bloc confrontation would only deepen this crisis and, far from strengthening the European project, could entrench the presence of nationalist and segregationist movements within our societies.

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The European Union and NATO in the face of China's rise to power in Africa and the Mediterranean Basin: analysis in the light of NATO's Strategic Concept 2022

Abstract

China's rising power in the world is fuelling the reluctance of Western powers, especially the United States. In this sense, the Mediterranean and Africa have experienced in recent years a steady increase in China's *soft and hard power*; an expansion that is mainly economic and commercial, but also strategic and political in nature. If China's growing presence in these perimeters accentuates the West's misgivings, as China gradually rebuilds the international order in its favour, for the countries of Africa and the Mediterranean in general, China is a major economic and strategic opportunity. This dynamic could further upset power balances in various regions of the world, thus fuelling existing conflicts and ruptures in the international order. In order to examine these hypotheses, the first section of this paper looks at China's overall foreign policy objectives. Second, we look at China's growing presence in the Mediterranean and Africa, how China is transforming its collaboration with its partners, from the economic and commercial to the strategic and political. In the third section of this paper we look at US and European perceptions vis-à-vis China's rise to power in the world, its influence on the international order, and the fracture this is creating for the Atlantic Alliance. And finally, we look at NATO's Strategic Concept 2022, and see how the Atlantic Alliance reversed

and refrained from describing China as a major threat as was envisaged before the Ukrainian war stand-off. In terms of methodology, this paper is mostly based on analysing official strategy documents and official statements of the parties involved[1].

Keywords

China, United States, EU, NATO, Africa, Mediterranean.

Cite this article:

Introduction: China's Grand Strategy: ambitions of supremacy

Current and future geopolitical and geostrategic realities cannot be understood without taking into account China's rise to power[4]. China's Grand Strategy —or the 'Chinese Dream'— as Chinese policy-makers call it[2], ultimately aims to respond to three interconnected and complementary objectives or sets of objectives. 'Inviolability' comes first; a concept that is closely related to the sovereignty and survival of the political regime, its legitimacy, and the territorial integrity that comes with the recovery of 'Greater China' territories[3]. The second set of objectives is associated with 'global social stability'; based on sustainable economic and social development. In this sense, China is aware that it needs the world to survive, because without the resources of the entire planet, a country that is home to one sixth of the world's population would not be able to sustain itself. And thirdly, there is the quest for a 'rightful place under the sky'[4]; which can be interpreted as the quest to become a global superpower.

To achieve these goals, China's Grand Strategy relies on a number of instruments, including military capability, the economy, communication, and technological innovation. At the same time, China opts for multilateralism, a key instrument for achieving global hegemony, with the intention of exporting its model[5]. They are therefore defensive, expansive and hegemonic instruments, making up a strategy that can be classified as a grey zone.

However, China cannot achieve these goals in a friendly manner. Beijing's ambitions clash with the interests of other international actors, hence the search for a balance of power with its rivals and competitors is indispensable. This is primarily a matter of possessing military capabilities that will allow it, firstly, to repel the United States —its main rival and competitor— from its strategic perimeter and influence, which is the 'first Pacific island chain', and, in the long term, to restrict its access beyond the 'second island chain'[6]. Secondly, its potential hegemony depends on possessing a navy

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2 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People's Republic of China. China's Arab Policy Paper. (2016). [Accessed on 22/5/2020]. Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1331683.shtml

3 Morga, F. (2015). 'China's Military Strategy 2015'. *Fondation pour la recherché stratégique*. N.°15/15, 2015.

4 Dellios, R. (1999). *Modern Chinese Defence Strategy*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan. Pp. 93- 94.

5 In October 2017, during the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress, Xi Jinping was re-elected for a second five-year term as General Secretary of the Communist Party. In his speech, he stated that "China's model for a better social governance system offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence. It offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind".
See the full text of 'Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress'. (2017). *China Daily*. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm

6 Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress. (2017). *China Daily*.

capable of defending China's growing economic, commercial and political interests on a global scale.

This vision does not seek confrontation, but rather a low-profile 'continuous competition' that ensures peaceful coexistence with other international powers. It is a strategy inspired by the Chinese philosophy that '*if you want peace, you must prepare for war*' and '*if you want security, then you must become powerful*'[7].

These postulates are in line with the strategy revealed in China's 2015 White Paper[8], as well as with President Xi Jinping's statement at the 19th Communist Party Congress in October 2017 that the goal of the People's Liberation Navy is to become a world-class global navy by 2049. This is why China is seeking to close the gap in its military backlog vis-à-vis the US, especially in naval forces. In this regard, China's new military doctrine seeks to build up an international contingent and establish overseas military bases. Priority objectives are the defence of maritime lines of communication to the Persian Gulf and Africa, the fight against low-intensity threats, UN peacekeeping missions, humanitarian aid missions, and the affirmation of China's global status and image as a major world power.

China also continues its policy of increasing its strategic power by strengthening military cooperation relations with several countries, especially in the African Union[9]. That China will seek to build —like the US— a network of military allies in the future has not been ruled out.

To enhance its capabilities and knowledge, China opts for cooperation with Russia. Although Beijing does not recognise its strategic alliance with Moscow, the two countries continue to strengthen their ties at various levels[10]. This reinforced cooperation is based in particular on the strategic arms trade, technological cooperation and holding military exercises in regions considered strategic for both powers, such as the Baltic and the Mediterranean[11]. All this without forgetting political cooperation, which has its origins in the defence of similar positions within the United Nations Security Council.

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7 See Tzu, S. (2017). *L'art de la Guerre*. Paris, Flammarion.

8 *Ibid*, Morgan, F. See also Monteiro, D. S. and Charbon, P. (2019). *Le livre blanc sur la défense chinois 2019 : un effort de communication lacunaire*. Institut de recherche stratégique de l'école militaire.

9 See in this regard the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on September 9. Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/xwfw/lxjzzdh/202209/t20220911_10765048.html

Edgar, J. G. (2021). *Una globalización armada de China*. Opinion Paper, 5 April 2021. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies.

10 Russia had supplied China with advanced systems to strengthen its air defence against ships and submarines.

11 Ekman, A. (2018). La Chine en Mediterannée : une présense emergente. Note de l'IFRI, Institut Français de Relations Internationales.

China's growing presence in the Mediterranean and Africa: from the economic and commercial to the strategic and political

The Mediterranean and Africa have seen a rise in China's *soft and hard power* in recent years. These regions offer significant economic and trade opportunities as they are considered emerging markets and important sources of natural resources. Moreover, the political and business environment in these regions is suitable for China to increase its presence and influence in the world, allowing Chinese diplomats and industry leaders to build personal relationships and conduct transactions without going through official institutions.

China's presence in these regions has taken a turn with the launch in 2013 of the New Silk Road project[12], which almost all African countries have joined. Since then, China has become the largest trading partner in Africa, and the largest holder of African foreign debt[13].

Eight China-Africa Cooperation Forums have been organised since 2000, the last one taking place in November 2021 in the Senegalese capital Dakar. Thanks to this framework, according to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on its official website, Chinese companies have built more than 10,000 kilometres of railways, almost 100,000 kilometres of roads, around 1,000 bridges and almost 100 ports, as well as more than 80 large-scale electrical installations in Africa. They have also helped build more than 130 medical facilities, 45 stadiums and over 170 schools. Looking ahead, China is determined to further strengthen this cooperation to build what it has called a community of common destiny between China and Africa[14].

This dynamic cooperation goes hand in hand with the consolidation of its *soft power* influence. In this regard, Beijing established 61 *Confucius* Institutes in more than 46 countries. This is a partnership between the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and various local administrations with influence in education.

China's growing presence in Africa and the Mediterranean is part of its strategy of projecting influence into distant geopolitical spaces. This expansion allows Beijing to achieve economic and commercial, but also strategic and political objectives. China's main objective with this forward presence is to circumvent the containment policy that the United States, along with its East Asian allies, is pursuing against it. Simultaneously, Beijing seeks to increase competition with Western powers in regions considered to be the classic perimeters of the West.

12 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People's Republic of China. (20169. China's Arab Policy Paper. [Accessed on 22/8/2022]. Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1331683.shtml.

13 What China is really up to in Africa. Forbes. Available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2019/10/03/what-china-is-really-up-to-in-africa/?sh=5e53c16e5930

14 Wang Yi: FOCAC Will Set a New Milestone. (2021). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 29 November 2021. Available at:_https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/gjhdq/fz/3074/3076/202111/t20211130_10458977.html

China's rapid rise to power in Africa and the Mediterranean basin is due to several factors. First, the US shift of interest from the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean to the Indo-Pacific has been key, leaving a vacuum that Beijing has spared no effort to fill. On the other hand, China has been able to exploit political instability, poverty and economic crises in some developing countries to its advantage. China's lending to several African countries reflects this trend[15]. Moreover, the hostile and interventionist positions of Western states in the internal affairs of these countries have aggravated the antagonism of regimes and societies towards the West. China's effective instrumentalisation of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis must be added to these factors, which has allowed it to increase its influence and further legitimise its presence. Beijing has been ultimately more reactive and supportive than the US and Europe[16].

In order to maintain good relations with all partners —and contrary to the policy of Western countries— China chooses not to condition its relations, not to intervene in internal affairs, and to maintain neutrality in contentious issues. This focus allows China to establish relations even with rival countries in a region, or 'voyous' (rogue) countries.

Aware that economics is the key to any rapprochement, China prioritises increasing trade and economic relations with its partners. It opts for the attractive 'win-win' equation, which aims to help partners build growing and sustainable development models. The implementation of this vision is based on several lines of action, such as increasing the production capacity of partner countries, transferring know-how, building low-cost infrastructure, and rapid industrialisation.

China's rise to power in Africa and the Mediterranean is also explained by another key factor: its adaptation to the needs and priorities of its partners, without imposing a pre-established agenda on them. This policy allows China to create and foster its partners' dependence on it. Indeed, Beijing has managed to convince its partners and societies that it is a non-colonial power and that it is the better alternative to the West[17]. In fact, for many countries, China is a good role model[18]. Its attraction lies in

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15 In 2020 Africa owed \$153 billion to China, which has provided more than 1,143 loans to governments on the continent over the past 22 years. For more information, see La inversión de China en África. EOM. Available at: https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/prestamos-de-china-a-africa/

16 China's Role in COVID-19 in Africa: Tuánjié (Solidarity) or Zhànlüè (Strategy)? (2021). *ACCORD*. Available at: https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/chinas-role-in-covid-19-in-africa-tuanjie-solidarity-or-zhanlue-strategy/

17 These are the findings of the Arab Barometer survey, conducted in 17 countries.
https://www.arabbarometer.org/ar/media-news.

18 محمدعبد العزيز الأبعاد الصينية في القيمية السياسة الصينية وتأثيرها على النظام الدولي.
المركزالديمقراطي العربي 2021

18 Abdelaziz, M. (2021). Valuable dimensions of Chinese politics and its impact on the international system. Democratic Arab Centre, 2021. Berlin. (Translation by author). In this article written in Arabic, the author argues the reasons behind some Arab governments' and peoples' consideration of China as a role model.

enhancing economic development while safeguarding the sovereignty and political independence of the partners.

Cooperation with China allows developing countries to accelerate economic progress that will enable them to remedy the problems of unemployment and poverty; factors responsible for the political and social stability of these countries.

For the latter, China is also a political and strategic opportunity. Cooperation with China enables political regimes to strengthen their legitimacy and ensure the survival of their governance systems in the face of foreign intervention in their internal affairs; it also facilitates the balance of power in their regions and puts strategic pressure on Western powers.

For all of the above reasons, making China a political and strategic partner for developing countries could be a long-term strategic option.

China's engagement in these regions is both substantial and prudent. Aware that the interests of the countries in the region are different, China does not opt for a one-size-fits-all policy, but adapts to the interests of each partner. Its approach to these countries can range from economic relations to enhanced political and military relations and, in many cases, evolves from economic and commercial to political and military. The cases of Djibouti, Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Zambia and Burkina-Faso stand out, with which China maintains close relations in terms of arms sales, military training and manoeuvres, including the construction and use of military bases (in the case of Djibouti)[19].

China's military presence in Africa and the Mediterranean has increased considerably, especially after the launch of the Silk Road project in 2013. China has thus become the second-largest arms seller in Africa[20]. In fact, Beijing builds and manages several ports in Africa, such as those in Namibia, the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Principe, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Guinea, and Djibouti. The latter is the cornerstone in the construction of China's future military and intelligence projection complex. The Djibouti base is currently the hub of China's anti-piracy and humanitarian operations in the Gulf of Aden area. With the construction of this port, Beijing has

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See also in this regard: AD489: Africans welcome China's influence but maintain democratic aspirations. Afro Barometer, 15 Nov 2021. Available at: https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad489-africans-welcome-chinas-influence-maintain-democratic-aspirations/

19 China instala base militar en Africa. *EL PAIS*, 02 December 2015. Available at: https://elpais.com/elpais/2015/12/02/africa_no_es_un_pais/1449039600_144903.html

'More Chinese Military Bases in Africa: A Question of When, Not If', *Foreign Policy*, 17 August 2022. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/16/china-military-bases-africa-navy-pla-geopolitics-strategy/

20 In total, China sells to 23 countries in Africa, diversifies its products. In addition to light weapons, it sells heavy weapons at attractive prices: battle tanks, armoured personnel carriers, patrol boats, aircraft, missiles, drones and artillery. It exports its K-8 training aircraft and its tactical drones and mini-drones, and does not refrain from selling to embargoed countries.

achieved a permanent presence and military projection in Africa and the Middle East[21]. In recent years, Beijing has redoubled its efforts to increase its military expansion in Africa. Around 2,000 Chinese troops are already permanently stationed at the base.

After Djibouti, other possible bases could see the light of day. China has several strategic partners on whose lands Beijing is building and managing ports, which regularly host the Chinese navy; mainly Mozambique, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Angola, Namibia, Kenya, Seychelles and Tanzania. These countries participate in joint military exercises, and are China's main arms procurement partners[22].

In 2014, an article by the Chinese Naval Research Institute mentioned China's interest in building seven ports internationally, including Djibouti, Seychelles, Tanzania, Kenya and Namibia. These ports are the subject of intense speculation in the Chinese media, but the government denies this[23].

In 2011, Beijing began to show its military might in Africa when, in the midst of the Libyan crisis, China sent a warship and military aircraft to evacuate more than 35,000 Chinese in the North African country. In March 2015, it evacuated about 600 Chinese nationals in Yemen. In these manoeuvres China used frigates with the latest guided missiles built by the country: the Xuzhou in Libya, the Linyi and the Weifang in Yemen.

These activities go hand in hand with China's increased Peacekeeping Operations in Africa. Beijing has become the second-largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations in Africa[24]. China is currently the second-largest financial contributor to the UN. And it has contributed the most peacekeepers. The vast majority of Beijing-supported peacemaking have taken place in Africa[25].

Since 2008, China has deployed more than 40 naval operational forces in Africa, and escorted 7,000 ships abroad. All these activities are part of the strategy to gain more experience on this continent.

On this issue, China's 2015 Defence White Paper for the first time identified the protection of 'external interests' as a 'strategic mission' of the Chinese military. Subsequently, in 2019, this document acknowledged that China was developing

21 According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). 'Northern African countries were the primary destination of Chinese weapons, constituting 42 percent of Chinese exports to the continent'. How dominant is China in the global arms trade? (2018). Center for Strategic and International Studies, 26 April 2018. https://chinapower.csis.org/china-global-arms-trade/

22 Nnqdege, R. L'Afrique dans la stratégie chinoise. *Revue Défense Nationale*. N.º 846, pp. 98-103.

23 Nantukya, P. (2022). Consideration relatives a une nouvelle base navale chinoise en Afriaque. Centre D Etudes Strategiaue de l Afrique, 27 mai 2022.

24 See the UN website. China is currently the second largest financial contributor to the UN. Available at: https://peacekeeping.un.org/es/china

25 Duggan, N. (2018). The Expanding Role of Chinese Peacekeeping in Africa. *Oxford Research Group*, [Accessed on: 2 December 2022]. Available at: https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/blog/the-expanding-role-of-chinesepeacekeeping-in-africa

'overseas logistics facilities to strengthen overseas support in emergencies, including assessments'[26]. It is worth noting that Africa is home to more than 10,000 Chinese companies, one million Chinese and around 260,000 workers, most of whom are engaged in the framework of the Silk Road project.

China's military strategy also includes military exercises in several areas. In 2017, the naval group consisting of the destroyer *Ghangsha 173,* the frigate *Yincheng 571* and the logistics support ship *Lomahou* conducted target practice in the Mediterranean Sea, while conducting military exercises with Russia in the Baltic[27].

Beijing also relies on its intelligence apparatus in this projection policy, which is present in several African countries. The most active service in Africa is known as *Guoanbu*[28]*,* which belongs to the Chinese Ministry of State Security. It has five regional coordination centres on the continent, with headquarters in Egypt, South Sudan, Nigeria, Angola, and South Africa. China also owns chains in Kenya and Mozambique.

This increase in military power is accompanied by political and diplomatic actions. Thanks to the pressure it exerted, China has managed and/or forced several African countries to break off diplomatic relations with Taiwan[29].

In order to protect its global trade and investment, China may decide in the future to develop its military intervention capabilities. Its growing interests in the region may also prompt it to intervene in conflicts in the region. Moreover, given its growing weight in the region, China would be in a position to ask its partners for political quid pro quos, at the expense of the interests of other actors. Beijing may also choose to support one partner or actor against others, which would foment latent conflicts.

Europe and NATO in the face of China's rise to power: challenges and opportunities

China's rising power in the world is fuelling Western powers' misgivings about Beijing's ability to rebuild the international economic, financial and strategic order in its favour[30].

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26 China's Military Strategy. (2015). The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, May 2015. Available at: https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/China%E2%80%99s-Military-Strategy-2015.pdf

27 Las maniobras ruso-china 2017 en el mar Báltico. Available at: https://Artículo30.org/politica-defensa/maniobras-ruso-china-2017-baltico/?print=print

28 *Ibid*, Abdelaziz, M.

29 Taiwan has now become an almost forgotten casualty of China's big drive into Africa. (2018). Institute for Security Studies. Available at: https://issafrica.org/iss-today/taiwan-has-lost-all-its-friends-in-africa-except-eswatini

30 NATO. (2021). Brussels Summit Communiqué issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels, 14 June 2021.

The West's reluctance stems mainly from China's exceptional financial and human capacity, which surpasses that of any other state. These capabilities allow Beijing to project its influence around the world, and to have a long-term vision that exceeds the forecasts and calculations of other states. Several indicators can justify this, including a GDP in permanent evolution (8.1% growth in 2021). In trade terms and according to the World Trade Organisation, China's share has increased from 5.9% to 15.2% between 2003 and 2020, overtaking the United States, which has fallen from 9.8% to 8.4%. Not to mention its rapidly growing military capability, making it second only to the United States in military spending[31].

The rise of military and technological power is the main source of the West's misgivings. In this sense, arms sales to third countries, as well as the transfer of innovative defensive technology, Sino-Russian cooperation, technological competition, and hybrid threats, can upset the balance of power in various world regions, at the expense of Western international powers, which want to maintain the current international order built after the Cold War.

At political level, Western countries also see China's authoritarian regime as a threat. China's constant violations of human rights and international law, along with Beijing's opposition to economic liberalism, its coercive economic approach and diplomatic intimidation, and the disinformation it 'practices', are threats no less important than the achievements of democracy and the liberal system.

China's rise to power presents the EU and NATO with a major geopolitical challenge, forcing them to adjust their strategic calculations. It growing presence in the Western powers' perimeter of strategic interest reinforces the latter's misgivings about China's intentions. At the same time, however, for many European countries China is an important trading partner and investor.

The United States in the face of China's rise to power: the first strategic concern

Under the Obama administration, and even more so in the Trump era and now under Biden, US-China rivalry has continued to grow[32]. In the face of China's

31 World Bank, see data at https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=CN

32 Joe Biden warns US faces 'decisive decade' in rivalry with China. (2022). *Financial Times*. https://www.ft.com/content/c9011130-a119-40d5-beb9-a09e7faff2e1

DoD. (2020). Annual Report to Congress. Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China. Available at: https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF

Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community 2021. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 9 April 2021.

exponential ambitions in the world, the United States seeks to strengthen its presence and alliances to protect its interests, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, the most dynamic economic and trade region in the world.

Unlike NATO and the EU, the language used in the US to describe what China means for US interests is very clear and blunt. Official strategic concepts and reports from US institutions, as well as studies by prestigious research centres, rank China as an existential threat to the United States, on par with the threats posed by Russia, Iran and North Korea. In particular, China's militarisation to re-establish its pre-eminence in the Indo-Pacific region fuels Washington's misgivings[33].

According to the current US naval strategy *Advantage at Sea*[34], China's continued modernisation of its naval forces, militarisation of islands in the China Sea, substantial build-up of its maritime police and militia apparatus, establishment of military agreements with several countries to project its interests around the world, cyber-attacks and the proliferation of strategic or related technologies[35], constitute complex and exponential threats that undermine US alliances and disrupt the current world order. For these reasons, the new US strategy envisages evolving into a future force capable of controlling the seas, projecting power and dominating the oceans[36].

Regarding China's economic expansion policy, US experts believe that Beijing seeks to secure access to critical resources and create a polarised 'economic network' in its favour[37]. For Washington, the threat is that Beijing could exploit the economic dependence of these countries to obtain political quid pro quos[38].

In the face of these alarming forecasts, Washington continues its international efforts to contain Beijing's expansion. NATO could be a useful instrument and, consequently, the Alliance's new strategic objective incorporates the implicit goal of containing China's rise to power. In this sense, the United States is trying to pressure its European allies to realise their material commitment to contain China[39], as

33 '"The Longer Telegram: Toward A New American China Strategy'. (2021). *Atlantic Council Strategy Papers*. The Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Available at: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/01/The-Longer-Telegram-Toward-A-New-American-China-Strategy.pdf

34 Advantage at Sea, Prevailing All Domain Naval Power. (December 2020). Available at: https://media.defense.gov/2020/Dec/16/2002553074/-1/-1/0/TRISERVICESTRATEGY.PDF

35 This technology is also used in the military industry and intelligence services. We refer here mainly to 5G, Artificial Intelligence, and some companies such as Huawei,

36 DoD. (2020). Annual Report to Congress. Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China. Available at: https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF.

37 Annual Threat Assessment Of the Intelligence Community 2021. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 9 April 2021.

38 *Op. cit.*

39 Henrik, L. (2020), *China's rise can unite Nato*. Vol8/13, December 2020. Zurich, CSS.

Washington considers it illogical that an Alliance in which it invests massively is of no use in mitigating the risk posed by its primary strategic concern.

So far, the US has tried various policies to enlist the contribution of Europeans to its strategy. Following Trump's policy of pressure and rupture, Biden has opted to reconcile the two visions in order to reach an agreement on the distribution of roles. Washington is looking to European allies to compensate for US withdrawal and force reductions in certain regions of the world, such as the Middle East and the Mediterranean, where China is strengthening its presence. This support will allow the US to focus its efforts in the Asia-Pacific to rival China's growing presence and influence. This is why Washington —through the so-called Quad alliance— is strengthening strategic and economic ties with the main players in this region, namely Australia, Japan, South Korea and India[40].

The European Union between defending its Atlantic link and China's attractive opportunities

US-China rivalry is deeply divisive within NATO. The position of the Europeans is controversial. In the words of the EU's High Representative for Foreign Policy, Josep Borrel, "China is a strategic partner with whom the EU shares partly convergent objectives" but, at the same time, "it is a systematic adversary"[41].

EU member states are reticent about the US strategy of containment of China, and also about the Europeans' strategy of compensating for US withdrawal in some parts of the world. Europe, however, wants the United States to remain —in the NATO framework— committed to Europe's security.

The EU believes that the US perception of the threat posed by China is exaggerated. This position is indirectly reflected in statements by European leaders, especially France, whose President Emanuel Macron declared in his address to the 75th UN General Assembly that "The world today cannot be reduced to the rivalry between China and the United States, irrespective of the global weight of these great powers". He thus called for multilateralism, rather than the policy of containment that Washington calls for[42]. European experts believe that deeper knowledge about China is needed so as not to be dependent on the US view. Experts also consider that Europe's vision should not

40 Mario, E. (coord.). (2021). España ante la rivalidad estratégica entre China y Estados Unidos. ELCANO. GROUP RAND.

41 Statements by the EU's High Representative for Foreign Policy, Josep Borrel. (2021). Service Diplomatique de l'Union Européenne, 8 September 2021. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/chine-le-haut-repr%C3%A9sentantvice-pr%C3%A9sident-josep-borrell-et-le-conseiller-d%C3%A9tatministre-des_fr

42 Watch the speech in the video available at: https://www.europe1.fr/international/macron-a-lonu-le-monde-ne-peut-pas-se-resumer-a-la-rivalite-entre-la-chine-et-les-etats-unis-3993634

seek to please Washington as its supreme goal, but rather its own security and interests in its immediate perimeter[43].

Europe's pragmatic position is rooted in the economic and commercial interests that bind it to China; China is the EU's largest trading partner. As its economy is heavily dependent on trade (44% of GDP)[44], Europe sees China as a vital partner, especially in terms of technology, hydrogen production and artificial intelligence.

China is also a major investor in the old continent. The European Union is China's second most important investment destination. Recent years have seen a setback due to the Covid-19 pandemic, however as of the end of 2021 Chinese investments in Europe increased by 33%[45], a figure four times lower compared to 2016, but a rapid recovery is expected in the future. The top five countries receiving investment from the Asian giant are the UK, Germany and France, followed by Portugal and Italy[46].

Chinese investments in infrastructure in the Mediterranean and Africa are also in line with the interest of the European market. These infrastructures make it possible to reduce maritime transport times and costs, and thus to keep imports from China competitive on the European market.

Based on the above, Europe cannot do without a major partner to align itself with Washington's antagonistic policy. On the other hand, despite the economic and commercial interest, investments in submarine cables[47] and port construction and management fuel European misgivings about the nature of these activities. A recent report by the think tank C4ADS[48] underlined that under a new law in China, all commercial ports are obliged to provide logistical support to their country's armed forces, if requested. The implementation of these projects by Chinese state-owned enterprises further reinforces European reticence[49].

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43 Several works have been published defending this view, including Ekman, A. (2018). La Chine en Méditerranée : une présence émergente. Note de l'Ifri, February 2018.

Edgar J. G. and Roald, H. L. (2018). The new sea people: China in the Mediterranean. Instituto Affari Internazionali, I*AIPapere* 18/14 July 2018, p. 12.

44 See Eurostat. Archive le commerce international de bien. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Archive:Le_commerce_international_de_biens#Forte_progression_du_commerce_de_biens_avec_la_Chine_entre_2009_et_2019

45 Chinese FDI in Europe: 2021 Update, Mercator Institute for China Studies. April 2022. Available at: https://merics.org/en/report/chinese-fdi-europe-2021 update#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20Chinese%20VC%20investment,%2C%20gaming%2C%20AI%20and%20robotics.

46 Roald, H. L. *Op. cit.,* p. 12.

47 Referring to the Huawei cables; Hannabal linking Tunisia to Italy, and another cable linking Libya to Greece.

48 Thorne, D. and Spevak, B. (2017). Harbored Ambitions. How China's Port Investments Are Strategically Reshaping the Indo-Pacific. Washington, C4ADS. https://c4ads.org/s/HarboredAmbitions.pdf.

49 *Op. cit.*, Devin, T. and Ben Spevack, H.

The other major suspicion relates to China's joint military exercises with Russia in the Mediterranean. The US regional pivot to the Asia-Pacific has reduced Washington's availability to contribute to security in Europe. This means that Europeans must rely more on their capabilities to ensure their security vis-à-vis Russia.

Europe is arguably under direct pressure from the United States and indirect pressure from China. Such pressures will become more acute in the future if the confrontation between Washington and Beijing escalates. In a worst-case scenario, the United States could invoke Article 5 of the NATO Treaty to force European Allies to engage militarily against China[50].

NATO's China strategy: Analysis of NATO's Strategic Concept 2022

The divide between US and European perceptions or approaches to China has been made clear in official NATO documents as well as in statements by NATO representatives. The starting point is the 2020 report by the Reflection Group set up by the Secretary of the Alliance at the request of Allied leaders following the 2019 London Summit to reflect on how to strengthen the Atlantic Alliance[51].

In a 67-page document, the report mentioned China more than seventy times and in various threat contexts, describing China as a systemic threat. The document links China to threats of terrorism, transnational threats, the ideological threat, the threat of the New Silk Road project itself, the threat of climate change, the threat of China's influence in the Middle East and its strategic agreement with Iran, the threat it poses to extra-atmospheric space, among others. It often mentions China along with Russia, although the phrase is to a *lesser extent* if frequently used when comparing China to Russia to avoid equating what the latter means to NATO with what China means. Overall, the paper concluded that China represents challenges but at the same time opportunities for NATO. It adds that China poses a very different challenge from Russia.

The paper reveals that China does not pose a direct military threat to the Atlantic Alliance; however, its global strategic agenda, along with its global economic and military weight, are sources of concern for the West. According to this report, Beijing's readiness to use force on its strategic perimeter, its policy of economic coercion and diplomatic intimidation, the modernisation of its military power and its projection into the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Arctic —especially the of its naval forces—, its nuclear weapons and missiles, and its strengthened defence ties with Russia, represent potential threats to the Alliance's strategic stability and its collective resilience to protect its interests[52].

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50 *Op. cit.*, Mario, E. (coord.).

51 NATO 2030. (2020). United for a New Era. Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General. Pp.17-18, 25 November 2020.

52 *Ibid.*

To meet these challenges, the report recommended that Allies coordinate more closely, develop capabilities to anticipate and react to China's hostile actions towards the Alliance, devote more resources and time to understanding what China is doing, and bring Allies and other institutions and partners together to exchange information and share experiences. And, above all, to keep the path of dialogue with China open.

The prominence given to China in the Reflection Group paper, as well as in official US documents, policy debates, official statements and Western think-tank work foreshadowed that NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept will be more forceful and clearer in its reference to China, going so far as to describing China as the main threat, equating it with the threat posed by Russia to the Alliance. However, it seems that the outbreak of war in Ukraine has forced NATO to backtrack, recalculate, and reaffirm the goal of the Alliance's creation, which was to contain Russia.

In a 14-page document, the 2022 Strategic Concept[53] devoted only two paragraphs to describing what China means for NATO: points 13 and 14, as well as mentioning China only seven times and in fewer threat contexts compared to the 2020 Reflection Group paper.

As anticipated, the Concept incorporated the conclusions of the Reflection Group's report; confirming that China represents a systemic challenge to Euro-Atlantic security. Allies see China's stated ambitions and coercive policies as challenging NATO's interests, security and values. The Strategic Concept described the reasons for China's perceived threat and argues that China employs a wide range of political, economic and military tools to increase its global presence and project power, while its strategy, intentions and military development remain opaque. The paper also notes that China's hybrid and cyber operations, described as malicious, and its confrontational and disinformation rhetoric, target Allies and undermine Alliance security.

The Strategic Concept also sees China seeking to control key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure and strategic materials and supply chains. it underlined the rapid development of nuclear capabilities and delivery vehicles, the lack of goodwill and willingness to strengthen transparency, and the partnership with the international arms control system.

The Allies see China as using its economic leverage to create strategic dependencies. The Concept deems that China is subverting the international order, especially in the cyber and maritime fields. In addition, the Concept echoed the Alliance's misgivings about the increasingly close strategic partnership between China and Russia, which it argued undermines the international order, values and interests of the Allies.

In point 14, the Concept reveals that the Allies remain open to constructive engagement with China, including to generate reciprocal transparency, with a view to safeguarding the Alliance's security interests. At the same time, it demonstrates Allies'

53 NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. Available at: https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/

willingness to work together to address the systemic challenges China poses to Euro-Atlantic security, ensure NATO's ability to defend and secure Allies, improve resilience against China's coercive tactics and efforts to divide the Alliance, and defend shared values and the international rules-based order, including freedom of navigation.

Conclusion

We are facing a complex dynamic of clash and competition. On the one hand, China seeks to become an international economic and military power, which sees US actions as an obstacle to its development and a threat to its political system. Meanwhile, the United States sees China's rise in power and influence in the world as a challenge to the international order and its leadership position. The EU shares US reticence, but cannot forgo the economic and trade opportunities offered by China. African countries view cooperation with China as an opportunity for their economic development, increased strategic influence, competition vis-à-vis the West and balance of power in the international order.

Rivalry between Washington and Beijing is intensifying. Disputes over trade, technology, the South China Sea, Taiwan's legal and international plight and Hong Kong's loss of rights are recent examples of deteriorating relations with global implications. The United States is determined to counter China's power in the Pacific through its sustained political, economic and military presence. While Beijing is aware that the US is firm in its policy of containment, it wants Washington to renounce its policy, but at the same time continues to pursue its strategy of strengthening military capabilities and increasing offensive geo-economic capabilities, reinforcing its strategic position in global supply chains and expanding its influence in international maritime trade routes.

Both Washington and Beijing are working to avoid a rise in tensions that seems difficult. While for China confrontation with the US —albeit limited— is counterproductive, for Washington, military response could be the ultimate solution to contain China and its growing interests in the world. Détente is difficult because the more powerful and influential China becomes, the more the United States hardens its responses.

Finally, the fact that NATO's Strategic Concept 2022 refrains from describing China as the main threat and does not propose containment action, means the Alliance accepts that the current dynamics of rivalry and competition will continue. On the other hand, at a time when NATO was expected to take a clearer stance on China, describing it as a direct threat to the Alliance, like Russia, the outbreak of war in Ukraine has forced NATO to backtrack and reinforce the objective of the Alliance's creation, which was to contain Russia.

Western powers are increasingly aware that China's strength lies both in its evolving domestic capabilities and in cooperation with developing countries. These two elements of power remain unchanged and are not threatened by the possible use of

force, so China is likely to continue to increase its power. The question of whether China can match the US as a superpower or even achieve global hegemony therefore depends primarily on China itself and not on opposition from the US and its allies.

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Methamphetamine trafficking in Southeast Asia

Abstract

There has been a shift in the illicit drug market in Southeast Asia, with non-synthetic drugs such as opium and heroin taking second place to synthetic drugs such as methamphetamine and ecstasy. This paper will analyse the current status of methamphetamine trafficking as the main synthetic drug in South-East Asian drug trafficking, looking at regional and sub-regional trends, specifically in the so-called 'Golden Triangle' of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand (and to a lesser extent China). Current factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of governance in the Mekong countries will be highlighted, as well as the dangers to global and regional security posed by an expansion of methamphetamine trafficking by means of determining its current and proximate scope. Last, it will examine the current state of international drug trafficking legislation and what it means for the pursuit and prosecution of those involved in drug trafficking networks through regional cooperation.

Keywords

Drug trafficking, methamphetamine, Southeast Asia, Golden Triangle, security.

Cite this article:

Introduction

There has been a shift in the illicit drug market in Southeast Asia, with non-synthetic drugs such as opium and heroin taking second place to synthetic drugs[1] such as methamphetamine and ecstasy. In this text, we will address the current situation of methamphetamine trafficking in South-East Asia given that methamphetamine production has soared in South-East Asia in recent years, displacing other substances from the top production positions.

The first two sections will present data on the numbers and scope of this shift in drug trafficking, identifying potential dangers to global security in relation to the drug route. These pages will focus on the so-called "Golden Triangle" area as the main current drug route in Southeast Asia, an area along the borders of Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and China, corresponding to the Mekong River route.

In the following section, the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic will be examined as a catalyst for this phenomenon. Later, we will examine the three Golden Triangle countries and, in particular, point out how Myanmar and Thailand are two sides of the same coin, establishing entirely differentiated measures to address the fight against drug trafficking, to conclude that Myanmar is the key player in the Golden Triangle region.

Last, regional cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking will be examined in two sections: the first will focus on the study and critique of the Mekong Memorandum of Understanding as a frustrated initiative whose international significance (given that it is framed as a UN initiative) distances it from other initiatives. The second section will aim to review the current state of international anti-drug trafficking legislation and how different Southeast Asian states are establishing security cooperation networks through bilateral or multilateral agreements.

Figures

On 31 May 2022, UN News released disturbing news: in 2021, a record number of methamphetamine seizures were made in Southeast and East Asia, reaching "172 tons, or one billion tablets seized"[2]. According to a study conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in 2019 the percentage of methamphetamine seized in Southeast Asia reached 78.3% of the total (the rest corresponds to production in East Asia), an estimated 115 tons[3]. In 2020 and 2021, the percentages grew to 84.8%

1 UN news. (2022). Synthetic drug trade grows in Asia, more than 1 billion methamphetamines seized in 2021. Available at https://news.un.org/es/story/2022/05/1509542

2 Un news. (2022). *Op. cit.*

3 ONUDD. (2022). Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia Latest developments and challenges. P. 5. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/Synthetic_Drugs_in_East_and_Southeast_Asia_2022_web.pdf

and 88.6%, reaching a figure of approximately 155 tonnes out of the above-mentioned 172 tonnes[4].

Within Southeast Asia, special mention should be made of the figures achieved in the so-called "Triangle of Art" or "Golden Triangle", which covers parts of the states of Myanmar (formerly Burma), Thailand, China and Laos[5], and especially the border area between these states. According to UNODC data in its report *Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia. Latest developments and challenges* of 2021, these are the figures for methamphetamine seized in each of the Golden Triangle countries:

– Thailand:

- 368,798,198 units of methamphetamine tablets (the lowest quantity since 2017).
- 25,072.6 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine (the highest in recent years)[6].

– Laos:

- 18,602,900 units of methamphetamine tablets.
- 5,564.4 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine (the largest amount in years)[7].

– Myanmar:

- 328,410,692 units of methamphetamine tablets (the largest quantity in recent years).
- 17,363.9 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine (the highest figure in recent years)[8].

The importance of this cross-border area lies in the fact that, despite not being a common trade route, it has long been used as one of the main hubs for the production of synthetic substances in Southeast Asia, including methamphetamine, heroin and opium[9]. The lack of governance in these areas and their consequent instability, in addition to their jungle geography and the route provided by the Mekong River,

4 ONUDD. (2022). *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

5 Sen, S. (1991). Heroin Trafficking in the Golden Triangle. *Police Journal.* Volume: 64 Issue: 3 Dated: (July-September 1991). Pp. 241-248. Available at https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/heroin-trafficking-golden-triangle

6 ONUDD. (2021). Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia. Latest developments and challenges. P. 92. Available at https://www.unodc.org/roseap/uploads/documents/Publications/2021/Synthetic_Drugs_in_East_and_Southeast_Asia_2021.pdf

7 ONUDD. (2021). *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

8 *Ibid*, p. 72.

9 Arana, I. (2020). Asia's Golden Triangle leaves heroin behind to become a huge synthetic drugs laboratory. *La Vanguardia.* Available at https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20200522/481317922513/el-triangulo-de-oro-asiatico-deja-atras-la-heroina-y-pasa-a-ser-el-gran-laboratorio-de-las-drogas-sinteticas.html

which flows through these three countries, are factors that can lead to the Golden Triangle being considered one of the main drug routes in Southeast Asia, as supported by the UN[10].
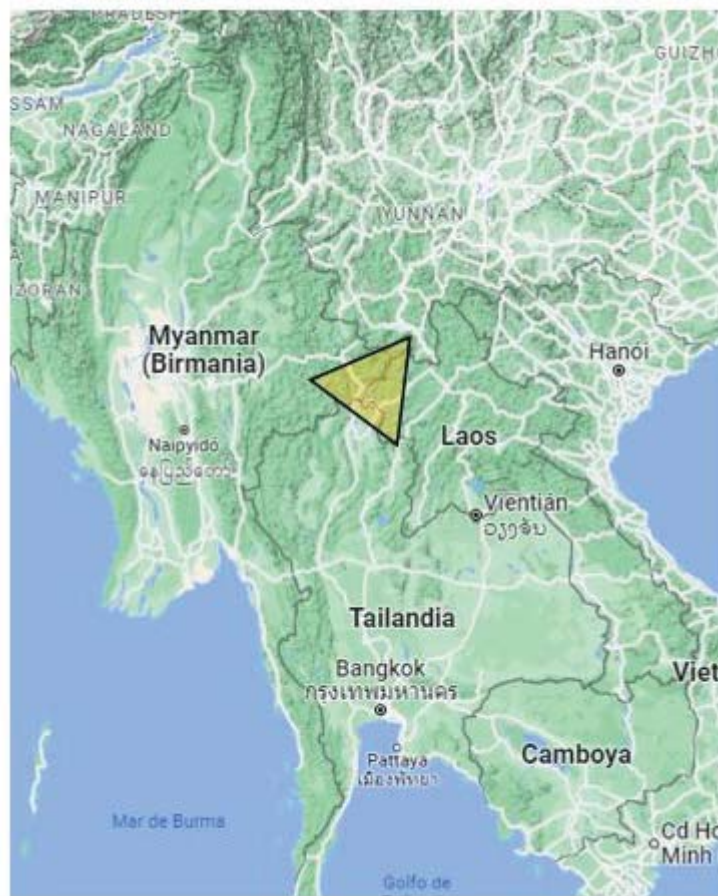

Figure 1: Golden Triangle (own elaboration with Google Maps).

Scope and possible dangers to global security

In relation to the methamphetamine routes under study, they cannot be said to be global in scope (at least directly) as the routes of this substance are framed within the South-East and East Asian region and Oceania, although an emerging route to India is of concern. In this regard, the Indo-Burma border is a new *hotspot* in the fight against drugs in Southeast Asia[11]. This new route has a similar characteristic to the "Golden Triangle" route, namely the lack of governance in these border areas. In India, national documents attest to the presence of armed violence in the states of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur (these states can be seen in Figure 2), which are referred to as "insurgent"

10 UN news. (2022). *Op. cit.*

11 GlobalScenario. (2021). Mixed perceptions of India's plan to tackle drug trafficking on Myanmar's border. Available at: https://www.escenariomundial.com/2021/08/13/percepciones-encontradas-por-el-plan-de-india-para-enfrentar-el-narcotrafico-en-la-frontera-de-myanmar/

groups by the Indian authorities themselves and which benefit from the trafficking of small arms[12]. For their part, the inter-ethnic conflicts in Myanmar, in what is Chin State and Sagain (states in the north and west of the country, both bordering India) and their confrontation with the Tatmadaw[13] (Burmese Armed Forces), have reinforced this factor, turning the Indo-Burma border into a real "sieve".

Figure 2: Myanmar-India border (own elaboration with Google Maps).

The shift of the methamphetamine route to West Asia is a major issue, as it is not known what effects the collision of two major drug routes, the "Golden Triangle" route with the "Golden Crescent" route, the latter consisting of the states of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan and dominated by the former and its gigantic opium production, could have. In contrast to the "Golden Triangle" route, this route does reach Europe, with heroin being one of the main commodity substances[14].

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12 Masferrer, B. (2006). Political Violence and Terrorism in Contemporary India. *Asia-Pacific Yearbook*. No. 1, p. 225.

13 Gcr2p. (2022). Atrocity Alert No. 299: Myanmar (Burma), Democratic Republic of the Congo and Accountability. Available at https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/atrocity-alert-no-299/

14 Rosselló, D. (2016). Intravenous gold: the geopolitics of opium (2/2). *The World Order*. Available at https://elordenmundial.com/ii-la-media-luna-dorada-afganistan-narco-estado-la-sombra-del-hindukush/

Figure 3: Representation of the Golden Crescent (own elaboration with Google Maps).

To this effect, and although it does not form part of the largest percentage of drugs seized, the trend in Europe towards methamphetamine use appears to be clearly upward, according to data from the *European Drug Report* published in 2021[15]; therefore, a shift "in production and trafficking" (which could happen if the main route from West Asia is joined by one of the main routes from Southeast Asia) could "highlight the risk of increased use"[16].

The threat posed by the expansion of the Golden Triangle route into West Asia will therefore also require cooperation between the two existing regional organisations, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), the latter made up countries such as India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Pakistan, among others. In fact, the two organisations have already established cooperative relations in the fight against terrorism and crime, including drug trafficking[17].

The COVID-19 crisis and its impact on methamphetamine trafficking in Southeast Asia

Methamphetamine is a *psychostimulant* which, as such, stimulates the central nervous system and produces effects related to pleasure, euphoria, well-being and

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15 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. (2021). European Drug Report 2021: Trends and developments. *Publications Office of the European Union*. Luxembourg. P. 15.

16 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. (2021). *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

17 Gordon, S. (2009). Regionalism and Cross-Border Cooperation against Crime and Terrorism in the Asia-Pacific. *Security Challenges*. Summer 2009, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Summer 2009), p. 84.

excitement; however, its effects are much longer lasting than other substances and can cause serious damage to the central nervous system[18]. Nonetheless, this has not prevented criminal networks and drug cartels from thriving and being able to continue expanding their market in a situation marked, almost globally, by the COVID-19 pandemic. By 2021, virtually all South-East and East Asian countries have confirmed methamphetamine as the main substance of concern, while ten years earlier in 2010, only a few countries such as Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines, South Korea or Japan confirmed the same[19].

The prioritisation of state measures aimed at controlling the pandemic has opened the way for these cartels to continue their activities; however, while these organisations have shown to be resilient and have been able to adapt to these measures, they have also suffered the consequences of the restrictions, especially those affecting mobility and transport. First, while the price of commodities has been rising, the price of methamphetamine has been on a downward trend[20], meaning that its supply and demand dynamics have remained stable in this severe economic environment. Methamphetamine has thereby become a much more affordable product for those who could not afford to use the substance in the recent past.

Second, these organisations and cartels were able to adapt to the mobility restrictions imposed by the respective governments. Although mobility and transport restrictions made some routes unusable, including air routes[21], and the transport of some licit products with which methamphetamine and other substances were transported has been reduced[22] according to UNODC, the use of online methods has increased and the use of the Andaman Sea or Burma Sea maritime routes[23] continue to be used[24]. A special feature of methamphetamine trafficking is that methamphetamine is often transported by air, which is why in 2020 the UNODC predicted a strong impact on its transport due to restrictions on air routes, especially when these substances were destined for countries such as South Korea, Japan or Australia. However, the 2021 report showed that this was not the case. The report stated that "COVID-19 and its associated mobility restrictions caused only a short-lived disruption in

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18 United States National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2019). What is methamphetamine? Available at https://nida.nih.gov/es/publicaciones/serie-de-reportes/abuso-y-adiccion-la-metanfetamina/que-es-la-metanfetamina

19 ONUDD. (2022). *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

20 *Ibid*, p. 13.

21 ONUDD. (2020). COVID-19 and the Drug Supply Chain: from Production and Trafficking to Consumption. P. 7. Available at https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/covid/Covid-19_Suministro_de_Drogas.pdf

22 ONUDD. (2020). *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

23 Sea located south of the Myanmar region, connecting to the Strait of Malacca and thus to Malaysia and Indonesia.

24 ONUDD. (2022). *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

methamphetamine supply and demand", concluding that this "indicates a limited impact on methamphetamine availability"[25].

Therefore, although the restrictions on mobility and transport prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic have affected methamphetamine and drug trafficking in general in Southeast Asia, it has only been temporary thanks to the adaptability of the different methamphetamine-producing organisations. The falling price of methamphetamine, porous international borders and the ability to adapt to new circumstances have enabled trafficking in this synthetic substance to increase over the past two years.

The Golden Triangle: Myanmar, Thailand and Laos:

Myanmar as a major player: a difficult duality to resolve

As mentioned above, Myanmar is one of the components of the "Golden Triangle" route. Jeremy Douglas, UNODC's Asia-Pacific representative, stated that "Myanmar is really the epicentre of the drug trade [...] at least in the Mekong region"[26]. However, it is in Shan State (eastern Myanmar, bordering China, Laos and Thailand) where the focus is on the fight against drug trafficking. Shan is a federal state where instability reigns in the form of a struggle among the ethnic groups that inhabit Shan, and also with the Tatmadaw[27], as is the case in many other parts of the country. Media outlets such as CNN[28] and institutions such as UNODC[29] consider Shan State as one of the main sources of methamphetamine production in Southeast Asia.

Myanmar ranked 131st in the 2021 *Global Peace Index* report, while Thailand and Laos ranked 113th and 45th, respectively[30]. Currently, with data from 2022, this index

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25 ONUDD. (2021). *Op. cit.*, p. xiii.

26 Slow, O. (2017). UNODC's Jeremy Douglas: Myanmar really is the epicentre of the drug trade. *Frontier Myanmar*. Available from https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/unodcs-jeremy-douglas-myanmar-really-is-the-epicentre-of-the-drug-trade

27 DRC. (2021). Myanmar: Responding to humanitarian needs in Northern Shan. Available at https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-responding-humanitarian-needs-northern-shan

28 Berlinger, J. (2019). Asia's meth trade is worth an estimated $61 billion as region becomes a 'playground' for drug gangs. *CNN Asia*. Available at https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/18/asia/asia-methamphetamine-intl-hnk/index.html ; Berlinger, J. (2021). Methamphetamine production soared in Asia as economy shaken by COVID-19, report says. *CNN Asia*. Available at https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2021/06/10/produccion-metanfetamina-auge-asia-economia-covid-19-informe-trax/

29 UNODC. (2022). *Op. cit.,* pp. 5, 7, 9.

30 The *Global Peace Index,* produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace, is the largest global peace index that uses several indicators to help measure the *peacefulness* of individual states in the international community. This index measures peacefulness across 3 areas: the level of societal protection and security, domestic and international conflicts, and the degree of militarisation. Institute for Economics & Peace. (2021). Global Peace Index 2021. Pp. 9-10. Available at https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GPI-2021-web-1.pdf

ranks Myanmar in 139th position (its worst ranking since 2009) and Thailand and Laos in 103rd and 51st, respectively. According to the World Bank, of these three countries, Myanmar has the lowest values for the effectiveness of its government, as well as for the "rule of law"[31]. These data suggest that Myanmar is on a trend with little prospect of improvement in the near future, as long as the military remains in power. This is evidenced by the *Global Peace Index 2022* report when it states that "*Myanmar recorded the largest deterioration in peace in the Asia-Pacific region, as the country grapples with the consequences of a military coup*"[32].

These numbers place Myanmar at the centre of drug production in the absence of governance and initiatives to combat trafficking in illegal substances. Moreover, the Tatmadaw is known to be corrupt and to accept bribes or payments from traffickers[33], making it just another player in the drug trafficking chain in Myanmar and, by extension, in Southeast Asia.

However, corruption is a common denominator in all three Asian countries. Thailand, Laos and Myanmar are ranked 110th, 128th and 140th (out of 180 countries) in the 2021 *Corruption Perception Index* [34]; the question is, what makes Myanmar a central player in the fight against drug trafficking in Southeast Asia above its neighbours? An answer to this question could be sought in the permissiveness of successive Burmese governments vis-à-vis the illegal or informal economies produced within different ethnic communities. Lizzette Marrero, in her article *Feeding the Beast: The Role of Myanmar's Illicit Economies in Continued State Instability* discusses duality in the study of Burma's illicit economies. According to Marrero, Myanmar's illegal economies contribute to the country's stability and prevent Myanmar from descending into "civil war" by preventing "collisions" between different rival ethnic groups[35], which explains the permissiveness of successive Burmese governments, including the current Tatmadaw. However, this stabilising character is at odds with its nature as an organised crime and a danger to security and health, meaning that one could speak of a *duality in the nature of drug trafficking,* complicating the task of finding a solution to this situation.

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31 See in *Transparency International.* https://www.transparency.org/

32 Institute for Economics & Peace. (2022)."Global Peace Index 2022. P. 16. Available at https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/GPI-2022-web.pdf

33 Lin, K. (2022). Myanmar: The drug epidemic in Rakhine State. *IWGIA.* Available at https://www.iwgia.org/en/news/4822-myanmar-the-drug-epidemic-in-rakhine-state.html

34 The *Corruption Perception Index* is an index produced by Transparency International, a non-governmental organisation, which since 1995 has published annual measurements of corruption in the public sector. Transparency International. (2021). Corruption Perceptions Index. Available at: https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021

35 Marrero, L. (2018). Feeding the Beast: The Role of Myanmar's Illicit Economies in Continued State Instability. *The International Affairs Review*. Available at: https://www.iar-gwu.org/print-archive/3jbhl8ch71kydhndufwonnmnqngroq

Thailand as a counterpoint to Burmese permissiveness

Thailand, unlike Myanmar, has shown a positive attitude towards the fight against drug trafficking. An example of this is the *Golden Triangle Campaign 1511,* promoted by the country itself, which seeks to unite the states of the Mekong region in the fight against drug trafficking[36]. Thailand is also party to cooperation agreements (discussed in further depth below) by sending vessels to other states to facilitate their efforts to seize and prosecute criminal drug trafficking networks[37].

One of the major achievements of the Thai administration has been to be one of the few countries to suppress illegal opium production[38]; however, methamphetamine use has been on an upward trend, mainly in the form of a substance called "yaa baa"[39] (a mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine). From 2020 to 2021, the amount of methamphetamine seized in the country increased by 29.4%, showing a good performance in relation to drug seizure operations in the Mekong region.

One of the main features of Thailand's drug policy is the use of the rhetoric of "victim and patient" rather than "criminal"[40], depriving the reintegration of the drug user in the punishment. An example of this is the Narcotics Rehabilitation Act passed in 2002, whose rehabilitative character is present throughout the legal text. This rhetoric, however, does not appear to be incompatible with the death penalty for "serious drug offences" in situations of organised crime and for endangering national security and health, which has led to a reduction in drug-related crimes[41]. In contrast, in Singapore the death penalty is imposed for the use and possession of illegal drugs, according to Amnesty International[42].

Another step away from the measures aimed at severely punishing situations related to drug use and distribution has been the legalisation of the cultivation and

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36 The Nation Thailand. (2019). Six Mekong countries join mission to fight narcotics trade. Available at: https://www.nationthailand.com/in-focus/30378423

37 Vietnam Plus. (2020). Southeast Asian countries promote cooperation in the fight against drugs. Available at: https://es.vietnamplus.vn/paises-sudesteasiaticos-promueven-cooperacion-en-lucha-contra-las-drogas/117385.vnp

38 Windle, J. (2016). Drugs and drug policy in Thailand. *Journal of drug policy analysis.* P . 2. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/windlethailand-final.pdf

39 Windle, J. (2016). *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

40 *Ibid*, p. 5.

41 Lai, G. & Eaimtong, U. (2021). Thailand reforms drug laws to reduce impacts of criminal justice system. *International Drug Policy Consortium.* Available at: https://idpc.net/blog/2021/12/thailand-reforms-drug-laws-to-reduce-impacts-of-criminal-justice-system

42 Amnesty International. (2022). Singapore: The shameful resumption of executions after more than two years will not put an end to drug-related crime. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/es/latest/news/2022/03/singapore-new-execution-death-penalty/

consumption of cannabis[43], a substance which, unlike methamphetamine, has already been subject to legalisation measures in other countries around the world, and contains medicinal properties. One of the reasons behind this legislative measure could be the need to decongest Thai prisons since a large percentage of the prison population (82% in 2021) is incarcerated for drug-related offences[44]. Another reason for this liberal policy towards cannabis use could be the need to attract tourism to Thailand in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a measure compatible with others such as the withdrawal of the obligation to wear masks, the opening of bars until late hours and the non-obligation of quarantine[45]. However, methamphetamine as a *hard drug* is still subject to illegalisation and prosecution in its distribution, involving the possibility of the death penalty depending on the seriousness of the case and whether or not it is included in an organised criminal network.

This focus on tourism through liberalisation measures and the prosecution and punishment of crimes related to hard drugs such as methamphetamine is a real and current feature of Thailand.

Laos, a means of transit

Like Thailand, Laos also shares a border with Shan State in Myanmar, although to a lesser extent. In addition to being mostly methamphetamine-consuming countries (Thailand to a lesser extent), Laos and Thailand share a long border along which the Mekong River flows, and it is the Mekong River that marks the border between the two countries. It is therefore not uncommon to find joint patrol operations between the authorities of Laos, Thailand, Myanmar and China[46]. Laos is thus a transit point for drugs from Shan State[47] to the south, mainly to Cambodia, the methamphetamine production centre, from where they are shipped to Indonesia and Oceania. From Thailand the route extends south to Malaysia and Singapore.

43 BBC World News. (2022). The country that went from prosecuting drugs with the death penalty to perhaps the world's most liberal on marijuana. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-61903566

44 International Federation for Human Rights. (2022). Thailand Annual Prison Report 2022. Available at :https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/thailande791angweb.pdf

45 Bridge, M. (2022). No masks, legal cannabis, open bars. Is Thailand going for tourism? *Your Guide to Thailand*. Available at: https://tuguiaentailandia.com/sin-mascaras-cannabis-legal-bares-abiertos-tailandia-apostando-por-el-turismo/

46 La Vanguardia. (2019). Thailand, China and neighbouring countries to continue joint patrol on Mekong River. Available at: https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20190112/454084130372/tailandia-china-y-paises-vecinos-proseguiran-patrulla-conjunta-en-rio-mekong.html

47 ONUDD. (2021). *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

Therefore, the importance of Laos lies in its strategic position as a distribution point for goods arriving from Myanmar and the Chinese province of Yunnan, which borders Laos, to the south (Cambodia) and to the east (Vietnam), as can be seen in the following map.
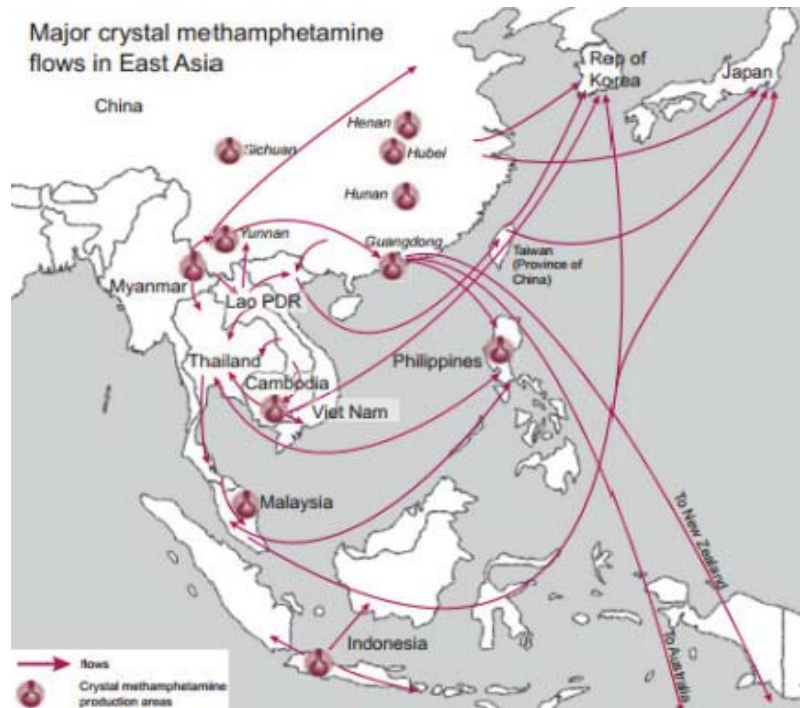

Figure 4: Crystal methamphetamine routes in South-East Asia (Source: ONUDD (2015). "Summary Submission of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement Inquiry into Crystal Methamphetamine", p. 8).

Drug trafficking in international law: current status and a look at regional cooperation structures in Southeast Asia:

Current state of international law

Drug trafficking is not an international criminal crime (as are genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression), although there is a very strong debate in the doctrine about its inclusion among crimes against humanity[48]. This fact should not seem odd, especially since its integration as one of the crimes under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) was raised in the 1980s; in fact, the debate on the constitution of the ICC was reopened thanks to a

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48 Cuenca, S. (2013). Narcotráfico: Un crimen de lesa humanidad en el estatuto de Roma de la Corte Penal Internacional? *Anuario Ibero-Americano de Derecho Internacional Penal. ANIDIP*. Vol. 1, 2013, pp. 105-134; Matus Acuña, J. P. (2014). Drug Trafficking is Not a Crime Under International Criminal Law. *SSRN*. Available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3093587 o http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3093587

request from Trinidad and Tobago based on the increase in transnational organised crime, and in particular illegal drug trafficking[49].

As it is not considered an international criminal act, the principle of universal justice is not applicable and, therefore, the acts committed by criminal networks in relation to international drug trafficking are not prosecutable by third states. When we refer to third states in the framework of the principle of universal justice, we are referring to states whose sovereign territories are located outside the place where the acts qualified or qualifiable as international criminal acts occur, since this principle is identified with "extraterritoriality as a criminal exception"[50]. The main consequence of not being an international crime is that it is the states where the events are taking place that are responsible for pursuing and prosecuting the perpetrators in accordance with national laws and international instruments to which they are party.

Three international instruments form the foundation on which the International Drug Control System was consolidated during the period 1961 to 1988: (i) the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs; (ii) the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances; and (iii) the 1988 United Nations Convention on Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances[51]. Methamphetamine, in particular, is considered a psychotropic substance due to its effects on the nervous system, and is included in *Schedule II of the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances*[52]. The four Golden Triangle states (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and China) are States Parties to all these instruments[53], and are therefore fully subject to the obligations arising from them. Here, it is interesting to note in connection with what we said previously, the reservation made by Myanmar in the 1961 Single Convention with respect to the Shan State, aimed at allowing its inhabitants to consume opium for a certain period of time and to produce and manufacture it[54].

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49 UN: United Nations General Assembly. (1989). Resolution 44/39. International criminal liability of persons and entities involved in cross-border illicit drug trafficking and other transnational criminal activities: establishment of an international criminal court having jurisdiction over such offences, (A/RES/44/39). Available at: https://www.un.org/depts/dhl/resguide/r44_resolutions_table_es.htm

50 Bonet Esteva, M. (2015). *Principle of Universal Justice: from an absolute model to a restrictive model, with regard to successive amendments to Art. 23.4 L.O. Judicial Power*. Document 123/2015. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2015/DIEEEO123-2015_Principio_Justicia_Universal_Margarita-Bonet.pdf

51 Sánchez Avilés, C. (2014). *The international drug control system: formation, evolution and interaction with national policies. The case of drug policy in Spain* [PhD Thesis]. Pompeu Fabra University. Pp. 151-173. Available at: https://www.tdx.cat/bitstream/handle/10803/283753/tcsa.pdf;jsessionid=6354EF9DA564F76F820022A8CE0DA65B?sequence=1

52 UN. (1971). Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971. P. 32. Available at: https://www.incb.org/documents/Psychotropics/conventions/convention_1971_es.pdf

53 UN Treaty Collection. (n.d.). Chapter VI: Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Available at: https://treaties.un.org/Pages/Treaties.aspx?id=6&subid=A&clang=_en

54 UN Treaty Collection. (n.d.). *Op. cit.*

The Mekong Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control (Mekong MOU) and the ASEANAPOL

The Mekong MOU constitutes the agreement of six countries to address drug trafficking in the lower Mekong region through the creation of a cooperation structure. The process began with the proposal, made by UNODC in 1992, for a common understanding on the control of drug trafficking in the lower Mekong region, mainly between China, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand[55]. These four countries would go on to sign the Memorandum in 1993. Later, in 1995, the states of Cambodia and Vietnam joined in this initiative by signing the Mekong Protocol MOU[56].

This initiative aimed to create a sub-regional structure capable of controlling drug trafficking via ministerial-level cooperation among signatory countries with UNODC assistance, and by means of annual and biannual meetings which would serve as forums for dialogue on the main strategies in the fight against drug trafficking[57].

The main criticism of the Mekong MOU could be its controversial effectiveness, based on the data studied so far in relation to the current state of methamphetamine trafficking. This criticism can also be made of the liberal perspective that promoted its creation, within an international organisation such as the UN. Following John J. Mearsheimer's conclusion, "*institutions have a minimal effect on the behaviour of states*"[58]. However, this conclusion should be highly qualified since it is a generalisation that ignores other factors (cultural, political, historical), and has been reached in response to a Westernised study of the effectiveness of institutions as tools to prevent and deter states from war (in a historical situation of constant humanitarian interventions in internal conflicts: the 1990s).

The application of this conclusion to the Southeast Asian region, however, seems to be quite appropriate since the main cooperation structure created so far has focused on economic cooperation (ASEAN). Even the European Union (EU), while also predominantly a guarantor of economic cooperation and union, has other powers in the area of European security, both in border and judicial matters. However, unlike Africa, Europe and South America, the Asia Pacific region does not have a regional human rights protection system. Both factors are key to understanding the historical failure to establish security cooperation structures beyond the bilateral level. The

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55 UNODC. (n.d.). Partnership, Cooperation and Action in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Drug Control. P. 4. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific//Publications/2017/MOU_Brochure.pdf

56 UNODC. (n.d.). *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

57 *Ibid*, p. 7.

58 Mearsheimer, J. J. (1994). The False Promise of International Institutions. *International Security*. 19(3), p. 7. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/2539078

Mekong MOU could therefore be described as the imposition of a Western model of security cooperation in a politically unstable region such as the Mekong region, one that is not ready for this kind of cooperation.

ASEAN's role as a regional organisation

ASEAN, which is made up of ten Southeast Asian states (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam), is not a military or mutual defence organisation and, unlike other regional organisations such as ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), which in situations like those in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s did intervene in the territories by sending military troops from the organisation's countries, has not taken any such measures, maintaining a clear principle of neutrality and non-intervention in its foreign policies. With regard to the principle of non-intervention, this is not to say that other organisations such as the EU have the competence to act on the territory of states in security matters, since respect for state sovereignty is also an overriding principle. However, in the European case, the creation of judicial institutions both within the union, such as the Court of Justice of the European Union, and outside it, with the European Court of Human Rights which fulfil a function of guaranteeing respect for the fundamental rights enshrined in their respective texts, is the main difference with ASEAN, which lacks similar institutions.

ASEAN initiated a multilateral cooperation project with China in 2000: the *ASEAN and China Cooperative Operations in Response to Dangerous Drugs* (ACCORD). Ralf Emmers, in his text *International Regime-Building in ASEAN: Cooperation against the Illicit Trafficking and Abuse of Drugs* 2007, reviewed this proposed integration of the International Drug Control Regime under the ASEAN umbrella. Emmers concludes that this cooperation, rather than developing multilaterally, was taking place unilaterally and bilaterally, between China and ASEAN states (exemplifying ASEAN's lack of strength)[59].

The causes of the failure of this type of cooperation can be found in internal factors such as corruption, "domestic pressure" (influence of drug lobbies on national governments), capacity constraints and intra-regional variations[60], which are some of the factors that Emmers points to as possible explanations. A multi-causal examination of this phenomenon is therefore necessary, incorporating both institutional and local levels, and especially the elements intrinsic to "informal economies" and their influence on the stability of the Mekong countries, as previously noted in the case of Myanmar.

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59 Emmers, R. (2007). International Regime-Building in ASEAN: Cooperation against the Illicit Trafficking and Abuse of Drugs. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. December 2007, Vol. 29, No. 3, p. 519.

60 Emmers, R. (2007). *Op. cit.*, pp. 519-522.

ASEANAPOL and ASOD. The ASEAN Action Plans

To fill the gap of an authority capable of having operational capabilities in the fight against drug trafficking and transnational organised crime in general, it was decided to form an institution within the organisational structure of ASEAN along the lines of the well-known INTERPOL: the "ASEANAPOL" or Asian Chiefs of National Police (later, SAARC followed the same path towards the constitution of the so-called "SAARCPOL") [61].

ASEANAPOL is composed of the national police commands of the various ASEANAPOL member states: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The functions of this organisation include i) preparing and implementing work plans for the implementation of the resolutions adopted in the annual Joint Communiqués of the ASEANAPOL Conferences; ii) facilitating and coordinating cross-border cooperation in intelligence and information exchange; iii) facilitating and coordinating joint operations and activities related to criminal investigations; and iv) preparing the annual report on its activities and submitting it to the ASEANAPOL Executive Committee[62].

ASEANAPOL has already entered into cooperation agreements with its counterpart and leading international police organisation, INTERPOL, allowing for greater collaboration through the sharing of databases of the two organisations[63].

Figure 5: ASEANAPOL logo (Source: Facebook).

61 BDNews. (2006). Police chiefs of SAARC countries decide to form SAARCPOL. Available at: https://bdnews24.com/politics/2006/05/08/police-chiefs-of-saarc-countries-decide-to-form-saarcpol1

62 ASEANAPOL. (n.d.). Objectives and Functions. Available at: http://www.aseanapol.org/about-aseanapol/objectives-and-functions

63 INTERPOL. (2007). INTERPOL and Aseanapol sign historic information-sharing agreement. Available at: https://www.interpol.int/News-and-Events/News/2007/INTERPOL-and-Aseanapol-sign-historic-information-sharing-agreement

The next institution created within the ASEAN organisational structure is the ASOD (ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters). The ASOD is the body responsible for overseeing ASEAN's action with regard to the fight against illicit drug trafficking, within the framework of the action plans drawn up by ASEAN. The first action plan was drawn up for the period 2009 to 2015. The second action plan covers the period from 2016 to 2025. One of the main differences with respect to the object of the two schemes is the aforementioned displacement of natural drugs by synthetic drugs such as methamphetamine[64].

The previous action plan (2009-2015) is structured in 3 Parts:

1. Part I: on the actions that should be taken to achieve sustainable and meaningful education on illicit crops.

    In this part, the objective is to analyse the main sources that motivate farmers to grow licit crops, and to realign government funds in the direction of providing support to these farmers and farming communities so that they can be integrated into other economic or development plans.

    Thus, this part considers socio-economic causes as one of the main factors explaining the development of illicit crop cultivation activities. However, it does not refer to the production of synthetic drugs, for which other means and facilities are required.

2. Part II: refers to actions that should be taken to achieve a sustainable and significant reduction in drug production, trafficking and drug-related crime.

    Explicit references to the fight against the smuggling of precursor chemicals, which are necessary for the manufacture of synthetic substances, can already be found in this part.

3. Part III: refers to the objective of reducing the prevalence of illicit drug use, mainly through the development of prevention plans in education, public awareness and drug abuse control programmes, i.e., facilitating access to prevention, treatment and rehabilitation for those who use these substances[65].

The new action plan (2016-2025) has a somewhat more extensive structure, as it is divided into 7 sections: i) a general section; ii) preventive education; iii) law enforcement; iv) treatment and rehabilitation; v) research; vi) alternative development; and vii) extra-regional cooperation.

64 ASEAN. (2017). The ASEAN Work Plan on securing communities against illicit drugs 2016-2025. *ASEAN Secretariat.* Jakarta. Available at: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Doc-2-Publication-ASEAN-WP-on-Securing-Communities-Against-Illicit-Drugs-2016-2025.pdf

65 ASEAN. (2009). Draft ASEAN Work Plan on Combating Illicit Drug Production, Trafficking and Use, 2009 - 2015. *ASOD Workshop.* Ha Noi, Vietnam. Pp. 3-8. Available at: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Doc-1-ASEAN-WP-on-Combating-Illicit-Drug-Production-2009-2015.pdf

The general part explicitly mentions the importance of the "Golden Triangle" and the need to homogenise national standards on drug control measures. The remaining parts are very similar to the previous action plan in terms of objectives and functions to be carried out, although the current action plan mentions issues that were not in the previous one, such as the need to continue cooperation and open new forums for dialogue, mainly with India and China[66].

Bilateral cooperation agreements

Given that the subject of this study is a transnational crime, regional cooperation structures may appear to be the ideal instrument to confront these criminal networks and enforce agreed international obligations. This cooperation may even expand to encompass "bi-regional" cooperation, an example of which can be found in the current form of cooperation on drug trafficking between Europe and Latin America, specifically between the EU and AMERIPOL (Community of American Police)[67].

Having examined the role of ASEANAPOL and its extra-regional connections with other organisations, special mention should be made of the cooperation that takes place through bilateral agreements between Southeast Asian countries. Examples include the agreements reached between Thailand and Singapore with Laos and Myanmar to send ships to help the latter fight drug trafficking across the Mekong River[68]; the cooperation agreement between the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia to develop maritime and air patrols[69]; and the exercise of joint drug seizure operations, such as the recent one between China and Laos[70].

Measures to improve the current situation: attacking the heart of Southeast Asia's drug trade

Myanmar as a central objective

In light of the above, to achieve significant results in the fight against drug trafficking in Southeast Asia, it is vital to address Myanmar's domestic issue. As can be seen, in

66 ASEAN. (2017). *Op. cit.*, p. 33.

67 The PAcCTO. (2021). Cooperation between Latin America and Europe in the fight against drug trafficking. Available at: https://www.elpaccto.eu/noticias/cooperacion-entre-america-latina-y-europa -frente-al-narcotrafico/

68 Vietnam Plus. (2020). *Op. cit.*

69 La Vanguardia. (2019). Philippines and Malaysia strengthen cooperation against terrorism and drug trafficking. Available at: https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20190307/46901808947/filipinas-y-malasia-estrechan-la-cooperacion-contra-terrorismo-y-narcotrafico.html

70 SwissInfo. (2022). China and Laos seize more than a tonne of methamphetamine in a raid. Available at: https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/china-narcotr%C3%A1fico_china-y-laos-decomisan-en-una-redada-m%C3%A1s-de-una-tonelada-de-metanfetamina/47699566

the Golden Triangle the epicentre of methamphetamine production and distribution is located inside Myanmar, a state affected by internal conflict, whose government is controlled by a military junta that may in turn benefit from the revenues derived from methamphetamine trafficking[71]. A first package of measures should therefore be aimed at finding a solution to this internal issue.

The current leader of the Tatmadaw, General Min Aung Hlaing, declared after the coup d'état that the purpose of the Armed Forces was "*to guard the democratic system according to the 2008 constitution*"[72]. In this speech, the general declared that this was a transitory situation, a state of emergency which, when it ended, would welcome free and fair general elections. However, he made no reference in his remarks to the conditions under which the state of emergency could be declared to have ended, leaving the situation somewhat uncertain as to its future.

ASEAN and its possible role as a mediator

In relation to confronting this situation, María del Mar Hidalgo García speaks of ASEAN as a possible mediating actor, although she also admits some limitations, such as its questionable neutral character or a possible division within it[73]. Other authors also share this central view of ASEAN as a protagonist in offering a course of action, at least in the diplomatic field[74]. China, for its part, is also in favour of this option. Moreover, the regional organisation itself has already taken its own measures in this regard, including the "five-point consensus" on addressing the situation in Myanmar. Among these five points is the possibility of ASEAN acting as a mediator in the dialogue process with the Tatmadaw[75].

It should be noted that the founding text of ASEAN (the ASEAN Declaration or Bangkok Declaration of 1967) sets out a number of points that constitute the aims of the organisation. However, the only point that refers to security matters is the second one: "promote regional peace and stability through continued respect for justice and

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71 Hidalgo García, M.ª del M. (2022). *Myanmar and the risk of civil war (reprint).* Analysis Paper 66/2022. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. P. 21. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA66_2022_MARHID_Myanmar.pdf

72 The National News. (2021). Myanmar's military chief speaks following coup. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbxSVGKTwmM

73 Hidalgo García, M.ª del M. (2022). *Myanmar and the Risk of Civil War (reissue). Op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

74 Cerbián Gómez, D. (2022). *Myanmar: A Difficult Conflict to Solve.* Analysis Paper 92/2022. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. Pp. 16-17. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2022/DIEEEO92_2022_DAVCEB_Myanmar.pdf

75 VietnamPlus. (2022). ASEAN promotes the implementation of the five-point consensus on the situation in Myanmar. Available at: https://es.vietnamplus.vn/asean-promueve-la-implementacion-del-consenso-de-cinco-puntos-sobre-situacion-en-myanmar/138269.vnp

the rule of law"[76]. The ASEAN Policy and Security Community was established to achieve this goal. However, if we analyse its mandate[77], we can see that its objectives are oriented towards the resolution and prevention of intra-regional conflict situations, i.e., between the states that make up ASEAN. Based on the above, it can be said that ASEAN's move towards taking measures to address the internal situation of one of its member states is an important factor in this process, taking into account respect for the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states, especially when an internal situation has harmful cross-border effects on neighbouring states.

Action against the Burmese military junta government

Looking back, this is not the first time the Tatmadaw has been at the helm of the Burmese government; on the contrary, the trajectory of democracy in Myanmar is actually young, with the first real elections taking place since independence in 2010 (elections were held in 1990 but the Tatmadaw did not recognise the results and arrested opposition leaders). Until then, and since the 1962 Tatmadaw coup d'état, the military junta was the main leader of its government. It was not until the legitimacy of the military regime was seriously challenged[78] that the military junta was forced to give up in the name of democracy. Further steps should therefore be aimed at delegitimising the actions of the military junta and undermining its foundations. Among these bases is the flow of arms transfers, which requires action in line with the recommendations of the UN Security Council's International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (IFFM), through the imposition of an arms embargo on Myanmar[79]. However, this possibility may be hampered by two actors in particular: Russia and China[80], both of which, according to the IFFM report, have continued to provide arms to the Tatmadaw after its coup (in contrast to other countries such as Ukraine and South Korea, which stopped their arms transfers). Serbia and India are other states that have also continued these actions[81].

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76 ASEAN. (1967). The ASEAN Declaration (Declaration of Bangkok). Available at: https://agreement.asean.org/media/download/20140117154159.pdf

77 ASEAN. (n.d.). ASEAN Political Security Community. Available at: https://asean.org/asean-political-security-community/

78 Moya Barba, G.(2022). The Rohingya Crisis: the invisible genocide. *Journal Historia Autónoma*. 21 (2022). P. 131. e-ISSN: 2254-8726.

79 Human Rights Council. (2022). Progress made and remaining challenges with regard to the recommendations of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar. Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General (A/HRC/51/41). P. 5.

80 Russia and China stand out for their relevance as permanent members of the UN Security Council and thus their inherent veto power in that body.

81 Human Rights Council. (2022). Progress made and remaining challenges with regard to the recommendations of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar. *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

Furthermore, the aforementioned report emphasises the economic capacity provided to the Tatmadaw, derived from entities that allow the entry and exit of foreign currencies and companies that maintain their activities on Burmese territory by engaging in trade and investment (in addition to what has been said, with the income derived from drug trafficking in Southeast Asia). Measures in these areas are therefore necessary to undermine the military junta's economic base.

However, the Tatmadaw's base not only rests on its military power and the economic capacity to perpetuate this power, but there is also an important social base that helps it to sustain and govern itself. This basis is closely linked to what could be called the "Rohingya issue"[82] and the junta's relationship with Buddhist monks and part of the Buddhist population in Myanmar. Since its inception, the Tatmadaw has advocated polarisation, in general, between Buddhists and people belonging to other ethnic and religious minorities and, in particular, between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims[83]. This is how Burmese activist and academic Maung Zarni tells the story: "*The military systematically engaged in spreading Islamophobia (...) they want to get rid of the Rohingya and discriminate and persecute others*"[84].

Therefore, the first package of measures to address the drug trafficking situation in Southeast Asia, surprising as it may seem, does not so much advocate measures related to the fight against drug trafficking at the regional or international level, but measures related to attacking the epicentre of drug crime in the Golden Triangle: Myanmar. To this end, and through the collaboration of regional (ASEAN) and international (UN) institutions, the military, economic and social bases on which the military junta government operates should be the main targets (China's geopolitical and economic interests in Myanmar should also be considered in this respect, as it is a state through which it has access to the Bay of Bengal and has numerous economic links). Once the necessary steps have been taken to restore stability in Myanmar and, ultimately, prevent its transformation into a failed state, work can begin on the necessary actions to tackle drug trafficking in Southeast Asia.

Conclusions

Methamphetamine trafficking in Southeast Asia has expanded and continues to expand without a central authority to prosecute drug traffickers, but rather with

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82 Expression used by the academic Maung Zarni. Source: Alam, S. *et al*. (2020). Academic: 'The Rohingya issue in Myanmar goes beyond the Muslim versus Buddhist paradigm'. Agencia Anadolu. Available at: https://www.aa.com.tr/es/an%C3%A1lisis/acad%C3%A9mico-cuesti%C3%B3n-rohiny%C3%A1-en-myanmar-va-m%C3%A1s-all%C3%A1-del-paradigma-de-musulmanes-contra-budistas-/1892231

83 The Rohingyas are an ethnic minority who practise Islam and live mainly in northern Rakhine State in western Myanmar, bordering Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal.

84 Alam, S. *et al*. (2020). Academic: Rohingya issue in Myanmar goes beyond the Muslim versus Buddhist paradigm. *Op. cit.*

individual states conducting their own drug seizure operations which, through regional cooperation, manage to tackle this cross-border threat.

For the time being, the scope of methamphetamine trafficking is regional, not extending beyond the Asia-Pacific area. However, a major concern centres on a possible expansion of the route across the Myanmar-India border into West Asia, where two major drug routes could collide: the Golden Crescent route (Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran) with the Golden Triangle route, which poses a potential threat to European security because the Golden Triangle route does extend into Europe.

The "Golden Triangle" region of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar (and to a lesser extent China), which also corresponds to the lower Mekong region, is seen as the main trafficking route for this type of synthetic drug in Southeast Asia.

The attempt at regional cooperation through the Mekong MOU could be described as a failure in terms of achieving its objective: curbing illicit drug trafficking in the Mekong region. Myanmar is seen as the central state on the Golden Triangle route in terms of methamphetamine production; in particular, the focus is on Shan State as the main producer of methamphetamine. The necessary measures must therefore be taken to ensure the stability of the Burmese state, with the economic, military and social foundations on which the Tatmadaw government is currently based as its fundamental objectives. These measures would be the prelude to future actions in relation to the fight against drug trafficking.

Last, the absence of a regional authority capable of implementing measures aimed at engaging national governments' actions on drug trafficking makes this situation even more difficult to resolve. To this end, as has been seen with cooperation relations with China, cooperation agreements are more likely to be reached with the Southeast Asian states as such than with ASEAN as the regional organisation into which they are integrated. This is why cooperation between the various police organisations created under the umbrella of different regional organisations (ASEANOPOL under the umbrella of ASEAN and SAARCPOL under the auspices of SAARC) is growing in importance. And although this cooperation is not a long-term solution, but rather just a palliative method to curb illicit drug trafficking, it could help curb the expansion of drug routes into other territories, further compromising the difficult solution of drug trafficking in Southeast Asia.

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The new operating environment and aerospace operations

Abstract

The strategic context and new risks and threats shape a novel operating environment to which armed forces, and air forces in particular, will need to adapt if they are to maintain their operational capability and effectiveness. The events of war and conflict over the past two decades reveal that advances in technology have radically altered the space of operations and, as a consequence, have affected the application of military power. The traditional way in which military operations are planned and conducted has therefore been clearly affected. In current and future operational scenarios, greater agility, flexibility and adaptability in the way operations are conducted will be required to maintain the strategic advantage that allows [aerospace] operations to be executed with a probability of success.

Keywords

Operating environment, hybrid strategy, multi-domain, operations space, operational agility.

Cite this article:

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Conflicts in the Western hemisphere since the end of the Cold War have generally led, at the time they occurred, to a misperception of future conflicts, under the proclamation that technological superiority would be sufficient to defeat any adversary (a clear reference to the first Gulf War and Operation *Allied Force).* However, events in recent years related to different crises or conflicts have been increasingly diluting this initial perception. In addition to a complex and constantly evolving strategic context, with new threats and the influences they have on the operating environment, conflict management is fundamentally a dynamic activity due to the various factors that influence the state and its relations with society, and to the sometimes unpredictable effect of the use of the instruments of state power against an adversary. Therefore, through the synergistic and cross-cutting application of the instruments available to the government (Diplomatic, Information, Military and Economic), the success of the necessary comprehensive strategy for crisis or conflict resolution requires not only a correct knowledge of the context, risks and threats and good political-military coordination, but also an adequate understanding of the nature and evolution of conflicts. Knowledge of these and the implementation of good coordination and synchronisation will not ensure victory, but without them, it will be difficult to implement the instruments of the national strategy effectively.

Therefore, the effort of foresight on how to operate in operational environments in the short and medium terms (on an approximate horizon of 2040) must begin with a review of the strategic context and the risks and threats to help us understand how operational environments are shaped and how their characteristics affect the application of military power in what is called the *operational space*[1]. Spain, like other neighbouring nations, needs to define how to confront scenarios, not just conflicts, from the military point of view, in the short and medium terms. In line with some allied countries, all indications are that we need to evolve towards a new way of operating in what we can call a "multi-domain environment", which we will come to in due course. For now, we begin by looking at the current strategic context, the threats and the characteristics of the operational scenarios we can expect.

New strategic context

The world today seems no safer than in the past. Despite there being few conventional conflicts, there is a high level of conflict in the international strategic context (Dacoba, 2021a: 4), and very high levels in 2022 due to the conflict in Ukraine, a context that could be described as complex, dynamic and competitive.

The international panorama is in a continuous evolution which, in recent times, has accelerated and become extremely complex. But today's international context is

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[1] The space of operations is the portion of the physical and non-physical fields of operation where the instruments of power, particularly the military instrument, operate, actions are executed, engagements take place, and effects are produced (PDC-01A).

not only complex but also very demanding (Fojón, 2021: 3), a product both of its own complexity and of the difficulty of the different state actors to find the right place on the international "chessboard". These actors are suffering from the effects of strategic competition between the US and China and the growing pressure exerted by Russia in its quest to remain a major player which just because it is well known is no less dangerous, as current events reflect. They also face new challenges, such as the rise of China in various respects, the US administration's shift in focus towards Asia-Pacific and energy insecurity, not to mention the increasingly damaging effect on the world's population of the use of information for malicious purposes.

In an X-ray of this panorama, the following aspects can be highlighted by way of summary, defining its main characteristics:

– *Evolution to a new balance of power*. With the rise of China as a new economic and technological power with growing military capability, and with almost constant pressure from Russia in its quest to remain a major player, in many aspects the world is evolving from the unipolarity and hegemony of the US in the late 20th and early 21st centuries to a multipolarity of aggressive competition. This strategic competition drags the rest of the middle and small powers into a dynamic of growing tensions in all areas (Dacoba, 2021b: 4).

– A *struggle for hegemony and influence at the international level* with several new actors and one crucial one, China, in strong competition with the US. China's progress in different areas is worrying since official confirmation of a test of Chinese hypersonic weapons in October 2021 (due to the difficulty of detection and interception) and the development of artificial intelligence, which is of great interest to the Chinese military establishment. Both aspects are described as very worrying by the US authorities[2].

– *Increased access to technology coexisting with asymmetry in capabilities* between different actors (Operating Environment 2035, MINISDEF, 2019: 36). In recent years, there has been a proliferation of non-state actors who, although they have the capacity to access new technology, do not have the possibility or prefer not to engage in conventional confrontation with major state actors, a strategy also used by some revisionist powers. This has led to a huge increase in the use of new, so-called "non-physical" domains, which allow attempts to circumvent this asymmetry in technology and capabilities through the use of non-conventional methods. Authoritarian regimes find an ideal terrain for employing, in an unattributable way, these unconventional tools, which is one of the reasons why such regimes have proliferated (Dacoba, 2021a: 3).

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2   https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/top-us-general-confirms-very-concerning-chinese-hypersonic-weapons-test-2021-10-27/

https://www.elconfidencial.com/tecnologia/2021-11-14/eeuu-china-inteligencia-artificial-tecnologia-militar_3323119/

– All the above justifies that in the 21st century there is a perception of *widespread and intense conflict*. The 2021 edition of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) conflict report notes that, after a pronounced deterioration in global stability and security over the last decade to 2020, there is a mixed picture on overall trends. It highlights growing military spending, an increase in the number of armed conflicts (although the total number of casualties decreased, possibly due to the end of the Syrian conflict), and a balance between potential escalation and containment in most hotspots on a geopolitical chessboard with numerous regional rivalries.

This conflictivity is not only identified with the existence of traditional conflicts, but also, and to an increasing extent, with non-war scenarios, included in what is known as the "grey zone", where the adversary seeks to achieve its strategic objectives without exceeding our response threshold, and where there is therefore no fully fledged or traditional conflict.

– Globalisation and new technologies have also led to the greater interdependence of the different actors. What happens in one part of the world has a direct and almost instantaneous influence in parts far away (Panorama of Geopolitical Trends, Horizon 2040, 2nd edition: 115), as evidenced by the effects on different sectors of strategic measures or actions in other areas. This huge interdependence also produces a perception of tension and conflict that is not only generalised but also ongoing, a situation that contributes to the rise of nationalism and populism as a reaction (sometimes negative) to outside influences.

– In addition to the numerous traditional geopolitical disputes and the existence of warlike confrontations (in many cases, with great powers involved through *proxies,* generally non-state, to prevent actions from being attributed), the elements identified above also encourage new forms of competition between great powers, while avoiding head-on confrontation (Dacoba, 2021a).

– Last, technological development and the increasing emergence of disruptive technologies not only take us into a profound technological transformation, but also force us to be part of a world in which change is inexorably occurring at an accelerating pace, as the *Strategic Foresight Analysis report* 2017 (15-16) points out.

Risks and threats

In the strategic context described above, there are classic threats and risks[3], new ones and some that are only intuited, or simply not yet known. Societies in our Western environment strive to achieve the highest degree of security, which in this context

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3 Threat is any circumstance that endangers the security or stability of Spain, and risk is the contingency or probability that a threat will materialise and cause harm.

is no easy task, given the complex nature of the challenges we face. In this respect, official and reference documents highlight virtually the same risks and threats, which are broadly summarised in the 2021 National Security Strategy (NSS).

Although the 2021 NSS has retained almost all the challenges and threats from the previous 2017 NSS, with a new naming of risks and threats, it has several significant nuances. First, there are the "*disinformation campaigns*" which find in cyberspace fertile ground for their propagation, targeting people and their perceptions and jeopardising the legitimacy of democratic systems, undermining, moreover, citizens' trust in institutions and social cohesion itself (Dacoba, 2022: 6). Likewise, as common and transversal elements of risks and threats, the NSS underlines technology and the prominence of the use of hybrid strategies, which is increasingly widespread and within the reach of all types of actors, state and non-state. Furthermore, the new NSS stresses the dynamic nature of risks and threats as elements of a continuum that reflect a progressive gradation, which depends on the degree of likelihood and impact because, among other things, the interaction and interconnection between the different domains is much greater than it was previously, as we will see below.

With regard to hybrid strategies, and hybrids in general, it is necessary at this point, from a security perspective, to delve into a brief analysis of the evolution of conflicts over the last two decades, focusing primarily on the concept of hybrids, which is having such an impact not only on the understanding of conflicts but also on the correct execution of optimal responses to the challenges they pose.

Evolution of conflicts. The concept of the hybrid

Since the beginning of this century, a change seems to be taking place in the characteristics of armed conflicts, but not in their root causes; from the Napoleonic-industrial model to one in which the line between war and peace has become blurred, it is an evolution that makes it very difficult to analyse present and future conflicts from a "war and peace" perspective (Martínez Cortés, 2020: 849).

In this period, much has been written about the concept of "hybrid warfare", a concept that has undergone a certain evolution; since the end of the Cold War, there has been a proliferation of articles related to the concept, provoking intense debate and analysis within the Western community. The aim of both debate and analysis has been none other than to better understand what really happens in the context of armed conflicts regarding their objectives, strategies and the means used by the actors who aspire to a change in the *status quo*.

As far as the concept of hybrid warfare is concerned, the first mention in academia is attributed to Robert G. Walker, who used it in his graduate thesis (Walker, 1998). Drawing on the *Fleet Marine Force Manual Warfighting*, Walker argues that 21ST century warfare will be characterised by an intimate mix of conventional and special actions. In this regard, we must recall three relevant elements of reference. First, it was not until the publication of the article "*The War of the Future: The Coming of Hybrid*

Conflict", written in November 2005 by the then US Secretary of Defence, Lieutenant General James N. Mattis, together with Lieutenant Colonel Frank G. Hoffman, that it was given theoretical content. Second, it was in the 2006 conflict between Israel and *Hezbollah* that its first major practical manifestation seemed to take place. And third, it was the presentation of Hoffman's 2007 essay "*Conflict in the 21st Century: The Beginning of Hybrid Warfare*" that popularised this idea in the defence community. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding these contributions, the main contributions of the leading exponent of hybrid warfare, Frank G. Hoffman, were at their most productive in the last years of the first decade of the 21st century, when in 2009 he published several articles on the subject. In this regard, given the good reception that Hoffman's approach received from the outset, it is still a paradigm that has been much cited, worked on and in constant evolution.

But why is this concept so well received by experts? In Baqués' opinion, much of the blame lies with the difficulties the US encountered in taking control of Afghanistan and Iraq after the initial success of their respective interventions in 2001 and 2003; far from stabilising both scenarios, the situation deteriorated. The US's heavy investment in the most sophisticated weapons systems did not help much, nor did its huge defence spending. Hoffman notes that without a new paradigm adapted to post-9/11 realities, lethal operations on the ground would be doomed to failure (Hoffman, 2009a: 1).

The enemy the Western troops encountered did not correspond to the idea of a conventional army - well trained and equipped with the doctrines needed to carry out combat missions - while its funding was, at best, precarious and unstable. Furthermore, non-state armed actors of different kinds were appearing everywhere, generating synergies unfriendly to the US (local militias, often equipped with new communication technologies, collective weapons and even heavy weapons, which were rarely available to the old guerrillas of centuries ago; organised crime linked to illicit trafficking, also equipped with long arms and sometimes rocket launchers and grenades; terrorist groups, etc.). This fact made it necessary to review bibliographies and newspaper archives, and to dust off the lessons learned in long-ago conflicts such as Vietnam, to determine whether we were dealing with an insurgency or whether what was emerging was really something new. In turn, Western concern about what was happening in Afghanistan and Iraq was significantly heightened following the confrontation in southern Lebanon in the summer of 2006 between Israel and Hezbollah. At that time, Israel, with one of the most advanced armed forces in the world at all levels (technologically, but also doctrinally, and even in terms of combat motivation), was unable to defeat an enemy that neither responded exclusively to the logic of conventional armed forces nor simply acted as a guerrilla force.

Events in Afghanistan, Iraq and southern Lebanon highlighted several weaknesses of Western powers. Beyond the spectacular data in military balance sheets about their supposed superiority, the best-endowed states on the planet were incapable of winning wars that seemed —at least a priori— minor, but things had certainly taken a turn for the worse precisely when those responsible for Western strategic planning least expected it (Baqués, 2021a, 82). But what had the antagonists of the major powers

done right to create this situation? Fundamentally, knowing and understanding the adversary, a major priority, although less commonly put into practice than may seem (on many occasions due to overconfidence or complacency), but which in fact should be the sine qua non condition for facing any war adventure, as Sun Tzu expressed in his famous essay on "The Art of War" (2013: 11).

> "If you know others and know yourself, you will not be in danger in 100 battles; if you do not know others but know yourself, you will lose one battle and win another; if you do not know others and do not know yourself, you will be in danger in every battle".

Among other things, opponents had noted that the change in values in Western societies had led them to embrace the "doctrine of the low 0s", and that the most important issues for citizens were now related to "quality of life" and "well-being", thus displacing other concerns that require greater effort or greater capacity for sacrifice. What resulted was a scenario where, as the wars generated more dead and wounded, more expenditure that failed to be spent on welfare policies and greater scepticism among the citizenry, the desires of Western political leaders to seek a graceful exit -which might include the withdrawal of their troops, operating as a servitude that would especially affect the capacity of those same Western powers to use force - would increase in proportion (*op. cit.*, p. 3. *Cit.*, 82).

Meanwhile, this reality encouraged new rivals to develop strategies that could put some of the world's most powerful states in the position of having to deal with disagreements in their own territory. Hybrid warfare would, after all, be one of the best ways to achieve this impact. For this set of reasons, the aim of those who advocate this type of conflict is to prolong the confrontation until it becomes unbearable by the standards of the most advanced societies. Above all, the new rivals sought to prevent the Western powers from concentrating large numbers of troops and firepower on the enemy, precisely to seek a rapid resolution of the conflict. In short, the aim was to prevent them from being able to implement the "American way of waging war", which consisted of overwhelming the adversary based on their military superiority (Calvo, 2011: 10).

However, regardless of the terminology used, as Baqués expresses, part of the analysis carried out in this respect is shared by different authors, in the sense that conventional wars between states are becoming less numerous (Baqués, 2021b: 1). Likewise, in this context, the role of state and non-state actors is increasing who, avoiding direct confrontation, employ a [hybrid] strategy based on the use of a combination of conventional and non-conventional techniques and/or tactics of high or low intensity, to exploit our vulnerabilities. These types of adversaries have increased the use of the domains whose effects are more difficult to attribute, the non-physical domains (cyberspace and cognitive)[4], thereby avoiding direct confrontation and possible

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4 According to the Joint Doctrine for the Employment of the Armed Forces (PDC-01), there are three physical domains (land, maritime and aerospace) and two non-physical domains (cyberspace

denunciation by the international community (Colom, 2018: 39-43). Moreover, in the strategic context defined, the growing technological gap between countries, together with greater accessibility to certain types of technology with the existence of effective weapons systems and the possibility of using other spheres of action, encourages non-traditional confrontations by a greater number of actors or revisionist powers, which has led to an increase in the use of so-called hybrid or hybrid strategies.

For its part, the objective of this type of strategy is to increase its strategic options (Martínez Cortés, *op. cit.*: 851) in an unconventional and unexpected way to improve, in the case of the revisionist powers, their position in international relations. Thus, when a state actor does not possess sufficient resources to win a conventional war, it may use civilian means to a greater extent, developing a hybrid strategy that seeks to undermine the adversary's order and security system by circumventing the rules of the international system. The application of ambiguous and comprehensive strategies (with increased use of civilian and non-conventional means) is the modus operandi of this type of [hybrid] threat. In this regard, to achieve their objectives, we can expect hybrid strategy actions of all kinds, especially unconventional ones, either in open conflict or without the need to initiate one, which can seriously affect our environments, in particular the cyberspace and cognitive domains, as well as the space environment (including in the aerospace domain) and the electromagnetic spectrum, all of which are very demanding in terms of employment and need for protection.

However, we must be aware that the combination of the conventional and the irregular, what is known today as "hybrid", is nothing new (Martínez Cortés, *op. cit.*: 851). The use of a combination of conventional and irregular means in conflict is as old as the history of conflict itself. A classic war of this type is the Peloponnesian War. According to Victor Davis Hanson, as a result of the events of the Peloponnesian War (in which Athens was a naval power and Sparta a land power), it was not a war in which direct battles were the regular form of fighting but rather a war fought by unconventional means (Arauz, 2013: 61-62). Moreover, the use of all necessary means at one's disposal (military and non-military) to achieve one's stated objectives is also as old as war itself, and therefore this type of warfare, distinct from conventional warfare, is also as old as humanity itself. More than 2,500 years ago, the great Chinese strategist *Sun Tzu* wrote in his famous text "The Art of War" about the optimal expression of the strategy of "*defeating the adversary without having to face him on* the battlefield, through *spies and information management*".

The point being that hybrid warfare is not an "invention" of the late 20th century; it has always existed. So, why is there so much talk about it now, where is the real novelty in it? This question has to do with the fact that, in our times, there is a proliferation of wars that do not reach the threshold of convention (Baqués, 2021b: 2). In part, this is because some of the new technologies, those related to information, communication and artificial intelligence, can be leveraged by non-state actors to greatly increase their

and cognitive).

chances in the event of conflict against a superior power in conventional forces; systems based on such technologies are no longer the monopoly of the strongest. In addition, many actors realise that pushing for a confrontation against conventional forces at a higher level leads to rapid failure. Thus, whether by state or non-state actors, the use of a hybrid strategy opens up a range of alternative options to being defeated by militarily superior forces.

Thus, from the point of view of the states targeted by the apparent proliferation of (state and non-state) actors of hybrid strategies, what is truly worrying (Martínez Cortés, *op. cit.*: 851) is the ability, based on evolution and new technologies, to "combine and synchronise, innovatively and simultaneously, regular and irregular, military and non-military means and methods (above all, cyberspace and information), and the capacity to switch rapidly between them to create strategic effects. None of its individual components is really new; it is the combination and harmonisation of different actions that achieves a surprising effect and creates ambiguity, making it very difficult to react appropriately".

Last, in line with the need to understand how operating environments are shaped, it is important to avoid analysing what is discussed here (strategic environment or context, risks and threats, and possible adversary actions) solely from a Western perspective, because many of these and other actions, and this *hybrid* way of acting, have been extensively discussed previously in conceptual work outside the West, such as that of Chinese colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui in their essay translated into English "*Unrestricted Warfare*" (1999: 122-123). In this essay they say:

> "However, using the combined method, a completely different scenario and situation can be set up: If the attacking party secretly raises large amounts of capital unnoticed by the enemy nation and launches an undetectable attack on its financial markets and then, after causing a financial crisis, installs a computer virus and a pre-programmed computer hack into the opponent's computer system, while also carrying out a network attack so that electricity, traffic management, financial transactions, telephone communications and media networks are completely paralysed, it will cause the enemy nation to fall into social panic, street riots and a political crisis. Eventually, the attack by the army would develop and military means would be used in gradual stages until the enemy was forced to sign a dishonourable peace treaty".

New operating environments

The new strategic context that affects us today (both internationally and in our immediate European environment) and the threats and risks that we now have to face shape, to a large extent, the operational environments in which our Armed Forces (hereinafter, SAF) must operate, considering in this regard the broad spectrum of conflicts from peace, crisis and open conflict. Therefore, what has been discussed so

far has a direct influence on the configuration of these environments, but also, and even more importantly, on the way in which the components of the armed forces, and the air forces in particular, must develop and act within them. It is therefore essential to review the effects that the new strategic context and threats have on the operating environment and, consequently, on the way of operating, but not without first highlighting the most salient characteristics of the new operating environments, of which the following are noteworthy:

a) Technological development and access to new technologies will allow potential adversaries to use non-conventional strategies, with an increased role for non-physical domains and the electromagnetic spectrum, when such adversaries cannot cope with a conventional confrontation. Moreover, based on this development and new technologies, the evolution of future scenarios reveals an increasing interaction and interdependence between the different physical and non-physical domains (Reilly, 2018: 2), which will facilitate synchronised action and the generation of effects by the adversary based on the synergy of its actions (provided it has the capacity to do so). In the new area of operations, a given area may be affected by the effects produced by an adversary in a completely different area. Both aspects, increased use of non-physical domains and domain interaction, have significantly altered the space of operations and the way we work in it.

b) New technologies and the increased use of non-physical domains are accelerating the pace of change and the consequent actions and effects that an adversary can have on our forces, and this in turn is having a major influence on the environments in which we operate. The ability to employ all domains and to carry out simultaneous, coordinated and often covert actions seeks, on the one hand, to hinder our ability to respond by entering our decision-making cycle; and, on the other hand, to operate below our threshold of action.

c) Technological advances will also transform the operational environment, expanding the space of operations and allowing for greater sensorisation of it, of automation of data processing and weapon systems, and of the range and accuracy of weapon systems, as well as logistical simplification. This will require changes in the operational art. In this regard, advances in miniaturisation and nanotechnology will make it easier for organisations, and even isolated individuals, to execute potentially destabilising lethal actions at any level, be it state, regional or international.

d) Combining technological advances with conventional and non-conventional strategies makes it possible to diminish or threaten military asymmetry, using the parts of the conflict spectrum that make it difficult to distinguish between peace and conflict. In summary, it is safe to say that the use of hybrid strategies by multiple actors, both in hybrid conflicts and in the Grey Zone, is here to stay for the long haul.

e) The greater interdependence of actors at the international level as a result of globalisation and new technologies makes states more vulnerable than before

and our vulnerabilities more transparent. In particular, in the information age, immediate access to the necessary information has a direct negative effect on the population, which becomes a target susceptible to being directly affected by adversaries (Operational Environment 2035, MINISDEF, 2019: 61), with often unpredictable effects, through an infinite number of devices and, in particular, through social networks. This effect puts the focus back on the population which, for a long period of time (basically since the end of World War II), has been a mere spectator of warfare, an aspect that forces us to increasingly focus on the cognitive domain. In addition, the civilian population is routinely present and actively interacting with military forces in areas where they are deployed. In the midst of this dynamic, combatants and non-combatants increasingly share a single operational space wherein the latter are often used as real targets.

f) Another important aspect to bear in mind is that the complexity of current scenarios in terms of the interdependence between areas, the difficulty of attribution and persistent volatility, makes it necessary to have greater knowledge and understanding of the threats that affect us or could potentially affect us, which leads to the need for better training and preparation of the personnel available or that will be available in the Armed Forces.

g) Last, based on the described characteristics of the current operational environment, and linked to the interdependence of domains and the adversary's ability to produce cross-domain effects, the new operational environments lead to the need to manoeuvre nimbly among them and the ability to produce cross-domain effects, in a scenario where connectivity becomes a key element for operating in the so-called "*combat cloud*", *a* virtual network in which the "systems of systems" will be interconnected and linked to an interoperable command and control structure (an aspect that will be expanded on later). This reality turns the network, in itself, into a critical capacity (Martínez Cortés, 2019: 158-164), thereby making it necessary to maintain a certain degree of superiority in cyberspace that allows it to be used with the necessary freedom of action.

The new operating environment and effects on the application of military power

The strategic context and the general characteristics of the new operating environments, together with other scenario-specific parameters, shape a new operational space to which it will be necessary to adapt if the SAF is to remain operational and effective. On the basis of what has already been analysed, we can affirm that the events of war and conflict in recent decades show that advances in technology have radically altered the current space of operations; and that this has had its effects on the application of military power (which we will address below) and, therefore, on the way of operating in many different aspects (also addressed below).

The high availability of non-physical domains, coupled with the sophistication of new weapon systems and the ability of the adversary to create A2/AD areas[5], may also make the achievement of [traditional] domain superiority more difficult in general terms and may not be as straightforward as in past operations[6]. In addition to having capabilities to penetrate A2AD systems where necessary, success may depend on access in a single domain that allows actions in other domains to be combined to seek new ways of producing effects (Reilly, *op. cit.*: 3). This does not mean that it is no longer necessary to fight to achieve and maintain air superiority, because it will be; however, there will be occasions when scenarios will have to be adapted to produce effects, through domains other than the traditional one, even as a matter of priority.

A widely argued point in recent years, especially in US forums, is that easy access to technology, together with an increase in highly sophisticated weapon systems (incorporating hypersonic speed) and the use of other domains of operation by potential adversaries, probably make current operational scenarios more competitive and may break the [Western] paradigm of easily achieving superiority in physical domains. The evolution to "contested and/or degraded environments", where the adversary has the ability to limit or deny our forces access and manoeuvrability through A2/AD capability (contested environment), and to disrupt or degrade our command-and-control networks and systems (degraded environment), will also increase our need for adaptation and resilience, or the ability to adapt and recover from a disruptive agent or adverse state or situation (PDC-01A: 30). This is because in complex operating environments, the adversary will most likely degrade, to varying degrees, our ability to act.

Third, the existence of a complex "*continuum of interrelated domains*", with non-physical domains and the electromagnetic spectrum playing a major role, may render ineffective the use of traditional strategies to achieve superiority in the aerospace, land and maritime domains, necessitating the use of non-traditional strategies (Reilly, *op. cit.*: 3-4). This does not mean that achieving superiority in these domains is not essential, because it probably will be, but that achieving this superiority will most likely not be sufficient since other actions in other domains may have a significant first or second order effect, or even cascading effects, which will also be very difficult to predict (Reilly, *op. cit.*: 3). This will make the ability to operate in the different domains much more uncertain. What is at stake here is not a step forward from coordinated joint action, but a very significant shift towards truly integrated joint action.

Furthermore, because of the harmful effects of potential adversaries and, in particular, the close linkage of cyberspace with traditional instruments of military power, special attention should be paid to non-physical domains. Moreover, the

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5 A2/AD capability (anti-access/area denial). Ability of a potential adversary to hinder access to an area of operations and prevent/hinder own movement and action within it.

6 (The) French Joint Vision of Multi-domain, Joint Concept JC-0.1.1_M2MC, French Joint Centre for Concepts, Doctrine and Experimentation (2021, 18).

increasing interdependence and interaction between physical and non-physical domains and the consequent ability of the adversary to use different domains in a rapid and synchronised manner to create cross-domain effects will not only require us to change our mindset at all levels of action, but also to operate in a more agile, flexible and interoperable manner and, even more importantly, to operate in a networked and synchronised manner. This is because it will be the only way to possess cross-domain agility to deal with the various actions and dilemmas we will be subjected to by the actions of the adversary (in line with Operating Environment 2035, 2019: 76-78). This greater agility will also be imposed by the acceleration of the pace of battle and of the changes that have taken place, which require planning, decision-making and execution cycles that are more compressed than those to which we are accustomed.

The general characteristics and effects on the application of military power outlined above constitute what has come to be known as the "multi-domain environment", *a* concept that should be defined as clearly as possible, primarily because it provides the basis for the way in which the new operational spaces must be addressed. In general terms, as set out in *Basic Aerospace Doctrine* IG-00-1, Air Force, 2nd Revision (2020: 5, 31-32), the multi-domain is envisaged as a "complex environment encompassing the physical (land, maritime and aerospace) and non-physical (cyber and cognitive) domains, as well as the interaction and interdependence between them, which is conceived as a whole for the planning and execution of military operations".

Perhaps the most important aspect of this new "multi-domain" concept is the existing interdependence and capacity for interaction between domains and their integral conception in terms of activities related to the planning and use of military power. However, although this concept is currently fashionable, it is important to be aware that simultaneous manoeuvring in different domains is nothing new (Reilly, *op. cit.*: 2). One of the earliest recorded uses of multiple domains to achieve operational objectives occurred in the 12th century BC when tribes known as the Sea Peoples were attempting to conquer Egypt. Before their invasion attempt, they attacked and destroyed numerous civilisations in coastal areas along the Mediterranean in Anatolia, Cyprus, Syria and Canaan. The Sea Peoples' plan to invade Egypt envisaged a land assault, through southern Lebanon, and a sea attack. The Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses III met and defeated the land assault of the Sea Peoples in southern Lebanon around 1178 BC; however, Egypt was still under threat from a maritime invasion. In 1175 BC, that threat emerged in the vicinity of what some historians believe was the Pelusian branch of the Nile River. The Sea Peoples' ships were technologically superior to those of the Egyptians, and Rameses knew that he could not defeat their fleet on the open sea. He therefore allowed the Sea Peoples to enter the Delta unopposed. Once they were inside the confines of the Delta, Rameses simultaneously attacked the fleet with the Egyptian fleet and with Egyptian archers from land. Unable to manoeuvre to avoid such a trap, Rameses annihilated the Sea Peoples' fleet. In this respect, it is certain that increased access to non-physical domains and growing technological progress in sectors such as cybernetics, directed energy, nanotechnology, robotics, biotechnology and *Bigdata* will drastically increase the complexity of the interrelationships between domains.

Last, technology has also given more actors the ability to challenge the *status quo*, providing them with tools whose harmful effects, consequences and implications are still largely unknown. The very possible degradation of the electromagnetic spectrum and communications, coupled with the increasing use of non-physical domains, may not only make access and freedom of movement of own forces in the operational space more difficult, as mentioned above, but may also force greater independence of tactical commanders in the execution of their missions, thus causing the need for changes to the standard system of command and control of the own forces involved. This is because, even with satellite communications (SATCOM), the capacity to secure communications for a traditional command and control process will not always be available (Priebe, *et. al*, 2019: 49).

Aerospace operations in the new operating environment

The different aspects outlined above on the new operating environments and the consequent effects on the application of military power lead us to the need to evolve towards a new way of operating, an evolution that must go beyond a mere adaptation of procedures. The traditional conduct of joint operations will not be sufficient to cope with the complexity of today's operational scenarios and threats and requires evolution or adaptation in several respects, a point developed further below.

As mentioned above, the only way to possess cross-domain agility to deal with the various actions and dilemmas we will be subjected to by the adversary's actions (in line with Operating Environment 2035, 2019: 76-78) will be to operate in a networked and synchronised manner. This will require adaptation and improvement in what has come to be called "operational agility" (a term already used in reflection and analysis documents such as the Operational Environment 2035), understood as the ability to quickly generate multiple solutions to a given challenge, being able to switch between them, allowing for rapid adaptation to any situation or action by the adversary. It is not so much a matter of responding faster but of generating multiple solutions quickly, with the capacity to saturate the adversary[7]. This operational agility must go hand in hand with greater agility in the decision-making cycle. The standard format established in these processes will not be valid in environments where the interconnection of domains greatly accelerates the speed of events, and this will affect all levels. This forces us to respond and move towards a new model of [multi-domain] operational scenario with a higher degree of interdependence, interaction and synchrony, and with the consequent need for a new model of multi-domain command and control, and a new way of applying military power.

One of the important implications mentioned will be the need to operate in a network that allows for the necessary synchrony. Superiority in multi-domain

7 NATO JADO: A Comprehensive Approach to Joint All-Domain Operations in a Combined Environment, Joint Air Power Competence Centre (2021) and Joint Concept Note 1/20, Multi-Domain Integration, UK Ministry of Defence, MOD (2020).

environments will only be achieved through data-driven *situational* awareness and advanced analytics systems to support faster and more accurate decision-making (Saur, 2021: 112). As a result, this new way of operating will require a much higher degree of processing, automation and integration throughout the mission cycle from planning to execution and subsequent assessment than is currently the case. And this is where the need for networking, connectivity and the so-called *combat cloud* arises, on which we now focus our attention because of its importance.

The *combat cloud* is basically a connection network of nodes integrated in a cloud environment (an environment in which its elements have the capacity to access information from any device and location), in which they can store and manage data, run applications and deliver content, each with a specific function. To implement the 'system of systems' concept, the *combat cloud* would ideally include a combination of manned and unmanned elements constituting the parts of a comprehensive combat system based on an interoperable network of command and control elements, including platforms, sensors and weapons [a range of effect producers that can execute different orchestrated and synchronised actions]; operators; information (and the ability to process, prioritise and distribute it); and interfaces to convert information into execution (Sanchez-Horneros, 2019: 665-666). Through secure and resilient connectivity to attacks in cyberspace, this concept aims to progressively connect manned and unmanned platforms by incorporating new digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence, *Big Data* management and quantum computing for decision support and systematic execution of the chain of actions and activities included in the mission cycle in military operations.

Ideally, in this environment, increasingly networked ground, naval and air assets should be seen not only as producers of effects but also as sensors and data relays of a true joint command-and control-network, in which all the component commands (or established commands) are integrated and from which they benefit. The importance and effectiveness of weapon systems operating in this *combat cloud* will not be based on what they can do in isolation but more on what they are able to contribute to the other elements of the overall combat system. The priority of the network will therefore be connectivity, the free flow of information and data transfer between airborne platforms, and the command-and-control system to other component commands, which will increase decision making at all levels and tactical options for weapon and sensor employment.

This environment, the development of which is a highly ambitious project, will henceforth be the enabler of how to fight collaboratively. Although it has already taken its first steps in the industry and in the Spanish FAS at a conceptual and planning level [the future FCAS system[8] will have to operate in environments of this

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8 The Future Combat Air System (FCAS) project involves air assets and technologically advanced liaison satellites. It is based on two pillars: the Next Generation Weapon System (NGWS) and the so-called cooperators, a group composed of data link satellites, the A400M (operational-tactical transport aircraft), the MRTT (strategic transport and in-flight refuelling aircraft), the Eurofighter and the UCAV (Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle), unmanned combat air assets. Sánchez-Horneros J. (2019, 664-673).

type alongside previous systems, the so-called *legacy* systems], its implementation is a long road where adequate operational requirements and a new Concept of Operations must be defined, all harmonised at a joint level because a progressively greater number of systems, platforms and operators of all types will work in the combat cloud in a collaborative manner.

To this effect, operating will therefore increasingly mean doing so in a network, and connectivity is a key element in this. Only a robust and secure connection will allow the commander to make the rapid decisions that this way of operating demands, and also for the systems used, which are capable of operating in a multi-domain environment, to produce the effects at the right time and in the right place. However, this network environment must be clear and well-structured, otherwise it will hard for it to achieve the necessary agility and efficiency. It must be based on properly established standards, rules and procedures, on the existence and acceptance of a shared code, and on the willingness to exchange information between its components, which implies sufficient bandwidth.

This makes the network a critical capability and therefore a vulnerability, making it necessary to maintain a certain degree of superiority in cyberspace and in the use of the electromagnetic spectrum. The interaction of the two domains, aerospace and cyberspace, and the dependence of the former on the latter, further underlines the need for an alternative mode of operation based on positive and procedural control, which can be accessed by automated reversal procedures in case of the degradation of cyberspace and its own data and communication networks.

Based on the possible difficulties of accessing different zones and maintaining "conventional" [traditional] superiority in the domains, in this environment the key to countering the adversaries will be to manoeuvre with agility between domains and to obtain multiple opportunities to produce harmful effects on their vulnerabilities through what are called "windows of opportunity"[9]. This can be via actions in any of the domains, saturating them with multiple dilemmas at different points in time and space (Martínez Cortés, *op. cit.*: 160), while complementing or abandoning [depending on the circumstances] the classical concept of planning and execution in phases, as well as the traditional criterion that effects in one domain must be primarily achieved by forces operating in that same domain. To this end, in terms of cross-domain integration, and in addition to the step forward that must be made with the integration of the traditional domains (supposedly coordinated to some degree at present), progress will have to be made progressively with the effective integration of the cyberspace and cognitive domains with the aerospace domain in the case of the Air Force, adjusting the concept and planning of operations accordingly in parallel with progressive understanding of the form of integration and operational implications.

As far as command and control is concerned, this should undergo a process of evolution. This joint function includes tasks such as establishing command

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9 Joint Concept Note 1/20, Multi-Domain Integration, UK Ministry of Defence, MOD (2020, 43-45).

relationships, planning, allocating tasks and resources, and evaluating progress towards objectives. For decades, the communications network on which the Armed Forces, and particularly the Air Force, have been based to conduct these activities has been largely uncontested, in an operational environment that has allowed for a highly centralised approach to air command and control. In turn, the centralisation of aerospace operations planning in a *Joint Air Operations Centre* (JAOC) has allowed the joint force to maximise planning efficiency, ensuring that commanders could weigh sensitive issues and reallocate resources flexibly as priorities changed.

However, and depending on the circumstances, this approach in a potentially "contested" environment can create a great vulnerability in aerospace operations (Priebe, *et.al.*, *op. cit.*: 47-54): an attack on the JAOC or significant disruptions in long-range communications may leave certain forces without the ability to plan and coordinate air operations. In addition, even when communication links between the JAOC and other locations may be available, bandwidth may limit the size of files, making it difficult to share images and videos. The joint force should therefore evolve the model via which it establishes authorities and responsibilities among subordinate commanders, prepares plans, prioritises and allocates resources, and communicates orders.

As outlined above, the very likely degradation of the electromagnetic spectrum and communications, coupled with the increasing use of non-physical domains, requires greater independence of tactical commanders in the execution of their missions. In particular, the fundamental principle established in aerospace operations of "centralised control and decentralised execution" should be complemented, depending on the circumstances, by a distributed control[10] that should adapt to operational changes and needs (Reilly, 2016: 70-71), allowing for delegated action based on windows of opportunity rather than on traditional methods in the physical domain. Basically, we are talking about a delegation of authority in the search for effectiveness, but in a restricted, limited and progressive manner. The allocation of this distributed (delegated) control should be made according to different parameters such as the nature of the operation and its priority, available means and geographical range of the desired effects, in addition to who has the best knowledge of the situation, which thereby acquires greater importance than previously. However, based on the terms of delegation of authority and the strict protocols to be established, this complement to distributed control must never be abstracted from the action of centralised command and control (personalised in the commander and his executive delegation of authority structure), so as not to hinder the implementation of the principle of unity of command. It is important to bear in mind that distributed control should be able to be applied only

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10 Distributed control constitutes "a pyramidal structure in which certain responsibilities and competencies are delegated from higher levels, limited in time and/or place, and according to pre-established criteria. This delegation of authority is a function of several factors, in particular the nature and scope of the mission and tactical situational awareness...". Basic Aerospace Doctrine IG-00-1, Air Force, 2nd Revision (2020, 32).

to certain missions, and should be combined with centralised control of all other activities.

In this regard, and in the light of communications threats, some air forces (such as the US and the French ones)[11] are developing new concepts for greater decentralisation of air operations control, "shifting the doctrinal reliance on large and vulnerable centralised command and control nodes to more agile networked solutions, evolving towards distributed control and the decentralised execution of multi-domain operations". It is important to note, however, that this major change should not be seen as an all-or-nothing event, and will most likely not only be implemented in a restricted way but also progressively, as technology and proprietary systems allow for its implementation.

To this effect, in these new environments, the principle of centralised control and decentralised execution, which is deeply rooted in aerospace operations, will be complemented and its execution enhanced by distributed control (Priebe, *et al., op. cit.:* 47-55) to different subordinate levels of responsibility (where appropriate and under the terms of delegation of authority to be determined). By means of data sharing and based on a delegation of authority protocols, this add-on, which will increase operational efficiency across domains, will also allow commanders to focus more on realignment and redirection of capabilities to complete objectives and on decision issues, rather than on the actual execution of [aerospace] operations. However, an appropriate balance between centralisation (command and control) and decentralisation (execution) will need to be sought because connecting tactical operations with operational and strategic objectives will become more common.

In the other hand, in terms of the new way of operating, the big difference will be that in many cases, instead of looking at the forces he has in the particular domain or component, the operation commander will have to look at the overall force mix to determine which forces or elements are best able to achieve the desired effect, whatever their original domain. However, this statement should not lead us to think that in the future all available forces will be able to have an impact in all domains, which would lead to an inappropriate distribution of resources. On the contrary, and considering the roles and missions of each force adapted to the needs of the future, from among the elements of the force capable of performing effects in the relevant situation, the commander will have to choose the option that is most advisable. What is certain is that in this context the operational commander's intention and the overall operational situation (provided in the *Common Operational Picture* (COP), a representation of the overall operational situation pieced together on the basis of data and information provided by more than one component command) must be well known and updated in real time at all levels, including at the lowest level of the operator (MINISDEF, 2019: 36-37).

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11 Summary of the Joint All-domain Command and Control Strategy, Department of Defense, USA (2022) and Concept d'Emploi des Forces CEF, État-Major des Armées, France (2020).

Likewise, the new way of operating should provide for the decoupling, as appropriate, of dominance and component command. The complexity of the operating environment is evolving in such a way that the interdependence and interaction of the different domains, and the possible cascading effects, will force a change in the comfortable spaces of the operational domains linked to the different component commands (land, maritime, aerospace and cyberspace), which will basically require a change of mindset as well as strategies to be able to influence, in particular, the non-physical domains from other domains. The shift from operating each component (land, maritime, aerospace and cyberspace) primarily in its respective domain [with varying degrees of effective coordination] towards a new synergistic way of acting across domains, but selecting the component or elements that are best placed (MINISDEF, 2019: 36), spatially or temporally speaking, will need to break many mindset barriers as it is a radical departure from the format learned by most SAF commanders.

Moreover, although it may seem merely a matter of semantics, the difference between operating in a multi-domain environment and producing effects in different domains in a cross-domain way (which has already been done for years) is substantial, as they differ in objectives, strategy and means (Bott, 2017: 24), a scheme known as "ends-ways-means" in its English terminology. In terms of objectives, there should be a move from coordination of objectives by separate component commands to "complementary objectives with a single purpose". In terms of strategies, when circumstances and capacities allow, there should be an evolution towards the search for and achievement of windows of "temporary advantage" and the "projection of power and production of effects in all domains", allowing freedom of action for actors in other domains to produce the necessary effects. And last, in terms of available means, the evolution will probably consist of a shift from a concept of massed forces (located in large forward operating bases) with constant communication and regular supplies, towards a type of "flexible forces operating in a dispersed way and following the commander's intentions in a rapid and autonomous manner", operating in line with the "mission-command" concept[12].

Furthermore, the pace of battle and its acceleration will make it impossible to address conflicts through standardised tasking and execution of operations in a traditional format; the processes of planning and executing military operations, aerospace in this case, will need to be reviewed. The cyclical-linear system of selecting and assigning targets, executing the appropriate effects, checking damage and reassigning targets is likely to be maintained, but should be revised and evolve to a more agile and dynamic

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12 As set out in the Framework for Future Alliance Operations, NATO (2018), future C3 (command, control and communications) requires the Alliance to possess resilience, adaptability and interoperable C3 systems. Due to the complex and dynamic battlespace [operations space] of the future, commanders will increasingly need to exercise their authority and issue instructions using a philosophy referred to as "mission-command" in which disciplined initiative is allowed within the framework of the commander's intent. Forces will also need the ability to observe, guide, decide and act across domains to conduct fully integrated operations using a holistic approach to achieve the desired effect.

approach *(Air Force Future Operating Concept*, USAF, 2015: 7-8) imposed by the tempo of a new [multi-domain] operating environment with much a faster pace than is usual.

Human resources have always been a critical element in the military operations environment, and even more so when it comes to stages or phases of evolution. Technology alone will not maintain the strategic advantage; the complexity of current and future scenarios demands not only mental agility and a change of mindset but also an adequate preparation of staff, harnessing their full potential. Achieving the right level of individual and teamwork skills will require adequate education and training in line with the needs of modern scenarios. Both training and coaching should shift their focus towards greater complexity and integrity. As a pivotal element in this evolution, aspects related to the mental agility demanded by this evolution and way of operating should be addressed and improved, as should the training itself, basically in terms of the holistic vision of problems and the capacity for analysis and interest in knowledge. Furthermore, in addition to leadership skills, critical thinking (the ability to analyse incoming information) and strategic thinking (the ability to focus on a forward-looking approach and strategies to achieve something concrete and a plan of action to achieve the desired objectives) should be encouraged, both of which are areas that need to be emphasised as they are generally neglected in staff training.

Last, with regard to the way in which aerospace power roles should be implemented[13], they should generally not change significantly in this new space of operations *(Air Force Future Operating Concept, USAF*, 2015: 11); what will change will be the way in which they are implemented and, above all, the command-and-control scheme in which they will be immersed. Likewise, in the short to medium terms, cyberspace capabilities will be progressively integrated into all aerospace power roles in general, as they will be in other instruments of military power. In this way, aerospace systems, likewise suitably integrated in the multi-domain environment, should be able to contribute to maintaining superiority and producing certain effects in other domains and to general situational awareness to continue to be the primary tool of National Security that it is today.

In summary, we can say that operating in the new operational environments will require a significant change in the way we operate, performing networked missions and integrating the ability to produce cross-domain effects, with faster decision-making and [real] combat agility that incapacitate an adversary who simultaneously applies traditional and non-traditional methods. The only way to achieve integration in this scheme will be to have a single set of information about the adversary and its movements by connecting to a single *combat cloud*. This new way of operating is, without exception, a challenge to all those operating in the aerospace domain; it will not only directly affect the way we operate [as has been widely seen], but also the

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13 As set out in Basic Aerospace Doctrine (IG-00-1, 2nd revision, 2020) and NATO Aerospace Doctrine Document AJP-3.3. (Allied Joint Doctrine for Air and Space Operations, Edition B Version 1, April 2016), and in addition to the necessary command and control, the four fundamental roles of aerospace power are air-space control, lethal/non-lethal strike, air mobility and ISR.

design of future military capabilities. However, technology is not everything; as in other policy areas, aerospace power operators will need to achieve their systems skills, capabilities and processes in high-intensity environments by learning the necessary knowledge, analytical skills training and training in, among others, next-generation LVC (*Live, Virtual and Constructive*) scenarios[14]. Of course, while the concepts of "fog and friction", in *Clausewitz'* s terms (representing uncertainty and friction), continue to exist, rigorous training and demanding process training should help to quickly understand and overcome emerging impediments to mission achievement.

Conclusion

On the basis of what has been discussed in this article, it can be stated that the operational space of the operating environments that await us today and in the medium-term future (up to 2040) are being significantly altered by the different aspects mentioned above. To maintain effectiveness as an essential tool of National Security, the Air Forces, and the Air and Space Forces in particular, should evolve and adapt the way they act and operate in this operational space. Failure to do so would mean losing the relevance of the Air Force as an instrument at the disposal of the government to fulfil its mission.

Among the key elements in addressing these developments, the following can be highlighted. First, greater knowledge and understanding of hazards and environments will be required, as well as the necessary adaptation and resilience to withstand and recover functions adequately. Second, it should be possible to operate with greater agility across domains, which will only be possible by operating in a network via robust and secure connectivity that allows for agile cross-domain effects, for which it will also be necessary to enjoy the desired superiority in cyberspace.

In addition, a more agile configuration of command and control should be progressively implemented to facilitate the application of the fundamental principles of the command-and-control function, evolving towards greater decentralisation under the "*mission-command*" philosophy. This should allow subordinate commanders more disciplined initiative within the framework of the commander's intent. Third, greater agility and flexibility, in addition to a huge capacity to adapt the way of operating, will be necessary to maintain the strategic advantage that allows [aerospace] operations in

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14 The Armed Forces will need to be supported by highly capable operational training systems focused on innovation, adaptation and responsiveness, and that are capable of incorporating the complex, increasingly contested and degraded operating environment. By creating complex, customised training events and leveraging existing technological capabilities to integrate real and artificial (synthetic) elements and performances, these systems enable training in highly dynamic, high-intensity environments in which decision-making under pressure can be improved, both in the command function and in the execution of operations, while allowing for a decreasing use of real platforms.

a multi-domain environment to be tackled with probability of success, producing the necessary effects across domains. Last, given that human resources, like cyberspace, are a cross-cutting element, superiority in the cognitive domain will also be necessary, although this will be difficult to achieve in all its aspects.

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The nuclear factor in international relations: war and peace dimensions

Abstract

Nuclear weapons undoubtedly shape international relations; they have done so throughout the Cold War and will continue to do so in the future. Efforts by the international community, mainly in the framework of the United Nations, to regularise and even eliminate these weapons have helped shape the current international system but have not succeeded in eradicating them. The most provocative question addressed in this paper, though not the only one, is whether their elimination would be conducive to peace between states or to more conventional conflicts, even between the world's major powers, which are currently far from being on friendly terms.

Keywords

Deterrence, Mutually Assured Destruction, UN, NPT, IAEA.

Cite this article:

Introduction

A question mark hangs over nuclear energy, in particular nuclear weapons, and their impact on international relations. On this issue we could question the usefulness of atomic energy, its contribution to the development of humanity, its impact on stability and even its contribution to peace between nations, the role of nuclear weapons in today's world, or the interest of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the benefits it brings to the non-nuclear-weapon State parties to this Treaty and to international security.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the reality of 'the nuclear' in International Relations, and taking into account that the nuclear military capability of states serves mainly as an instrument of deterrence, but is also useful to underline their international relevance by granting a status that makes them the object of particular consideration (or perhaps rather concern) by the rest of the international community

We will defend that in the framework of international relations, dialogue, treaties and agreements between the main states of the world have been and are essential to preserve peace. A peace with a greater or lesser degree of stability, but in which the nuclear capability of the powers that possess it has an important role to play.

The genesis of the atomic bomb. A bit of history

It all began scientifically in the 19th century and militarily in the course of World War II. Studies on the atom and radioactivity had been ongoing since the late 19th century, but it was in the first third of the 20th century that research made a decisive breakthrough, and it is safe to say that most studies, experiments and scientists were concentrated in Germany. Hitler's rise to power, with his progressive persecution of Jews, marked a before and after for atomic research in Germany at the time. Many German scientists of Jewish descent, increasingly harassed and persecuted, fled to other countries. Most of those who chose to leave Germany looked for opportunities to continue their research activity and found them mainly in the United States and England, where they continued their work in universities, specialised facilities and government programmes.

Apart from the terrible cost in human lives, wars spur research and discovery. World War II was no exception, and research into the use of nuclear fission, recently discovered in Germany, to produce an 'ultimate' weapon intensified in the countries involved in the conflict. Despite being a recurring theme, it has never been clear how Germany's nuclear programme developed during the war, nor whether Germany ever came close to obtaining the atomic bomb, which it would undoubtedly have used against England. How far off was it from achieving this? In any case, it is known that research on atomic energy and nuclear weapons continued in Germany during the war, and that the flight of scientists of Jewish descent had a negative impact.

According to Natividad Carpintero Santamaría, these flights 'were going to upset the balance of science, which from that moment on would irreversibly tilt in favour of the United States of America' (Carpintero, 2007: 9). In the same vein, Sean Coughlan argues that 'German refugees played a key role in ensuring that, when it came to atomic weapons, the United States was at the forefront' (Coughlan, 2013).

Germany did not get the bomb, but the United States did with its Manhattan Project, in which, along with American scientists, many of the German Jewish scientists who had previously emigrated to the country played an important role. The origin of this project even involved Albert Einstein, who signed and addressed a letter to US President Franklin Roosevelt, prepared by Hungarian physicist Leo Szilard, on 2 August 1939 before the outbreak of World War II. In the letter, he informed him of the capabilities of nuclear weapons, suggesting that he was interested in pursuing them, and alerted him to German activity in this field. In her book *La bomba atómica. El factor humano en la Segunda Guerra Mundial*, Natividad Carpintero includes the text of Einstein's letter, from which we include here three very significant paragraphs:

'Sir,

Some recent work by E. Fermi and L. Szilard, which has been communicated to me in manuscript, leads me to expect that the element uranium may be turned into a new and important source of energy in the immediate future. Certain aspects of the situation which has arisen seem to call for watchfulness and, if necessary, quick action on the part of the Administration. I believe therefore that it is my duty to bring to your attention the following facts and recommendations:

In the course of the last four months it has been made probable—through the work of Joliot in France as well as Fermi and Szilard in America—that it may become possible to set up a nuclear chain reaction in a large mass of uranium by which vast amounts of power and large quantities of new radium-like elements would be generated. Now it appears almost certain that this could be achieved in the immediate future.

This phenomenon would also lead to the construction of bombs, and it is conceivable—though much less certain—that extremely powerful bombs of a new type may thus be constructed. A single bomb of this type, carried by boat and exploded in a port, might very well destroy the whole port together with some of the surrounding territory' (Carpintero, 2007: 93-94).

The gauntlet, if it was, was picked up; and the result was the Manhattan Project, in which a large number of scientists from several countries collaborated. In particular, the UK intervened by sending some 60 scientists to the United States in those years who were already working on a similar British project, called *Tube Alloys*, to develop the atomic bomb (Cathcart, 2006). This project was integrated into the Manhattan Project following the 1943 Quebec Agreement between the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada.

This agreement established a nuclear alliance between the United Kingdom and the United States, which in one form or another is still in force today. On the British side, the Manhattan Project came to be seen as a joint project of the United States, Great Britain and Canada. According to the text, signed on 19 August 1943, the United States and the United Kingdom agreed that 'we will not use it against third parties without each other's consent' (Quebec Agreement. The Manhattan Project). And it was British Field Marshal Henry Maitland Wilson, his country's representative on the Combined Policy Committee, which dealt with the development, production and testing of the atomic bomb, who signed the UK's consent to its use against Japan on 4 July 1945 (Wilson).

The British perception that the Manhattan Project was a joint project would not last long. The Quebec Agreement was amended by the *United States Atomic Energy Act* of 1946, which prohibited providing confidential information on military nuclear matters to its allies on pain of death. This obviously could not have been to the liking of the British, undoing their idea of a more or less equal agreement. Thereafter, the United Kingdom resumed its own efforts (*High Explosive Research* programme) to acquire the atomic bomb.

Despite the situation brought about by the *United States Atomic Energy Act*, cooperation between the two countries in the nuclear field continued, leading to the signing in London on 3 June 1958 of an important agreement on cooperation 'in the use of atomic energy for mutual defence'[1]. Under this agreement, the United States supplied the British with nuclear weapons, and the two countries shared radioactive materials and nuclear technology. They later signed the Nassau agreements in December 1962, which facilitated the UK's acquisition of Polaris missiles to deliver its nuclear warheads, and later Trident missiles.

Going back to the time of World War II, the world's first nuclear explosion took place in Alamogordo, New Mexico, on 16 July 1945 as part of the Manhattan Project and as the culmination of the project. Less than a month later, on 6 August, the first atomic bomb dropped in the context of war, with an approximate power of 16 kilotons, destroyed Hiroshima. The effects were terrible: 'of the more than 320,000 Japanese who were in the city between civilian inhabitants and garrison soldiers, almost 80,000 died instantly and more than 50,000 died in just a few months as a result of radiation from the bomb' (Montoto, 2013: 291).

Three days later, on 9 August, another atomic bomb —this time with a power of 22 kilotons— exploded over Nagasaki. The result of these two explosions was approximately 120,000 casualties due to the immediate effect of the explosions. According to a United Nations report on the 75th anniversary of the explosions, 'the two atomic weapons left more than 200,000 people dead from radiation and

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1 Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for Cooperation on the uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defense Purposes. 3 July 1958.

in subsequent decades claimed 400,000 victims from bomb-related health problems' (United Nations, 2020).

The Japanese government surrendered just one week after the bombing of Nagasaki (Powasky, 2011: 90). If Japan had had the nuclear weapon at that critical time for the future of its country, when kamikazes were immolating themselves to defend it, would the United States have launched its attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Would a situation similar to that which later, during the Cold War, was called *Mutual Assured Destruction* not have arisen? What is certain is that the use of the atomic weapon marked a turning point in international relations.

The start of the nuclear race: the first nuclear states

World War II ended, and in the first years after the end of the war the United States was the sole possessor of the atomic weapon. This was of great use in dealing with the delicate situation created by Soviet forces being maintained in the countries they had occupied and the establishment of communist regimes in those countries. Meanwhile, American, British and French forces were demobilising, and the situation created by the Soviet Union was destabilising the entire continent.

In these years, and in order to understand the origins of the nuclear arms race, US National Security Council reports submitted to the president and, after his approval, served to establish the US position in the international arena, were of particular relevance.

Of these reports, NSC-68, issued on 7 April 1950 and presented to US President Truman, estimated that the Soviet Union already had between 10 and 20 atomic bombs and that by 1954 it would have about 200 (National Security Council, 1950: 19 and 60). Three years later, a new National Security Council report, perhaps the most significant of them all, NCS 162/2, approved by Eisenhower on 30 October 1953, stated:

> 'The capability of the USSR to attack the United States with atomic weapons has been continuously growing and will be materially enhanced by hydrogen weapons. The USSR has sufficient bombs and aircraft, using one-way missions, to inflict serious damage on the United States, especially by surprise attack. The USSR soon may have the capability of dealing a crippling blow to our industrial base and our continued ability to prosecute a war' (National Security Council, 1953: point 4).

The report also argued that 'the risk of Soviet aggression will be minimized by maintaining a strong security posture, with emphasis on adequate offensive retaliatory strength and defensive strength. This must be based on massive atomic capability'.

The nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union had thus begun. In reality, it had begun not when the USSR carried out its first nuclear test on

29 August 1949, but already before the end of World War II when the USSR decided to invest all possible resources (including espionage in Great Britain and the United States) in order to get hold of the atomic bomb.

Events followed in a chain reaction: the British had detonated their first nuclear fission device on 3 October 1952 in the Porto Bello Islands (Australia) and the Americans their first hydrogen bomb (nuclear fusion) on 1 November 1952 on an atoll in the Pacific. Just ten months later, on 12 August 1953, the USSR also exploded its first hydrogen bomb. The United Kingdom would do so in 1957. France would test its first atomic bomb on 13 February 1960 in the Sahara desert, while the hydrogen bomb would have to wait until 24 August 1968. The nuclear arms race was already in full swing. To complete what would become colloquially known as 'the atomic club', we cannot forget China, which had tested its first bomb on 16 October 1964 and the hydrogen bomb on 17 June 1967. With the entry of the People's Republic of China, the club (the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France and China), which would be accepted internationally as having the right to possess such armaments by the UN in the NPT, was definitively formed. Since the entry into force of this Treaty in 1970, the United Nations and all club members have united their efforts to prevent its enlargement, with a result that can be considered positive although four countries, of which we will speak later, have managed to acquire a limited number of nuclear bombs without being part of the NPT.

Since those years, the nuclear arms race has kept the world's attention focused on the nuclear threat. In the Cold War, all states possessing these weapons jealously guarded their capabilities in this field and kept them ready for use. Some of the non-NPT countries that have managed to acquire them are perhaps currently the most likely to use them. Of these countries, India, Pakistan and North Korea pose a greater risk —if not greater in size at least in probability— of a conflict with a nuclear component than Russia and the United States. The two superpowers have already had time to learn to live with a capability they know they must never use. Let us hope that they continue to think so, especially in these times of veiled, or not so veiled, Russian warnings of the possibility of its use in conflict caused by its invasion of Ukraine.

Nuclear states outside international law

A number of countries currently possess nuclear weapons without being States Parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty; they pose varying degrees of serious concern to the international community. These countries are certainly India, Pakistan and North Korea. With regard to Israel, although there has been no explicit acknowledgement on its part, all analyses and studies on this issue consider that it possesses it. Iran's attempts to acquire such weapons are also of particular concern in the international community. All these cases will be discussed below.

The nuclear programmes of India, Pakistan and Israel

With regard to India and Pakistan, the former conducted its first atomic test in 1974, and five more tests on 11 May 1998 (Rosas, 2017). Just two weeks later, on 28 May, Pakistan responded politically to India's defiance by conducting five more nuclear tests, adding another two days later *(Nuclear Weapons Archive*, 1998). With these explosions, the conflict over Kashmir, a territory whose possession had for decades been and still puts the two countries at odds, causing three wars and a situation of permanent conflict, potentially took on a new dimension and greater complexity with the risk of the use of the atomic weapons both countries possess. Unsurprisingly, a few days later, on 3 June 1998, the UN General Assembly issued a Resolution condemning the nuclear tests by both countries and urging them to refrain from future nuclear testing[2].

One might ask whether in this case, possessing atomic weapons has prevented so far this century not only a new conflict between India and China like the one that took place in 1962 over border issues, but more recently the violence in Kashmir from escalating into an all-out war between India and Pakistan. On the latter issue, what is currently a territorial border conflict could be in danger of turning into an all-out war between the two countries, whose cultures and religious conceptions (Islam and Hinduism) have always been at loggerheads. Given the case, recourse to atomic weapons could not be ruled out. However, since there has been no significant escalation of the conflict since the nuclear tests mentioned above, we can safely assume for the time being that the nuclear weapon is fulfilling its role as a deterrent.

Israel is also considered by all studies and analyses consulted to be a nuclear-weapon state, and will be treated as such here. It reportedly developed its first nuclear device in 1968 (IISS, 2008: 122). The aim of its nuclear programme would be purely defensive, which can be deduced from the lack of publicity and threatening statements about the use of these weapons on its part. Consistent with this stance, Israel, totally surrounded by hostile countries, would have relied on nuclear weapons as a last resort to counter a mass assault by the surrounding Arab countries. In any case, Israel has carried out targeted air strikes against its neighbours' nuclear reactors, thus disrupting their efforts to develop military nuclear programmes that it believes could have resulted in the development of a nuclear weapon. The first of these attacks is known to have taken place on 7 June 1981, when the Israeli air force attacked Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor (Operation Opera) located at Iraq's Al Tuwaitha nuclear site south east of Baghdad. This attack was 'strongly condemned' by the United Nations Security Council on 19 June of the same year, which in point 5 of its communiqué 'calls upon Israel urgently to place its nuclear facilities under the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency'[3].

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2 United Nations General Assembly Resolution AG/RES 1600 (XXVIII-O/98). 03 June 1998.

3 United Nations Security Council Resolution 487 of 18 June 1981.

Years later, on 6 September 2007, the Israeli air force carried out another such attack on the Syrian nuclear power plant at Al Kibar. There has been much controversy over the outcome of the attack and Israel's acknowledgement of its authorship[4].

North Korea's nuclear programme. Its influence on international relations

Of particular interest and topicality is the case of North Korea, which is why we will deal with it in a little more detail. This country signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1985, a year in which the United States had maintained a notable nuclear capability in the area (since 1958 and mainly in South Korea), which it gradually reduced to approximately one hundred weapons of this type in 1991, the year it withdrew them in the context of the first Nuclear Arms Limitation Treaty (START I) (Bohigas and Fortuny). The two Korea had signed a Joint Declaration on the denuclearisation of the entire Korean peninsula that year, and inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) began in May 1992. One of them considered the existence of a military nuclear programme in North Korea, which then rejected IAEA inspections and threatened in 1993 to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Following negotiations in Washington that led to a Framework Agreement between the two countries in 1994, it suspended its threat to withdraw from the NPT and IAEA safeguards, and inspections were resumed.

However, in 1997, North Korea began a uranium enrichment programme that would enable it to manufacture a nuclear device, announced that it would restart its shutdown facilities, expelled IAEA inspectors and, on 10 January 2003, withdrew from the NPT.

The UN Security Council reacted with a Resolution 'urging it to reconsider its announcement, and to reaffirm its adherence to the Treaty'[5]. The matter was taken up directly with the North Korean authorities by a group consisting of the United States, South Korea, Japan, Russia and China. Compensation was offered, but North Korea went ahead and carried out its first atomic explosion on 9 October 2006. The United Nations condemned the nuclear test and demanded that it not conduct any further tests or ballistic missile launches.

Although the United Nations enacted a series of sanctions that initially appeared to be successful, the situation worsened again when in April 2009 North Korea publicly announced its definitive withdrawal from the Treaty and, a month later on 25 May,

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4 Confirmation of responsibility for the attack is definitively accepted by the BBC on 21 March 2018 in an article entitled 'Por qué Israel reconoce por primera vez que destruyó una central nuclear en Siria hace once años'. Link: bbc.com/world/international-news-43486931

5 United Nations Security Council Resolution 825 of 11 May 1993.

exploded its second nuclear device[6]. The UN Security Council again condemned this nuclear test[7], but on 12 February 2013, North Korea conducted a new test. The UN Security Council again issued a new statement calling the test a provocative act, and again demanded that North Korea 'return to the NPT as soon as possible'[8].

More recently, on 6 January 2016, North Korea conducted a fourth nuclear test that it claimed was a hydrogen bomb explosion, which was considered more than doubtful due to its limited power. On 9 September of that same year, it was estimated to have conducted another nuclear test and on 3 September 2017 the last one to date.

A series of contacts with North Korea began in 2018 that failed at the 2019 Hanoi Summit and have since stalled. In January 2022, the North Korean state news agency reported that North Korea has left the door open to 'resume all temporarily suspended actions', which has been interpreted to mean that it will continue to develop its nuclear military programme (*El País*, January 2022).

In the context of this issue, we must bear in mind that a nuclear weapon has no military utility without a delivery vehicle, which can be a carrier aircraft or a missile capable of reaching its targets. North Korea has been producing and developing missiles of ever greater range and capability since 1998, an activity that has been confirmed by the large number of launches it has carried out in 2022.

According to media reports, the country has conducted around 70 ballistic missile test launches in 2022 (*El País*, December 2022), most of which are expected to be capable of carrying nuclear loads, the latest in response to US military exercises with South Korea called *Vigilant Storm* that have been underway since 31 October (*Reuters*, October 2022). The launch of a North Korean missile that reportedly flew over north west Japan on 4 October has been of particular interest (Pérez, 2022).

Taken together, all these tests obviously give North Korea the visibility that its authorities want their country to have in the world of international relations. For its part, the North Korean government maintains that its entire programme is aimed at strengthening its defence against possible US aggression, an argument that its president no doubt demagogically uses domestically to rally the population around him.

The main problem in this country is political and to a large extent internal. Internationally, the greatest danger is that North Korea will decide, or has already decided, to sell its nuclear weapons abroad. In any case, if more consideration has been given here to the North Korean nuclear situation, it is because it offers a very interesting interpretation of the influence of the nuclear factor in international relations. The threat of the use of its nuclear weapons, although very small compared to those of

6 House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Report No. 4 of the 2008-2009 session: Global Security: Non Proliferation. Page 48. London, 2009.

7 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1874 of 12 June 2009.

8 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2094 of 07 March 2013.

India, Pakistan or Israel, and certainly very small compared to Russia or the United States, has political connotations that go beyond the defensive or dissuasive. North Korea knows that if it were to launch a nuclear attack on any other country with nuclear weapons (particularly the United States), its response would wipe out the country, but the mere possibility that Kim-Jong-un might do something crazy causes concern among his neighbours, gives his regime and his person international prominence and visibility, and allows him to blackmail and try to obtain not inconsiderable economic benefits in any kind of international negotiation.

Iran's nuclear programme: the world's most serious nuclear threat

Despite North Korea's stubborn pursuit of its nuclear programme, the case of Iran is even more worrying in the long term, which is why we will also devote special attention to it here. Iran's nuclear programme is considered 'one of the main security concerns affecting international security' (Zunzunegui, 2015), not only because of the clear Western perception that Iran's goal is to acquire nuclear weapons, and the country has the means to do so both technically and economically, but also because of political tensions between Iran and its neighbours in the Middle East. Furthermore, if the international community were to fail to stop or control its nuclear programme, Iran would have demonstrated that the international community does not have sufficient capacity to prevent nuclear proliferation, and this could set an example for other countries in the region to follow, especially some that also have sufficient economic resources from oil to develop a nuclear programme. If a radical Islamist regime were to take power in one or more countries in the region and the new governments were to support terrorist organisations, as is, in fact, the case today, the situation would become extremely complicated.

Iran began its nuclear research with the help of the United States in 1957 (Martí Sempere, 2013) under the Atoms for Peace programme, and signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty from the time it was established. It subsequently received Western technological assistance, which was interrupted in 1979 by the Khomeini-led revolution that overthrew the Shah. The Iran-Iraq war subsequently interrupted the new regime's nuclear programme, but after the war the programme was restarted in the late 1980s with Soviet and later Chinese assistance.

The Iranian government has since claimed that its nuclear programme is only for peaceful purposes, but the international community does not believe this to be the case. Further complicating the situation is the fact that the country has developed significant ballistic missile activity at the same time.

Relations between the IAEA and Iran have been, and are, very complicated. In some cases, the Iranian authorities have allowed a visit to a nuclear facility, but have not accepted the Additional Protocol that would allow the IAEA to carry out more clarifying inspections. The tug-of-war between the IAEA and Iran has continued over the years, and in 2009 Iran rejected a joint proposal by the US, France and Russia to clarify the situation.

In 2013, the P3+3 group (the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Iran) reached an agreement with Iran that entered into force on 20 January 2014, and the following year the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was finally agreed. This plan involved the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, the European Union as such and, of course, Iran, and was driven by President Barack Obama and the European Union. According to the Plan, the number of Iranian super centrifuges —essential for uranium enrichment— would be reduced, the stock of enriched uranium would be reduced, highly enriched uranium needed for the manufacture of atomic bombs would be eliminated, and the Additional Safeguards Protocol, which would allow the IAEA to carry out unannounced inspections of facilities it deems appropriate, would be signed with all its consequences[9].

As it was, on 8 May 2018, President Donald Trump, who was seeking a renegotiation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on more favourable terms, announced that the United States was withdrawing from it as insufficient and unfulfilled by Iran, and reinstated pre-Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action sanctions on the US side. 'Faced with this situation, Iran declared that it was withdrawing from the agreement although it would continue to cooperate with the IAEA' (Campos, 2021).

With the arrival of the new President Joe Biden, the State Department recently announced on 18 February 2021 that the US would be ready to resume JCPOA negotiations, and similarly Iran has also done so seven months later, on 27 September 2021. In any case, Iran wants all post JCPOA sanctions lifted, but Western suspicions about the ultimate goals of its nuclear programme remain well-founded.

All in all, a long and complicated story that still needs, at best, a few years to be resolved. If this is not resolved and Iran ends up with a nuclear weapon, however limited in quantity, the greatest risk would be that Saudi Arabia would respond to the geostrategic imbalance that would ensue in the area with a decision to pursue a similar nuclear capability, and perhaps even President Erdogan's Türkiye could follow suit. If all this were to happen, and it could happen if the current Iranian aspirations are not cut off in time, the already complicated situation in the Middle East would become unmanageable and tenuous international stability in this part of the world would become a mere memory.

The international legal framework for disarmament and non-proliferation.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: nuclear disarmament efforts

As early as the end of World War II, nuclear weapon proliferation was seen as likely, which could eventually lead countries involved in crises or conflicts to resort to

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9 The European Council/Council of the European Union has produced the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and restrictive measures document, which deals in detail with this issue. Link: consilium. europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/iran/jcpoa-restrictive-measures

nuclear weapons. On 24 January 1946, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution establishing 'a Commission to deal with the problems raised by the discovery of atomic energy'[10]. This Commission, which was renamed the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission, 'shall submit its reports and recommendations to the Security Council'[11], and 'shall in particular make specific proposals for control of atomic energy to the extent necessary to ensure its use only for peaceful purposes'[12] as well as for 'the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons'[13]. The only country that possessed such weapons at the time was the United States, but many nations were interested in having them or in preventing them from being used against them. The Commission was established and worked as best it could until 1952 when it was dissolved without having achieved the expected results. The main outcome would have been the elimination of atomic weapons from national arsenals, but this was obviously too ambitious a goal.

Nevertheless, an attempt was made. A couple of months after its creation, on 14 June 1946, the US delegate to the Commission, Bernard Baruch, presented a plan that seemed respectable: it called for the elimination of nuclear bombs from national arsenals, and the establishment of a High International Authority that could impose sanctions on countries that did not comply with their commitments under the plan, without such sanctions being vetoed by the permanent members of the Security Council. The attempt failed, among other reasons, because of the Soviet position against the elimination of its veto power, and because, while the American position was to reduce its atomic weapons in stages as negotiations to establish an international agreement for their control progressed, the Soviets demanded that atomic weapons should be banned before negotiations on atomic weapons could begin[14].

As a counter-proposal, Soviet ambassador to the UN, Andrei Gromyko, proposed an alternative plan under which violations would be judged internally in each country alleged to have committed an offence. This left it up to the governments of the states that wanted to obtain nuclear weapons whether or not to comply with the agreements made at the United Nations. Consequently, the Soviet proposal was not accepted.

In the context of the situation in those years, Eisenhower's famous 'Atoms for Peace' speech was made on 8 December 1953. The US President proposed the establishment

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10 UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/1/1 of 24 January 1946. Link: documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/NL4/603/33/PDF/NL460333.pdf?OpenElement

11 *Ibid*. Point 2.a).

12 *Ibid*. Point 5.b).

13 *Ibid*. Point 5.c).

14 The Manhattan Project: Making the Atomic Bomb. Part VI: The Manhattan District in Peace Time. The Baruch Plan-Atomic Archive. https://www.atomicarchive.com/history/manhattan-proyect/p6s5.html

of an international atomic energy agency[15], as occurred. After a couple of years of work, the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was approved within the UN framework and entered into force on 29 July 1957 'a specialised government agency belonging to the United Nations system, with the mission of acting as a forum for scientific and technical cooperation to strengthen the contribution of nuclear energy to world peace, health and prosperity. This mission revolves around three pillars or areas of work, which are technological and physical safety, science and technology and safeguards'[16]. Indeed, for the first time, an organisation had been created not just to deal with the threat of nuclear weapons, but to promote and share the peaceful use of atomic energy. The IAEA is still fully active today, promotes peaceful international relations and is the main instrument for ensuring compliance with the NPT.

As mentioned above, in the 1950s, the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom obtained the hydrogen bomb. China in 1967 and France a year later. The nuclear arms race was already unstoppable and the Cold War was entering a particularly worrying moment. Kennedy became President of the United States in 1961 and relations with the Soviet Union appeared to be improving, but in October 1962 Khrushchev decided to install nuclear-capable missiles in Cuba in response to the US deployment of Jupiter missiles in Türkiye. Never has a conflict between the two great superpowers been so close; a conflict that would obviously be nuclear. This crisis prompted an increase in the Soviet nuclear arsenal that led it to reach strategic nuclear arms parity with the United States in 1969 (Powasky, 2011: 182 and 204) despite the fact that they also heavily boosted their production of such weapons.

In December 1962, just after the Cuban missile crisis ended, Khrushchev invited Kennedy to negotiate a nuclear test ban treaty, but negotiations failed. Kennedy then took the initiative: on 10 June 1963 he announced that he would 'give new impetus to disarmament negotiations in Geneva and work to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons' (Leffler, 2007, 235). He would also establish a 'hotline' with the Kremlin to avoid situations that could lead to a nuclear confrontation, and stated that he would 'stop nuclear testing in the atmosphere if and when other nations follow suit' (ibid., 235).

The Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was not agreed, but the Partial Test Ban Treaty was signed in Moscow on 5 August of the same year by the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, and entered into force in October 1963. From then on, the nuclear tests of the signatory states were conducted underground. Neither China nor France signed the Treaty, and continued to conduct nuclear tests in the atmosphere.

This was the situation in 1965, when negotiations leading to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons began. On 19 November of that year the

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15 International Atomic Energy Agency. Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace. The speech that inspired the creation of the IAEA. Link: iaea.org/sites/default/files/publications/magazines/bulletin/bull54-4/54401210304_es.pdf

16 Spanish Nuclear Safety Council. Link: csn.es/organismos-nucleares-internacionales/oiea

United Nations General Assembly issued a Resolution calling on all States 'to take all necessary steps for the speedy conclusion of a treaty to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons'. The treaty was to 'be a step towards the achievement of general and complete disarmament and, more particularly, nuclear disarmament'[17]. Neither France nor China participated in this Disarmament Committee, but the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom, which were further advanced in their nuclear programme, did.

While negotiations were taking place, the five permanent Security Council members supported the signing of the Treaty of Tlatelolco on 14 February 1967, whereby the signatory states committed themselves in Article 1:

> 'use exclusively for peaceful purposes the nuclear material and facilities which are under their jurisdiction, and to prohibit and prevent in their respective territories the testing, use, manufacture, production or acquisition by any means whatsoever of any nuclear weapons [...] and the receipt, storage, installation, deployment and any form of possession of any nuclear weapons, [...]'.

From this quotation, we can underline the prohibition of 'the deployment and an form of possession of any nuclear weapons', a formulation which in my opinion is directly aimed at avoiding a repetition of what happened in Cuba a few years earlier. The Treaty entered into force in 1969 and was eventually ratified by all Latin American countries except Guyana and Cuba[18].

Returning to the process of establishing the NPT, as a result of the work of the Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Committee, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was finally adopted by the General Assembly on 12 June 1968, submitted for ratification and entered into force in 1970 for an initial period of 25 years. In 1995, it was agreed to extend it indefinitely. Although initially signed by 43 countries, membership has now risen to 191, making the NPT the Treaty with the largest number of member countries after the United Nations. Only India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea and South Sudan (which until 2011 was part of the Republic of Sudan) are not part of it.

The NPT[19] encompasses three objectives: non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, disarmament, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The most difficult goal to achieve was nuclear disarmament. The following are some of what I consider to be the most relevant points of the Treaty.

Article I of the Treaty provides that 'each nuclear-weapon State Party to the Treaty undertakes not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or other

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17 UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/2028 (XX) of 19 November 1965.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 204.

19 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. https://iaea.org/sites/default/files/10403501117_es.pdf

nuclear explosive devices or control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly'.

Article V provides that:

> 'Each Party to the Treaty undertakes to take appropriate measures to ensure that potential benefits from any peaceful applications of nuclear explosions will be made available to non-nuclear-weapon States Party to the Treaty on a non-discriminatory basis and that the charge to such Parties for the explosive devices used will be as low as possible and exclude any charge for research and development'.

Article VI commits all Parties to the Treaty to 'pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control'. This crucial objective, and not only in the framework of the NPT, has been repeatedly attempted, but no definitive result has been achieved.

In Article IX, the Treaty provides that 'a nuclear-weapon State is one which has manufactured and exploded a nuclear weapon or other nuclear explosive device prior to 1 January 1967'. This legally limits nuclear power status to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Finally, Article X dictates that each Party shall have the right to withdraw from the Treaty, but with a wording that makes it very difficult to comply with, given that this article, legally accepted by all signatories to the Treaty, provides that a state that has signed the Treaty may withdraw 'if it decides that extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country' and that its notice 'shall include a statement of the extraordinary events it regards as having jeopardized its supreme interests'. Obviously, a country that wants to withdraw from the Treaty is because it wants to get what the Treaty denies it: nuclear armament, and getting it on its own would mean going against the Treaty that it had previously signed with a commitment to respect it.

Taken together, the Treaty is the best element available to the international community to prevent a nuclear conflict and brings together two groups of nations in one forum, those that possess nuclear weapons and those that pledge never to possess them. On the other hand, non-nuclear-weapon States parties to the Treaty make commitments, but receive significant support for the development of peaceful nuclear energy in their countries, with the benefits that this entails. This support should be provided by possessor States, which undertake in the Treaty to transfer nuclear technology necessary for peaceful uses to the other States Party to the Treaty.

The main instrument for nuclear proliferation control under the NPT is the IAEA and its main tool is safeguards agreements, which are bilateral in nature between the IAEA and NPT member nations. The safeguards contained in these agreements involve inspections of countries to verify that the nuclear facilities they possess and

the activities they carry out there are indeed aimed at the peaceful use of nuclear technology. These inspections are based on the IAEA statute, which provides that the IAEA may

> 'to send into the territory of the recipient State or States inspectors, designated by the Agency after consultation with the State or States concerned, who shall have access at all times to all places and data and to any person who by reason of his occupation deals with materials, equipment, or facilities which are required by this Statute to be safeguarded... and to determine whether there is compliance with the undertaking against use in furtherance of any military purpose'[20].

Initially, these inspections, 'after consultation with the State or States concerned', were oriented towards those facilities declared as nuclear by the country itself, but subsequently, since May 1997 and with the nations that have signed the 'Additional Protocol to the Agreements between States and the IAEA for the Application of Safeguards', the IAEA can inspect all existing facilities in the country that has signed this additional protocol practically without prior notice[21]. Literally, the Protocol states that 'the period of advance notice shall, if the Agency so requests, be at least two hours but, in exceptional circumstances, it may be less than two hours'[22].

As for the impact of the NPT on international relations, and in particular its contribution to peace, this Treaty has been in force since 1970 and more than 50 years have passed since then. If we were to take stock, the positives could include that there has not been a single nuclear conflict on the international scene. We should also consider it a triumph that no less than 191 states are party to the Treaty, many have benefited from transfers of nuclear technologies for peaceful uses, and this benefit remains open to all member nations through the IAEA. Consequently, the Treaty has undoubtedly made a decisive contribution to global security and stability.

If the Non-Proliferation Treaty did not exist, there would now be a larger number of countries that could be described as 'middle powers' with nuclear weapons, and even others of more modest status that would have managed, with an economic effort disproportionate to their means, to possess the atomic weapon individually. In relation to this possibility, we can bring here some of John Mearsheimer's opinions from 1993, in the context of the demise of the Soviet Union, set out in his article 'The case for a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent', which we will return to later in more detail (Mearsheimer, 1993: 50). In his article, Mearsheimer argued that the multipolarity brought about by the demise of the Soviet Union would favour nuclear proliferation in Europe, and that this would make our continent more likely to remain at peace.

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20 IAEA Statute as amended up to 28 December 1989, Article XII, Paragraph A, Item 6.

21 Document INFCIRC/540 (corrected). Link: iaea.org/topics/additional-protocol

22 Additional Protocol to Agreements between States and the IAEA for the Application of Safeguards, Article 4(b)(ii). Link: iaea.org/sites/default/files/infcirc540c_sp.pdf

He also stated at the time that it was unwise for Ukraine to transfer its nuclear arsenal from Soviet times to Russia, a transfer that was subsequently agreed and finalised in 1996 with all Soviet nuclear weapons, tactical and strategic, stationed until then in Ukraine being transferred to Russia. Success did not go the way of the famous professor on this occasion.

However, we can consider that with more countries possessing nuclear weapons, there would also be a greater likelihood that some would opt to use them in the event of a conflict. The world would be less safe.

Considering the worst-case scenario, and taking into account the hatred and the situation in the Middle East between Arabs and Israelis, or between Shiites and Sunnis, if the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty did not exist, it is not difficult to imagine that some country in the region that had managed to acquire an atomic weapon would launch a nuclear attack on a neighbouring country in a moment of crisis (so frequent in that area), and a monumental disaster would ensue throughout the region, which at best would take decades to repair.

Of course, we know that some non-treaty countries currently possess atomic weapons and overshadow the international scene with dangerous positions, but they are few. The success is precisely that: that there are very few countries, and that the remaining countries, the vast majority, reject the use of such weapons.

To sum up, three ideas: the NPT is essential to promote prudence in international relations and is a very important element in averting the danger of a nuclear confrontation; the fact that a large number of NPT member countries have committed to not possessing nuclear weapons and a few are able to do so is intrinsically good for international relations because of the moderating role these powers can play on the international stage; and, finally, it should not be forgotten that the greatest medium- and long-term danger to be faced in the coming years lies in the Middle East, with Tehran as its capital.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

To complete the current picture in the nuclear field, an issue that has had an undeniable impact on international relations since the discovery of the possible military use of atomic energy, we will devote a few lines to the recent international attempt within the framework of the United Nations to eliminate all nuclear weapons from the planet. The goal could not be more ambitious or more difficult.

It is the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. This Treaty entered into force on 22 January 2021, having already been ratified by 51 nations out of the 86 that had signed it in 2017. This group of nations does not include, as might be expected, the states accepted as nuclear-weapon states by the NPT, and even less so the countries known to possess nuclear weapons without being members of the NPT (India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel). Finally, NATO member states are not among the

parties to the Treaty either, as they see their ultimate security guarantee in the support they receive from US nuclear capability.

The content of the treaty is certainly very ambitious. Article 1 clears up any doubt of interpretation: 'Each State Party undertakes never under any circumstance to develop, test, produce, manufacture, otherwise acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosives'. The same article in point (d) also prohibits to 'use or threaten to use nuclear weapons'. These formulations are complemented by Article 4.2, which literally requires that 'each State Party that owns, possesses or controls nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices shall immediately remove them from operational status, and destroy them as soon as possible'[23].

As for the duration of the Treaty, Article 17 states that it is of 'unlimited duration', and that to withdraw from it, a state that decides to do so must wait one year: 'shall only take effect 12 months after the date of the receipt of the notification of withdrawal'.

As we have seen a couple of paragraphs ago, many countries are currently participating in this Treaty, and with regard to its future it must be borne in mind that the current international order is based on a distribution of powers in which the nuclear military capability of the countries that possess it plays a role of the utmost importance, and that changing an already consolidated competitive international order through a voluntary and generous agreement without a conflict or a crisis of sufficient magnitude to impose it is something that seems impossible to achieve in the short- and medium-term.

In short, this is a Treaty that reflects the feelings of a large part of humanity: the feeling of rejection of nuclear weapons because of their enormous destructive power, and for this reason, we could consider that perhaps when the international situation allows the establishment of an organisation that controls all nuclear weapons, and the nations that currently possess them have placed them under its authority, it will be possible to reach a general commitment by all States not to develop, acquire, stockpile, use or threaten to use nuclear weapons, as established in the current Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and in particular, to 'destroy those it already possesses'[24].

The magnitude of the nuclear threat. Considerations for the European Union

Prestigious Spanish scientist and Air Force General Guillermo Velarde estimated in an analysis published in 2011 that in the 1980s-90s there were around 80,000

23 United Nations 2017. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Link: d3n8a8pro7vhmx. cloudfront.net/tectodevms/pages/2417/attachments/original/1571248128/English.pdf?1571248128

24 DW Actualidad. Tratado de Prohibición de Armas Nucleares entra en vigor. dw.com/es/tratado-de-prohibicion-de-armas-nucleares-entra-en-vigor/a-56308682

nuclear warheads in the world! The wise Spaniard also tells us that by the year 2010, the total number of nuclear warheads had decreased to around 22,000. The bulk of this reduction was almost entirely the responsibility of the United States and Russia, whose arsenals were reduced to 9,600 and 12,000 nuclear warheads respectively. These figures may not reflect the reality of those years with mathematical accuracy, which was obviously of a secret nature, but they can be estimated as important data taking into account the category and knowledge of Professor Velarde (2011).

At present, and after the cutbacks following the signing of the START III Treaty, we can estimate data provided by the *Federation of American Scientists* as very reliable. This federation was founded in 1945 by scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project and has been producing information on these issues ever since. In its 2022 report by Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda, they estimate that the US has 5,428 nuclear warheads, Russia has 5,977, China 350, France 290, the UK 225, Pakistan 165, India 160, Israel 90, and North Korea 20[25].

Data from the *Federation of American Scientists* is very closely aligned with data published by the prestigious *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (SIPRI) for January 2022, as total inventory 'includes stockpiled warheads plus retired warheads awaiting dismantlement'[26].

On the international scene, the situation between the two great superpowers in the nuclear field improved particularly in 2011 with the signing of the START III Treaty, also known as *New START*, which entailed the beginning of a new reduction, very substantially limiting the number of Russian and American nuclear warheads. The Treaty was to last for ten years and, although President Trump threatened in its final years to withdraw, the change in the US presidency finally meant it could be extended for five more years, until 5 February 2026.

According to the *Congressional Research Service* of the US Congress, among other things, the *New START* Treaty:

> 'limits each side to no more than 800 deployed and nondeployed land-based intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) launchers and deployed and nondeployed heavy bombers equipped to carry nuclear armaments. Within that total, each side can retain no more than 700 deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs, and deployed heavy bombers equipped to carry nuclear armaments. The treaty also limits each side to no more than 1,550 deployed warheads; those are the actual number of warheads on deployed ICBMs and SLBMs, and one warhead for each deployed heavy bomber'[27].

25 FAS Status of World Nuclear Forces. fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/

26 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute SIPRI Press Release, 13 June 2022.

27 The New START Treaty: Central Limits and Key Provisions. Update July 30, 2021. Congressional Research Service Report. https://crsreports.congress.gov

A particularly interesting element to consider with respect to the nuclear threat is the report prepared by Professor Velarde in 1977 on the probabilities of a full-scale nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States, commissioned by then Chief Lieutenant General of the Air Defence Command of the Spanish Air Force.

His study considered two possible strategies: that the initiator of the attack would first target the adversary's nuclear facilities, or that it would target its cities and industrial centres. In the first case, and if the country initiating the attack were the Soviet Union, '62% of US ICBM launch silos would be destroyed, with the remaining 38%, or 380 ICBMs, surviving, as would 100% of the aircraft and submarines on their bases. Seven per cent of the inhabitants of the United States would die in a few weeks, or 16 million dead' (Velarde, 2016: 244). The US response would be to counter-attack with the surviving ICBMs, i.e. approximately 380 missiles each armed with several nuclear warheads, and with the bombers and submarines not destroyed because they were outside their bases at the time of the Soviet attack. The counter-attack would be directed at industrial centres and population centres, as Soviet silos and launch systems would be empty after the attack, and the result would be a mass destruction of the USSR in those years: 75% of its heavy industries would be destroyed and 45% of the population would be killed, some 115 million dead.

If the Soviet Union were to apply the city strategy, the USSR would launch its strategic nuclear weapons primarily against US cities and industrial centres, and as a result, 60% of the US population would be killed (130 million dead) and the country would be virtually destroyed, but not its missile silos, submarines or strategic bombers. The US response would be even more devastating using its full nuclear force, which would be little damaged as its missile silos and submarine and aircraft bases were not generally attacked. The response would mainly target Soviet cities and industrial centres, resulting, as we have seen in the case of the silo strategy, in 115 million dead and the virtual destruction of the Soviet Union. In his study, Velarde concludes that 'the nation initiating the attack would have the greatest chance of being massively destroyed, and no nation would want to initiate an all-out nuclear attack' (Velarde, 2016: 245).

According to the above reasoning, neither the Soviet Union nor the United States would initiate a mass nuclear strike against the other, and consequently the likelihood of an all-out nuclear war, according to Velarde, would be very small. If, on the other hand, the USSR had launched a nuclear weapon against a Western ally, how would the United States have reacted, knowing that whoever launched an all-out nuclear attack would be completely destroyed? This is the argument, Velarde continues, on which General de Gaulle's doctrine was based. He argued that 'the only effective nuclear umbrella was one's own nuclear deterrent' and asserted that in the nuclear war of the future, those nations with nuclear weapons would have the greatest chance of survival. This doctrine was put into practice, and on 3 November 1959 he announced at the *Ecole Militaire de Sait-Cyr* in Paris the creation of his own independent nuclear force, which he christened the *Force de Frappe* (De Gaulle, 1959).

This French conception of the need to have its own nuclear capability, embodied in its *Force de Frappe*, is still valid in our neighbouring country. Indeed, French President

Jacques Chirac reaffirmed it in a statement on French defence policy and nuclear deterrence at the French missile submarine base at l'Ile Longue in Brest on 19 January 2006. There he stated that 'nuclear deterrence remains the fundamental guarantee of our security' (Chirac, 2006), and outlined a new concept for the use of its nuclear weapons aimed at their potential use against an attack by a lesser state. According to the French president, one could respond not only with the two alternatives of a conventional response or nuclear annihilation of the attacker, but by adapting a French nuclear response to the dimension (nuclear or otherwise) of the aggression received from a hostile state.

The current French president, Emmanuel Macron, delivered another major speech on 7 February 2020 at the French *Ecole de Guerre*. It had much in common with Chirac's in 2006, and he considered that, with today's nuclear proliferation and the development of delivery vehicles, attacks by regional middle powers that have developed nuclear weapons can directly reach European territory. In the face of such a threat, he called for European sovereignty and freedom of action, a rebalanced transatlantic relationship, and a greater capacity for autonomous European action. As for France's nuclear force, Macron said he was becoming more and more determined every day to embrace the value of nuclear deterrence.

Like Chirac, and in similar words, he argued that French nuclear forces 'play their own deterrent role, particularly in Europe. They strengthen Europe's security by their very existence and, in this respect, have a truly European dimension'.

If we have given importance here to these statements by the presidents of the French Republic, it is because they offer an alternative in the use of limited nuclear means in international relations to what we might consider 'classical' in the context of a mass nuclear confrontation. These interventions by Presidents Chirac and Macron speak of deterrence at European level with the possibility of limited use, including as a weapon against terrorism. This would be the case of a terrorist group with sufficient economic resources, for example Daesh, that manages to get hold of a nuclear fission device, whether or not under the protection of a country that is not a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Going deeper, one should ask in particular whether, in addition to considering its nuclear deterrent and its *Force de Frappe* as the ultimate guarantor of the nation's vital interests, France wishes, as De Gaulle intended during the Cold War, to play a role in Europe and the European Union similar to the one it has seen the United States play in the Atlantic Alliance. If so, it might be willing or able, subject to agreed limitations and conditions, to extend its nuclear umbrella of protection in some way over other European nations, within or outside the framework of the European Union. As for the latter, any rapprochement in this direction would give France de facto leadership of the Union, but would not be easily acceptable to the United States, and perhaps not even to those NATO countries that base their security on NATO membership, even though this 'Euro-French' deterrence would in any case be complementary to and coordinated with that of the Atlantic Alliance. We should not forget that in the nuclear field the United States' nuclear capability has been and continues to be the best

guarantee for Europe at all levels of conflict, although the decision to use its nuclear means will always be in American hands. At this stage, however, these ideas are only food for thought rather than a matter for negotiation, but one has to start somewhere.

We cannot forget the other ally, NATO member, and until recently a member of the European Union, the United Kingdom. Its interest in nuclear energy dates back to before the outbreak of World War II and its major involvement in the US Manhattan Project. With the latter, they have maintained close cooperation in all areas, the so-called *special relationship*, which has also been clearly manifested in the nuclear field with the Quebec agreements of 1943, the Mutual Defence Agreement of 1958, and the Nassau Agreement of 1962, and since then, they have been somewhat in the shadow of the United States, but with a performance, as we have already said, that is very satisfactory for the interests of both countries.

Since the end of the Cold War, its nuclear strategy has been to reduce its number of nuclear weapons, but always maintaining a sufficient capability to compensate for the decline in its conventional forces, which it nevertheless maintains at a high operational level, and to sustain its standing in the world as a global player and nuclear power. A new development in this behaviour has been a recent statement by Boris Johnson (in March 2021) to strengthen its nuclear weapons arsenal, which he will undoubtedly do once again in cooperation or at least coordination with the United States.

Conclusions

From all that has been seen here, it can be concluded that, although on a smaller scale than during the Cold War, there is a nuclear risk to our continent in our time which certainly influences international relations, and which must be taken into account at all times. We have recently been reminded of this by Vladimir Putin and his foreign minister with more than one warning of its possible materialisation in the context of the conflict provoked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In any case, the risk of a nuclear conflict in the world is different than it was during the Cold War, but it still exists and is potentially very important. Not only do we have to live with this risk, we have to confront it, mainly with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, but also with coordinated and strong European diplomacy, so that none of the crises that occur with some frequency on the international scene culminate in the use of atomic weapons of any kind. Indeed, this is the primary objective underlying the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the agreements that have been reached between the United States and the Soviet Union, and later with Russia,

It is obvious that the nuclear factor in the international relations of our time has a dual dimension: military and peaceful. The latter has contributed to the development of peoples and understanding between states through technological aids for its use in its many facets. The military dimension, although it has been a primary element of deterrence among states possessing this type of weapon, and from this perspective has prevented conflicts that could have become enormous (as they would have been in

the context of the Cold War), is in itself a factor of instability that affects the security of states and their foreign relations. If nuclear means were used in the event of a bilateral conflict between medium-sized powers, the consequences would already be catastrophic, but in the case of a conflict between the major powers, the consequences would be unpredictable and would seriously affect the entire planet.

For all the above reasons, the nuclear factor is and must be permanently taken into account as a major element in the international relations of our time and in the foreign policy of states. Overall, we could say that it is true that nuclear weapons have helped to control crisis situations or potential conflicts, and therefore peace, but they have made the world globally a more insecure place than it was before.

Among those who have studied this dilemma in depth is the famous American professor and international relations theorist John J. Mearsheimer, who believes in an article published in 1993 that 'nuclear proliferation sometimes promotes peace' and that 'overall, the best formula for maintaining stability in post-Cold War Europe is for all the great powers —including Germany and Ukraine— to have secure nuclear deterrents and for all the minor powers to be non-nuclear' (Mearsheimer, 1953: 50). Mearsheimer also tells us that 'in fact, nuclear weapons often diminish international violence, and Ukrainian nuclear weapons would be an effective deterrent against a Russian conventional attack or nuclear blackmail' (Ibid.: 57).

His article suggests a debate on a very delicate issue: the right balance between peace with insecurity, versus an increased risk of conventional warfare, which can also take a heavy toll. This dilemma raises the question of what would have happened if, in the process of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the strategic nuclear weapons that were deployed in Ukraine in 1994 (the American author puts the number at 1,656) had not been transferred to Russia. An unanswered question, but one that, as we said in the opening lines of this article, is worth asking. Would the Russian invasion have taken place? Would Moscow have used nuclear blackmail? Would there have been a nuclear conflict?

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