SECURITY & STRATEGY

& SPECIAL ISSUE

Recent Developments *in the* Security Environment

ROYAL HIGHER INSTITUTE
150-year *think tank*
for DEFENCE

March 2021

CENTRE *for* SECURITY *and* DEFENCE STUDIES
SECURITY & DEFENCE

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The aim of the research conducted in this field is to build up knowledge and improve the comprehension of the political, military, institutional, technological, socio-economic and ideological trends that have had or are likely to have an impact on the rise, development, management and consequences of crises and conflicts in the world.

The CSDS also offers an interdisciplinary platform aimed at supporting the reflection of the decision-makers in their task, giving room for debates with experts and developing the cooperation between institutions and researchers interested in security and defence issues.

The CSDS fulfils its missions among others through the publication of studies and articles and the organisation of events such as evening conferences and colloquia. Through its activities, the CSDS ensures the link between actors and experts in the field of security and defence, and civil society.

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Table of content

Introduction

Maarten DANCKAERT

The June 2016 Strategic Vision for Defence characterised the Belgian Security Environment up to 2030 as "*continuously uncertain and more complex*". The COVID-19 pandemic that the world has been facing for one year now is a rare circumstance that does not only confirm this statement, but also incites us to regularly think about the state of the world. The Centre for Security and Defence Studies (CSDS) of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence (RHID) has seized this opportunity to conduct an analysis of the recent developments in the security environment.

For this purpose, the CSDS researchers, based on their expertise and research lines, have studied the pertinent elements and the recent events that have had an impact on our security environment. Several main trends and their consequences for Belgium and the Belgian Defence have been identified and recommendations are formulated for the policy-makers at all concerned levels. Indeed, this academic analysis aims, as input for further policy preparation, to provide policy-makers, military personnel, diplomats and analysts with insight into recent developments in the international security environment and its impact on our country, our alliances and our international commitments.

This *Security & Strategy Special Issue* is divided into **three thematic and five region-oriented chapters**. An introductory chapter discusses the main trends. Strategic and institutional evolutions in Belgium and within NATO and the EU are discussed in the chapter *Security and defence architecture*. The chapter *Threats, challenges and strategic responses* examines the importance of hybrid threats, cyber attacks, climate change, emerging healthcare challenges and strategic communication. The chapter *Future critical technologies* takes a look at the "New Space" phenomenon, the development of a new generation of combat aircraft and the quest for advanced Artificial Intelligence as spearheads of innovation in the field of defence technology. The chapter *The United States of America* sheds light on national security crises during the Trump administration. The chapter *Russia and the Eastern neighbourhood* is devoted to Russia's foreign and defence policy and its strategic goals in the eastern neighbourhood. The chapter *Asia* studies the rise of China as a superpower and its increasing influence in the rest of Asia, and the chapter *Middle East & North Africa* takes a closer look at the major events in this region. The chapter *Sub-Saharan Africa* focuses on the main political and security issues in the Sahel and Central Africa. Finally, the most important recommendations are discussed in the Conclusion.

A Strategic Review of the Security Environment at the dawn of the 21st century's third decade

The year 2020 will go down in history books as the year of the "SARS-CoV-2", COVID-19" "coronavirus pandemic". This pandemic runs as a sort of "guiding thread" through this analysis of the security environment. Therefore, and where possible, we will make sure to reflect on the impact and (likely) consequences of the health crisis for our stability and security. This virus has painfully highlighted that, in times of crisis, international and European solidarity has often proven to be absent, solidarity that our country nevertheless greatly needs and to which it must proactively contribute in order to safeguard our vital national interests in geopolitically uncertain times.

The challenges facing our country, its fellow EU Member States and transatlantic allies are everything but simple. Besides a persistent threat of radicalisation, violent extremism and international terrorism, our country and Europe have increasingly been confronting cyber threats and disinformation campaigns that threaten our political and electoral stability as well as our economic and industrial potential. Furthermore, with the Brexit, a former US President who until recently acted often unilaterally, an assertive Russia and an emerging, getting ever stronger China have created much uncertainty and a complicated geopolitical landscape.

It is clear that the balance of power in the world is shifting and our transatlantic relations have come under pressure. It remains to be seen what foreign and security policy the newly elected US President will pursue and to what extent he will give new energy to multilateralism and the transatlantic Alliance. In the meantime, the European Union and Russia are still tangled up in a difficult balance in their shared neighbourhood. While China strives towards offering the world an alternative leadership model, the Middle East and Africa remain turbulent regions, burdened by conflicts, jihadism, global warming, explosive population growth and the migration challenges that result from it.

And Belgium…? Belgium and the Belgian Defence also have to confront serious challenges. In order to safeguard our subjects, our democracy, our values, our critical infrastructure and our (inter)national interests, our country must invest in its personnel and its equipment and keep up with new and future technological developments. According to our newly appointed Chief of Defence, Admiral Michel Hofman, the Belgian Defence needs to strike a healthy balance between four domains: the introduction and commissioning of new acquired equipment; the readiness of our capabilities; our international operations and our staffing situation.[1]

Belgium is and wants to remain a reliable international partner. As the presentation of the Operational Plan of our new Minister of Defence, Mrs Ludivine Dedonder – the first woman to hold this position – has shown, the Belgian Defence therefore anticipates two important priorities in 2021: aid to the Nation and civil society, and the commitment of our armed forces in military and humanitarian operations abroad.[2]

Although Operation Vigilant Guardian is still phasing out, the Belgian Defence aims to keep on contributing to society and domestic civil protection, as well as increasing its support to the Nation, by playing an important role in the fight against the coronavirus. As regards our international commitments, it has been decided to prioritise in 2021 our military presence in the Baltic States and the Middle East, to possibly increase our commitment and strengthen our partnerships in the Sahel region, and to withdraw our troops from Afghanistan.

In a European and NATO context, Belgium will continue to engage in deterrence and collective defence missions on the eastern border with Russia. The Belgian Navy will also be deployed in the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf to monitor maritime safety and (energy) supply. In cooperation with other European countries, our military presence in the Middle East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa

will be maintained in the name of the fight against terrorism. For example, it will be considered to expand our deployment in Mali in the context of the European military Task Force *Takuba*, which will advise, assist and accompany the Malian armed forces, as well as to participate in the French-led counter-terrorism operation *Barkhane* targeting Islamist insurgents in the Sahel.

The purpose of this *Special Issue* is to offer a better understanding of the challenges our country is faced with. The prominent elements of the security outlook that will be discussed in the following chapters will first be briefly introduced hereunder.

Global health challenges

Although several countries were already able to start with their first vaccination campaigns as from December, 2020 is the year in which a global pandemic held the world in its grasp. The COVID-19 pandemic, an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, highlights the vulnerability of our world characterised by globalisation. Even though several experts had warned us beforehand, this crisis is the result of humanity's entry into an era of high pandemic risk associated to the degradation of our ecosystems. Moreover, for the first time since the founding of the United Nations, a pandemic does not cause an international consensus.

Not only infectious diseases that spread worldwide and can develop into **pandemics** pose new health challenges, but other consequences of human behaviours – global warming and **climate change** – have serious global aftermaths. They cause extreme weather phenomena (including drought, hurricanes, floods and desertification) that are able to put significant pressure on water, food and energy supplies and economic livelihoods with malnutrition, heat-related stress and the spread of diseases, as well as an increase of conflicts, displacement and (forced) migration as a result. Not in the least Africa is one of the most vulnerable continents to climate change.

The effects of climate change and global pandemics exacerbate pre-existing problems, weakening the resilience of weak states and causing public unrest. Likewise, authoritarian regimes and non-state actors such as nationalist and jihadist agitators abuse vulnerable populations to exploit or pressurise them or to gain state control of dissident political voices.

These and other global health challenges are putting Europe and our country under pressure. For example, we are still struggling to find a (collective European) answer and/or solution for the large migration of refugees and immigrants to Europe. Furthermore, the coronavirus crisis has highlighted the vulnerability of our health sector, the shortcomings of our crisis management and our lack of autonomy. Belgium and Europe turned out to be particularly dependent on China for the supply of mouth masks, laboratory reagents and other pharmaceutical materials. Paradoxically enough it is even possible that the impact of the coronavirus on the world economy could have facilitated China to become the world's largest economic power.

Shifting balance of power

According to John Ratcliffe, a prominent Republican and member of the Trump administration who heads the American intelligence community as Director of National Intelligence, China is ready for world dominance. In an opinion contribution to the Wall Street Journal, he explains why he considers China to be the biggest threat to the US and to freedom and democracy in the world since the Second World War. In the past, after the end of the Cold War, especially Russia and international Islamist jihadi-terrorism were considered the greatest security challenges to the US and to world peace, but in the wake of the Trump administration, and in the words of intelligence director Ratcliffe, it seems that "*Beijing intends to dominate the U.S. and the rest of the planet economically, militarily and technologically*".[3]

By means of economic espionage, China would succeed in copying American technology, competing Western companies out of the world market and increasingly dominating the US. Ratcliffe's vehement wording at the end of the Trump-legislature raises questions about its true intentions, but it is clear that the US feels threatened by China and is concerned about the shift of global power in the direction of Asia. The question therefore arises as to how the newly elected President, Joe Biden, will wish to deal with China during his term in office and whether his strategy towards China will differ much from that of his predecessor.

China's emergence as a global superpower

In recent decades, China has developed into a global economic superpower through exponential growth and is expected to surpass the US as the largest global economy in the coming years. This trend has been accompanied by a continuous shift in Beijing's position and ambitions in and towards Asia and the international system in general. Supported by increasing technological and financial capabilities, China is also increasingly striving to enforce its growing global geostrategic interests. President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the main conceptual umbrella for numerous projects on nearly all continents aimed at building economic networks centred on China.

In doing so, China actively promotes its economic interests and attempts to further develop its vision and its power potential by expanding its influence in its regional neighbourhood and beyond. This is followed by a gradual but rapid and unprecedented build-up of military capabilities to defend these interests in its environment and beyond. Although still far behind the US, China is already the second largest military spender in the world today. Due to its scale and magnitude, China's cumulative political, economic and military rise is changing both regional and global geopolitics, including strategic alliances and the balance of power in East and Southeast Asia, in a way that is leading to major shifts in the international security environment.

The Sino-Russian rapprochement fits within this logic. Russia's growing dependence on Chinese capital to advance its development plans, along with the increasing re-militarisation of its territories, attests to an increasingly relevant but ambivalent dynamic of their partnership, with one side (Moscow) being more dependent on the other (Beijing). Moreover, tensions with the West and negative trends in the commodity market may force Russia to adopt an increasingly submissive attitude towards China. Although a Sino-Russian competition has not yet begun, in the long term there is a feeling that Beijing must prepare for a withdrawing Russia, and it is already preparing for that moment.

Nonetheless, for the time being both countries will continue to cooperate, for instance against American hegemony. In this way, China expands its security footprint, becomes more active and closes the gap with the US (and Russia). The increased arms trade between the two countries, including the sale of Russia's most advanced weaponry to the Chinese military, could have far-reaching consequences for the balance of power in several hotspots in the region Asia-Pacific and the rest of the world, with direct consequences for the countries in the region, but also for the US, and to a lesser extent for the EU.

The consequences of the rise of China for the military orientation and global leadership of the US are significant. In a context of worldwide competition, the strategic implications for Europe are just as important. European countries are therefore increasingly aware of being challenged by China. While they used to see China primarily as a partner, the EU now considers China more and more as a "systemic rival". Nevertheless, a comprehensive European vision for China is still not in preparation. Considering what is at stake, China's "hegemonic" ambitions for world domination should proactively be incorporated in our strategic monitoring and security forecasts. The same is true for Russia's increased assertiveness in our common neighbourhood, the Middle East and Africa.

Assertive Russia

Twenty years after Vladimir Putin's assumption of power, Russia has entered the third decade of the 21st century in a turbulent geopolitical environment resulting from the strategic choices and internal developments of the past decade in a familiar mix of change and continuity. The same applies to European security, intended to remain closely linked to the evolutions in its eastern and northern sectors. The Russian-Ukrainian crisis has forced Western states to reconsider their neighbourhood policies and their strategic priorities against the background of budgetary difficulties and new needs for regional military cooperation and other comprehensive partnerships.

Major developments in Russian security and foreign policy over the past decade reveal a strong link between the type of foreign policy that Moscow pursues and the domestic ideological foundations of today's Russia and the instruments for legitimising the regime, which probably will continue to be used in the coming years. An increasingly weaker Russian economy results in Putin tightening his grip on power. Years of economic policy aimed at protecting the country from external shocks have failed to change the basic characteristics of the Russian economy – highly dependent on state investments for growth and on fossil fuels for revenues. Ironically enough, Putin's "*Fortress Russia*" is economically greatly dependent on the rest of the world.

Nostalgia for the Soviet Union's mighty military past and pride in Russia's recent military successes in Ukraine and Syria have taken an important place in Russian identity politics. Russia's diplomatic and military might as well as international influence and assertiveness in neighbouring regions, the Middle East and Africa, may be a source of pride, but Russian aspirations for a normalised or closer relationship with the West, and some other close neighbours, remain intangible for the time being. Despite this, problems caused by sanctions, economic stagnation, corruption and limited capabilities of the defence industry have not prevented the Kremlin from modernising the armed forces. Russia has renewed its strategic nuclear deterrence and significantly improved its conventional warfighting capabilities. Moreover, the understanding has grown that warfare is evolving from traditional combat domains towards the aerospace and the cyber domain.

Transatlantic relations under pressure

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) "celebrated" its 70th birthday in 2019. However, it was a birthday in a minor key for some. French President Emmanuel Macron even went as far as declaring NATO "brain dead". Several causes lay at the origin of the confidence crisis between both sides of the Atlantic. President Trump began to relinquish the US leadership role as a world power by reversing his country's international commitments, reducing its dedication to the UN and even hinting at leaving NATO at one point. The trade deficit between the EU and the US, Europe's pursuit of more "strategic autonomy" and major collective European military procurement programmes that appear to be to the detriment of the US defence industry created in Washington – or at least in the camp of the Trump administration – the perception that Europe is untrustworthy and disloyal.

On the other hand, not a single European state wanted to give up NATO. Notwithstanding the fact that deterring Russia remains the primary role of the Atlantic alliance according to its European member countries (and the EU), Europe is no longer the United States' primary concern, because of the competition with China. Already during President Barack Obama's second term in office, US foreign and security policy made a pivotal shift from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region. With his "doctrine of responsibility", Obama pointed out to European NATO member countries their responsibility to share costs, burdens and risks more fairly within the alliance, thus creating the expectation that, by 2024, member countries would spend a minimum of 2% of their GDP on their national defence budgets and

expressing the desire to change the finance model of the treaty organisation's operational working budget to reduce the US contribution.

Under Trump, not only did the budgetary issue come more prominently to the surface, but his electoral promises, economic priorities and "interventionist listlessness", as well as his unilateral withdrawal from the INF Treaty[4] and the Iran nuclear deal have put further pressure on the relations between the US and the other NATO member countries. The expansion of the alliance to the east, with the possible accession of Ukraine and Georgia, also posed delicate issues. In addition, mounting tensions between NATO allies Greece and Turkey, a Turkish headstrong intervention in Northern Syria with which the US appears to have betrayed its Kurdish allies, and the reluctance of many European countries to respond to the US demand to repatriate their FTFs from Syrian and Iraqi detention camps have only exacerbated the breach of confidence. Recently, the White House even threatened to withdraw US troops from Germany and to relocate them to Poland.

Despite the growing awareness in Europe of the necessity for a common security culture and of a European technological sovereignty against a background of strategic autonomy, each European state remains too dependent on its own security objectives, its own strategic culture and often on its own geographic position. For the time being, NATO therefore remains the cornerstone of transatlantic security and there is no question of a "de-Americanised" treaty organisation. Besides, in December 2020 and January 2021, despite a veto (threat) by President Trump, a bill was passed by both Democrats and Republicans, and with an overwhelming majority of votes in both Houses of the US Congress, that not only approved the US defence budget for 2021, but also adopted measures to prevent the planned troop withdrawal from Germany.

As transatlantic relations have come under increasing pressure in recent years, there has been a growing sense of the need for Europeans to take up both more responsibility in the alliance as well as to strive towards more European Defence. The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) are two examples in this regard which, while being mistrusted by the Trump administration, could provide a suitable way for EU Member States within NATO to strengthen the treaty alliance on our side of the Atlantic. They could, as it were, form a European "pillar" within NATO and enhance transatlantic solidarity.

New threats

The "hybrid attacks" aim to exploit the vulnerabilities of states and prevent a coordinated response from the international community by using a variety of practises such as cyber attacks, disinformation, sabotage or "proxy war" in a highly integrated manner. When we talk about "**hybrid threats**", we invariably think of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, Russian interference in elections and referenda or disinformation campaigns that Russia and China are accused of conducting during this coronavirus crisis in order to polish their own image. However, this recent societal development is also accompanied with a more or less pronounced paramilitarisation of non-state actors who also use hybrid methods by combining classical guerrilla tactics with more innovative techniques.

In addition to disinformation, cyber attacks have been one of the most likely to occur risks in recent years. Cyber attacks and cyber espionage are increasingly being used offensively to strive for political and military hegemony. Military conflicts are therefore getting more difficult to imagine without a focus on ICT. Given the vulnerability of our societies and critical infrastructure to cyber attacks, controlling our cyber space and securing our IT systems both are essential problems that require Belgium, the EU and NATO to make from "**cyber space**" a new fourth operational domain – in addition to land, air and sea – in which governments, armed forces and private companies will have to join forces.

Beside "cyber space", "**space**" is an essential part of the new field of operations, also characterised by the role of private actors. In fact, space is a sector in which US authorities are attempting to reform the military-industrial complex inherited from the Cold War into a technological base focused on the private sector. American "New Space" companies should be considered as new instruments aimed at guaranteeing the United States' first place in international space issues – and thus its lead over China (and Russia) – by counteracting every form of competition from outside its territory.

Other forms of new critical technological advancements include the development of a new generation of combat aircraft and the quest for advanced Artificial Intelligence (AI). Given that advances in **AI** could radically change the way in which military operations and future wars will be waged, and thus might be able to determine the future of international politics, a real race has taken off in recent decades for control of its constitutive technologies. AI is therefore at the heart of a global competition between the great powers. The US, China and Russia are all trying to guard their advancements and leadership in this sector, whereas in Europe the EU Member States seem to progress in scattered formation.

Other protracted conflict grounds

The US "*New Deal*" for the Middle East "peace plan" appears at first glance, at least in the very short term, to bring some more peace to the MENA region. However, it remains to be seen what it will ultimately deliver and how the populations of various Arab-Muslim states, including the people of Iran and the Palestinian people, will respond to the increased pressure and tensions in their region. Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya remain active war zones where regular state armies, local proxy militias, jihadist movements, ethnic minority self-defence groups and international intervention forces are entangled in a bloody vice. Moreover, the countries that succeeded in largely evading the domino effect of the so-called "Arab Spring" in 2011 now seem to be hit by a new wave of socio-political unrest.

The security landscape in North and Central Africa has deteriorated significantly since the beginning of the popular (Arab) uprisings ten years ago. The transfer of power has been and continues to be difficult and sometimes rivalling, sometimes cooperating terrorist, jihadist and militant Salafist groups compete for power and undermine the regional stability in protracted conflicts that continue to spread in the region. Witness to this is the Sahel, where the threat of jihadist groups affiliated with the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb continues to spread, which increasingly requires our attention and efforts in order to prevent further humanitarian catastrophes and the export of the threat to our region.

Despite steady economic growth, many populations in Africa continue to be faced with extreme poverty and inequality, failed governance, democratic deficit, corruption, illegal exploitation, smuggling and limited access to education and health care. Lingering internal conflicts in different countries also continue to cause violence and displacements of population. Notwithstanding the deployment of large UN peacekeeping and EU training missions in the Sahel, the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa, overall security conditions have not significantly improved for local populations. Contrariwise, prolonged foreign military and peacekeeping presence has increasingly fuelled local discontent in both the DRC and Mali, as recent protests in both countries remind us. On the other hand, UN personnel are increasingly becoming the target of attacks, Mali being the country where the UN has suffered the greatest loss of lives.

Security and defence architecture

André DUMOULIN

<u>Trends</u>

The international environment remains most uncertain and complex. European geopolitics itself is crossed by heterogeneous trends. On the one hand, the propensity of states to guarantee their vital and national interests, sometimes ignoring solidarity when risk-taking is being considered, or at the beginning of the coronavirus health crisis. On the other hand, a timid but real willingness to overcome divisions and egoism in order to get ahead with the construction of the Community despite or thanks to Brexit. And, as if it were not complicated enough, an American policy that appears to be very erratic (with the outgoing President, Donald Trump) or uncertain (with the President taking office, Joe Biden) on a transatlantic level and in the field of arms control, a Chinese orientation playing on the duality "partner/adversary" with Europe, as well as a Russian "imperial renaissance". Added to this is Turkey's desire to play an important role in regional and Mediterranean geostrategy, with certain belligerent overtones despite its status as a member of the Atlantic Alliance. More generally, cyber threat becomes more widespread and has consequences for the internal political and electoral stability of certain European states, requiring both a reform of intelligence services and defence actions in this virtual space. Finally, the protection and resilience of critical infrastructures are considered important issues.

While the fragmentation of the world is definitely on its way, regional security dynamics are becoming more visible as Asia's weight continues to grow in its strategic and commercial dimensions. In this context, the challenges for the security and defence architecture in Europe are numerous. The southern periphery of Europe is facing the challenge of migration, the war in Libya and security issues in the Levant. In addition, the jihadist threat in the Sahel is not diminishing and remains a challenge for the stabilisation of the area, a stabilisation that is nevertheless necessary to prevent this threat from spreading to our countries. These are security but also socio-economic issues concerning weak states suffering – but sometimes fuelling – internal and tribal conflicts, against a backdrop of international crime. Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and the Gulf of Aden, as well as rising tensions in the Persian Gulf, also affect Western interests.

There is definitely a need to intervene at the same time in a military, good governance and development framework, knowing the strong interactions between internal and external security, but also between climate, demographic, energy challenges and access to resources (water, agriculture, fisheries, and rare metals).

In the NATO area, the stakes remain high, particularly in terms of the multifaceted response to the Russian challenge. The Russian-Ukrainian crisis has forced Western states to review NATO's neighbourhood policy, its strategic priorities against a backdrop of budgetary difficulties and the new need for regional military cooperations and other in-depth partnerships (Baltic States, Nordic region). The question of enlargements was also raised, whether it concerned the EU or NATO, between "freezing" and a "more cautious strategy" towards Georgia and Moldova.

As at the time of the Harmel Report, the current urgency rests both on a strategic US-NATO reassurance and on the will to relaunch the dialogue with Moscow. With all the difficulty of a perception that is at times reminiscent of the former overtones of the "new Europe" (worried and Atlanticist Central and Eastern European countries) in the face of the "old Europe" (the more nuanced and cautious Western Europe). The objective for the Alliance is to strengthen the discourse on deterrent reassurance (Article 5, military manoeuvres, mobility plan, return of doctrinal reflections on

grey zones, hybrid warfare, major commitments and high-intensity warfare) as well as to guarantee a lasting peace on the continent, all the more so as the security challenges are similar.

The neighbourhood is common to both entities and each one has economically, politically and strategically much to lose in the persistence of tensions. The cursor has yet to be found, whereas the war of words and communiqués often biases the analysis and the search for a lasting peace for the whole continent: Russia is still a European country and its strategy may also be aimed at anchoring itself in the European commercial and economic sphere. Ultimately, it is up to political decision-makers and diplomacy to make "neutral" Ukraine a bridge and not a wall. NATO member countries must not allow themselves to be drawn into an already latent confrontation between Washington and Moscow on the one hand and between Washington and Beijing on the other hand. Moreover, French-Greek-Turkish tensions in the eastern Mediterranean have forced NATO, under the impetus of Paris, to launch a reflection at the end of 2020 on a new multilateralism (a reflection also underway within the EU, scheduled for spring 2021) and on the need to improve diplomatic consultations between member states. Beyond this reflection, it is not impossible that a re-founding of the Alliance could lead to a strengthening of the European pillar within it, with the possible consequence of a playing down of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). There are several scenarios here.
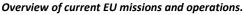

Force protection specialists from the Belgian Air Component guard a freight train being loaded with material of the US 1st Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Hood, Texas, during Operation Fort to Port 2020 in the Port of Antwerp. This operation is part of the NATO-exercise Atlantic Resolve to enhance NATO's collective security and deterrence posture. (Image: Belgian Air Force – Jozef Vanden Broeck)

While NATO has been able to "benefit" from the crisis in terms of visibility and protection, the EU – having underestimated the need to prepare for military threats – will also have to build, with its CSDP, a genuine security and defence strategy worthy of the name, through what is hoped to be a non-competitive complementarity. In the meantime, each European state remains dependent on its own security objectives, its strategic culture and its geographical positioning, even if for the Russian and Turkish dossiers the harmonisation of a multi-faceted response (dialogue, economic sanctions, etc.) is underway. Nevertheless, an analysis of official discourse and studies by European think tanks

in 2019 and 2020 reveals an awareness of the need for a common security culture and European technological sovereignty, against a background of strategic autonomy and reflections on the evolving notion of power. The questioning of the unanimity rule in foreign policy and the idea of a European Security Council are also expressions of this awareness. Moreover, even with the new President Joe Biden, the United States would henceforth refuse the title of "world policeman" with which it has long been associated.

The EU's second window of opportunity on strengthening CSDP seems to be partly bearing fruit, although there are already some delays. It concerns an approved European Defence Fund – but reduced to 7.014 billion euros (2021-2027) –, military mobility (1.5 billion) and the European Peace Facility (5 billion). The Coordinated Annual Review of Defence (CARD) associated with the capability area is on track. Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) (its first three phases, at least) has been launched and is continuing with revisions and other readjustments, as some states are struggling to meet their commitments. The question of the participation of third countries in these projects is under discussion. In addition to these points, it is expected that the EU will improve the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) and promote the member states' numerical resilience as well as its industrial independence in the pharmaceutical (COVID effect) and space sectors.

Overview of current EU missions and operations.
(Source: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/430/military-and-civilian-missions-and-operations_en)

The ultimate objective is to have the will but also the capacity to act as a stabilising pole and a global player in crisis management. In order to finalise the future CSDP strategic and political document, it was necessary, upstream, to have an analysis of the threat at European level (in the framework of the "Strategic Compass" proposed in June 2020 and due to be finalised at the beginning of 2022) while adopting external action concerning the prevention of terrorism and violent extremism. The European Commission's new DG Defence Industry and Space (DEFIS) is operational and the EEAS is still dealing with crisis management in a shared decision-making space. However, not all EU missions are effective

and means are often lacking because they are still dependent on the goodwill of capitals. As for the Battlegroups, which have never been used, they attest to the political difficulties in the differentiated perception of threats by the member states, in addition to the obstacles put in place by London before Brexit. EU's "survival" today rests on the renewed and strengthened notion of "solidarity", while moving from words to deeds. In this respect, scenarios for the future of CSDP are legion, including the return of the debate on enhanced cooperation along the lines of the European Intervention Initiative (EII) launched by the French President.

Implications for Belgium

Belgium's level of defence spending remains among the lowest ones with 0.93% of GDP (2019), despite the planned catch-up in terms of major equipment (thirty-four F-35 aircraft, four MQ-9B SkyGuardian UAVs, several A-400M aircraft, 2 new frigates, 6 new anti-mine warfare vessels, 442 French wheeled armoured vehicles for its motorised capacity). The health crisis and the government's priorities could weaken or delay the alignment of the Belgian Defence budget with the European average of 2% by 2024, a budgetary target considered as still unreachable according to the monitoring committee under the Wilmès Ministry. It should be recalled that the former Chief of Defence, General Marc Compernol, pleaded in July 2020 for defence spending to reach 1.28% in 2024. However, the primary objective remains to maintain Belgium's relevance in international missions and operations, as well as its influence in the decision-making process, and to make concrete efforts in terms of fair sharing of the common burden.

It is in order to be in line with this objective that we have to understand Belgium's willingness to take part in NATO exercises (via the Enhanced Air Policy Measures mission) and in the air policing mission in the Baltic States, its contribution commitments in the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) and in the framework of the NATO Readiness Action Plan, as well as its participation in Operation Sea Guardian (Mediterranean) and Operation Resolute Support (Afghanistan), involving a gradual and conditional withdrawal in coordination with the German partner.

In the EU framework, Belgium is stepping up its participation in EUTM Mali and is considering sending a company in 2021 for Operation Barkhane (Mali). Within the UN framework, participation is redirected towards supporting the training of UN units in Mali (MINUSMA). Finally, as part of the international coalition against Daesh, Belgian F-16s are back in Jordan from October 2020. All these efforts are aimed at maintaining solidarity and bilateral (in Niger, for example) and multinational cooperation in a "win-win" game, while at the same time seeking to guarantee national security through anti-terrorist measures and territorial defence, the role of the reserves and Benelux cooperation.

Belgian diplomacy, supported by a national Comprehensive Approach, still has to integrate the "defence" niche, with all the difficulty of combining political support for European defence, the importance of the UN Charter and a very cautious "strategic culture", against a background of public opinion that is just as cautious. It is also a question of maintaining international security (transport, flow of goods, cyber defence, protection of nationals) in order to guarantee the freedom, security, well-being and prosperity of Belgians. These elements are set out in the Strategic Vision to be pursued (with an addendum in progress for the horizon 2024), which aims to maintain a fair balance between the key missions of "collective defence" and "collective security", but which will have to be adopted by the next Belgian Government.

The difficulty lies in being able to take up several challenges at the same time: recruiting and retaining personnel (recruitment of 10,000 soldiers over the next six years), transforming the Motorised Brigade, getting combat units and combat support to work together, working on the joint forces, modernising infrastructure and strengthening Army-Nation links.

On this subject, Belgium's defence policy will have to examine the weight of its medical component, the place it devotes to the aid to the Nation and its future positioning in the September 2019 "Defence Mission Statement and Strategic Framework for Conditioning". In 2020, some have pointed out that in the Strategic Vision for Defence (2016-2030), "aid to the Nation is virtually invisible. It is no longer included as a priority, one of the central axes, one of the major pillars of defence policy"[5]. Today, however, the health response must be thought of on an international level, as a common cause. The Covid crisis is clearly revealing the importance to be given to public services and aid to the Nation, which was confirmed by the new federal Government at the end of September 2020 and in the "Policy Statement" of the new Belgian Defence Minister, Ludivine Dedonder (4 November 2020).

Recommendations

- ✓ Preserving the Belgian Defence budget in order to create the conditions guaranteeing the operationality of the armed forces, the credibility of Belgian military commitments and the stability of personnel, while making it possible to launch the multi-year investment plan (without all the adjustment variables);
- ✓ Launching a global study on new major advances in bilateral and multinational cooperation, while playing on Belgian capacity niches and tending to maintain a balance between Benelux, French and German cooperations and their own specificities;
- ✓ Supporting collaborative complementarity between NATO and EU's CSDP;
- ✓ Strengthening the European pillar within NATO;
- ✓ Defining equipment choices taking into account the objectives of the European Defence Agency, civil-military synergies (the European Commission's dual-track approach), support for the Defence Industrial and Technological Base (DITB), the importance of struggling duplication and the need to aim for joint re-equipment as far as possible (depending on national timetables and other constraints);
- ✓ Strengthening capacities for strategic and doctrinal reflection and academic teaching within academic and professional training institutions, with a focus on human factors; acquiring the means to better understand asymmetric warfare and techno-guerrilla warfare, urban warfare (close combat and interweaving of forces, war in the midst of populations), cyber attacks, hybrid threats, internationalised civil wars and the dilemmas about so-called internal security;
- ✓ Strengthening the reserves and train it as a priority for internal anti-terrorist security and multifaceted aid to the Nation, in synergy with civil protection in a new interdepartmental vision;
- ✓ Maintaining and intensifying training missions for foreign armies in general and African armies in particular through bilateral cooperation (Operational Mentor and Liaison Team, OMLT);
- ✓ Tending to be proactive in participating in the two rapid reaction forces, *Battlegroups 1500* and the NATO Rapid Reaction Force (NRF);
- ✓ Drawing up a precise definition of risks and threats (see EU "Strategic Compass") on its own and then in concert with European partners, in order to associate a European strategic vision with it and try to "add" to it national multi-annual programme requirements;
- ✓ Re-launching the principle of drafting a European White Paper on EU security and defence in the spirit of the first attempt made during the Belgian Presidency in 2001;
- ✓ Studying the consequences of "shared sovereignty" in security and defence matters in priority non-strategic areas with a view to launching "prototype" integrated unit initiatives;
- ✓ Deepening up the content and functioning of the EU solidarity and mutual defence clauses on this subject;
- ✓ Taking initiatives within the European framework in order to gradually restore strategic stability in Europe by improving relations with Russia and the understanding with the United States of the Biden administration in a spirit of solidarity, dialogue, transparency and trust towards a return to multilateralism.

Threats, challenges and strategic responses

<div align="right">Estelle HOORICKX</div>

Hybrid threats

In recent years, "hybrid threats" or "hybrid warfare" practices have been identified as a major security challenge by the EU and NATO.[6] "Hybrid attack" aims at exploiting states' "vulnerabilities" and preventing a coordinated response by the international community, using, in a highly integrated manner, such diverse modi operandi as cyber attacks, disinformation, sabotage or "proxy warfare".[7] While hybrid warfare remains largely associated with the methods used by Russia in Ukraine, recent societal developments have been accompanied by a more or less pronounced paramilitarisation of non-state actors who also use hybrid modi operandi.[8] The "Islamic state" has thus had recourse to "techno-guerrilla", a hybrid mode of warfare combining some of the classic tactics of guerrilla warfare and others more innovative, such as drones, anti-tank missiles[9], the "strategy of influence" through social networks, the use of a proto-"air strategy", or the use of improvised chemical and biological weapons.[10]

Insofar as the fight against hybrid threats concerns state security, national defence and the maintenance of public order, Belgian authorities could usefully develop a centralised policy that takes into account vital national interests, Belgium's vulnerabilities, and the overall responses to hybrid campaigns. In addition, the Belgian state can only be encouraged to become more involved in projects aimed at improving knowledge of and resilience to "hybrid practices", as the Helsinki "European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats" pledges to do. The EU's "Friends of the Presidency" group (FoP), established in June 2017 and composed of experts from all EU countries, is also contributing to a better understanding of "hybrid threats" and to the development of appropriate strategies to prevent a hybrid campaign from degenerating into military conflict. Finally, it is imperative that the Ministry of Defence, which considers "hybrid warfare" as a first-rate challenge[11], continues to actively participate in the "Readiness Action Plan" (RAP), launched by NATO in 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea, in order to strengthen the collective defence of the Atlantic Alliance, particularly on the periphery of the territory of NATO countries.[12] Nevertheless, the evolving nature of hybrid threats must be taken into account.[13] Thus, particular vigilance must be exercised with regard to the method of "compromising" Western militaries in operation: indeed, there has been a resurgence in the exploitation of personal information, via social networks, of military personnel deployed in the Baltic States within the framework of NATO's enhanced forward presence.[14]
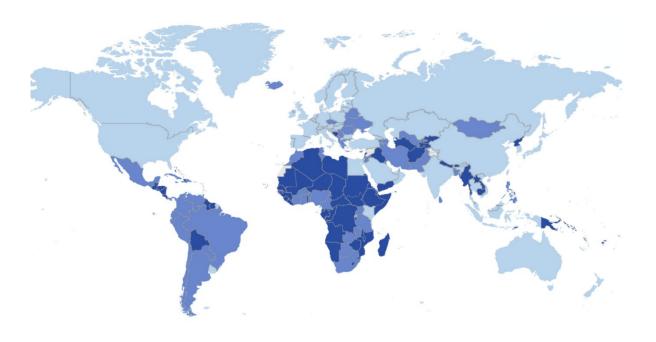
Cyber attacks

Over the past decade or so, cyber attacks have become one of the most likely risks worldwide, along with natural disasters, large-scale migration movements, inter-state conflicts and terrorist attacks.[15] One example is the recent publication by the United Kingdom of a parliamentary report on possible Russian interference in the campaign for the 2016 referendum leading up to the Brexit.[16] It also seems to be established that military conflicts can no longer be imagined without damaging information systems. The cyber attacks that struck Estonia in 2007 and Georgia in 2008 made significant use of information and communication technologies to achieve political and military hegemony, in particular through the use of offensive means. Even more worryingly, cyber attacks can now have effects as neutralising as those of conventional weapons, as demonstrated by the cyber aggression against Iran's nuclear programme in 2010. However, it must be stressed that cyber attacks create more of a perceptual effect than real violence. To date, no cyber attack has directly caused any deaths.[17]

The control of cyber space and the security of our information systems are essential issues for the future, given the vulnerability of our modern societies to cyber attacks.[18] The EU and NATO have recently recognised cyber space as a new area of operations, just as the land, air and maritime spaces.[19] However, the Euro-Atlantic cyber strategy faces a crucial challenge: the decisive role of states in protecting information systems and in providing a strategic response in the event of a cyber attack by one of them. On the one hand, states can play an important role in responding to a cyber attack on an allied country that might invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. On the other hand, an insufficiently zealous securing of national CIS is likely to undermine the performance of the fundamental tasks of the EU and NATO, a fact that also applies to private companies, which currently control a large part of cyber space.[20] Since the new coronavirus crisis, this securing of CIS has become even more crucial in view of the upsurge in cyber spying during videoconferences linked to teleworking.[21] Moreover, at the dawn of the deployment of 5G networks in Europe, the European Commission has recommended that States and operators assess the risks linked to cyber security, if they choose to turn to a provider with strong links to a non-European State.[22] Belgium's National Security Council has since decided to secure its future 5G infrastructure, and to limit de facto the mobile ultra-broadband equipment designed by Chinese telecom equipment manufacturers Huawei and ZTE.[23]

According to a 2017 study, which assesses the level of cyber security in the 28 EU Member States, Belgium is ranked 10th. National and international cooperation, but also the capacity for resilience and prevention are our country's strong points.[24] The current challenge for the Belgian authorities is to adjust the existing legal, organisational and technical means in order to have an appropriate response to cyber threats. Although the funds are available and the political will exists, it takes time to achieve such objectives: the revision of the national cyber strategy initially planned for the summer of 2018 should indeed take place during the current legislature. It would also be advisable to strengthen interdepartmental cooperation, centralised by the Centre for Cyber Security Belgium (CCB), in order to adjust more rapidly the national means available to counter cyber threats. Furthermore, cooperation should be strengthened in the field of training and research between the Belgian army on the one hand and the public and private sector on the other. Finally, and in accordance with its strategic objectives, Defence should be able to conduct offensive cyber actions from 2030 onwards. These offensive capabilities could, if necessary, be used during NATO operations and thus strengthen Belgium's military contribution on the international scene.[25]

The cyber strategy for Defence plans to strengthen Defence's resilience to cyber incidents, notably by developing a real "cyber hygiene culture" among its personnel. It also envisages the integration of cyber space as a new operational domain[26]. This cyber component of defence, whose operations "*may go beyond cyber defence and require a legal framework that will be created during this legislature*", will be established over the next five years, based on a "*reinforced cyber capacity within the Belgian General Intelligence and Security Service*", through investments and the recruitment of highly specialised cyber profiles[27]. In addition, it is also planned, "*provided that common ground is found between the partners concerned*", to make a "*greater use of the Defence cyber capability for the benefit of society*"[28].

The VCHOD for its part recommends, for cyber operations, "*an information dominance at the right place and at the right time*", considered "*crucial for mission assurance*"[29]. He adds that operations in cyber space "*can support the information function by providing both a secure platform for deploying information and the direct creation of effects that influence targeted audiences*"[30].
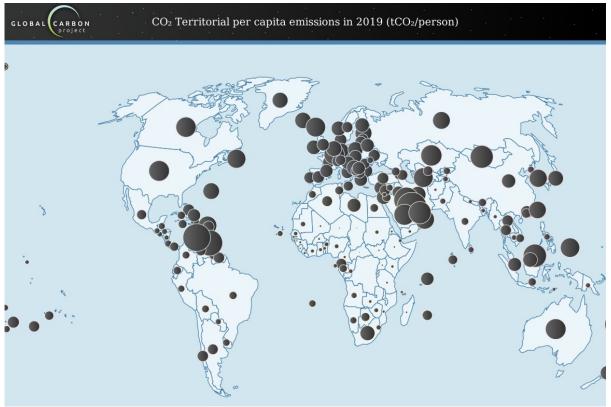
Heat map showing geographical commitment around the world. The colours in the heat map above indicate differences in the level of commitment with high, medium, and low scores in a range of colours from light blue (peak commitment) to dark blue (low commitment). Source: ITU (2018). Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI) 2018. Geneva: ITU. (p. 13). (Source map: UN.org)

Climate Change as a "threat multiplier"

The average global surface temperature, which has risen by more than half a degree since the 1970s (a rise of one degree since 1880), has led, over the last twenty years, to extreme and sudden climatic events (hurricanes, storms, heat waves and floods), melting ice, rising sea levels, plant and animal extinctions and the spread of disease, but also to population migrations.[31] According to some climate experts, the number of "environmental refugees" could increase globally from 42 million to 150 or 200 million by 2050 and the end of the century.[32] Climate change could therefore double the number of international migrants in the world, which currently stands at 272 million and represents 3.5% of the world's population.[33] In addition, the WHO predicts nearly 250,000 additional deaths per year between 2030 and 2050 because of malnutrition, malaria and heat stress.[34]

In its most recent report, published in 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) now considers it "extremely likely" – i.e. with more than 95% certainty – that the rise in the Earth's temperature since the middle of the 20th century is due to the build-up of man-made greenhouse gases, of which carbon dioxide and methane play a key role. Moreover, according to the same report, if we continue to increase greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, the rise in average temperatures could reach +2°C in 2100, according to the most optimistic scenario, or +4.8°C, according to the most pessimistic forecasts. The Paris agreement ("COP21") nowadays signed by 195 states (all but the United States) marks a leap forward in efforts to implement a global policy to combat global warming. However, the sum of the commitments made in Paris will not be enough to contain global warming between 1.5°C and 2°C. COP21 leads to at least +3°C. However, the benefits of strong and rapid action to reduce GHG emissions are undeniable, from both a human and an economic point of view. Natural disasters worldwide cost indeed 116.5 billion Euros per year, on average.[35] On this basis, as well as taking into account the recent IPCC report, the European Union has set the objective of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 in its March 2020 proposal for a regulation on climate.[36] Within this

15

framework and at the request of the European Commission, Belgium has adopted a climate plan for 2050, which provides for a reduction of between 85% and 87% of emissions from Belgian sectors, excluding large industries and aeronautics. The objective of carbon neutrality therefore remains, for the time being, out of reach in Belgium. The Belgian plan is nevertheless a minimum commitment that can be regularly updated.[37] From a very proactive point of view, the Covid-19 crisis could be a catalyst for substantial changes in terms of climate action.[38]

CO^2 emissions per country and per inhabitant (Friedlingstein et al., 2020: The Global Carbon Budget 2020, Earth System Science Data. Available at: Friedlingstein et al. 2020. Reproduced from the Global Carbon Atlas: www.globalcarbonatlas.org).

It is imperative that the armed forces include climate change in their practices. Firstly, international criminal law progressively and under certain conditions integrates environmental damage caused during armed conflicts into the scope of war crimes.[39] Secondly, many military sites, whether on the coast or inland, are exposed to natural hazards of increasing intensity and frequency. It is therefore not too early to plan for the protection of some military bases from rising water levels, where water levels are rising faster than average. Finally, although the equipment used by militaries is expected to operate in harsh environments with tolerances well beyond the climatic variations modelled by the IPCC, the performance of some systems is already affected by changes in the natural environment. The evolution of theatres of operations and missions could therefore lead to new logistics requirements.[40] Furthermore, the role of climate as a "threat multiplier", which accentuates existing health and security challenges, should be integrated into the geostrategic analyses produced by the military staff. Conflict specialists are particularly concerned about the exploitation by nationalist or jihadist agitators of the distress of populations that are victims of climate change. For the record, the Syrian conflict was preceded by several years of drought that led to a huge rural exodus.[41] In the coming years, it is also highly likely that the armed forces will have to become more involved in humanitarian operations and stabilisation missions linked to climate and demographic changes, particularly in the Sahel zone, part of the Middle East and Central Africa.[42] The EU is the world's leading migratory destination in terms of flows, ahead of the United States, and is facing an exceptionally large flow of refugees from these

regions: 626 000 asylum seekers in 2014 and 1.2 million in 2015 from Syria, Iraq, Libya, the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Somalia) and Afghanistan.[43] Although climate change is likely to have an impact on geopolitical developments, the causal links appear to be tenuous and any catastrophism in this area should be avoided. Indeed, while it is not unreasonable to claim that climate change may have an amplifying effect on instability in certain countries, particularly in Africa and the Middle East[44], this will not necessarily lead to an increase in the number of conflicts. The direct link between global warming and conflict is indeed far from clear. As for migration, assuming that it will increase due to resource scarcity and/or rising sea levels, there is no evidence that it is a direct cause of conflict.[45]

In her general policy note, the Belgian Defence Minister explains that the effects of climate change, particularly in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Sahel region, will have many impacts, particularly on issues such as migration and terrorism. She added that these regions "*deserve (...) our attention*"[46] (cf. General Policy Note, 2020). Furthermore, pursuant to the Defence "Environmental Policy", the "Environmental Charter" and the Strategic Vision for Defence, DGMR has drawn up a five-year environmental management plan 2018-2022, whose objectives correspond to European, federal and regional environmental policies. In concrete terms, Defence aims at the continuous improvement of its environmental performance; the application of environmental legislation and regulation; the engagement of partnerships with federal, regional and local public services, public interest organisations, universities and scientific institutes; and finally, the participation in the environmental policies of the UN, NATO and the EUMS[47].

Emerging health challenges

On 9 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced the discovery of a new coronavirus or "Covid-19" (infectious disease due to the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus) which appeared in China on 8 December 2019. The WHO declared an "international emergency" on 30 January and qualified the situation as a "pandemic" on 11 March 2020. In less than four months, the number of deaths linked to Covid-19 on American soil exceeds that of the Vietnam War.[48] "We are at war", even President Macron said at the start of the crisis. Scientists are talking about "microbial warfare".[49] On 29 December 2020, the WHO reported that more than 1.7 million deaths worldwide were linked to the new coronavirus.[50] Preceded by several explicit epidemic warnings, the Covid-19 crisis is the result of humanity's entry into an era of high pandemic risk linked to the degradation of ecosystems and long announced by epidemiologists. It is now important to integrate this observation and to measure its implications as soon as possible.[51] Rehabilitating the strategic role of states is a post-crisis priority. Indeed, globalisation increases the vulnerability of nations that do not take the necessary precautions to ensure their security in the broadest sense. This strategic autonomy must be built around various principles, such as reducing the dependence of states in the health field but also in the technologies of tomorrow, such as batteries or artificial intelligence.[52] The fight against epidemics will require the development of antivirals, vaccines, and protective equipment for health care workers, but also the establishment of stable and well-funded epidemic surveillance networks, transparent communication on emerging viruses, and the organisation of regular health exercises inspired by military manoeuvres.[53] While states must be able to protect their populations, the health response must also be international. The creation of a European RescUE programme, designed to tackle health risks, particularly by pooling resources, is a first step in this respect. It should nevertheless be noted that, for the first time since the creation of the United Nations, a pandemic does not lead to a consensus on the international scene. This situation is the result both of disagreements between states and of the lack of interest of some of them in any international leadership.[54]

Although contingency planning has developed strongly in recent years in Belgium, on the one hand under European pressure and on the other, following the crises that the country has experienced, two major problems were highlighted in the case of the Covid-19 health crisis: the difficulty of making

coordination and communication between the federated entities and the federal level operational, and communication with the networks of stakeholders at the height of the crisis. In addition, the government found itself having to improvise crisis management because the mechanisms in place were designed and dimensioned for other, smaller-scale crises. Finally, it is clear that the health sector has been under-funded and under-resourced for many years, as evidenced by the restructuring of the civil protection and health budget cuts. The recent health crisis has particularly highlighted the lack of capacity in rest homes, nursing homes and other health communities. Inseminating forward-thinking approaches into risk management institutions, procedures and public policies would help to better prepare societies for future crises that will have the same "out-of-the-box" characteristics as the Covid-19 pandemic.[55] While this crisis has demonstrated that Defence is capable of making its expertise and capabilities available to the Nation in a situation of emergency, "*it is clear*", as NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg points out, "*that we must further bolster the resilience of our societies, better [plan for] pandemics in the future, protect our critical industries and improve our business continuity planning*".[56] In this respect, the protection of military personnel on operations and their possible repatriation following a possible contamination must be taken into account to a greater extent by states but also by international organisations. In addition, civil-military medical cooperation could be strengthened. For example, the creation of an additional military hospital, in order to organise training or exercises bringing together military and civilian medical personnel, would enable better coordination. The pandemic strategy should also include the fight against threats related to emerging health challenges, such as disinformation (or "infodemic").[57]

The Belgian Defence Minister, L. Dedonder, wants "*support for the nation and civil society*" to become (once again) one of the two "*major operational priorities*" for Defence, along with "*involvement in military or humanitarian operations abroad*".[58]. Indeed, some people consider that the June 2016 Strategic Vision for Defence towards 2030 has "*virtually eliminated*" aid to the Nation.[59]

The Covid-19 pandemic has singularly increased national actors' awareness to the need for more integrated cooperation. Indeed, the defence of Belgian interests requires "a more global, interdepartmental and integrated approach". This should be based in particular on "participation in (inter)national exercises, the establishment of strategic stocks and related resources"[60]. In this context, the Belgian Defence "will contribute to the reflection about the provision of a crisis hospital function including the military hospital capacity"[61].

Strategic communication

The European Commission recently accused China and Russia of waging disinformation campaigns about the coronavirus pandemic, seeking to "*undermine democratic debate, exacerbate social polarisation and improve their own image*".[62] Commission Vice-President Věra Jourová added: "Lies about Covid-19 are literally costing lives". Indeed, disinformation can not only prompt people to ignore official health advice and engage in risky behaviour, but also have negative repercussions on democratic institutions as well as on the economic and financial situation of companies. Faced with this "infodemic", the EU is trying to develop a proactive and efficient strategic communication to promote reliable and verifiable health information and raise its citizens' awareness of the risks associated with disinformation.[63] Since the Ukrainian crisis, the EU has developed an action plan for countering disinformation and avoiding Russian interference in European and national elections. NATO is also developing strategies to counter Moscow's "information manipulation" vis-à-vis NATO's armed forces.[64] Non-state disinformation is also a matter of concern. Some indeed consider that the "virtual caliphate" of the Islamic state continues to exist despite the end of its "territorial caliphate" in Syria and Iraq, knowing that Daesh is still active and more elusive than ever on the cyber field, for the social networks allow propagandists to remain present on the web and to maintain the terrorist speech among the supporters of ISIS.[65]

In Belgium, the civil and military intelligence services – respectively the State Security and the Belgian General Intelligence and Security Service (GISS) – warn the authorities against an increase in disinformation campaigns conducted, in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, by foreign powers but also by extremist movements. State Security stresses in particular the importance of remaining vigilant with regard to foreign powers coveting strategic takeovers of companies in difficulty following the coronavirus crisis. This "corona diplomacy" is not necessarily in Belgium's interest, but rather aims to strengthen the strategic position of third countries that are trying to establish themselves on the European market.[66] In this context, the GISS has set up the Information Warfare platform, which works to counter the spread of disinformation, in close collaboration with State Security.[67] In its latest annual report, State Security called for a tripling of its budget and a doubling of its staff in order to be able to carry out its missions, particularly in the fight against espionage by third countries and the surveillance of radicalised individuals. Indeed, in collaboration with the GISS since 2018, it contributes to the fight against terrorism through a common information-sharing platform. In view of the increase in new security threats, it is imperative that intelligence services be refinanced. Indeed, Belgian State Security has had the National Security Council record that, as things stand now, it cannot keep up with certain threats. Among these, State Security denounced an increase in Chinese espionage in Belgium in order to "*acquire knowledge essential to certain military developments*".[68]

Future Critical Technologies

Alain DE NEVE

Until recently, globalisation has been considered as the main driver of international relations since the end of the Cold War. In such an environment mainly characterised by various forms of interdependence, it was alleged that, in spite of some areas entangled with endogenous forms of violence, technological progress could lead the world to some kind of virtuous convergence. Recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), big data, cognitive sciences, bio and nanotechnologies, autonomous devices or aerospace systems associated to new forms of innovation management led many observers to argue that more and more nations could reach a very similar level of industrial-technological development. However, such a view was largely optimistic and based on an oversimplified perception of technological innovation dynamics at a global level.

The attempt of the present contribution is to explore the global competitions to come in some critical technological domains. To be true, these races have already engaged since several decades and many indicators suggest that they will shape the future of the global military balance. The New Space phenomenon will be the first domain to be scrutinised in the light of the renewal of US space policy and the reforms that took place in Europe regarding the future of the launch sector. It will be argued that far from being the expression of a private/independent wave of investments emanating from companies coming from the digital world, the New Space industry is the instrument of a new US space policy determined to counter any form of competition coming from outside the US.

In the same vein, the competition engaged for the development of a new-generation combat aircraft on both sides of the Atlantic will be examined. These projects, currently in a technology demonstrator phase, are directed to counter A2AD strategies, combat aircraft programmes and hypersonic missile systems developed, among others, by Russia and China. New combat aircraft programmes will certainly see a reduction of the role played by human pilots. A big issue will be the place that should be reserved to pilots in a near future. Behind this debate, what is at stake is the role of advanced AI systems.

That debate leads us to our last illustration of the global races to come: the quest for advanced AI. Artificial intelligence (AI) characterises the ability of computers and machines to complete tasks previously performed by human cognition. A distinction is usually made between the so-called narrow AI from artificial general intelligence (AGI). Narrow AI is defined as discrete algorithms designed to execute a specific task, such as classifying a type of image or playing a game. An AGI, in contrast, could innovate on its own – not just executing a specific task but teaching itself to do new tasks in new categories of activities. Countries and companies around the world firmly believe that advances in AI will shape the future of international politics and military balance. China's National AI strategy advocates that leadership in AI will be critical to national power (this is a stance defended by Russia), and the US Congress created a National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence to ensure continued US leadership in that domain.

The "new space" phenomenon

At the time of its creation, SpaceX, a technological start-up founded by the young businessman Elon Musk, generated much mitigated reactions from the space community. Many leaders of the aerospace industry were highly sceptical about the chance of success of the project carried by the "just born" company. Yet, as it will be explained, the foundation of SpaceX is far from being a "spontaneous" phenomenon. To some extent, SpaceX can be considered as the logical result of years of tergiversations and uncertainty in the US space policy. The innovation model suggested by SpaceX

engineers was exactly designed in order to offer to the space industry a new breath at a time characterised by the entrance of new nations in the space community.

New tools, old recipes…

New Space is a somewhat misleading expression to point out a phenomenon that in many regards is part of a continuity.[69] Despite a very common view, the emergence of New Space does not stem from the desire of a few private firms to invest in a space sector that they would suddenly have perceived as a complementary source of income. The idea that the advent of companies such as SpaceX or Blue Origin would have been the founding moment of New Space must be brushed aside. The New Space phenomenon represents, to tell the truth, the ultimate avatar of an industrial diversification policy that the American authorities had initiated in the 1990s in order to convert the military-industrial complex inherited from the Cold War into a technological base oriented towards the civilian market. New Space companies have been able to take advantage of the American institutional support. In other words, American New Space companies have to be considered as the new instruments aimed at guaranteeing the US first rank in international space affairs.

Illustration: SpaceX performing a Propulsive Descent Landing with their Dragon capsule at the SpaceX Test Facility in McGregor, Texas.

NASA largely encouraged the private sector to design innovative solutions.[70] Public support for private initiative finds its roots in the USA's will not to rely anymore on the Russian Soyuz for refuelling the ISS. There have always been links between the private industrial sector and NASA. However, the Commercial Orbital Transportation Service initiated a change in the role the private sector would have to play. The private sector was no longer supposed to be just a subcontractor of NASA industrial projects but an initiator of programmes destined to integrate the budgetary framework set by the public sector. Indeed, it was mainly for financial considerations that New Space companies were involved in the US space policy: faced with the significant rise in transport costs imposed by the Russians (each seat inside the Soyuz rocket was billed $ 80 million to the United States), an alternative solution was urgently needed. Some launches have also focused on strategic projects for the United

States and, in particular, the U.S. Air Force. On September 7, 2017, the Falcon 9 rocket launched the USAF's X-37B space plane, an autonomous and reusable technological demonstrator. This launch ended with the successful return of the Falcon 9's first stage.

As we can see, New Space companies as a whole have benefitted from a reorientation of resources and objectives defined at the highest decision-making level. New Space is less the trigger for a process of transformation of US space policy than the product of the latter. Internationally, the desired objective remains unchanged: to counter competition from outside the United States.

What consequences for Europe?

Europe in Space still appears fragile in the face of the upheavals of New Space. For a long time, the European group benefitted from a situation of virtual monopoly for satellite launches. With the Soyuz medium launcher on the Guyanese launch pad and the Vega light launcher, Arianespace was able to cover the entire spectrum of orbits. These good times now seem to be over. However, Ariane's commercial success seems to have led Europe to push back the reforms that are essential to confront companies modelled on SpaceX. A striking example is the lack of conviction that guided Arianespace's response to NASA's call for tenders for the selection of a new ISS supply vessel. The ATV solution proposed by Arianespace revealed the European group's lack of enthusiasm for this market. Conversely, SpaceX, in search of as much public funding as possible, did not hesitate to work to ensure that its industrial solution could ultimately be chosen. This strategy allowed SpaceX to escape bankruptcy and helped the company to complete its programme portfolio.

Questions remain as to whether Europe has eventually seriously considered the challenges posed by New Space and SpaceX's aggressive pricing policy. Thanks to new and very simplified production methods and, admittedly, a high level of orders from NASA, SpaceX managed to present launch offers 30% below average market prices.

The proposal made by Arianespace in 2014 with the future Ariane 6 launcher was expressly aimed at reducing the cost of its launches. However, it appears that Ariane 6 will only be an interim solution that will evolve to become competitive in the long term. Admittedly, Arianespace intends to take a new step with the development of Ariane 6 Evolution from 2025. This prospect risks greatly complicating an already very tight forecast expenditure schedule. Indeed, European public authorities will simultaneously be faced with financing the development of Ariane 6, its technological upgrades, as well as the reusable versions equipped with the low-cost Prometheus engine. Such improvements will prove essential to face American competition. However, one of the weaknesses of European solutions in the field of launches lies in the gap between the real cost of a European launcher and the average market price (a gap long compensated by the EGAS programme during the Ariane 5 years). For the development of Ariane 6, Airbus and SAFRAN have undertaken to set up a new governance system to ensure the competitiveness of the European launcher of the future. The presentation of this solution had a first-rate strategic objective: to take the lead in the launcher sector to the detriment of the French CNES. However, it seems that manufacturers are always asking for more financial participation in support of exploitation to the detriment of technological innovation.

In addition, the European Space Agency has been slow to convince its member states about the need to invest in cheaper launchers. It was not until the ESA Ministerial Council of 2 December 2014, meeting in Luxembourg, that the ArianeGroup programme was launched with the company ArianeGroup (launch capacity of 5 tonnes in GTO orbit and 7 tonnes in sun-synchronous orbit) and Ariane 6.4 (GTO orbit carrying capacity of 11.5 tonnes). These launchers are expected to replace Ariane 5 from 2023. More specifically, Ariane 6.2 will replace the Soyuz launcher. Ariane 6's first flight, initially scheduled for September 2020, took the brunt of the coronavirus crisis. Its cancellation has not yet resulted in a new date.

The Race for a "sixth-generation" aircraft

Growing concerns have also arisen about the need for Europe to urgently engage itself into prospective reflections about the development of a future combat aircraft. The contestation of spaces, especially in the air, is accelerating through denial of access strategies (A2AD). A2AD has recently evolved to a combination of attacks and harassment techniques that are now taking over the new battlefields of space and cyber space domains. Aerospace defence has become far more complex and needs hybrid strategies that do not only rely on platforms and encompass more exotic technologies. All nations are currently working on innovative concepts and technological demonstrators aimed at countering adversary strategies in an unstable world. This phenomenon allows us to allege the advent of a new arms race for aerial systems, be they manned or unmanned. Several factors help explain this trend.

Firstly, the increasing density, variety, and resolution of sensors, coupled with powerful post-processing analysis techniques, will make it harder to enter contested airspace undetected. Being difficult to track and target (stealth) will remain valuable, but other elements of the survivability equation – such as speed, agility, electronic warfare, and sufficient combat mass to absorb attrition – may well regain some of their traditional importance.[71]

Secondly, future cutting-edge surface-to-air missile systems and sensors will proliferate from Russia and China to countries currently considered to be sub-peer opponents.[72] This will raise the risk and potential costs of air operations overseas. Russia is currently – and will likely remain for several decades – the manufacturer of the most capable ground-based air defence systems, as well as electronic-warfare capabilities which can significantly degrade NATO networks and sensors. However, China is emerging as the more potentially worrying manufacturer of future combat aircraft, which might pose a threat to Western types.

Thirdly, crucial enablers for combat aircraft such as large prepared airfields/aircraft carriers, aerial refuelling tankers, and the aviation fuel, spare parts, consumables, and munitions supplies on which sustained operations depend, will be at risk from both kinetic and asymmetric attacks, including hypersonic missiles, at much longer distances away from the traditional battlespace than ever before.[73]

However, it is in a very scattered formation that some European nations engaged their first efforts to incite their aerospace industry to enter a cooperation framework aimed at developing innovative concepts for a future aircraft. The most notable initiative is the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) launched by France, Germany and Spain.[74] Those countries awarded Dassault Aviation, Airbus – together with Safran, MTU Area Engines, MBDA and Thales – the contract for a demonstrator phase.

This initial framework contract covers a first period of 18 months and initiates work on developing the demonstrators and maturing cutting-edge technologies (including the Tactical Cloud, a kind of network-centric warfare concept), with the ambition to begin flight tests as soon as 2026.[75] Since early 2019, the industrial partners have been working on the future architecture as part of the programme's Joint Concept Study. The FCAS programme is soon to enter the demonstrator phase.

It is however far from sure that the FCAS will seduce external partners inside Europe and convince them to join the French-German-Spanish initiative. Many reasons lead us to this observation. A first reason is the lack of clarity of the tripartite initiative regarding the respective industrial participations. Germany and France disagree about the participation ratio of their national companies. One has to regret that negotiations between Paris and Berlin connected the future of the FCAS with the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS), another cooperative programme associating France and Germany for the development of a future ground combat vehicle aimed at replacing the Leclerc main battle tank (France) and the Leopard II (Germany). A second reason is the informal competition existing between the French-German-Spanish initiative and the existing British project named *Tempest*. It is notable that

these programmes present very similar milestones. There is however little to expect regarding the possibility of any future rapprochement between both projects (even though an agreement exists between Paris and London regarding some key technologies that could be integrated in both the FCAS and the long-awaited UCAV cooperative programme). [76] A third reason to doubt of a future Europeanisation of the FCAS is the evident absence of the European Defence Agency. Nowhere throughout the several communiqués posted by the concerned nations and their industries figures the EDA. This is to say that the Agency will be excluded from the tripartite initiative although it could assume an interesting role aimed at creating a cluster of participating nations to give a European scope to the project.

Outside Europe, tremendous efforts aimed at producing the aerial system able to dominate the skies have been made for a long time. [77] This is particularly the case for the United States. Several and diverse initiatives, either in the unmanned field of research or the piloted aircraft group of projects, clearly translate the American determination to maintain "air dominance". [78] Recently, the Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) programme has reached a new milestone with the achievement of a test campaign during this last summer. The NGAD programme, like the B-21 Raider bomber programme, is expected to initiate reforms in the way major defence programmes will be conducted in the future. The objective is to develop a very responsive programme structure around distinctive subcontractors, each of them being in charge of a specific part of the whole programme. In other words, the DoD wants to accelerate the acquisition process while maintaining the highest level possible of adaptation of its main programmes in order to fit them with the evolution of the global strategic context. [79] These changes could severely affect interoperability inside NATO. Moreover, projects conducted by the USAF and the DoD envisage the insertion of variable degrees of autonomy technology, either in the perspective of a fully autonomous air force or in the event of swarming strategies. These scenarios suppose the injection of some artificial intelligence systems. And artificial intelligence is at the core of a global competition between great powers.

Military AI: the ultimate competition?

The development of advanced technologies and the appearance of highly complex machines and algorithms have changed the face of war at an unprecedented scale. Deployment of semi-autonomous or fully autonomous machines has nothing to do with sci-fi: it has become a day-to-day reality for those forces engaged in distant theatres. [80] More and more technological demonstration programmes cross new thresholds and are on the way to the completion of totally autonomous systems. Advanced AI systems do not only concern armament and complex weapon systems, they also enter into the conception process of the military industry and assist political-military decision makers in the assessment of crisis and conflicts. It may be argued that the main breakthroughs to expect regarding AI will far less concern military platforms than future advanced algorithms helping politics to elaborate decisions.

The implementation of AI systems inside political-military organisations does not benefit from a total support and the degree of acceptance of AI largely depends on the type of organisation considered. [81] However, it seems obvious that a majority of organisations and administrations – as long as they have the necessary technological and industrial base – will rely upon artificial intelligence systems.

Though AI does not constitute an armament in itself, a real race has emerged during the last two decades for the control of its constitutive technologies. A harsh competition does exist between nations to attract the best scientists and engineers. Many nations produced their own AI strategies and action plans. One has to regret a real lack of concertation between nations about AI, especially inside Europe where the EU members seem to progress in scattered formation.

Though a confusion seems to persist between the role played by UAVs and the AI race issue, these two distinct debates should not be muddled. AI could radically alter the way future wars will be waged and military operations conducted.[82] The impact of AI on existing political-military structures will turn out to be tremendous. This is especially true as far as nuclear deterrence is concerned. The adjunction of advanced AI decision support systems to established deterrence mechanisms could alter the nuclear balance, independently of the level of destructiveness of the nuclear arsenals.[83] In the future, decisions assisted by AI in time of crisis could be taken at unprecedented levels of speed, without any human supervision.[84] The power of future AI systems propelled by advanced algorithms associated with extended big data fed by our numerical behaviour will reach a degree of complexity that outperforms human cognition capabilities. For some observers, the risk of witnessing a war at the speed of light has never been greater.[85]

Such a scenario and many others have been the causes of many concerns among the scientific community and technological leaders. The possibility of creating thinking machines generates a number of ethical issues and dilemmas. Perhaps one of the greatest fears is the use of AI for military purposes. Many researchers and scientists have signalled the risks involved in the use of artificial intelligence in the military industry. Thus, at the Buenos Aires Artificial Intelligence Conference in Argentina, Stephen Hawking, Elon Musk and over 1,000 robotics researchers signed a letter[86], warning of the potential disaster that "autonomous weapons" would have. Elon Musk (the boss of SpaceX) was warning that the ambitions of the great powers to dominate the area of artificial intelligence could cause a new world war. It is somewhat paradoxical to see the leaders of the top technological industry to alert the opinion, and especially the politicians, about the risks their own products could generate for humanity. Actually, calls for a ban on AI research are not only illusory but they also convey a wrong message about current and future AI capabilities.[87]

How to get out of it

Our country, often considered as a modest actor on the international scene, will inevitably be impacted by the many changes that could occur in the three domains explored. Few developments in science and technology hold as much promises and fears for the future of international relations as those identified. For Belgium – a credible space actor playing its part in the European Space Agency framework – transformations induced by the New Space entrepreneurship will have direct and indirect consequences for its own policy. The reconstitution of the aerospace technological and industrial base, especially in Europe, will lead to reconfigurations of its proper industrial base largely dependent on external big groups. Belgian space policy is based on a fragile but effective balance between the federal level and its federated entities, between its regions and communities, between national aspirations and multinational programmes. Each of these equilibriums could be indirectly impacted by the wave of changes to come in the European entrepreneurship structure due to the development of New Space companies.

The development of the next generation of combat aircraft, to be part of a system of systems with satellites, drones and other military assets, does represent the main technological challenges for air forces and aerospace industries in Western countries. Two competing initiatives are unfolding in Europe: the Franco-German FCAS project and the *Tempest* programme led by the UK. FCAS should be a European project that transcends national borders, bringing in involvement from countries such as Spain, Italy, Sweden or Belgium. Sooner or later, the Belgian defence industry will have to position itself in such a programme. This could have a great impact on future acquisition decisions and the chance for Belgium to access new emerging critical technologies: stealth, systems of systems, network-centric technologies, AI and advanced algorithms, etc.

The United States of America

Luk SANDERS

US Military Security

From a military point of view, 2020 was for the US among the calmest years of this century so far. Under Trump's presidency, the number of US troops deployed overseas decreased significantly and the US military budget remained relatively stable (cf. figures 1 and 2). Nonetheless, in 2020 the US military budget raised with 5.3% up to $732 billion, which is more than the twelve next biggest military spenders combined (China, India, Saudi Arabia, Russia...) and almost 40% of the 2019 global military budget.[88]

US troops overseas, 2008-2020

400,000

Trump enters
White House

300,000

200,000

100,000

0

2008   2010   2012   2014   2016   2018   2020

Source: US Department of Defense

US military spending, 2008-2019
Figures in $US millions, adjusted for inflation

Obama enters
White House

Trump enters
White House

800,000

600,000

400,000

200,000

0

2008   2010   2012   2014   2016   2018

Note: Figures are at constant 2018 prices, except for the last figure, which is at 2019 prices and exchange rates.

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

Fig. 1   *Fig. 2*

The most noteworthy military incidents in 2020 were at the beginning and at the end of the year. On January 3 when an American drone targeted and killed Iranian Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, near Baghdad International Airport. In a way, this incident was part of President Trump's divide and rule policy in the Middle East, upgrading the coalition against Iran as well as against the Palestinians. Another illustration in this respect was the normalisation of relations between Israel on the one hand and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco on the other. From that perspective, these new deals are double-edged swords; they create more peace in the region, at least on the short term, even though the ultimate outcome of the pressure it creates on both Iran and the Palestinians could be even more difficult to assess.

The other major incident started presumably already round March 2020 but was only discovered in late December, i.e. a sophisticated cyber espionage operation on the heart of the US government, something that almost looks like the modern equivalent of an armed raid on the United States mainland by a foreign power. According to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Russia was trying to undermine America's way of life, adding that Vladimir Putin remains a real risk. The Treasury and Commerce Departments were first said to have been compromised, then Homeland Security, the National Institutes of Health, the State Department, Defence and even the Los Alamos nuclear weapons lab.

However, the most valuable lesson the US learned in 2020 with respect to both global and national security is that it is about much more than just military security. In fact, for many countries, 2020 has been a year that challenged the way in which *national security* should be understood.[89] In 2020, the US underwent several major national security crises, none of them being directly related to the military.

How us national security is perceived in a realist prespective

Ever since the end of the Cold War, 1986 more in particular, the US National Security Council (NSC) has periodically produced a National Security Strategy (NSS) that reflects the presidential administration's view of the threats America, its citizens and their interests are facing, and how to tackle them. In these documents, George W. Bush was the first to define national security and the related threats as being broader than just military security, integrity of the homeland and economic prosperity, paying greater attention to values like democracy and threats like pandemic disease.[90] Barack Obama also included climate change as a national security issue, yet the Trump NSS, published in 2017, broke the new pattern by abandoning issues like universal values and a stable international order, replacing them by "*preserving peace through strength, and advancing American influence in the world*."[91]

A strategy strongly based on the realist school of thought in international relations, the 2017 NSS was premised on the idea that states are the primary actors in world politics and the primary threats to that security are other states. In the realist view, power is to be expended only on core security interests. The threats then perceived are for instance China's expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea, Russia's attempts to stir domestic chaos in the US or the nuclear threats from countries like Iran and North Korea.

Even though neither global warming nor viruses care about borders, in a realist perspective, issues like climate change and pandemic disease should be solved at state level. However, when neighbouring countries are unwilling to take necessary action against such threats, particular efforts in one country might have little effect. Therefore, in such a paradigm, collective action problems are difficult to resolve, which occasionally results in a simple denial of problems. Even more because few politicians are keen to ask their voters to pay for countering threats that are considered unlikely to occur before the end of their political career.
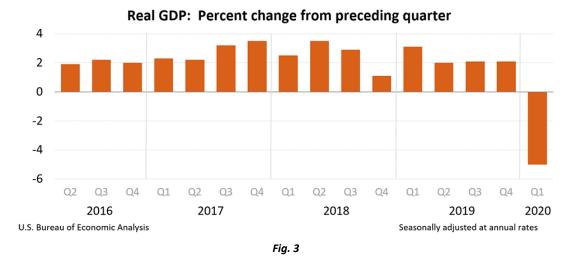
The Calm before the storm

In spite of the outbreak of a highly infectious Covid-19 virus in Wuhan at the end of 2019, the White House did not adapt its security policy at the beginning of 2020. Top priorities were still a strong military, the rivalry with China for global dominance in all fields, an emphasis on national sovereignty, resulting in closing borders and scepticism towards multilateralism, etc.

Meanwhile, the internal policy of Washington D.C. was still marked by a nearly sole focus on the economy. Therefore, dramatic budget cuts have been carried out in almost any governmental department, like education, health care and social security. The idea was that, if the economy goes well, all the rest will follow. In that context, the then National Security Advisor John Bolton announced, in May 2018, to disband the Global Health Security directorate (founded by President Obama in the aftermath of the Ebola epidemic), as part of a plan to streamline the NSC. In reality, the directorate was reduced– rather than streamlined – to a centre for preventing biological warfare.
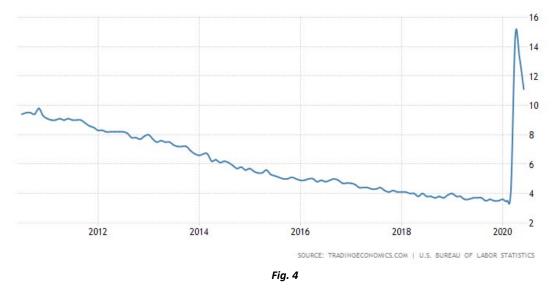
The Washington Post published an article claiming this breakup "*comes at a time when many experts say the country is already underprepared for the increasing risks of a pandemic*". Their article ended with a quote of Luciana Borio, director of medical and biodefense preparedness at the NSC (being part of the disbanded directorate): "*The threat of pandemic flu is the number one health security concern. Are we ready to respond? I fear the answer is no.*"[92] Actually, Bill Gates had already warned in a 2015 Ted Talk that "*[i]f anything kills over ten million people in the next few decades, it is most likely to be a highly infectious virus rather than a war*" and that "*[w]e are not ready for the next epidemic.*"[93]
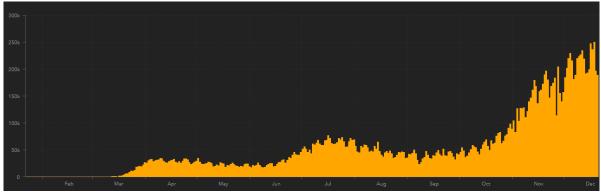
A national health crisis

Although the government focused so much on the economy, economists know that important investments should be spread, and that goes for political and electoral investments as well. Therefore, in spite of its strong economy and ditto military, the US, just like many others, seemed almost defenceless against an enemy that is so tiny the human eye cannot see it, a new coronavirus. America was unprepared to the point that doctors in New York City had to treat Covid-19 patients in tents, wearing garbage bags to protect themselves and begging the government for ventilators, while cooling trucks were driving on and off to remove the bodies. As a result, US GDP contracted by 4.8% in the first quarter of 2020 (see figure 3). In other words, the strong economy collapsed.

Fig. 3

In February 2020, US unemployment rate was at a 50-year historic low with only 3.5%. Two months later, it was at 14.7%, with 48 million initial jobless claims in only 15 weeks. Another two months later, in June 2020, the job market already started to recover (11.1%) due to an early reopening of the economy (see figure 4). However, that recovery came with a deadly price.

Fig. 4

As can be seen on figures 4 and 5, along with the reopening of the economy (in June), the curve of contaminations immediately started to climb again. Soon the fatalities followed.[94] Surprisingly, the month before the elections, almost every day a new high record of contaminations was broken, creating a climbing curve that only continued after the elections.

Fig. 5

A national Racial Crisis

Around the same time, the US was hit by another major crisis that, once again, could not be tackled by a strong economy nor by a ditto military. On May 25, 2020, African-American male George Floyd was killed by a white police officer. As a result, in nearly every at least medium-sized American city, protests were being held against police violence based on racial profiling. Soon, hundreds, if not thousands of anti-racism protests occurred in many places throughout the world.[95] Even though a large majority of those marches in America were peaceful, the President and his supporters seemed to be less concerned about the alleged systemic racism within American police than about the violence that happened in some cities anyway.

A national political crisis

These two major crises came on top of yet another one that is afflicting the US since many years with evermore-increasing tensions, i.e. the disruptive party division between Republicans and Democrats.

Although democracy *thrives* to a certain extent on division,[96] this century the proper functioning of American politics is increasingly hindered by a growing rivalry between the two American leading political parties, creating an excessive polarisation among Americans throughout the last two or three presidencies. A month before the 2020 election, roughly nine-in-ten registered voters in both camps said to be worried that a victory by the other would lead to "lasting harm" to the United States, and roughly eight-in-ten – again in both camps – said their differences with the other side were about core American values.[97]

At the time when the horrible footage of the killing of George Floyd was going viral, nearly two-thirds of Republicans (64%) still had a positive view on how police around the country do in treating racial and ethnic groups equally, while only 10% of Democrats agreed with that (see figure 6).

A similar observation could be made with the perception of the severity of the Covid-19 crisis. In mid-July, the virus already killed many more Americans and costed much more dollars than any war the US had been involved in since the Second World War, and meanwhile the curve of both contaminations and fatalities was still climbing at a staggering speed. Speaking of denial, in those days (June 16-22), less than half of the Republicans and people leaning to the Grand Old Party considered the coronavirus outbreak as a major threat to the health of the US population (46%). At the same time, 85% of their Democrat counterparts shared that opinion.

A Pew Research survey conducted in 2019 showed an even wider cleavage between Republicans and Democrats with respect to climate change (a gap of 54%) and gun policy (60%).[98]
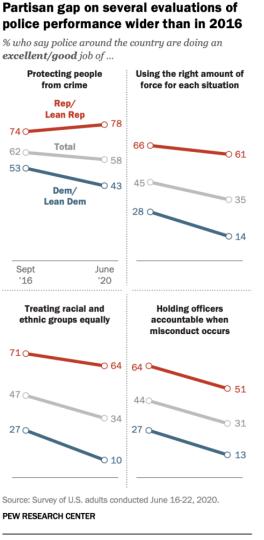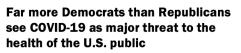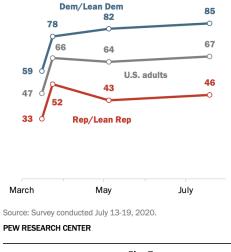
Partisan gap on several evaluations of police performance wider than in 2016

% who say police around the country are doing an ***excellent/good*** *job of ...*

In fact, the three mentioned crises seem to reinforce one another. In addition to the fact that Republicans and Democrats have a very different perception of health care and racial policy, it also seems that American coloured citizens are much harder hit by corona than white Americans. Moreover, Asian Americans faced insults because the virus originated in China and African Americans as well, for bearing more responsibility for spreading the virus throughout the US (amongst others due to side effects of social inequality).

Far more Democrats than Republicans see COVID-19 as major threat to the health of the U.S. public

% who say the coronavirus outbreak is a major threat to the health of the U.S. population as a whole ...

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-22, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Survey conducted July 13-19, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

A national democratic crisis

The United States is the oldest functioning democracy in the world. Nonetheless, there too some kind of national security crisis showed up. Throughout Donald Trump's presidency, numerous commentators and members of the Democratic Party have expressed their concerns about the state of America's democracy. At the same time, countermeasures to tackle this trend, such as the President's impeachment (because of charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress), were often dismissed by the President's supporters as deep state conspiracies. Ever since 2016, the entire presidency was marked by such mutual upbraiding concerning undemocratic behaviour, back and forth, as if everybody in Washington D.C. agreed American democracy was derailing.

What we witnessed in the last four years was at least the creation of an undemocratic climate, even though most democratic institutions were still functioning properly.[99] However, a warring transition of power actually is undemocratic, especially the way it went in America after November 3.

There were at least fifty lawsuits concerning election fraud, none of which revealing any irregularity. A *Joint Statement from Elections Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council & the Election Infrastructure Sector Coordinating Executive Committees* declared the 2020 election "*the most secure in American history*" and noting "*[t]here is no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes,*

changed votes, or was in any way compromised." This led to the resignation of director Christopher Krebs, just like it led to Attorney General William Barr's resignation after he confirmed this statement. Two days after the Electoral College confirmed the outcome of November 3 (on December 14), Fox News anchor Maria Bartiromo stated "*[…] an Intel Source telling me that President Trump did in fact win the election*".[100] Meanwhile, the President kept on declaring himself the actual winner of the election, still being backed in that respect by a considerable part of Republican senators. The President even kept calling his supporters and all members of the Republican Party to "fight" in order he could stay in the White House anyway and his former security advisor Michael Flynn called the President to invoke martial law and even the armed forces to *rerun elections* in the "disputed" swing states. Earlier, yes-men of the President had already replaced the heads of both the CIA and the FBI.

Even though the actual President elect, Joe Biden, keeps on calling for reconciliation, and healing as well as Covid-19 vaccines are available now, his term of office will be all but an easy job; in the last four years many American top institutions have been highly politicised, a large minority of Republican voters (up to 40%) still believe Democrats stole the election, and Covid-19 inflicted blows to the economy with long-term effects.

<u>Closing remarks</u>

It is unlikely that the way the US dealt with the four mentioned national security crises in 2020 contributed to the 2017 NSS objective of *advancing American influence in the world*. In this respect, the relevance of *peace by strength* sounds far-fetched as well.

Maybe, the problem of the 2017 NSS was not so much what was in it, but rather what was not. How national security is conceived can be part of the political debate. However, 2020 learned America that not taking into account an upcoming pandemic risk, nor structural problems of democracy and human rights in the homeland simply should be considered as an incomplete conception of national security. In the meantime, the question remains how many more natural disasters and other warnings will be necessary before it becomes obvious for future US presidents that also long term threats affecting the integrity of the entire country and its population (like global warming) are issues of national security.

Nowadays, all democratic ideologies agree that the safety and security of a country and its citizens are a core mission of the state. The way in which they are implemented is subjected to the ideological debate (how to tackle threats, how to deal with foreign enemies, budget priorities…). However, the 2017 US NSS, on the one hand, and the reality of 2020, on the other, showed in a painful way that *the risk assessment* of a state, on which a national security strategy is based, should be a technical matter, free from ideology, with participation of experts in numerous fields.

The Belgian public opinion tends to show little understanding for American policy in recent years. Given the crises mentioned in this text, this might seem to be justified; only we should not forget that in 2020 our country went through similar crises. No country in the world envied America for its statistics with respect to Covid-19, but the same goes true for Belgium (were the mortality related to the number of infections is among the highest in the world). Here too, we struggle with an undigested history of racial inequality (colonialism) that today still disadvantages coloured people. Moreover, here too, the differences in opinion between political parties put pressure on the functioning of our democracy (once again, it took more than a year to form a new government). Maybe it is for similar reasons that the American public opinion also shows little understanding for countries like Belgium.[101] It might be wise to learn from one another, rather than judging each other.

Zoom In: "A decline in multilateralism"

Ever since the Second World War, Belgium has proved to be an avid supporter of multilateralism. We are a founding member of the UN, NATO and the EU, we generously contribute to peacekeeping operations and we are the host nation to the NATO HQ and many EU institutions. In the past two years, our country has been a member of the UN Security Council for the sixth time. Nevertheless, Belgium needs to be careful not to lose its good reputation abroad. A rather low Defence budget and political instability are just two examples that have caught the attention of our multilateral partners and have caused reputational damage to our country.

Unilateralism often leads to a grimmer world in which larger states can dominate the smaller ones. Obviously, small countries like Belgium are no match for superpowers. That, however, does not mean that large states are better off without multilateralism. For centuries, Europe has acted as one of the main battlefields of the world, a fate that only stopped with the advent of multilateralism after the end of the Second World War, when the US military security umbrella and the founding of the UN, NATO and, later, the EU provided peace and prosperity on the European continent. For decades, we have benefitted from US protection. Yet, in the past few years, US President Donald Trump has opted for a much more outspoken unilateral approach to international politics by steering the US out of the Paris Climate Agreement, out of UNESCO, out of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and by threatening to leave the WHO by 2021. Rumours have it that Trump even considered leaving NATO for a while.

At the international level, the phasing out of multilateralism between democratic countries should be reversed, in order to join forces against regimes with undemocratic intentions. A decline in democracy eventually leads to a decline in multilateralism, which is extra detrimental to small nations like Belgium. In recent years the two largest NATO members, the US and Turkey, seemed to prefer a predominantly unilateral course. Although it is unlikely that any of them will actually leave NATO, it is a wake-up call for the EU members within NATO to join forces and create a credible European 'pillar' within it. This means, a group that is capable of both carrying out military operations independently and speaking with one voice within the Atlantic organisation. For Belgium in particular, the former will be a bigger challenge than the latter, since counting on others for our own defence is a traditional weak point of our country, at least when it comes to finances, whereas smart diplomacy is one of our traditional strong points.

Russia and the Eastern neighbourhood

Nicolas GOSSET

European Security and the Russian factor: key trends ahead

Russia's domestic developments and foreign policy conduct: an enduring nexus

Amid the pandemic, President Putin successfully got his way, without much of a surprise, in the referendum on sweeping constitutional amendments he unexpectedly proposed early March 2020. Enacted changes to the Russian Constitution, however, raise as many questions as they provide straight answers as to how the country's steering system and its conduct are going to evolve. In spite of the anticipated success of its constitutional sleight of hand, Russia's leader has entered the new political era with a poor track record as regards delivering economic growth – Russia's GDP as a share of world total has been constantly dropping since 2008, and growth has not topped 3% since 2012 –, which is creating a new set of political pressures for President Putin and United Russia's monopolistic position.

Years of economic policy aimed at insulating Russia from external shocks have been unable to overcome the basic characteristics of Russia's economy – heavily reliant on state investment for growth, and dependent on hydrocarbons for revenue –, which directly tie Russia's economic fate to global economic recovery and growth beyond its borders.[102] Ironically, Putin's "Fortress Russia"[103] is economically dependent on the rest of the world. His best chance to strengthen the country lies in a more resilient economy. However, what strengthens Russia weakens Putin's hold on power[104], and as he rewrote the constitution to allow himself another term as president, we know his power will be what is preserved.

Vladimir Putin's longevity in power has allowed him to steer Russia through significantly changed circumstances, especially a renewed international influence. Yet, the country's original economic reconstruction, enabled by high commodity and fossil fuel prices early in the century, has not maintained momentum, and Western sanctions adopted after the annexation of Crimea have hindered economic development. Russia's raised diplomatic and military clout and international assertion in its neighbouring sphere, yet also in the Middle East and in Africa, may be the source of a somewhat reclaimed international prestige and ubiquity. Nevertheless, the methods and tools mobilised as well as their consequences have made elusive every aspiration to a normalised or closer relationship to the West, and even with potentially close neighbours and partners. Much of this revolves around the role the regime would like military glory to play as the new centrepiece of Russian pride and identity.

As Russia's economic model founders (having hit a dead-end in 2014), nostalgia for the mighty Soviet military past and pride in recent military achievements (Ukraine, Syria) have taken an important place in Russia's new identity politics. Furthermore, the development of the military-industrial complex plays a central role in Russia's "re-industrialisation" plans[105], with the aim of modernising the economy through investment in the defence sector. Hence, Moscow will continue to perceive the military sphere as a key policy area, and the (threat of) use of force, as a key foreign policy tool. Although decisions on future long-term armament plans have been postponed until the economic situation stabilises, there is no backtracking on defence as the new *raison d'état*.[106] This could lead to two different types of contingencies. Firstly, potential military interventions in the post-Soviet space to secure Russian predominance. Secondly, "Public Relations-wars"[107] aiming at delivering strategic shocks to the West by limited interventions in regional conflicts. Syria is an example, but other such campaigns might happen in the future (e.g. in Libya). While a direct aggression against NATO is highly unlikely, given

dramatic differentials (both qualitative and quantitative) in the balance of forces, escalatory dynamics from other crises remain likely to affect Western-Russian relations in the years to come.

Now the long-escalated uncertainty about the prospect of power succession in the Kremlin – initially due in 2024, when the last constitutionally allowed term of President Putin was to expire – has been dispelled by law, the reset of Russia's power configuration has arguably been made to further cement continuity than to herald change. Amid the autocratic answers given as to Putin's future role, having now opened up legal (yet theoretical) possibilities for de facto life presidency, all key figures of the Russian leadership have been reaffirmed in their positions, hence confirming the intended continued nature of policies focused on regime consolidation and security, with all other objectives feeding that singular end.

Much of the Kremlin's project, domestically and abroad, is firmly set on restoration, with the international status of the USSR at its peak as the principal guiding reference.[108] Even though eventually adjusted, that overarching Putinian paradigm is not likely to change drastically in the future. So does the Kremlin's design to make national pride and Russian "spiritual-moral values" the replacement glue for eventually binding regime and society together as Russia's economic model founders. Following its power maximisation logic and the powerful nexus between foreign and domestic policies that enabled the regime to amplify its leadership's popularity at home throughout charismatic and historical legitimation during President Putin's third term, the Kremlin may still be tempted to rely on emergency measures putting the nation on a war footing in order to enhance patriotic mobilisation, and yield resources of legitimacy in the new locked-in political era. Doubts, however, are raising in front of regime fatigue, plummeting resources, and long-term economic decline.

Russia's disruptive influence and the strengthening of the military

As showed by key developments in Russian security and foreign policy over the past decade, there exists a strong link between the kind of foreign policy Russia conducts, the domestic ideological foundations of today's Russia and the regime legitimation tools that are likely to keep being used in the next decade or so. In this interplay between domestic public opinion and foreign policy, virtually no single other issue thrills so much the Russian public than the Kremlin's attitudes to the US.[109] Moreover, with Russia's economic problems unlikely to vanish, anti-Westernism as a key lever of legitimisation for the regime is there to stay.[110]

Although military investments take time to bear fruit, they eventually yield long-term dividends. Regardless of whether the announced defence budget cuts turn out to be real or not (17,6% of total budget expenditures in 2019 remain classified)[111], Russian armed forces have regained undisputable capabilities over the last decade, to the extent that the army is now able to effectively wield military power in the neighbourhood and has the potential to act as a security spoiler overseas for some years to come.[112] Military service conditions and defence industry modernisation significantly improved.[113] Despite problems caused by sanctions, economic stagnation, corruption and limited capacity in the defence industry, at the end of 2019 official statements suggested that around 40% of the armed forces inventory had been modernised (yet falling short from the 70% by 2020 envisaged in 2012).[114] Beyond equipment modernisation, the focus has been on coordination, monitoring and control. The military has undergone thousands of no-notice exercises, from the tactical to the strategic levels, to test readiness and responsiveness. The Kremlin has been renewing its strategic nuclear deterrence, as well as significantly reinforcing its understanding that combat is evolving away from traditional battlegrounds towards aerospace and information. In the meantime, Russia's armed forces have demonstrated their significantly improved conventional warfighting capacities in the course of the Syrian intervention, including large strategic bomber raids and strategic naval capacity. The scope and

nature of that deep transformation process enacted in Russian military affairs within the framework of the so-called "Serdyukov reforms"[115] as well as the country's evolved concept of strategic deterrence[116] should not be minimised, although the Russian army keeps operating at "various speeds" and remains technologically lagging behind other major military powers in a number of keys areas. Dividends of these changes will be lasting, while non-military instruments too have been set to play an increasingly prominent role. As such, NATO has been increasingly concerned that Russia could resort more frequently to the complex mix of tactics it used in Ukraine, i.e. combining military tools with cyber attacks, political and economic pressure, and intensive influence/disinformation campaigns. Russia's toolbox for coercive action is not solely situated in the military field (information warfare, PsyOps, …), and the military factor promises to take on forms that are ever more ambiguous (disguised, denied or merged with the use of other tools) in the future. In addition, even if Moscow's hard power is even more eroded due to the economic slowdown, the process will be gradual. Russia's disruptive influence and revamped military are there to stay, and so does the potential of risks and strategic surprises in its foreign policy conduct.

Chart 3: SIPRI data – NATO combined vs. Russia

Military Balance	United States	Europe and Canada	Turkey	**Total NATO**	**Russia**
Defence budgets 2019 (in billions of dollars)	649	295	19	**963**	**61**
Total staff (in thousands)	1 348	1 509	355	**3 212**	**900**
(of which Land forces and Marine infantry)	660	942	263	**1 865**	**361**
Air Forces					
Combat aircrafts	3 424	2 134	333	**5 891**	**1 112**
Heavy transport	263	54	5	**322**	**111**
Medium transport	365	230	31	**626**	**65**
Air refuelling	530	52	7	**589**	**15**
Radar aircrafts	11	23	6	**140**	**18**
Heavy UAVs	628	25	9	**662**	**A few**
Land Forces					
Tanks	3 336	4 371	2 485	**10 192**	**3 130**
Gun-batteries	3 098	3 815	1 836	**8 749**	**2 255**
Multiple launch rocket systems	640	485	146	**1 271**	**896**
Combat helicopters	793	935	92	**1 820**	**376**
Heavy-/medium transport helicopters	2 645	712	103	**3 460**	**339**
Naval Forces					
Aircraft carriers (catapult)	11	1	0	**12**	**0**
Aircraft carriers (vertical take-off)	9	3	0	**12**	**1**
Amphibious ships (large)	22	18	5	**45**	**19**
Naval combat ships (main)	96	137	18	**251**	**33**

Nuclear attack submarines	54	12	0	**66**	**26**
Submarines (classic)	0	49	12	**61**	**23**
Strategic Forces					
Ballistic missile submarines	14	8	0	**22**	**13**
Submarine-launched intercont. missiles	336	128	0	**464**	**208**
Intercont. ballistic missiles	400	0	0	**400**	**313**
Strat. Bombers	90	0	0	**90**	**76**

Source: Author's data compilation. From SIPRI, Military Balance, 2019

Moscow's strategic objectives' lasting effects in the neighbourhood:
Russian interests increasingly challenged, yet meant to remain prominent

Moscow's strategic objectives are widely accepted to be: regime protection, expansion/conservation of its "near-abroad" influence, weakening of Western states and alliances, and (re)instatement of a multipolar world. However, understanding its priorities requires a functional understanding of how "*maskirovka*"– or "strategic deception" –, underpins Moscow's pursuit of strategic advantage and its ability to successfully operationalise deterrence-challenging typologies: controlled pressure, limited probes or *faits accomplis*. Nuanced application of sub-conventional methods executed by intermediaries (i.e. proxy factions and/or semi-state private military security companies)[117], affords the Kremlin deniability while obscuring operational intent. While the West traditionally views economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure as levers to prevent conflict, Russia views them as measures of war itself.[118]

The epicentre of this multi-localised struggle stands in the post-imperial glacis stretching from Kaliningrad to the Black Sea, where Russia has repeatedly deployed a mix of incentives and coercion spanning the economic, humanitarian, informational and military spheres to assert its regional goals of maintaining dominance. Geopolitically, Russia is concerned that EU membership or even just closer relations with the EU are a stepping-stone towards NATO accession. Therefore, countries in the "shared" neighbourhood cannot be allowed to make their own security policy choices, nor can they be left to decide which development and/or governance model they would like to adopt. Russia wants to keep a sort of ownership *vis-à-vis* that choice, intended as a requisite to its own national security. This insistence on a special Russian path of development also underlines a rationale underpinning the Kremlin's policy in and towards Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and, most lately, Belarus. In effect, the war in Ukraine has demonstrated what the ultimate cost for not complying could be. No country in the neighbourhood can match Russia's military power, and Moscow has shown it is willing to use force to achieve prioritised goals in Georgia and in Ukraine – i.e. countering the "choice" for the West, as well as Western interests and influence in the region. Whereas Georgia has perhaps better managed to introduce the rule of law and to engage with the West, Ukraine has turned into a long-term hearth of instability in Europe.

Seven years after the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in Donbas, the situation in and vis-à-vis Ukraine remains critical, as the country's political and economic governance itself is turning increasingly fragmented, and contested, amid continued conflict with Russia and lasting latent war in the East. Political and diplomatic prospects for conflict resolution remain low. On the one hand, on 9 December 2019, the first-ever meeting of Ukraine President Zelensky with President Putin in Paris resulted in a much-awaited prisoner swap and opened up the way forward on the contentious questions of elections in the separatist-controlled areas and control of the border that all sides can eventually accept. Yet, this will not curb the Kremlin's ability to use force in Ukraine's conflict areas. Amid treadmill achievements from the first Normandy format summit in over three years and Russia's

a minima testimony of commitment to negotiating a peaceful resolution of the conflict it fuelled and instrumentalised at first, Moscow indeed continues to integrate the separatist "republics" into its economic space and maintains a heavy military in-zone footprint. These may appear counterintuitive, but understanding the difference between a speculative investor and a strategic one helps to explain Russia's approach in this respect. Rather than searching for short-term profits, Russia seeks to carve out a share of the market to the extent that it can shape the rules of the game for other players on the medium to long term. While some regard Donbas as an increasingly toxic liability for Russia, the Kremlin sees it rather as long-term investments in a multi-purpose lever that can be exploited in Ukraine, and beyond, in its tug-of-war play with the West and Moscow's strategy of exporting instability for control and securitisation, i.e. de-containing Russia by re-encircling it within a "ring of fire". A same logic applies to Russia's presence in Transnistria, as regards Moldova, or Ossetia and Abkhazia vis-à-vis Georgia.

Protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet space and the threat of backlashing are central to Russia's policy towards its independent neighbours, and therefore are meant to continue to be exploited to influence and disrupt unwanted internal developments and divergent foreign policy orientations in the respective countries. Under those circumstances, there is every reason to believe that none of the separatist conflicts will be resolved in the short to medium term. And even though there also exist reasonable grounds for arguing the Kremlin is unlikely to opt for full-scale military invasions of countries in the region[119], Russia's continued military build-up – coupled with the ubiquitous threat of resorting to force, outspoken or implied – will however continue to be crucial destabilising factors in regional politics over the coming years. Moscow changing track is highly unlikely in this respect. The current leadership is intended on remaining in power and on strengthening – at least, safeguarding – its positions in a region where Russia's long-term goal is to achieve economic, security and, ultimately, political integration around Russia.

In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, the dramatic outcomes for Armenia of the conflict re-ignition in late 2020, as well as the form, content and conditions of the "permanent truce" deal negotiated under Moscow's aegis in order to halt the worst fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan in decades, appear to consolidate the fact that Armenia will continue to be dependent on Russia for its military security and looks likely to remain so. Yet, Russia's deployment of troops to a region where it was already meant to be dominant is another additional burden on its military and treasury. Ultimately, Moscow does play an augmented role into Caucasian geopolitics, but the escalation of its commitment to retain position does not look like a sign of progress, and seems to be nothing less than labouring to hold back decline.

A trajectory of eroding dividends from a "heavy metal" foreign policy conduct?

The combined trend made of increasingly autocratic Putinism, economic "muddling along", and the ascendancy of the military has significant foreign policy implications for Russian approaches to the post-Soviet space, the EU, the US, the Middle East and China. Despite the growing costs of its militarised foreign policy, an inflated sense of self-confidence swept over the country after the perceived victories scored in Ukraine and Syria. That Moscow pictures it managed to outsmart the US only added to this sense of achievement. From that viewpoint, force-backed diplomacy might then be considered as somewhat more efficient than economic statecraft-backed foreign policy. Although Russia's tough foreign policy does not rule out "truce" proposals, these, however, are only to be made from a position of strength and are designed to convert military wins into political dividends. The Kremlin's efforts to sideline the Geneva process while building parallel platforms of dialogue on Syria (i.e. with Turkey and Iran) and simultaneously vying for lucrative contracts illustrates this approach.

Russia is a predominantly geopolitical rather than a commercial power.[120] As such, it is more driven by the security agenda than by a moneymaking philosophy, even though both are also interrelated. The policy towards Ukraine is symbolic of this: although Russia claimed that the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement between Kyiv and the EU would jeopardise its trade with Ukraine and weaken the whole project of its Eurasian Economic Union, it was rather the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas that left bilateral commercial relations in tatters and led to Russia's Eurasian "plan B", thereby eroding trust from partners with internal divisions uncomfortable with the use of force in front of "Russians abroad" issues.[121] This also shows how much Moscow's overreliance on force in advancing its foreign policy objectives and interests, though effective at first sight, or at least being perceived to be so, actually comes with a heavy price, including being forcibly confined into an impoverishing neo-imperial political paradigm generating economic setbacks, seclusion from the West, and asymmetrical dependencies towards China.[122] If Russia does not alter its current course, it will have ever fewer resources for the upkeep of its armed forces, the principal tool Moscow relies upon to uphold its great power status. Will the Kremlin eventually overcome its inflexibility to remedy the security dilemma in which its international behaviour encloses the country? Hope must be, to say the least, tempered.

Metastasising international instability, the regime's latent insecurity and deep sense of vulnerability, the populist mobilisation of nationalist sentiment and the prominent role assigned to the military, all contribute to keeping high the risk of a continued weaponised and disruptive conduct of Russia's foreign policy. Current frozen conflicts and Ukraine remain the essential lightning rod for Russian nationalism. And so could also become Belarus, where similar claims have been used as pretexts by Russia to put pressure on its purported like-minded yet at times restive ally, now facing internal division over the survival of the regime. Unresolved disputes along the Baltic border and Kaliningrad also pose potential threats because Moscow can exploit those to infiltrate NATO territory or to claim that NATO troops are provocatively close to its territories, using meanwhile border negotiations as tools of influence against its neighbours, particularly Estonia.[123] Out of the former Soviet area, Syria remains an open sore whose stabilisation still seems a distant prospect. Beyond that, one has to look at protracted conflicts where Moscow has local proxies to rely on (e.g. Libya), that can be managed with limited resources, and serve to demonstrate Russia's strategic relevance and might *vis-à-vis* the West.

Consistently worked upon – and purposefully staged – in the wake of the growing estrangement from the West that resulted from the Ukraine conflict, the dynamics of the Sino-Russian rapprochement are part of the same logic. Despite some obvious limitations[124], the deepening Sino-Russian partnership already has significant consequences for Russian domestic politics, but also further afield. On many global issues – from UN Security Council diplomacy to virtually every issue debated in the UN, G20, WTO and all other international fora and organisations – China and Russia tend to display a more robust diplomatic front. Both countries have already engaged in some form of cooperation based on implicit division of labour in Central Asia, while keeping outside – i.e. Western – powers' influence at bay.

In addition, Russia's growing reliance on Chinese capital to foster its ambitious development plans in its Arctic seas and territories, along with the region's increasing remilitarisation[125], testifies to increasingly relevant yet ambivalent dynamics of partnership, where one side (Moscow) is more dependent on the other (Beijing). Notwithstanding, tensions with the West and negative trends in the commodity markets can only but force Russia to adopt a more submissive posture *vis-à-vis* China, as one may find that the Russian elite's bottom line now seems no longer to be modernisation, but the regime's survival. Most importantly, following that logic, negative repercussions for the West include a greater competitiveness for Chinese companies benefitting from widening access to Russia's natural resources and scientific capital. Furthermore, increased arms trade between the two countries, including sale of Russia's most sophisticated weaponry to China, might have far-reaching

consequences as regards the power balance in several hotspots across the Asia-Pacific, with implications for the US and, to a lesser degree, the EU[126].

The picture may be very different if the EU-Russia relationship radically improves, but this is unlikely to happen as long as the political system put in place by President Putin, his oligarchs and closely-knot *siloviki* (those associated with the security services) survive another decade, and the West is not willing to engage Russia through compromises. For Russia, on the other hand, adapting to the EU's "common" or "shared" neighbourhood approach would entail a threat to the *status quo* and therefore to regime security. Furthermore, as the EU and Russia are moving increasingly away from each other on values, it will become more difficult to arrive at a compromise based on interests, since the former and the latter are intertwined. As a matter of course, prospects for Russia and the EU finding a common position *vis-à-vis* the "shared" neighbourhood have deteriorated in recent years. Not only has the annexation of Crimea and continuous weaponised interference in Eastern Ukraine made progress more difficult – yet not impossible –, it has also become increasingly obvious that the profound differences in worldviews will be hard to bridge in the near future. Values are more than simply ornaments and rhetoric. For the EU, they are central to how institutions are constructed and to the very cohesion of the EU as a whole.

Russia sees the West, and chiefly the EU, as a competitor for influence and normative power in the post-Soviet space, but also as weak and fraught with inner divisions and tensions. In spite of Russia's current economic woes, there is thus little reason to believe that the Kremlin will be willing to compromise on influence in its "sphere of privileged interests". Ultimately, more dangerous escalation scenarios are less likely, but still possible. This will depend above all on the European defence posture and the credibility of NATO's deterrence in Europe. Conversely, decisive factors will be connected to Russia's attitude – i.e. its ability and/or necessity to tone down its "heavy metal diplomacy" and to give up its "take it or leave it" posture in relations with the West[127] –, upcoming US foreign policy developments, the "Asia factor" in many ways, but also the ability of the EU to enhance its competence to think and act strategically – something that has lacked dramatically in the EU's policy-making towards the Eastern neighbourhood.

Meeting the challenge: "*Ready for the worst, whilst working towards better*"

As for now, Europe is facing the reality of continued Russian military build-up in its neighbourhood and the threat of a "*persistently aggressive Russia*".[128] Challenged in many respects, European security today remains strongly interconnected with evolutions in its eastern and northern sectors. If anything, intense Russian military exercise activity over there, often close to the borders of neighbouring countries – also to the borders of those that are NATO members, in Scandinavia and the Baltic for instance – is a constant reminder of this. More critical still is the fact that, throughout the trajectory of its military modernisation over the past decade and the "peace-time" enactment of its new doctrines and concepts, Russia has shown us a glimpse of a new wave of warfighting: an intimidating amalgamation of grey-zone campaigns and highly lethal, cost-efficient armed force. To some extent, Russia's military build-up and capacity to deny access to its spaces already have challenging effects on the credibility of NATO's deterrence in Europe. The Belgian armed forces already actively contribute to NATO reassurance initiatives like the Baltic-air policing and NATO broader deterrence posture. Given the current context, it is essential not only to help preserve the balance of power with Russia, but also to look towards the East to enhance our capacities. We can think of counter-intelligence, countering disinformation, electronic warfare, advanced mine counter-measures, SOF deep infiltration, standoff warfare, trans-regional mechanised mobility, etc.

In the meantime, in dealing with Russia, Europe cannot revert to a solely defensive stance within NATO. Managing the eastern neighbourhood remains a key task that needs to be tackled beyond the

Alliance's borders. Therein, crisis management is an integral part of an extended defence posture. When it comes to sanctions, if they are to be conditionally re-evaluated, the EU cannot agree on business as usual. Furthermore, as certain critical aspects of Russia's economic modernisation – that would be facilitated precisely by easing sanctions – might directly fuel Russia's military capability development, utmost caution should be exercised. While sanctions affect few defence programmes directly, they do have an impact on defence sector's access to new technologies, precision tools, new materials and research network. This makes the sanctions an important and effective policy tool if maintained over a long period.

"*A consistent and united approach must remain the cornerstone of EU policy towards Russia*", the EU's Global strategy stresses.[129] Maintaining unity has been, and will continue to be, a constant test since not all EU members see the "Russia problem" with the same acuteness. So far, disagreements have been relatively muted because of the centrality of the principles that Russia's behaviour has challenged (including the inviolability of borders). However, differences in assessing the scope, size and nature of the challenge Russia represents, directly affect the ability of the EU to consider the best way to address that very challenge in a unified manner – how to tackle the real threats that it raises (including non-military ones), how to establish selective engagement with Moscow when needed/possible/desirable, etc.

The EU, its diplomacy and member states have an important role to play in promoting the second engine of the "double-track Russia strategy"[130] the West has been pursuing since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, i.e. strengthening defences on the one hand, as well as – if and when possible – pursuing dialogue and cooperative engagement on the other hand. In this prospect, the matters proposed by the EU's Global strategy as potential fields for engagement appear as low-key starters, on which Russia might be willing to make overtures without sending the signal – to its domestic opinion and non-Western partners – that it is yielding to European pressure. There have been precedents of Russian cooperation with the West in maritime security for instance. In the Arctic, while Russia has invested in the deployment of new military capabilities, it also pursued a cooperation line that maintains evidence of a willingness to cooperate. Conversely, the EU could also consider developing (cautious) interaction with the Eurasian Economic Union. Let us however face it: The gap between EU's principles and the domestic and foreign policy imperatives espoused by Russia in the previous decade cannot be entirely bridged by diplomacy, no matter how skilful it could be. These differences need to be assumed and managed. Even if the level of rhetorical animosity abates and confidence-building measures make relations between the EU and Russia more predictable, the basic paradigm of this relationship will still be a kind of "managed confrontation".

This calls, among other things, for the EU and its member states to invest more in expertise, intelligence and situational awareness *vis-à-vis* the former Soviet space in order to be better tooled to face the challenges and opportunities it presents, including the relationship with Russia. The evolution of Russia's relations with its neighbours at a time when it seems that its inclination to coerce them into Eurasian integration has proved rather counter-productive (which may bring out either efforts towards appeasement or more pressure) should be followed closely (e.g. keeping Belarus in mind). Its political atmosphere might evolve in very different directions in the near future, and it comprises too many variables for the EU to allow for superficial agenda-driven analysis. Although the EU and Russia are mutually distrustful, to say the least, they are not bent on destroying each other. Yet, Russia's infatuation with military power projection as a key tool to achieve foreign policy goals, or domestic consolidation, could trigger an escalatory dynamic that brings the European continent to the brink of new security crises. Belarus is at particular risk, and the situation in Ukraine continues to be highly tenuous. There, the combination of continued state weakness and insufficient reforms coupled with sustained pressures from Russia, as well as potential domestic incentives for Moscow to retrigger a security escalation, could reignite a highly dangerous situation. Alternatively, if events follow a more

hopeful trajectory, with positive developments in line with the Minsk Protocol as regards Ukraine or decoupling Lukashenko's fate from "loosing" Belarus, the EU and Russia could manage to restore as much as possible their relations for the coming years. In every step, Europeans shall be ready for the worst (reassurance/deterrence) whilst working towards better (dialogue/engagement). And that goes for Belgium, its diplomacy and armed forces too.
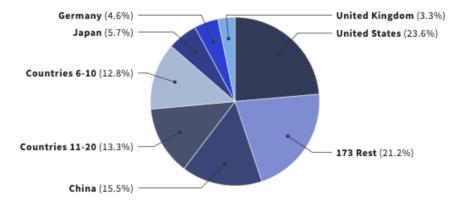
Asia

Nicolas GOSSET

Resurgent Asia and Confluence of Competition Risks in the Far East: Major Trends and the China Factor

It has become a commonly used truism that the 21st century is destined to be an "Asian Century", as the world's centre of gravity has been shifting towards the Asia-Pacific region over the past two decades with far-reaching implications for the global security outlook. The rise of Asia represents a fundamental shift in the balance of (economic) power in the world and some erosion in the political dominance of the West. The fact is that, more and more, "*history is in the making in Asia*".[131] The region today holds an economic and political significance that would have been difficult to imagine 50 years ago, even if it was the reality in the early 19th century. In the past half century, the "*world's once poorest continent*" has witnessed a profound transformation as regards the economic progress of its nations and living conditions of its people.[132] By 2019, as UN data shows[133], it accounted for nearly 40% of world income, 50% of world manufacturing, and over one-third of world trade, while its income per capita converged towards the world average. This transformation has been unequal across countries and between populations, thus making Asia's diverse regions a conglomerate hardly appropriate. Asia's economic transformation in this short time span is almost unprecedented in history.

% Share of the Global Economy

The 173 countries outside the top 20 make up less than a fourth of the total global economy.

Germany (4.6%)
Japan (5.7%)
Countries 6-10 (12.8%)
Countries 11-20 (13.3%)
China (15.5%)
United Kingdom (3.3%)
United States (23.6%)
173 Rest (21.2%)

Nb. Share of global economy expressed in nominal GDP (%) 2019, current prices
Data Source: IMF World Economic Outlook, October 2019
Charts: IMF data - % share of Asia in World economy and GDP based on PPP share of 2018 world total (in %)

Rising China: The Elephant in the Room

At its core, the powerhouse of that "Asian resurgence" has been China's own dramatic transformation, bedrock of its "new" fast-rising power.[134] Having broken the barriers of a centrally planned closed economy, China has fast evolved through exponential growth from an agrarian "Third-World"-like economy into one of the leading manufacturing and export hubs of the world, now vying for the status of being the world's largest economy – a position retained by the US since 1871. The difference in the size of the Chinese and the US economy has been shrinking rapidly in recent years. Back in 1980, China was the seventh-largest economy, with a (nominal) GDP of $305.35 billion, while the size of the US economy then was $2.86 trillion.[135] In 2018, the Chinese GDP in nominal terms stood at $13.37 trillion, lower than the US by $7.21 trillion (at $20.58 trillion). In 2020, that gap is forecasted to reduce to $6.05

trillion, unexpectedly narrowed further by the differential recovery between China/Asia's and Western economies following the recessive effect of the coronavirus pandemic.[136] Driven by a planned economy development model, trade surpluses, expanding networks and an incremental innovation trajectory, the powerful "*catching-up path*" of the Chinese economy is running fast amidst major challenges and vulnerabilities. In addition, the Covid-19 crisis, which originated in one of its industrial strongholds, may paradoxically help put the Chinese economy back on that path ever stronger. When economies are assessed in terms of purchasing power parity, the US has already lost its top spot to China. Even if the Chinese economy has slowed down, even if we make an extrapolation from the last ten years of slowing growth, China is still set to surpass the United States as the largest economy in the next ten years.

This consistent trend, as it intensified in recent years, has come with an ongoing shift in Beijing's position and aspirations in and *vis-à-vis* the region and the international system at large, underpinned by China's increasing technological, organisational and financial capabilities as well as the country's growing global geostrategic interests. In many respects, the last few decades have unfolded as a window of opportunity to advance China's main aspirations. The global economy was open; few countries bothered balancing its growing economic power; resistance was mostly symbolical[137]. Despite the recent confrontational policy of the US government under the Trump administration, the protectionist trade policy has been dysfunctional. China continued to run immense trade surpluses, yet consolidated further its economic cloud by managing to bring to a successful end the long-frozen negotiations of the *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership* (RCEP) that became on 15 November 2020, amidst President Trump's denunciation of the concurrent US-led *Trans-Pacific Partnership* (TPP) framework, the largest free-trade agreement in history in terms of share in world GDP and population concerned.[138]

One of the most pressing issues in contemporary international relations is the expectation of a new era of intensifying strategic competition, characterised by the confluence of political, economic, and military-technological competitions in the context of major shifts in the global security environment.[139]

Even if China is not a monolith and does not necessarily follow a single grand strategy[140], it has various official visions for expanding its influence on the Eurasian landmass and around.[141] President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the key conceptual umbrella for myriads of projects on virtually every continent aimed at building economic networks with China at the centre.[142] It is clear by now that the BRI is about much more than gaining market access and shares, securing trade routes and energy supplies as well as exporting Chinese industrial overcapacities to far-away construction projects. The initiative is a key part of President Xi Jinping's grand foreign policy design. In a nutshell, China actively advances its economic interests and has the vision to further develop its power potential by growing its influence in its regional neighbourhood and beyond. This is followed by a gradual build-up of military capabilities to defend these interests in its neighbourhood and overseas.[143] As such, the BRI is coming with a growing security component. Hence, the fast-paced development of the PLA's *inter alia* naval capabilities[144], military build-up of disputed reefs in the South China Sea, first base in Djibouti and Tajikistan, interest in other possible hubs such as Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and the expansion of state-affiliated private security providers, all presaging a more active and assertive military posture in line with consistent geopolitical aspirations.[145] Beijing's share of Asia's defence spending (Russia excluded) is now over 50%, meaning that it spends more on defence than all its neighbours combined. With sustained growth of its military expenditures since the turn of the century, and especially for the past decade, China today ranks as the world's second largest military spender ($261 billion in 2019), yet far behind the United States ($732 billion as of April 2020[146]). Backed up by expanding economic cloud and sustained GDP growth, the increasing technological and financial capabilities of China's military industrial complex reflect Beijing's ambitious objectives of accelerated defence modernisation as well as its growing global geostrategic interests.[147] However faced with a

myriad of challenges and still constrained in its persistent territorial discrepancies – rural *vs.* urban, seafront *vs.* inner China, North *vs.* South – and structural path dependencies, China's upward innovation trajectory was bound to serve the regime's growing aspirations in regional and global geopolitics.

If anything, China's dramatic transformation and its "new" role and status on the international stage stand amongst the most salient phenomena of the past three decades of globalisation. Nowadays, the country's tremendously expanded economic cloud is also coming with commensurate power and military effects. Whilst the PRC governmentality is still crucially revolving around the internal, "policing" dimension of its national/regime security, also increasingly building upon augmented technologies of control, its expanding financial and technological capabilities are also manifested in the increased military dimension of its might. As China's cloud and capability development expand, the underpinning for asserting its own model (i.e. so-called "China Dream"[148]), its views, and growing global geostrategic interests is also becoming stronger. Many of those who believed that a more economically liberal China would produce a more politically liberal China now feel they might find themselves on the wrong side of history. From the airspace over Taiwan to the streets of Hong Kong, the frozen Himalayas and Central Asia's Pamir to the reefs surrounding the Paracel/Xisha islands in the South China Sea, China's increasingly mighty conduct of its foreign policy is prompting a reassessment. From every viewpoint, its tremendously expanded economic and technological power, increasingly turned geopolitical and military in effect, has become an unmissable fact, reshaping global as well as regional geopolitics, including strategic alliances and the balance of power in East and South Asia in ways that are causing and/or accompanying major shifts in the international security environment.

Besides and beyond China's rise: "other Asia" matters

Amidst that paradigmatic change, its overwhelming consequences and effects across the globe, it is essential to recognise the diversity of Asia. Encompassing a loose conglomerate of realities, contradictions and complexities, the continent fairly stands as a tale of two worlds – the (hyper)developed and the side-lined developing one – that is meant to continue to unfold in the many years ahead.

There are marked differences between countries in geographical size, national histories, colonial legacies, nationalist movements, initial conditions, natural resource endowments, population size, income levels and political systems. The reliance on markets and the degree of openness of economies has varied greatly across countries and over time. Across Asia, politics range widely from authoritarian regimes or oligarchies to political democracies. So do ideologies, from communism to state capitalism and liberal capitalism. Development outcomes differ across space and over time too. There were different development paths, because there were no universal solutions or silver bullets.[149]

Emblematic of those puzzles is certainly Afghanistan. The restive Central Asian nation, with its chronicle instability and unsettled conflicts after decades of international intervention marked by pitfalls and setbacks[150], remains a grey zone whose political deadlock and socio-economic deprivation cumulating as a bedrock of sectarianism and jihadist militancy will continue to require our attention, also in close relation to neighbouring nuclearised Pakistan, whose stability remains at high risk. Whether or not full US forces withdrawal and further Western disengagement will pave the way for eventual Taliban takeover, the prospect of such a critical scenario is now calling from within the region for increased coordination amongst external stakeholders, in which Afghanistan's Western partners may not have the upper hand anymore in organising consensual guardianship over the war-torn nation. Both in terms of economics and emerging regional security architecture, China could now be prepared to take risks and support stabilisation initiatives to be eventually backed by Afghanistan's regional partners. This could occur within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,

which has expanded its membership to eight countries when India and Pakistan joined as full members in June 2017.

To the North of Afghanistan's borders, the tacit division of labour set between Russia and China over the past decade, where Moscow continues to shape the Central Asian Republics' conduct through its political and military ties and Beijing works as a creditor and driver of economic growth, appears to be swiftly evolving, as China is now steadily increasing its security footprint and closing the gap with Russia. While Russian influence and its role in Central Asian security are still strong, China is becoming increasingly active and growing its presence in the region for the decades to come, a trend that could see Moscow's influence undermined in the future. In that traditional Russian "*backyard*", Beijing has indeed been dramatically increasing its arms sales over the past few years, developing new training programmes, and set its first military facilities, building up a small but growing security presence in Tajikistan.[151] Similarly, the Chinese People's Armed Police Force has conducted drills and enhanced cooperation with Central Asian National Guard units taking part in an exercise in 2019 – an unprecedented move that caught Moscow's attention.[152] Certainly, Sino-Russian competition has not really started yet, but as China continues to grow as an arms and hard security supplier, it will have to eat into Russia's share, hence contributing to prospective tensions between Beijing and Moscow. In the long term, there is therefore a sense that Beijing needs to prepare for a receding Russia and it is preparing for that now.

Amidst persistent ambiguities as regards the scope and rationale of that perception, shared opposition to perceived US hegemony is pushing Russia and China to embrace closer coordination and cooperation within non-Western multilateral groupings. As for the SCO, both sides have tacitly underlined the role of the organisation as a bulwark against the West in the last few years. The expansion of the SCO membership to India and Pakistan in 2017 has further served this purpose, at least on the surface. Yet, besides and beyond China's enhanced regional umbrella and the country's boosted geo-economic presence and influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, the fact that nuclear arch-rivals India and Pakistan – China's traditional n°1 and per se unique ally – now stand alongside with Beijing (and Moscow) within a common framework aimed at promoting regional peace and stability does not necessarily hinder conflicting national interests that have prevented the organisation from achieving a higher level of regional cooperation so far.[153] Along with historical Indo-Pakistani enmity, which is due to remain intensely problematic given its nuclear proliferation dimension and persistent nuclear exchange risks on the subcontinent [154], ambivalent and often conflicting power politics dynamics underlying the Sino-Indian relationship remain a powerful driver of arms competition and regional instability, conducive to Washington's tenuous balancing act in Asia-Pacific geopolitics.

Long proud of its strategic autonomy as cornerstone of the matrix of its non-aligned foreign and security policy, India has been reeling at the implications of the May 2020 brutal clubbing of its soldiers by Chinese counterparts on the Doklam plateau, along contested parts of the Himalayan border, an act New Delhi regarded as unprecedented in its scope and implications for the relations between the two powers. [155] Voluntarily kept aside from China's BRI networks of which all of its neighbours (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh) are parts – thus increasing New Delhi's perceptions of Beijing's initiative as a threat to its own regional influence and allowing the Pakistani enemy to strengthen –, India is now facing a conundrum shaped on the basis of the status of lone power it fashioned for itself. Often described as the next Asian powerhouse, the subcontinent-country, bestowed with unique demographical, environmental and economic peculiarities, remains captive of its daunting societal vulnerabilities.

Torn between those and its great power expectations, India's strategic establishment has long argued the country should eschew permanent alliances: The ideal position for India is arguably to be closer to both China and the US than they are to each other. However, as the rhetoric and threats have been

escalating between New Delhi and Beijing despite an ever-growing economic interdependence, as it did meanwhile between Washington and Beijing with the advent of the Trump administration, it has become ever harder to navigate between China and the US in this way. China's "Doklam test" could well be decisive in this regard. May the two giants have avoided further escalation, the modus vivendi that was found does not entrench a status quo by law but a political transaction anew, which will therefore continue to give rise to considerable uncertainty and drive mutual capacity build-ups in sight of future tensions. Critically, it reaffirmed to India the reality of the "China threat", as the gap between the two continues to widen.[156] Over the past few years, India, although reluctant (like Japan) to support any kind of US-led hard balancing, has been moving in the direction of a sensible though purposely incomplete rapprochement with Washington that appears to be particularly decisive for the latter. Whether New Delhi's attitude towards China depends more on the two countries' border conflict and their relations with Pakistan than fudged US promises, that trajectory seems however to be continued, if only perfunctorily, given the stakes at hand in the strategic balance between the two powerful neighbours, and given the perception of the increasing scope and scale of challenges posed by the rise of China to India's own resurgence.

Strategic implications: A geopolitical reversal in Asia, and beyond?

Notwithstanding issues of path-dependency and unsettled conflicts in regional geopolitics, China has acquired, within the embedded dynamics of its economic-technological development, a growing capability to shape the direction and future trajectory of the strategic competition in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, yet also beyond (i.e. in Central Asia or in Africa) – not only through its accelerated military modernisation, but also through the diffusion of its investments and norms, and perhaps most crucially, the strategic choices they underlie. This includes also China's ability to alter strategic alliances in different geographic areas through its growing arms exports, technology transfers, and military cooperation. Accordingly, the ongoing struggle for dominance by the region's major powers, the future of the Korean Peninsula, intra-regional competition in territorial disputes in the East and South China Sea, and, perhaps more importantly, the contours of long-term strategic competition between China and the United States will be inherently shaped by China's diplomatic and national security strategies aligned with Beijing's growing geopolitical and economic aspirations and technological capabilities.[157]

While the US continues to maintain superior military advantages and regional presence, its ability to underwrite stability in the Asia-Pacific is already being increasingly challenged by China's own geopolitical ambitions and strategic goals. Interrelated to the dynamics of incremental arms competitions in the Asian theatre[158], the increasingly emphasised strategic rivalry between the two powers has rapidly built up over the past few years as the overarching divide of this century's geopolitics.[159]

Brewed slowly under the Obama administration, that rivalry took on a new urgency with the advent of the Trump administration, swiftly consolidating in US official discourse the belief that these are two incompatible systems. Steeped in exclusionary re-emphasis on great power competition, the Trump administration has adopted an unprecedentedly combative stance towards China – showcasing China as "*a strategic competitor*" and attempting at forcing many partners and allies to choose sides. In many respects, it felt as if a new kind of cold war was brewing, fought as much through technology and tariffs as with strategic alliances and arms competition.

Whether to be mitigated and eased by its successor, the Trump administration's legacy in this respect will be lasting. Already, it is clear that a new military arms race between the two is unfolding.[160] This involves pursuit of military dominance through strategic assets modernisation and emerging technologies, exacerbates rivalry in space and cyber space, and accelerates the development of new

weapons, including all sorts of missile systems and unmanned combat vehicles. For the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union, the prospect of a new military power struggle must be considered. Yet, for the time being, the core of the issue is more about the consolidating patterns of a battle for global standing as China is now mostly exerting its growing power to prolong jawboning – either to burnish its image or to exact concessions from the US, whose faith in leadership that has been one of the pillars of its global standing for decades has been severely damaged. Now, it remains to be seen how the United States will bend the curve and evolve its response to China's perceived challenge to its leadership.

Whilst the mere pursuit of the outgoing administration's path of head-on confrontation is unlikely in face of the return of a more multilateral foreign policy in the White House, the overriding desire to turn the page on the protectionist excesses of the Trump era and the costs-benefits analysis of the constraints and barriers encountered by the ill-establishment of a China-US binary system overall detrimental to US interests (and those of its partners and allies) in the Asia-Pacific region, the form and content to be taken by a renewed more measured framework of engagement remain yet to be seen. Whatever the form of the post-Trump "reset" may be, one thing is however certain: increasingly, in Washington, the policy narrative has shifted towards a largely trans-partisan understanding that China "*embodies an enduring strategic challenge to the US*"[161], notably in terms of its ability to underwrite stability in Asia-Pacific, at the forefront of intensifying strategic competition for future supremacy over global security and economic institutional grids.[162] In other words, the consequences of China's rise for the military orientation and the techno-economic leadership of the US are there to stay. So are its strategic implications for Europe, notably in terms of strategic disenfranchisement, techno-economic dependency and structural vulnerabilities, in a context where global patterns of strategic competition in the 21st century are more complex, unpredictable and diverse, and the EU-China relationship itself has been growing increasingly complex in terms of integrating varying drivers of cooperation and risk.

Whereas European countries remain generally reluctant to accept that China's economic growth comes with military effects, a growing sense is nonetheless building that Beijing's policies in its neighbourhood, as well as China's increasing (military) presence in Europe's neighbourhood, also in Africa, are parts of a dynamic which has started to challenge European interests.[163] And probably even more prominently, that China's new economic centrality and power may generate path-dependency whose growing risk of entrysm is calling for further review of the expected benefits from current bilateral exchange terms. The PRC already stands as a critical stakeholder in redeployment plans of Europe's conveyor and transportation systems in its BRI framework. Concurrently, it is also playing as a dividing factor with its "17+1 Forum" of BRI's European partners, also emerging as an increasingly influential third power in the Eastern neighbourhood: the Balkans, Belarus and Ukraine, Georgia[164], not to mention Central Asia.

Taken together, those consistent trends are raising an evolving set of fresh questions and concerns with due respect for the long-term strategic implications of China's growing power for Europe and the perceived lack of checks and balances in relation to it. Whereas the late European Security Strategy, which dates from 2009, refers to China as a partner and a country that shares Europe's goals and values[165], a later 2019 European Commission document named it for the first time a "*systemic rival*" and states that China's military assertiveness undermines trust and challenges European security.[166] Still, there is no comprehensive vision for China in the making. Most lately, however, bitter realisation amid pandemic surge of the human, financial and symbolic costs of a direly dependent Europe lacking indispensable materials (sanitary masks, medical disposables, laboratory reagents,…) on a commanding China to which it had long lost its own production capacities sounded a rough wake-up call to many and worried authorities around the spectrum. In this regard, China's controversial behaviour in response to the global health crisis could represent a clarifying moment. As if at every

stage, the unfolding of the crisis had pulled back another curtain, revealing yet more disturbing facets of the Chinese regime's character and highlighting the dangers it can pose to others.

At the forefront of many pressing issues in contemporary international relations, the future will be shaped partly by how China meets the challenges and exploits the opportunities created, consciously or inadvertently, by others, and partly by how the difficult economic and political conjuncture in the world unfolds. As a latest litmus test, the extent to which the regime may effectively succeed in leveraging on the effects of the coronavirus crisis to pursue global primacy remains under question. The country has been hit hard, but the sledgehammer remedy implemented by the Chinese authorities to tame the epidemic has had the same effect on the virus as it does on its population: forcibly efficiently. Given its swiftly demonstrated crisis management capacity, it now seems open to the Party-State to capitalise on its staged reactiveness to demonstrate its strength and leverage its comparative advantage further as a benevolent world power and a new international norms producer. Offering worldwide assistance while lecturing his experience to Europeans and the US overwhelmed by the shock of the emergency at once, President Xi sought to demonstrate China's ability to provide the world with an alternative leadership role model, i.e. to the US, thereby aiming at anchoring China's new centrality in a world whose centre of gravity is gradually yet consistently shifting towards East Asia.

As more broadly, China's "hegemonic" aspirations throughout that endeavour remain under question, and even if we assume China to be on an imperial trajectory, and consider its potential for dominance in the end, future dominance is no certainty. While its influence hardens, it displays fragility and strength at the same time. China's collapse has been predicted many times in the past decade. Each time, it showed resilience.[167] Be that as it may, it does not seem enough to just rely on assumptions of self-limitation in China when it comes to assessing long-term consequences of China's increasingly outward strategies and searching for means to mitigate, balance and counter their effects whether and when necessary. For reason of mere prudence and sanity, given what is at stake, China's "hegemonic" aspirations (for world dominance) should therefore be proactively incorporated in our perspectives, strategic monitoring and foresight, and our risk management calculations.

Rising to the challenge: Foresight and China-mainstreaming

Clearly, time is running short for rising to the challenge and developing better and more comprehensive responses to both China's rise in all its aspects and consequences and, more broadly, to the major shift taking increasingly effect in the global environment from the growing "competence leadership" of developed Asian nations and the consolidation of the production/innovation potential of their industrial systems. If any, performance differentials in facing the deadly bite of the coronavirus pandemic has brought to the forefront the reality effect of that ongoing shift not so much as a cause, but as a catalyst and accelerator of the new geopolitical and geo-economic centrality of China in a world system whose changeover to East Asia has become vivid and scalable in the long run.

Faced with the escapable risk of its decline and demotion, Europe, its member states and common institutions, cannot afford to passively wait and see if it *really* wants to be *geopolitical*, i.e. to exist and thrive, in the context of major shifts in the global environment[168]. The costs of finding itself subjected to others throughout the unfolding dynamics of growing rivalry for future supremacy over global security and economic institutional grids between the world's major powers would be far too high. As strategic competition intensifies between the US and China, Europeans have been increasingly called upon, yet rebuffing attempts at taking side in a shaping hegemonic struggle that only indirectly concerned them, but they could nonetheless mitigate the effects by acting as a truly geopolitical actor with shared vision of common superior interests and strategic orientations at European level.

Rather than taking it down to sanctimonious wordings unfit to withstand the pitfalls and contingencies of the commercial interests of individual member states, strengthening threat assessment and risk governance capacities, fostering innovation and cutting-edge technological advancements, communalising shared interests and capabilities, and institutionalising a strong common defence pillar within NATO would bestow Europe much needed power in negotiating with China on, *inter alia*, climate, the multilateral trade and financial system, Africa's development, and key dossiers of international security *vis-à-vis* which pro-active bilateral strategic dialogue must be engaged with Beijing. In substance, Europe should talk less *about* China and more *to* China, hence speaking the only language Beijing shall understand: that of leadership and power politics. Instead of permissiveness and moral protest, more strategic engagement *with* and *towards* China is urgently needed, without illusions, uncompromising on key European strategic interests, but also free from cut-and-pastes of purely US strategic concerns. Simply because Europeans' stakes and interests are not the same.

Yet, certain key challenges are common. Even if we skate around the discussion about its intentions, the question about whether we can rely on the official Chinese vow not to work towards hegemony, it is imperative to keep patterns of relations in check and balance. As regards that due balancing effort, Europe – given its economic relevance to China (and *vice-versa*)[169], and the scope and scale of its bilateral relations to Asian nations (China, but also Japan, India and ASEAN countries) – has a key role to play. Room exists for providing much needed strategic options to respond to China's growing power and the resulting Sino-US competition. Balancing China, however, needs to be conducted in a measured way.

At the political level, timely and important initiatives such as the *EU Strategy for Connecting Europe and Asia* (September 2018) and the key principles for advanced engagement it defines, the contents and recommendations of the framework-document *EU-China A Strategic Perspective* produced by the Commission (March 2019) and the legislation adopted by the Parliament in April 2019 for the purpose of trade defence investigations, as well as the protection of security and strategic interests must be incorporated and enhanced with commitment and determination at the national level. This requires relevant departments/agencies and security/intelligence services to be better equipped to address eventual challenges to national security, related to industrial espionage in sensitive sectors and against governmental institutions, eventual dependency on goods and services key for national safety (i.e. lessons learned concerning Europe's lack of autonomy), technology transfers in military or dual-use items, and so forth. Too often, we remain blind to the state of our exchanges with China. In this respect, reach out and cooperation with the industrial and scientific networks that are directly or indirectly concerned by any sensitive defence trade and/or industrial issues must be developed in order to provide assistance, guidance and explanation, while developing collaborative instruments of oversight and analysis aimed at countering more actively and effectively Chinese (and Russian) influence and espionage activities, both in their traditional form (human intelligence) and cyber. The dialogue with universities, research centres, civil society organisations and the media must therefore be enhanced. As China's fast-rising power is increasingly coming to the fore, eventually trying to assert its power on asymmetrical grab, stronger policy-oriented knowledge of China-related issues, strategic culture, political philosophy and business patterns must be acquired and comprehensively mainstreamed in foreign and security/defence policy products and processes, just as must be debated, both within parliament and society at large, the ins and outs of at times excessive dependency of our consumption patterns and logistical lines of China. In the new era of intensifying strategic competition, knowledge and situational awareness are also power.

Middle East & North Africa

Didier LEROY

The expression "Middle East and North Africa" (MENA) is more than ever a false friend as a singular wording for all Brussels national and international institutions. On one side, the EU's and NATO's southern neighbourhood is indeed facing transversal challenges that require large-scale coordinated responses in fields like climate change, human rights or economic disenfranchisement. On the other, envisioning our numerous southern neighbours solely as a vast regional continuum veils deeply-rooted local disparities that shape the different societal realities of Algiers, Istanbul, Jerusalem, or Abu Dhabi to name but a few, and Belgium needs casuistic bilateral approaches to promote its national interests.

MENA trends

Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic ranks first as common threat to the whole MENA region at the time of writing. The sheer body count of casualties has remained relatively low so far, compared to Europe or the US, notably thanks to the significantly younger population who is naturally more resilient to the consequences of contamination. But the fragile equations at stake (combining corruption, poor governance, ill-equipped public health, plummeting economies often relying on tourism, etc.) tend to point towards Hell-like scenarios of recurrent waves of social paralysis and increased poverty that could (re)open as many Pandora's boxes across the region in upcoming months, potentially years. Large countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey revealed alarming numbers of cases [170], and authoritarian regimes have taken advantage of the lockdown measures to reinforce state control over any politically dissident voice in countries like Egypt or Algeria. If the disease has struck the Middle East harder than North Africa so far, this trend could change in the future.

Before the coronavirus started spreading, another "wave" – one of socio-political unrest – was flagged and framed as "Arab Spring 2.0". Almost a decade after Mohamed Bouazizi's immolation, which sparked an unprecedented chain reaction of street protests spiralling out of Tunisia, several MENA countries – often those that had largely dodged the domino effect in 2011 – started to manifest similar symptoms of political instability. Last year (2019) saw Sudan jailing Omar al-Bashir after thirty years of presidency and Algeria oust Abdelaziz Bouteflika after twenty years of presidency. It further witnessed Iraqi and Lebanese infuriated citizens take to the streets of Baghdad and Beirut, calling for a drastic change within the political elites who have been systematically associated with rampant corruption and clientelism. The massive blast that devastated the harbour of Beirut in August 2020 is probably the worst and most graphic consequence of this institutional idleness that could be feared. Given the worsening parameters of COVID-struck economies[171], the barometer of popular pressure is due to steadily increase and regularly test the resilience of weak states and the patience of edgy security forces in the aforementioned countries and beyond.

Full-fledged military conflicts as well as subtler "cold war-type" rivalries over power and territorial resources have remained a sad constant across the region, fuelled by and fuelling back further the ignition of highly flammable identities. The infightings sometimes show a salient factor: tribal (e.g. in Libya), ideological (e.g. pro vs con Muslim Brotherhood), ethnic (e.g. Turks vs Kurds) or sectarian (e.g. Sunni vs Shia), but generally comprise a combination of several (e.g. Israelis vs Palestinians). The MENA martial landscape is predominantly shaped by the ongoing arm-wrestling between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and blinking red in three particularly bloody warzones, i.e. Libya, Syria/Iraq and Yemen. In each theatre, the intertwined agendas of local, regional and global stakeholders tend to produce blurry and hard-to-decipher pictures. In the first category of actors, we typically find regular armed forces, but also an increasing ratio of non-state, often jihadi militia-type phenomena. Among the regional actors,

Turkey, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar seem to stand out in the crowd for their particularly deep involvement in political and military affairs beyond their national borders.

In terms of global actors, the partial rebalancing of US resources away from the region has naturally allowed Russia and China to increase their local footprints. In the framework of his Fiscal Year 2021 budget request, President Trump continued in fact to propose more US foreign assistance – $6.5 billion – for MENA than for any other region.[172] Nevertheless, he did not request a significant increase in aid for the Middle East as he did for several other parts of the world. All in all, the US remains the most present and influential actor across MENA, primarily supporting its historical allies – Israel and the Gulf monarchies – and holding its control over Iraq. Russia has, for its part, significantly consolidated its military footing in Syria and thus secured its long-term naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea. Finally, China is acquiring a steadily more confident role in the region, economically in the broader framework of its One Belt One Road Initiative for which MENA is of great relevance[173], but also through its (first overseas) military installation in Djibouti.

Migration and refugee fluxes are global dynamics that are particularly visible across the MENA region. Europe is still considered a safe haven to seek political asylum and/or a better quality of life from the outlook of Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia, and the Libyan and Syrian warzones only bolster the numbers of individuals the EU has to deal with. The conjuncture of global warming, high birth rates, widespread poverty, Islamist radicalisation and terrorism paints an even darker picture, which is facilitating political bargaining (blackmail) by buffer-actors such as Turkey. Traditionally, maritime security in MENA has been associated to trade and to the transit of oil coming from the Gulf region. The EastMed (Gas) Pipeline Accord signed in 2020 by Greece, Cyprus and Israel drastically increases the sensitivity of the MENA maritime route connecting the Persian Gulf all the way to the Atlantic Ocean (via the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea and finally the Mediterranean Sea). Securing the mobility of super-tankers and the premises of new infrastructures – especially in the Levantine basin – will remain crucial to our current global economy and announces the enduring military presence of many stakeholders at the usual hotspots: the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Sicily and the Strait of Gibraltar.

North Africa

Overall, North Africa has significantly seen its security landscape degrading since the beginning of the popular uprisings almost a decade ago. Given the current state of play in Libya, it is probably wise to consider the desert around the city of Sirte as the natural demarcation area between Maghreb and the Levant (Mashreq), two regions affected differently by this battlefield.

Tunisia remains so far the only fragile "success-story" in terms of democratisation process in the Arab world, but faces significant internal challenges, notably through the rise of militant Salafism in its hinterland. If it can rely on ongoing massive support from the European Union, it is also struggling not to lose its balance in the face of plummeting US funding for democracy and governance programming. Algeria, undergoing a difficult post-Bouteflika transition, sees its military regime determined to maintain its grip on power and toughening its struggle against the elusive jihadi threat — notably Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) — taking advantage of the vastness of its southern desert, which connects Libya to Mali.

Libya has fallen into sheer chaos since the neutralisation of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, and still nurtures regional instability and the spread of jihadist groups in the Sahel, where rival groups such as ISIS and AQIM have shown worrying signs of collaboration in recent years. It is further impacting neighbouring Egypt, which is considering sending troops to support Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in Eastern Libya since Turkey sent its own ones to embolden the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA).

Egypt already has a lot on its plate between its ongoing campaign of repression against the Muslim Brotherhood, an imminent demographic implosion along the Nile valley, its fight against terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula and difficult negotiations with its southern partners regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project that will abruptly aggravate water scarcity at home. With more than 100 Million registered citizens, Egypt is the regional mastodon doomed to be tomorrow's time bomb with no tourism in sight for 2020.

Middle East

The Middle East has remained the theatre of several important antagonisms. The most structuring one in the region has been illustrated by escalating tit-for-tat retaliations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, often battling through local proxy militias across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. Opposing the respective champions of Sunni and Shia Islams, this enduring rivalry also projects a populist republican model in the face of the wealthy monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), around the sensitive resource of oil from the Persian Gulf.

In the context of the ongoing war in Syria and Iraq[174], the post-ISIS landscape is notably reshaping itself along ethnic-based clashes between the Turkish army and Kurdish armed factions. Western Syria itself can now be considered as a Russian-dominated territory with a consolidated Assad regime at its head, and a worrisome Iranian influence in the backroom. Neighbouring Lebanon is facing an unprecedented state of bankruptcy beyond protests demanding the removal of political confessionalism. Likewise, political instability has continued to shake Iraq, which struggles to keep its balance between the sensitivities of Washington and Tehran. Across these aforementioned territories, militia phenomena are numerous, with a stronger than ever magnitude of Hezbollah to be mentioned. This very actor could be at the core of a diffuse response to the Israeli annexation of the Jordan valley in the Palestinian West Bank, programmed in President Trump's "peace plan". The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, where our Belgian F-16s have operated in the framework of the anti-ISIS coalition these last years, is currently located in the – quiet so far – eye of the storm, surrounded by these different battlefields. However, it could very well witness a significant ratio of its population, whose majority is of Palestinian descent, take to the streets in retaliation to further Israeli provocations. The recent normalisation of relations between the state of Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain is an important milestone that may seriously affect the future behaviour of other "moderate" Arab states on this topic.

The Gulf region has lost a lot of its public image as a politically stable and prolific investment hub in a decade. Institutionally, the GCC's unity is still weakened by the crisis that has stigmatised and isolated Qatar. In Saudi Arabia, the rise of crown prince Mohamed Bin Salman has revealed cracks of deep anxiety from within the Al-Saud family ranks; Saudi territory has moreover been targeted by rocket and drone attacks from opponents based in Iraq and Yemen. In the same vein, the waters surrounding the Peninsula seem to announce that supertankers might become craved targets of tomorrow's asymmetric wars. At the time of writing these lines, an otherwise bustling city like Dubai is close to economic paralysis, and regional authorities struggle more than ever to know where to place the cursor between public health, economic development and religious piety during holy celebrations. Last but not least, 2020 has witnessed the ongoing agony of war-torn Yemen, where the Saudi-led "Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition" (IMCTC) has pursued a devastating bombing campaign over the Houthi rebels, triggering an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe and encouraging the local Shia populations to allow Iranian influence to further consolidate itself along the Yemeni-Saudi border.

Implications

Middle Eastern countries like Iran often speak to the EU in the same way that Central American countries like Honduras speak to the US, suggesting that the promotion of security/prosperity "abroad" ensures security/prosperity "at home". The Belgian Defence cannot afford to lose interest in this part of the world: on the contrary, MENA is a region loaded with security challenges of unprecedented magnitude that are bound to further increase and subsequently affect us more with time, both along a kinetic South-North dynamic and straight from within our own society. MENA is too close and the risk of crisis spillover is too high. This being said, MENA cannot be reduced to a shortsighted caricature of terror threat and migrant blackmail: this region holds both our past heritage to safeguard and our future opportunities to pursue.

There is no "fixing MENA", and Belgium should cautiously invest its modest resources along case-by-case tailored approaches that allow mutually benefitting endeavours without daydreaming of sheer "win-win" mechanisms that often do not exist at the regional level. In an endless and unavoidable balancing act, Belgium must identify its priorities by blending its national interests in the fulfilling of its commitments to the EU and NATO. The announcement, in June 2020, by the EU's Defence Ministers to develop a "Strategic Compass" seems like a timely initiative for the creation of a comprehensive EU security policy in MENA. As for NATO, the fight against jihadi terrorism will probably endure as its most unifying theme among member states. At the national scale, Belgium needs thus to secure a sharp empirical knowledge of more local developments along a pragmatic collaborative approach to shape its *ad hoc* bilateral relations.

Recommendations

At the national level, Belgium must secure solid empirical knowledge of local developments and adopt a pragmatic collaborative approach to shape its bilateral ad hoc relationships. To achieve this, the Belgian Defence needs to increase its research efforts on the MENA region, which in turn will support our intelligence community and our military operations.

The Covid-19 pandemic will undoubtedly exacerbate pre-existing problems and is likely to both increase the demand for international aid and make the provision of such assistance more difficult. The Belgian Defence can expect to be solicited by the UN in this framework.

The coronavirus "buzz" has cast a deceiving eclipse on terrorism-related issues, but these will inevitably resurface, and understanding the enduring factors of Islamist radicalisation will have to remain a priority for Defence. If terrorism is not the only lens through which we should apprehend them, we cannot forget that Maghreb countries produced worrying ratios of ISIS foreign fighters from 2012 on, and that some of them will keep on trying to target Europe. This should encourage our authorities to further promote a regionally balanced collaboration with local security apparatuses, with a logical emphasis on Morocco in the case of Belgium.

The socio-political convulsions currently labelled as "Arab Spring 2.0" are likely to become cyclical, given the deepening crisis of trust between the MENA populations and their ruling elites. The Belgian Defence would gain from deeper trainings prior to deployments, in order to enhance the understanding of unfolding events and the evolution of "social capital" among its soldiers, and thus keep more easily its balance between promoting human rights and supporting peaceful democratic transitions, without alienating local armed forces.

The energy revolution initiated by the discovery of game-changing gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean seabed has already triggered escalating tensions, notably between Turkey and Greece. The rekindled Cyprus question and the broader Levantine basin dispute(s) will undoubtedly call for

more monitoring of borders to exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and patrolling to ensure the management of future fluxes and the security of infrastructures against sabotage and piracy. Given the contemporary data on migration, we can reasonably expect a similar increase in the demand for maritime operations involving the rescuing of capsized ships, the escorting of refugees and the control of suspicious vessels.

Throughout history, conflicts and rivalries have been a sad constant rather than an exception in the MENA region. This is unlikely to change and we should therefore expect, at best, "armed peace" in most cases. Our political assessments and "prospective analysis" attempts will probably have to focus even more on the notion of "deterrence" beyond sheer military balance. Libya, Syria and Yemen can be flagged as the currently most active warzones, but we should expect escalations and asymmetric conflicts involving jihadi movements such as (Sunni) IS or AQIM in North Africa and (Shia) Hezbollah or the Houthis in the Middle East.

As the US is bound to remain the most influential global actor – but not the only one anymore – in the MENA, the EU should engage more in this vicinal region and ready itself to deal more with Russia and China on MENA-related issues. While these two giants have respectively penetrated the region with a military and economic tropism so far, it is only a matter of time before their political influence emerges strong too. Given the limited European resources, priority should probably be given to an enhanced effort in Libya, in order to ensure security on our southern flank to start with.

Zoom in: "The Abraham Accords"

The year 2020 witnessed another remarkable event in the MENA region through the "Abraham Accords", named after the prophet notably shared by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This US-led diplomatic initiative officialised the "normalisation of relations" between the state of Israel on one side and the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Bahrain on the other.

By joining the small club of Arab states at peace with Israel – Egypt since 1979 and Jordan since 1994 –, these two actors sent the bold message that curbing the Iranian threat has become a bigger matter than supporting the Palestinian cause. Shattering an already weakened Arab unity and most Palestinian hopes towards independence, statehood and a resolution of the conflict with Israel, this move is a providential development for Tel Aviv and a true nightmare for Tehran.

As this new unfolding reality is due to remain a volatile laboratory (surrounded by cornered Iranian allies), all eyes are on potential candidates to follow suit. Among them, we find Sudan, which apparently did so and was removed from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism, Oman that reportedly postponed its decision to after the US elections and Saudi Arabia, which has already agreed for airliners connecting Tel Aviv to Abu Dhabi to use its national airspace.

While the Trump administration obviously pushed with all its weight to reach this breakthrough of unexpected magnitude, a cautious rapprochement between Israel and some Arab Gulf states had in fact been at work since President Obama's second mandate. If the new American administration will certainly drop Donald Trump's one-sided peace plan erroneously dubbed "deal of the century", this significant reshuffling of cards is one that President-elect Joe Biden will most probably not go against.

Another consequence of the normalisation of relations is that some of the Arab Gulf States – notably the UAE – might be allowed to buy new American weaponry of the latest generation that otherwise would not be available to them for many years to come. Of notice is a possible sale of F-35 Lightning II jets for the United Arab Emirates Air Force (UAEAF), which might upset Israel's military edge in the MENA region. It remains yet to be seen how the state of Israel will respond to this – perhaps unintended – consequence of their normalisation strategy.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Myrto HATZIGEORGOPOULOS

Socio-economic challenges

Africa's steady economic growth in the last decade has failed to translate into better living conditions, sustainable job creation and improved governance. Although six African countries are among the world's fastest growing economies, there are significant variations among regions and countries. The African Economic Outlook 2020[175] highlights that extreme poverty and inequality remain higher than in other regions of the world. In 2019, more than 40% of sub-Saharan Africans lived in conditions of extreme poverty, i.e. less than $1.90 a day, while 7 of the 10 most unequal countries globally were located in sub-Saharan Africa. Inclusive growth was registered in only 18 of 48 countries in the region.[176] High levels of inequality have brought about limited availability and access to public goods, including health and education, for large parts of the population. Only 46% of the sub-Saharan African population has access to Universal Health Coverage (UHC), with only 25% of Somalians benefitting from UHC against 78% of Algerians.

#	Country	Gini index	Year
1	South Africa	63	2014
2	Namibia	59,1	2015
3	Zambia	57,1	2015
4	Sao Tome & Principe	56,3	2017
5	Swaziland	54,6	2016
6	Mozambique	54	2014
7	Brazil	53,9	2018
8	Botswana	53,3	2015
9	Honduras	52,1	2018
10	Angola	51,3	2018

Source: World Bank Data

Although the COVID-19 pandemic was expected to have a devastating impact in Africa, numbers of confirmed cases and registered deaths remain very low nine months after the onset of the crisis, with South Africa, Northern Africa, Ethiopia and Nigeria appearing most severely hit by the virus. Indeed, Africa's youthful population, its previous experiences with infectious deadly diseases, governments' swift responses to first registered COVID-19 cases, and limited domestic and international travels are likely to explain the controlled spread of the disease. Yet, low testing and reporting capacities do not permit to grasp the full picture just yet. Beyond the health emergency, the socio-economic fallout of the pandemic cannot be overlooked; lockdowns, travel bans, the falling prices of raw materials and the disruption in global supply chains threaten to exacerbate the continent's underlying vulnerabilities, including existing conflict drivers.

Access to strategic resources

Africa is prone to extreme weather phenomena such as floods, drought and desertification that put a strain on poor economic conditions, fragile food security, limited water availability and insufficient energy provision. With food production depending on small-scale rain fed agriculture by over 95%[177] and a diet relying on corn, which is particularly vulnerable to weather anomalies, the UN Environment programme has declared that Africa was among the most vulnerable continents to climate change.[178] Whereas governments' capacity to adequately adapt and respond to climate change is limited, resource scarcity undermines states' stability and fuels competition and conflict. This was exemplified by the renewed Egypt-Ethiopia-Sudan row over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Home to some of the richest and most diverse regions in the world, Africa's formidable potential for economic and sustainable growth is hampered by poor governance, illegal exploitation of resources, deforestation and illicit financial flows, with long-term devastating consequences on livelihoods. The abundance of natural resources also provides an enabling environment for the illegal exploitation and commercialisation of resources, but also for the transit of smuggled and trafficked goods towards Europe. Competition for the control of legal and illegal trade routes through West and East Africa is growing, which in turn fuels corruption, outward migration, violence and even terrorism.
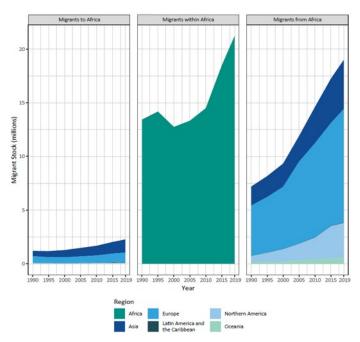
Governance

According to the Mo Ibrahim Foundation which assesses countries' performance across four key governance dimensions (safety and rule of law; participation and human rights; sustainable economic opportunity; and human development), overall governance in Africa has been improving in the last decade. Yet, when zooming in, the panorama is much more contrasted with a handful of countries increasingly improving (Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco and Kenya), while others continue to falter (Libya, Burundi, Madagascar, Mali, etc.).

Lack of representation and inclusivity of vulnerable and marginalised groups weaken social cohesion, democratic institutions, and fuel discontent. In the past few years, civil unrest has been on the rise across the continent. In 2019 and 2020 riots and protests broke out in Algeria, Togo, Guinea, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Sudan and South Africa, mostly against incumbent presidents and governing parties holding on to power but also against corruption, poverty and insecurity. Some governments cracked down on protesters, leading to clashes with security forces, injuries and deaths of activists. Although a decrease in civil liberties and political rights of sub-Saharan Africans was registered in the past 10 years (most notably in Burundi, Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Benin),[179] we also witness increasing civil society mobilisation demanding more transparency and representation from their governments. This increased cross-African mobilisation and connectivity through social media opens a window of opportunity for enhanced scrutiny of ruling classes.

Conflict dynamics

Overall, the number of conflicts on the continent has been increasing since 2014. Although the Sahel, the Lake Chad region, Somalia and the DRC have been registering the largest numbers of fatalities in the past five years, these figures remain far lower than those registered in the 1990s. Yet personal and national safety on the continent has been deteriorating in the past decade, with 33 of 54 countries being on a backward trend as opposed to only 19 improving.

Source: IOM: World Migration Report 2020

Protracted conflict continues to cause violence and displacement in different parts of the continent, most notably in Central Africa and the Sahel. Although Islamist insurgencies' advances were halted by foreign interventions, jihadist groups remain active and continue to cause massive violence and displacement at the border between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Mopti and Gao), as well as in Nigeria and Somalia. The threat of jihadist groups affiliated with the Islamic State is spreading, recently leading Mozambique to requesting assistance from the European Union. Strong international military presence and EU training missions in both the Sahel and the Horn of Africa have not achieved significant improvements in security conditions, and criticism against prolonged foreign military presence is on the rise. In this context, Russian private contractors have strengthened their military footprint in Africa, with governments such as the CAR or Sudan welcoming the introduction of new security actors in their countries. As Russia presents itself as a warrantor of state sovereignty, its renewed presence is likely to exacerbate tensions not only in Africa but also with European states.

The demographic dividend

Population in Africa is set to roughly double by 2050 and quadruple by 2100. Today, 41% of the African population is under the age of 15. The growing number of working-age people can be a blessing for governments that succeed to capture the potential and economic benefits from population growth; to do so, investing in youth's health, education, gender equality and empowerment is a priority. Yet, failure to harness the dynamism and transformational potential of rapidly rising population growth could exacerbate existing difficulties and increase poverty, migration, urbanisation and even violent extremism and conflict. Displacement and migration flows within and outside the continent have been on the rise since 2000.

Since 2008, the share of irregular migrants and asylum seekers from Africa to Europe has been increasing, whereas the share of regular immigrants (with visa or residence permits) has been dropping. Conflict, poor governance, poor living conditions and opportunities, as well as climate change are among the main drivers of displacement and irregular migration. Today, over 21 million Africans live in another African country and around 19 million live in a different region of the world. Europe is home to the largest African-born population outside Africa, with 10.6 million of residents, followed by Asia (4.6 million) and Northern America (3.2 million).[180] Yet the figures of African migration

to Europe remain relatively low when compared to migration within Africa. Indeed, a handful of African countries increasingly become a destination for intra-African migration; this is particularly the case of South Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, Uganda, Libya and Kenya. A notable aspect is the very small number of Africans born outside the region returning to the continent (around 2 million), as opposed to the large outward flows (close to 19 million), which has deprived the continent from trained talents and entrepreneurial youth.

Recommendations

If the migration crisis of 2015 seems overcome in Europe, the root causes of the massive migration flows have not been addressed. To begin with, the European Union and Belgium should support African governments in transforming population growth into social and economic capital. Investing in youth's health, education and empowerment, especially of women and girls, by improving access to health services, family planning, education and skills will create the conditions for long-term security. This also includes working with African states most affected by weather disruptions to increase their capacity to plan and adapt to climate change and its consequences on agriculture, livelihoods, energy and health. Innovative, resilient, ecosystem-based agriculture will not only mitigate the impact of climate change but also create sustainable jobs for the youth.

On the other hand, the European Union and its member states should take advantage from the reduced migratory pressure to further strengthen and standardise migration and asylum procedures to protect the rights, safety and dignity of migrants. This should go hand in hand with the adoption and implementation of a comprehensive and inclusive policy for tackling organised crime and human trafficking toward and across Europe. This includes training and equipping staff to strengthen local border control capacities in transit countries for drugs, counterfeit goods and illegally exploited natural resources. Yet EU support and expertise to break down trafficking networks in these countries would benefit from further intra-European cooperation by strengthening information sharing among judicial and law enforcement authorities.

There will be no peaceful and stable Africa without increased transparency, inclusion and representation. In this perspective, institutional and civil society oversight mechanisms must be promoted including with technical assistance, awareness-raising campaigns, and the use of technology to uncover and denounce abuses, fraud and corruption. In parallel, there is a need to support institution building in order to fight corruption and poor governance, in particular in countries where progress must be consolidated and sustained. Exports of surveillance technologies to countries with poor human rights records should be restricted, as these can be used to violate fundamental rights, and targeted sanctions should be imposed on individuals and entities involved in human rights abuses and acts of corruption. Finally, promoting the representation and participation of youth, women and minorities in politics and government is a means to reduce grievances and build more cohesive and inclusive societies that are less prone to violence and conflict.

The international community should take stock of the growing discontent fuelled by prolonged international and European military presence in the Sahel and Central Africa to reassess and possibly reorient its engagements, and increase the security of its peacekeepers. Russian proactivity on the continent must also be carefully monitored; the multiplicity of military actors present in the CAR ahead of the Presidential elections of December 2020 provided just a snapshot of a scenario that is likely to become increasingly common in resource-rich African countries. In this context, the European Union must speak with one voice and, when possible, engage with such actors to prevent divergences that may lead to further instability. At the level of EU foreign and security policy, building ad hoc coalitions of like-minded member states would give the Union the agility and assertiveness it lacks. Beyond security aspects, Belgium should ensure that the Great Lakes region remains on the European Union's

agenda, and that meaningful engagement increases using all EU foreign policy instruments. The EU should take full but cautious advantage of the opportunities provided by the brand new European Peace Facility, by carefully balancing the need to prevent conflict with the necessary refrain from funding equipment where this may be mismanaged or used for unintended purposes. Belgium should prompt the EU to maintain an overarching political strategy in sight, supporting local governments implementing peace agreements, combatting terrorism and trafficking, addressing the basic needs of the population and offering sustainable livelihood options.

Zoom In: "Current Belgian military engagements in Africa"

Central Africa has historically been the highlight of Belgian interests and engagements on the continent, despite bumpy relations with its former colonies since independence. Following three years of political stalemate, military cooperation with the DRC has recently taken a new turn with President Tshisekedi coming to power in January 2019, while bilateral military cooperation with Rwanda and Burundi remains suspended, to date.

Yet the growing challenges in the Sahel region have led Belgium to step up its presence as well as its contributions to multilateral and European partners' efforts to stabilise the region. Since 2016, Belgium has deployed military personnel and assumed the command of the European Union's mission EUTM Mali (July 2016 to January 2018), as well as the command of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) (March 2017 to October 2018). Since 2017, military cooperation with Niger has also been scaled up, with close to 100 Belgian soldiers on the ground training the country's armed forces as part of operation New Nero.

Belgian operational engagement in Africa is multidimensional: bilateral, through military training partnerships; multilateral, through EU or UN peacekeeping operations mandated by the UN Security Council; and on an ad hoc basis in support of its partners, as was the case of Belgian contribution to French operation Serval in 2013, and possibly Barkhane in 2021.

Conclusion

Maarten DANCKAERT

As outlined in the Introduction of this *Security & Strategy Special Issue*, global health challenges, the shift in the global balance of power due to the rise of China, increased Russian assertiveness in our common neighbourhood, the weakening of the transatlantic Alliance, new hybrid and cyber(space) threats, as well as other protracted conflict grounds form the main key trends of our security outlook. Many recommendations for Belgium, the Belgian armed forces and the European Union have emerged in the above chapters. This conclusion intends to sum up the most important ones.

Global health challenges

In order to respond appropriately to current and future global health challenges, the resilience of our society must be increased. The consequences of climate change need to be anticipated, epidemics and pandemics to be prevented, critical infrastructures to be protected, and social (and economic) continuity to be guaranteed. The role that the Belgian Defence can perform in this is to contribute to the development, operation and provision of surveillance networks for epidemics, transparent communication (strategies) about the emergence of viruses, the joint and coordinated formation of military and civilian medical personnel and the organisation of regular (health) exercises (if necessary inspired by military manoeuvres). The Belgian Defence has already demonstrated its ability to make its expertise and capabilities available to the nation. Nevertheless, civil-military medical cooperation needs to be further strengthened.

Both at home and abroad, the Belgian armed forces need to take into account acute health challenges and the consequences of global warming in their analyses and practices. Hence, the Belgian Defence must prepare for new logistical needs and challenges arising from the impact of climatic variations and changes in the natural environment in various theatres of operation. The protection of military personnel in operation and their possible repatriation, after a possible contamination, should be taken (more) into account. Plans have to be drawn up to protect certain military sites, which are exposed to natural hazards with increasing intensity and frequency (such as rising sea levels). And strategic communication strategies should also include the fight against threats that are related to these, as for example disinformation campaigns in case of an "*infodemic*".

Shifting Balance of power

In an inevitable and endless balancing act, Belgium has to identify its priorities by combining its national interests with fulfilling its obligations to the EU (and NATO). The announcement, in June 2020, by the EU Ministers of defence to develop a "*Strategic Compass*", appears to be an appropriate initiative for the collective creation of a comprehensive EU Security and Defence Policy provided with a genuine European security strategy – whether or not in complementarity with that of NATO – against the behaviour, the power (ab)use and the ambitions of (current and emerging) major powers and other, related and unrelated, security challenges that present themselves in our northern, eastern and southern neighbourhood. At the transatlantic level as well, initiatives must be taken within the European framework to gradually restore strategic stability in Europe by improving mutual understanding with the United States as well as our relations with Russia in a spirit of solidarity, dialogue, transparency and trust.

But in the meantime, Belgium, and the EU too, cannot return to a purely defensive stance within NATO when dealing with Russia. After all, Europe is confronted with the reality of continuous Russian military build-up in its environment and the threat of continued aggression. "*A consistent and united approach*

must remain the cornerstone of EU policy towards Russia", emphasises the EU Global strategy.[181] The EU and the individual member states therefore have an important role to play in promoting the second engine of the "double-track Russia strategy" that the West has been pursuing since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis. Namely, strengthening collective defence on the one hand, pursuing dialogue and cooperation, if and when possible, on the other. When the current sanctions against Russia have to be re-evaluated, the EU should therefore not agree with *business as usual* in the field of defence and technology. This would considerably endanger Europe's own security. Because, while Russia's political modernisation might be in the interest of Europe, its military modernisation most certainly will not. While sanctions only have a limited direct impact on defence programmes, they do have an impact on the Russian defence sector's access to new technologies, materials and research networks, making them an important and effective policy instrument, provided they are maintained for a sufficiently long period.

As concerns Asia, time is running out to rise to the challenge of China's emergence as a superpower. Europe should act as a geopolitical actor: rather than indulgence and moral protest, more strategic engagement with and towards China is urgently needed on key European strategic interests. EU member states and the Commission should work together to gain a common and comprehensive understanding of what is at stake in the "great power competition" and devise appropriate ways to respond to all aspects and consequences of China's rise. Hence pooling and strengthening their efforts to achieve greater coordination. By strengthening its threat assessment and risk management capacities, fostering innovation and ground-breaking technological advancements, communicating shared interests and capabilities, and institutionalising a strong common European defence pillar within NATO, Europe could gain greater power in negotiating with China on, amongst others, climate change, the multilateral trade and finance system, the development of Africa and important international security files. As with Russia, differences between EU member states in analysis, diagnosis and policy-making in face of every "Chinese threat", consequently need to be shared and addressed. In this context, European industries and scientific research centres, which are (directly or indirectly) involved in sensitive industrial issues and/or defence trade, and as such vulnerable for espionage and cyber threats, need to be identified, and tools for collective surveillance and analysis need to be developed in order to more actively and efficiently counter Chinese (and Russian) interference and espionage activities.

New threats

To protect us against new types of threats, including in the first instance so-called "hybrid threats", the Belgian authorities need to develop a centralised policy – in cooperation with our European and NATO Allies – that takes into account our vital national interests, our vulnerabilities and the global responses that can be offered against hybrid campaigns to prevent them from turning into armed conflicts. It is pertinent that the Belgian Defence continues to regard "hybrid warfare" as a major challenge and commits itself to projects that serve the purpose of increasing our knowledge of hybrid practices and our resilience against them. Within our armed forces, therefore, more academic and training attention should be paid to asymmetric warfare, techno-guerrilla, urban warfare, proxy wars, disinformation, cyber attacks and their evolving nature.

We should develop proactive and effective strategic communication (strategies) to combat "information manipulation", promote reliable and verifiable information, and raise public awareness of the risks of disinformation, cyber attacks and imprudent use of social media. Our intelligence services are already in the midst of this, but given the increase of these new threats, it is necessary that they receive the necessary means (more funds and more staff) to perform all of their tasks. Moreover, a review of our national cyber strategy and national interdepartmental cooperation under the leadership of the CCB is required to tackle cyber threats more quickly and more adequately. In the

EU and NATO context, we therefore need to accelerate the development of a "*counter-narrative*" strategy and remain vigilant against the use of hybrid methods that aim to "compromise" our staff in operation. In this context, and in agreement with its strategic objectives, the Belgian Defence needs to be able to deploy offensive cyber capabilities by 2030.

Not only regarding heath challenges, but also in the field of the "technologies of tomorrow", Belgium should try to build a strategic autonomy – if needed, in collaboration with European partners – or at least reserve a seat at the table for its industry. Because in the light of recent developments in New Space, the race for combat aircraft of the "sixth generation" and the quest for advanced "AI", the Belgian industry remains vulnerable. A new arms race has emerged for innovative aerospace and AI technology programmes that will initiate reforms about the way major defence programmes will be implemented in the future. These changes can not only seriously hamper interoperability within NATO, but also have a huge impact on future procurement decisions and the opportunities for Belgium to gain access to new emerging critical technologies.

Other protracted conflict grounds

In all likelihood, our country will be increasingly asked to participate in humanitarian operations and missions in the Middle East as well as North and Central Africa in the coming years. Given the importance of these regions full of security challenges that will undoubtedly continue to grow and then affect us even more over time, it is of the utmost importance to develop a solid empirical understanding of local developments and to follow a pragmatic collaborative approach to shape both our multilateral as well as our bilateral *ad hoc* relationships. To accomplish this, the Belgian Defence needs to increase its research efforts concerning these regions, which in turn will benefit our intelligence community and our military operations. In addition, as already stated, the role of climate change as a "threat multiplier", highlighting existing (health and) security challenges, needs to be integrated into our analyses of these regions.

Issues related to jihadist terrorism will inevitably continue to arise. One of the priorities for the Belgian Defence will therefore be to better comprehend and further monitor the factors behind the ongoing Islamic radicalisation. We should not forget that since 2012 many countries in (North) Africa and the Middle East have been delivering worrying numbers of jihadist fighters, who also threaten Europe. This should encourage our authorities to further promote a regionally balanced cooperation with local security services, as well as to prepare ourselves to consult more often with Russia and China on security-related issues in these regions – within the EU and NATO framework.

Furthermore, our country must ensure that the Sahel and the African Great Lakes region remain on the European agenda and that meaningful engagement increases using all the EU's foreign policy instruments. In the Sahel, the heavy-handed intervention led by France is showing its limits as local dissatisfaction is growing about the long-term foreign armed presence. That is why Belgium, the EU and the international community – through international training missions that increase the professionalism of local armed forces, police services and administrations – must provide more and better support to local governments in the implementation of peace agreements, the fight against terrorism and human trafficking, and in the provisioning of the basic needs of their population.

In the Introduction to this *Security & Strategy Special Issue*, we pointed out that 2020 had taught us that, in times of crisis, international and European solidarity is sometimes hard to find. Moreover, it may have become clear from the above that European member states and NATO Allies must consistently share and collectively address their differences in analysis, diagnosis and policy-making with regard to every security threat. Each country has its own perspective, stakes and interests with regard to new threats, existing conflicts, global health challenges, Russia, China, as well as towards the US. Therefore, we need to work together, within the EU and NATO, and through bilateral partnerships,

but at the same time maintain our independent ability to understand what the rise and fall of "new" and "old" superpowers is all about in order to handle it appropriately. Coordination in international organisations is essential, but a collective approach also requires individual countries to be willing to contribute their part to achieve mutual solidarity. As in all respects, we will find strength in unity: "*Eendracht maakt macht, l'Union fait la force*."

List of Acronyms

A2AD	Anti-Access and Area Denial
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AGI	Artificial General Intelligence
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CARD	Coordinated Annual Review on Defence
CCB	Centre for Cyber Security Belgium
CIS	Communication and Information Systems
COP	Conference of the Parties
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
DEFIS	Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space
DGMR	Directorate General Material Resources
DoD	US Department of Defence
EDA	European Defence Agency
EDF	European Defence Fund
EEAS	European External Action Service
ESA	European Space Agency
EUTM	EU Training Mission in Mali
FCAS	Future Combat Air System
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighter
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GERD	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
GISS	Belgian General Intelligence and Security Service
GNA	Government of National Accord (Libya)
IMCTC	Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (a.k.a. Daesh)
MGCS	Main Ground Combat System
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali
MPCC	Military Planning and Conduct Capability
NGAD	New Generation Aircraft Demonstrator
NRF	NATO Response Force
NSC	US National Security Council
NSS	US National Security Strategy
OMLT	Operational Mentor and Liaison Team
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
PRC	People's Republic of China
RAP	Readiness Action Plan
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SOF	Special Operations Forces

TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAEAF	United Arab Emirates Air Force
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UCAV	Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle
UHC	Universal Health Coverage
USAF	United States Air Force
WHO	World Health Organisation

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[167] Formulation inspired from Holslag, J. (2020). Balancing China's Rise. Why Small European Countries Matter. in L. Sanders (Ed.), *China: Systemic Partner, Economic Competitor and Negotiating Partner?* (pp. 93-109). Brussels: RHID.

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[169] The EU has been China's first trade partner since 2004. In 2020, for the first time, the reverse became also true (AFP).

[170] The Islamic Republic of Iran has cumulated the regional record of 360.000+ confirmed cases and 20.000+ deaths according to the World Health Organisation (WHO COVID-19 Dashboard, 27/08/2020).

[171] In August 2020, the Lebanese pound had lost more than 80% of its value and more than half of the Lebanese population had fallen under the threshold of poverty (The Economist, 11/08/2020).

[172] Project on Middle East Democracy, https://pomed.org/fy21-budget-report/.

[173] China has so far signed contracts with seventeen countries from the MENA region (Carnegie Middle East Center).

[174] Iraq and Syria are the two MENA states that were most affected by terrorism in 2019 (Global Terrorism Index 2019).

[175] African Economic Outlook 2020: Developing Africa's Workforce for the Future, African Development Bank Group, 2020.

[176] Data only available for 48 countries. UNDP RBA Income Inequality in SSA infographic booklet: https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rba/docs/Reports/undp-rba_Income%20Inequality%20in%20SSA_Infographic%20Booklet_EN.pdf.

[177] SIWI, https://www.siwi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Unlocking-the-potential-of-rainfed-agriculture-2018-FINAL.pdf.

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SECURITY & STRATEGY

SPECIAL ISSUE

Recent Developments *in the* Security Environment

The June 2016 Strategic Vision for Defence characterised the Belgian Security Environment up to 2030 as "continuously uncertain and more complex". The COVID-19 pandemic that the world has been facing for one year now is a rare circumstance that does not only confirm this statement, but also incites us to regularly think about the state of the world. The Centre for Security and Defence Studies (CSDS) of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence (RHID) has seized this opportunity to conduct an analysis of the recent developments in the security environment.

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