NATO OTAN

NATO Defense College

Rome | Italy

FUTURE Series

What if...?

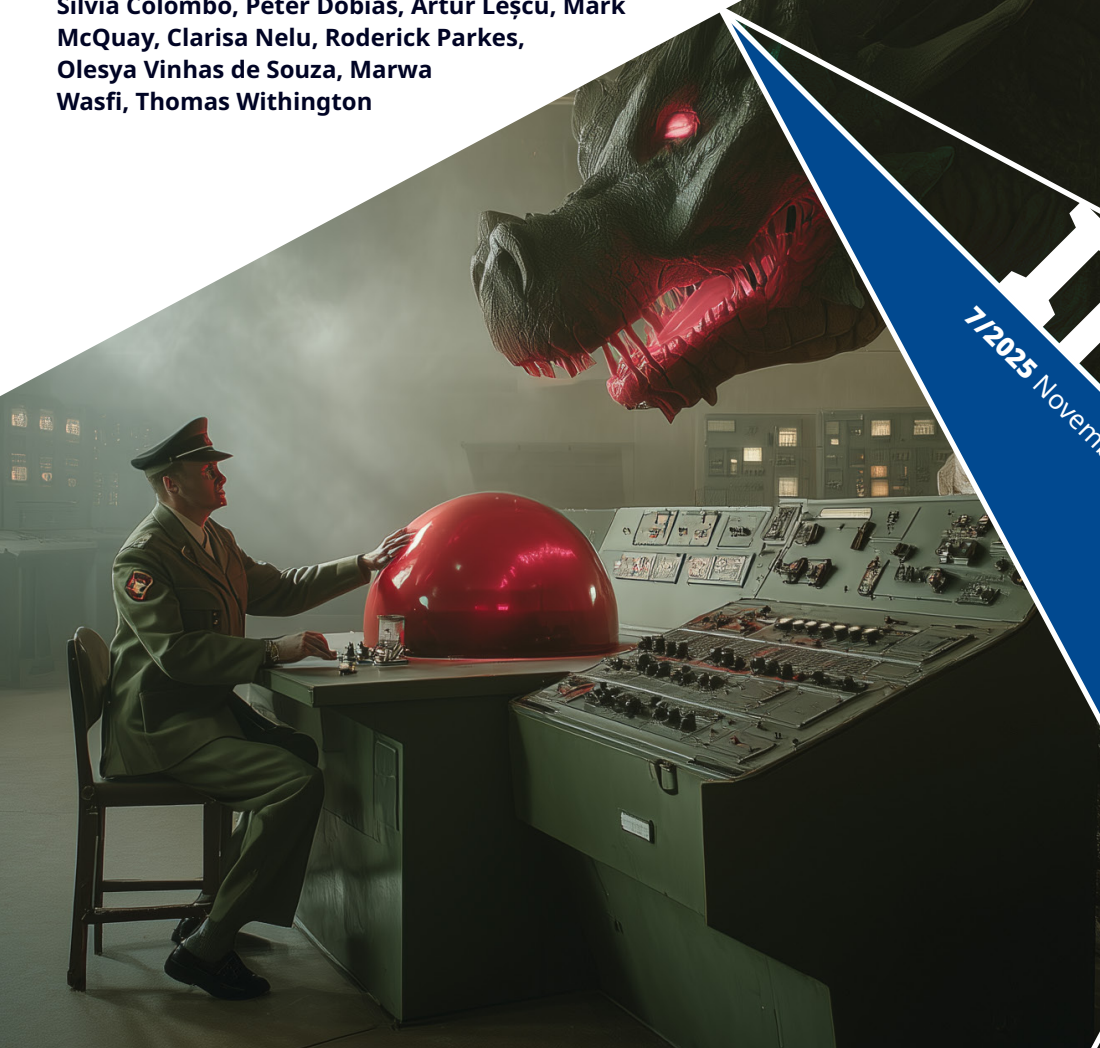
Ten Dragon King scenarios for 2030

Edited by

Florence Gaub

With contributions from

Silvia Colombo, Peter Dobias, Artur Leşcu, Mark McQuay, Clarisa Nelu, Roderick Parkes, Olesya Vinhas de Souza, Marwa Wasfi, Thomas Withington



INSIGHT

7/2025 November 2025

The NATO Defense College was established in 1951 in Paris based on General Dwight D. Eisenhower's suggestion that the Alliance needed an institution that could "develop individuals both on the military and on the civilian side who will have a thorough grasp of the many complicated factors which are involved in creating an adequate defense posture for the North Atlantic Treaty Area." In 1967, it moved to Rome, where it has been located since.

NATO Defense College – Insight

Series editor: Florence Gaub
Copy-editing: Mary Di Martino
This cover was designed by Andreas Loff using AI.

Insight 7/2025
The Future Series

Nota Bene:
The views expressed in this NDC Insight are the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NATO Defense College, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or any of the institutions represented by the contributor(s).

ISSN: 3006-5380 (print)
ISSN: 3006-5399 (online)

Limited copies of this NDC publication are available and may be obtained directly from

NATO Defense College,
Research Division,
Via Giorgio Pelosi 1, 00143
Rome, Italy
m.dimartino@ndc.nato.int

Printed and bound by
lightskyconsulting.com

Contents

Contributors

Silvia Colombo is a Senior Researcher at the NATO Defense College. She is a Middle East and North Africa (MENA) lover with a 15-year experience researching, writing and speaking about this region from the security and comparative politics perspectives. She is learning day by day and testing her personal and intellectual patience in order to be able to not only react to current events or to deal with crises with the benefit of hindsight but also to anticipate and be prepared for them, looking down the road, most recently with her NATO Defense College hat.

Florence Gaub is the Director of NATO Defense College's Research Division. In her work, she is fascinated by all things concerning future, strategy, conflict and innovation, topics she has written extensively about. She holds a PhD from Humboldt University in Berlin, and degrees from the SciencesPo Paris, Munich and Sorbonne universities.

Peter Dobias is a Chief Scientist at the Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC) Centre for Security Science. His previous appointments include senior strategic and operational analysis advisor to NORAD, Chief Scientist for the DRDC Centre Operational Research and Analysis, and Director of Research and Development (Combat in Physical and Virtual Environment). His research interests include hybrid warfare, deterrence and escalation management, wargaming, and intermediate force capabilities concepts, particularly from the complex adaptive systems perspective.

Artur Leşcu is a historian and university lecturer from Chişinău, Republic of Moldova, with a PhD in history, specializing in Eastern European studies and contemporary military affairs. Since 2010, he has taught courses on modern history and contributes to expert analyses on geopolitical developments. He is also involved in think tank research, focusing on military strategy and regional security issues, and has published numerous articles on the historical and political dynamics of Moldova and the wider region. He was a PfP research Fellow at the NATO Defense College in 2024/2025.

Mark McQuay is a doctoral candidate at Jagiellonian University researching interactions between state building and organised crime. He has worked in academic and policy settings, including as a Senior Eisenhower Defense Fellow at NATO Defense College, Associate Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Affairs, and as a trainee at EU Institute for Security Studies. His interests include strategic foresight, organised crime, and the Western Balkans.

Clarisa Nelu is a policy researcher focusing on human trafficking, human rights, and the governance of emerging technologies. She completed an internship with the OSCE, where she focused on policy analysis and capacity building. She previously worked with the Research Division of the NATO Defense College, supporting the team's analytical and publications efforts. Clarisa has authored research on the societal impacts of AI and its misuse by violent extremists, and she has conducted field-informed work on AI and human rights for CeSPI.

Roderick Parkes is Senior Researcher at the NATO Defense College. The focus of his research has been non-state threats and hybrid warfare, the management of international flows and the protection of critical infrastructure, crisis response and the geopolitical drivers behind internal security threats. Before joining the NATO Defense College, Dr. Parkes was the deputy director of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in Berlin and led its Alfred von Oppenheim Centre on the Future of Europe. Roderick studied at the Universities of Cambridge, Edinburgh and Bonn.

Olesya Vinhas de Souza is Senior Researcher at the NATO Defense College. She is a defense analyst with expertise in Russia and cybersecurity. She leverages cutting-edge quantitative methods to gain insights into the factors that drive Russia's foreign policy and identify changes in the operational environment that have strategic and tactical implications for NATO. At the RAND Corporation she published on the nexus between technology and security. She has worked for the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Policy) at the Pentagon, where she directly contributed to the development and implementation of policies to strengthen the U.S. defense posture in Eastern Europe and subsequently received an achievement award from the Under Secretary of Defense.

Marwa Wasfi is a Research Associate in the War Studies Department at King's College London, contributing to an international professional military education programme with some partner countries. She has taught at several leading UK universities, including University College London, University of Kent, and University of Bristol. She is a former Mediterranean Dialogue Fellow at the NATO Defense College; her research focuses on the NATO's Southern flank, with particular emphasis on transatlantic security policy and non-conventional warfare in the Middle East.

Thomas Withington is an analyst and writer specialising in electronic warfare, radar and military communications; a Research Associate at the Royal United Services Institute and a Senior Non-Resident Associate Fellow at the NATO Defense College. He has written widely on these subjects for a range of specialist and general publications. He also works as a consultant and adviser in these areas for several leading government and private sector clients. He regularly performs extensive field work in operational theatres in Ukraine, the Middle East and southern Mediterranean.

Introduction

Florence Gaub

Surprise isn't just something we like or don't like (studies show one is neurologically predisposed one way or another)[1].

Surprise has strategic value.[2]

When unexpected events unfold, humans need time to respond as their brains update their world view, hence the initial reaction to freeze. Depending on the magnitude of the surprise, this can range from a few seconds to several days or even weeks. And what is true for individuals is also true for groups of all kinds, such as states, military organizations or companies: it can take days or even weeks for the collective to make sense of what is actually happening and how to respond.

In war time, this freeze moment can be a real asset.

It creates space for operations that would not otherwise be possible – when coupled with low military readiness, the advantage is doubled. Stalin, for instance, allegedly went into shock for over a week when Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union despite a mutual non-aggression pact – a week that the Wehrmacht used to its advantage.[3] Other examples of the use of strategic surprise include the Suez War in 1956 or the Hamas attacks of 7 October (it is worth noting that terrorist groups rely overwhelmingly on surprise as they usually have little in the way of hard assets.) Taking an opponent by surprise therefore means buying yourself time to gain an advantage on the battlefield.[4]

Reducing surprise can happen in two ways. One is early warning: detecting developments early enough to understand, and if necessary, counter them. Most NATO Allies and, of course, NATO bodies possess units that monitor areas of interest and analyse possible scenarios. These units are, by and large, good at what they do, but they cannot catch everything. Where opponents deliberately disguise their intentions and moves, or where powerful biases work against clear analysis, we need a different approach to reduce the impact of surprise: imagination.[5] This is not as simple as imagining something preposterous such as aliens landing on planet Earth, but requires thorough research into weak signals that a change may be imminent. Armed with these weak signals, authors then push causalities towards a scenario that may be low in probability but high in impact.

The benefit of these scenarios is twofold. They complement early warning systems and intelligence analysis by covering areas that are too fringe, too unlikely to be explored. They therefore close gaps in thinking and anticipation. As a result, the reaction time is shorter when the event in question occurs: reading the scenario creates a "memory of the future," a cognitive familiarity. Furthermore, even if an event occurs that is not identical, but similar, the benefits of familiarity will be the same. Lastly, all scenarios, regardless of their likelihood, increase preparedness because they train human causality thinking, as well as fringe thinking, thereby reducing bias and increasing cognitive agility. This is one of the reasons why the U.S. Army uses zombie scenarios to train these abilities, as well as more realistic scenarios.[6]

However, the scenarios in this *Insight* are not zombie scenarios. As in the previous *What If* edition, authors were asked to think of a possible development resulting from a weak signal, an indication of a change that they would often have overlooked. Each scenario here has a basis in reality, even if the probability of the scenario occurring may be low. Their utility lies not in their likelihood, but in their capacity to engage you in innovative thinking, which in turn increases your mental preparedness. They are called Dragon Kings: rare, but impactful when they do occur.

1 Marret Noordewier and Seger Breugelmans, "On the Valence of Surprise," *Cognition & Emotion*, 27(7), 2013, 1326-1334.
2 Richard Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution,1982).
3 Patrick Jackson, "Barbarossa Hitler Stalin: War Warnings Stalin Ignored," BBC News, 21 June 2011, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13862135.
4 James Wirtz, "Theory of Surprise," *Paradoxes of Strategic Intelligence* (London: Routledge, 2008).
5 Meadhbh Foster and Mark Keane, "Why Some Surprises Are More Surprising Than Others: Surprise As a Metacognitive Sense of Explanatory Difficulty," *Cognitive Psychology*, Volume 81, September 2015, 74-116.
6 U.S. Department of Defense Strategic Command, CONPLAN 8888, CONPLAN_8888-11.pdf https://www.stratcom.mil/portals/8/Documents/FOIA/CONPLAN_8888-11.pdf.


New ways of war

1

What if...

rumours about a new bioweapon triggered panic?

Roderick Parkes

The accord: 2030

King Mohammed bin Salman abruptly cancels meetings for the rest of the month, reportedly unwell. President Xi unveils baffling policies, alienating partners and unsettling Chinese citizens – his demeanour, oddly transformed. After three weeks out of sight, President Putin re-emerges, uncharacteristically cheerful, mocking "Western attempts" to sabotage crops with genetic pathogens. He mimes a starting pistol, jovially declaring "the beginning of biowar." Ordinary citizens, gripped by unease, swap homespun advice: never put your name on a Starbucks cup – your DNA could be stolen; wear tightly woven clothing to minimize genetic shedding. And beneath the unease, a chilling question: have genetic weapons just been used against world leaders? And if so, what stops them from being used against us?

One month earlier, ten world leaders – six of them now exhibiting erratic behaviour – gathered to establish a concert of powers, define areas for future consultation and delineate spheres of exclusive national competence. Dubbed the Accord Summit, it took place in a brand new chrome-and-marble resort atop Greece's Mount Olympus. Euro-Atlantic leaders had believed that the spectacle would reassure citizens: for the U.S., which orchestrated the event, it showcased the ability to translate technological and financial dominance into a new world order; for the European Commission president, hosting it underscored the EU's regulatory power. Yet the summit's secrecy, exclusivity, and opulence had the opposite effect. For a public already distrustful of elites, it reeked of manipulation, deepening suspicions of hidden agendas.

Trouble began with a seemingly minor change to the summit's final communiqué. Biotechnology, initially slated as a discussion point, was conspicuously absent from the final draft, despite its clear significance in the summit's security protocols. Each delegation had insisted on handling its own "genetic security," destroying all personal waste to prevent DNA collection. Thus, almost from the outset, whispers were circulating about the existence – and potential use – of targeted bioweapons, possibly deployed by the hosts against their guests.[1] A summit designed to project unity and control had instead bred paranoia. And what was intended as a demonstration of Western dominance in technology and weaponry had, instead, deeply unsettled the very publics it sought to embolden.[2]

The speculation grew increasingly elaborate as public knowledge of biotechnology advanced. The ability to target genetic markers, decrypt an individual's DNA, and carry out precision genomic attacks via nano-bots or trained bacteria no longer seemed far-fetched[3] – nor did the prospect of inducing behavioural changes, triggering

1 Mallika Sen, "Explainer: Why Would World Leaders Balk at Giving Putin DNA?" *AP News*, 18 February, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-coronavirus-pandemic-science-health-russia-fa0fa0b21968e746dc095a9cf187ff14.
2 Michael Rühle, "The Renaissance That Wasn't: The Weaknesses of the Current Deterrence Debate," *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 8 August 2024, https://ip-quarterly.com/en/renaissance-wasnt-weaknesses-current-deterrence-debate.
3 Mackenzie Foley, "Genetically Engineered Bioweapons: A New Breed of Weapons for Modern Warfare," *Dartmouth Undergraduate Journal of Science*, Winter 2013, https://sites.dartmouth.edu/dujs/2013/03/10/genetically-engineered-bioweapons-a-new-breed-of-weapons-for-modern-warfare/.

diseases like cancer, or trapping someone in a body that would slowly kill them as their metabolism shut down.[4] Entire population groups – Basques, Finns, Ashkenazi Jews – could be targeted.[5] And politicians had few answers. The British prime minister likened the Summit to a game of wink murder and joked that he was grateful not to have been invited, only for a former Panamanian president to post sourly that exclusion from the negotiating table had never guaranteed protection.

Euro-Atlantic governments began to reassure their citizens through the familiar empathy-engineered social platforms. Blue-tick accounts, like the EU's, deploy advanced neuro-algorithms to influence viewer emotions. But what had been considered routine communications practice just weeks before now felt as invasive as the biotechnologies they were defending. By contrast, President Putin, the smirking host of the Grand Kremlin Palace, came across as far more authentic. Standing alongside Zimbabwe's president and the director of the nearby Pavlovsk seed bank, Putin accused Western scientific collaboration of serving as a front for harvesting genetic data. Citing the "failed sabotage of Russian crops", he claimed his country had safeguarded its genetic sovereignty and was ready to share its expertise with friends like Zimbabwe.[6]

Aftermath: consequences and controversy

Six months on, Georgia Boulanger, a former NATO official, has become the face of surging public unease. Dismissed from her job two years earlier for violating NATO's new security clearance protocols after submitting her DNA to a genealogy firm,[7] she has reinvented herself as a vocal critic of the Alliance. Through her bestselling book and frequent appearances on the (emotionally authentic) legacy media, she condemns NATO secrecy around Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDTs), arguing that it has undermined public trust. She now describes losing her security clearance as the moment when a new era of biowarfare kicked off, for which NATO was too cowardly to prime the public. As speculation surrounding the Summit escalates, Boulanger's warnings are gaining traction with the public.

In return, NATO leaders repeat a simple and truthful defence: that all Allies remain staunch adherents to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC) and reject offensive bioweapons;[8] and that start-ups and tech businesses would refuse to work with initiatives like DIANA, NATO's innovation accelerator if Allies could not demonstrate their commitment to ethical development of EDTs.[9] Yet, historical missteps undermine their credibility. Memories of Cold War experiments – 800,000 San Franciscans exposed to bacteria; microbes dispersed in New York subways – have lingered in the public consciousness.[10] And when Pavlovsk's director presents a ceramic bulb which she claims was used in Western drone attacks on crops, it triggers folk memories of lab pathogens and unethical experiments.[11]

Boulanger argues that even if the Allies are not using biotechnology in offensive strategies, their defensive measures must be made transparent. Any effort to guard against bioweapons likely involves bioengineering, and without openness, it risks turning Allied populations into unwitting test subjects. Her warnings resonate most with those at the highest risk of genetic targeting – military personnel. While defensive biotech may offer them protection, it also exposes the wider population to unknown risks. For soldiers who see their bodies as sacrosanct, rejecting untested genetic interventions is a matter of principle. And their deep sense of duty makes them willing to sacrifice for the greater good. Long wary of

4 Dominik Juling, "Future Bioterror and Biowarfare Threats for NATO's Armed Forces until 2030," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231401005; Ian Sample, "Synthetic Biology Raises Risk of New Bioweapons, U.S. Report Warns," *The Guardian*, 19 June 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/jun/19/urgent-need-to-prepare-for-manmade-virus-attacks-says-us-government-report.

5 Rosa Brooks, "Can There Be War Without Soldiers?" *Foreign Policy*, 15 March 2016, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/15/can-there-be-war-without-soldiers-weapons-cyberwarfare/; Uy Hoang, "BMA Warns of Arrival of Genetic Weapons," *BMJ* 318, no. 7179 (30 January 1999): 283, https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.318.7179.283.

6 Brandon Moss, "Elevating Zimbabwe's Agriculture: Vice President Chiwenga's Vision Inspired by Russian Farming Innovations," *AgriFocus Africa*, 26 February 2024, https://agrifocusafrica.com/2024/02/26/elevating-zimbabwes-agriculture-vice-president-chiwengas-vision-inspired-by-russian-farming-innovations/.

7 Julian E. Barnes, "U.S. Warns of Efforts by China to Collect Genetic Data," *The New York Times*, 22 October 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/22/us/politics/china-genetic-data-collection.html.

8 NATO, *Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation in NATO*, last updated 27 February 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics_48895.htm.

9 NATO, *Deputy Secretary General: NATO Will Set the Standard for Ethical Use of New Technologies*, 27 September 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_186936.htm.

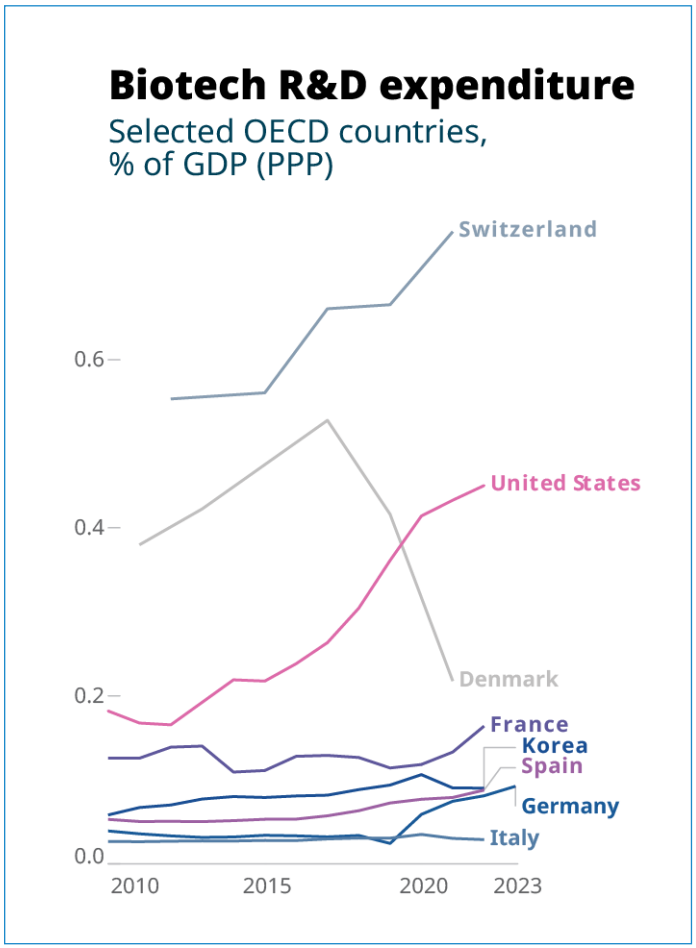
10 George W. Christopher et al., "Biological Warfare: A Historical Perspective," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 278, no. 5 (1997): 412–17; Andrew G. Robertson and Laura J. Robertson, "From Asps to Allegations: Biological Warfare in History," *Military Medicine* 160, no. 8 (August 1995): 369–373; Antony Barnett, "Millions Were in Germ War Tests," *The Guardian*, 21 April 2002, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2002/apr/21/uk.medicalscience.

11 Jaap van Ginneken, "Bacteriological Warfare," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 7, no. 2 (1977): 130-52, https://doi.org/10.1080/00472337785390121.

bio-experimentation and acutely aware of the military's history as a testing ground, service members begin to leave in growing numbers.[12]

The controversy over the so-called "CRISPR kids" erupts at a precarious moment. In recent months, wealthy couples have been taking advantage of gene-editing services in innovation-friendly Allies to enhance their future children. These families quickly become flashpoints of division within the Alliance, triggering both regulatory and physical barriers. Cautious Allies, wary of the ethical risks posed by gene-editing, impose travel bans, effectively barring these "genetically modified families" from crossing their borders. Yet, in their attempt to reassure citizens, they inadvertently deepen mistrust in scientific progress. Meanwhile, more bullish Allies, banking on societal acceptance to drive innovation, face a backlash of their own as access to cutting-edge technology remains the privilege of the wealthy, exacerbating existing inequalities.[13]

Mistrust in NATO echoes abroad. Excluded from the Accord Summit, smaller and poorer nations in the Global South criticize the gathering as an expression of Western presumption and recklessness. They cast Russia's approach as the antidote, praising the Pavlovsk seed bank – long dismissed by Euro-Atlantic scientists for rejecting international collaboration – as a symbol of responsible stewardship over global genetic heritage. The food security agreement Zimbabwe signed with Russia is now being extended to other African nations, as Russia leverages its new territories in the Ukrainian "bread basket" to strengthen ties with governments battling war and famine. So while Allies had led the global race to develop EDTs, including for military use, they had already lost the global biowar before a single shot was administered.[14]



The run-up: a trust crisis decades in the making

The roots of the Accord crisis lay in how Allies framed the EDT race. They had chased technological dominance but failed to bring their populations along. Advances meant to protect citizens instead fuelled anxiety, allowing adversaries to spread suspicion within NATO and beyond. Not since the 1950s had military technology advanced so rapidly. But trust in institutions, society, and authority had eroded beyond comparison. Today's EDTs required levels of trust comparable to the atom bomb, towards governments, and in science itself. Without it, even the most sophisticated capabilities were useless. Allies may have won the race for technological superiority, but they lost the public buy-in that gave such victories meaning. And so, the Accord Summit, meant to crown their success, ended in discord.

A decade earlier, the Allies had predicted that critical breakthroughs across key technologies would materialize by around 2030.[15] The stakes were clear: whichever side achieved the breakthrough would flip the balance of power with peer competitors; key breakthroughs – such as quantum decryption, which would render all prior decryption obsolete – would be so drastic as to make even the shiniest of exquisite tech look ancient from one day to the next. Democracies generally adopted an "of-

12 Ulf Schmidt, "Cold War at Porton Down: Informed Consent in Britain's Biological and Chemical Warfare Experiments," *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 15, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 366-80, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963180106060488; Cynthia M.A. Geppert, "Mistrust and Mandates: COVID-19 Vaccination in the Military," *Federal Practitioner* 38, no. 6 (June 2021): 254-255, https://doi.org/10.12788/fp.0143; Oren Liebermann, "Only 43 of More than 8,000 Discharged from U.S. Military for Refusing Covid Vaccine Have Rejoined," *CNN*, 2 October 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/02/politics/us-military-covid-vaccine/index.html; Alicia Gutierrez, "Project Operation Whitecoat: Military Experimentation, Seventh-Day Adventism and Conscientious Cooperation," *History in the Making* (2010): 3, 6, https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol3/iss1/6.

13 Ethan Bier, "Gene Drives Gaining Speed," *Nature Reviews Genetics* 23 (2022): 5-22, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41576-021-00386-0.

14 Caitlin Welsh, "*Russia, Ukraine, and Global Food Security: A Two-Year Assessment,*" *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 27 February 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-ukraine-and-global-food-security-two-year-assessment.

15 Thierry Tardy, ed., "*NATO 2030: New Technologies, New Conflicts, New Partnerships,*" *NDC Research Paper No. 17* , NATO Defense College, Rome, February 2021, https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1527.

fensive" strategy to defence innovation: they embraced disruption and sought breakthroughs across the whole field of EDTs. This was designed to outpace autocracies, which focused narrowly on defending individual vulnerabilities. But while this approach was technologically successful, it sidelined public buy-in, assuming that the results would speak for themselves.

Autocracies ran a different race, focused on societal trust as befits regimes paranoid about support and stability. Repeated global financial crises, the Snowden revelations, international sanctions – these episodes had taught them the importance of autonomy. And to secure autonomy, they prioritized public buy-in, framing their technologies as cautious and protective. By 2030, this narrative gained traction. Allies had become synonymous with disruption following their operations in Libya and Afghanistan, and offensive innovation seemed reckless. Russia and China portrayed themselves as champions of responsible technology, shifting the perceptions of ordinary people in their favour. They had erected firewalls around their tech ecosystems, and within those firewalls, trust and adoption were high.[16] The framing of the tech race had fundamentally shifted.

As societal mistrust in the Euro-Atlantic deepened in the mid-2020s, Allies became divided in their approaches to EDTs. Innovation-driven Allies continued to partner with disruptive start-ups, prioritising rapid breakthroughs. Cautious Allies, on the other hand, sought tighter regulation, demanding for instance that private firms pledge to surrender intellectual property to NATO during an Article 5 situation. These cautious states also attempted to cultivate home-grown tech champions but, in doing so, became increasingly dependent on external suppliers of rare earths and critical technologies, eroding their own strategic independence.

Biotechnology became the focus of this general public mistrust due to its deeply personal implications. It directly impacted health, one's own body, and the health of future generations. In just a decade, global investment in biotech exceeded $2 trillion, promising to cure diseases and transform economies. Yet the speed and scale of the change, and the implicit expectation that ordinary citizens would embrace these intrusive technologies in the name of progress, alienated large swathes of the population.

16 Tim Ruhlig, The Sources of China's Innovativeness," *DGAP policy paper*, October 2023, https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/DGAP%20Analysis%20No-5_October-2023_16pp.pdf.

2

What if...

Russia uses non-lethal acoustic weapons?

Peter Dobias

2030

Michael was in the lead escort vehicle of the supply convoy heading to Forward Outpost Delta, located not far from Dnipro in eastern Ukraine, close to the line of control. This outpost housed observers responsible for monitoring the truce. The supply convoy was bringing mostly fuel and meals and consisted of four trucks, a tanker and two escort vehicles. Michael had lost track of how many of these supply runs he had commanded over the last few months. He noted that there were significantly more people lining the street than he would expect for a Sunday morning. Even more disconcerting was the fact that most of these people were young men in their twenties and thirties. He recalled that during the previous night's briefing, his troops had been warned about increased chatter on the Russian side of the line of control. There were indications that something was being planned. The commander had made it clear that they should try to avoid any confrontation with civilians, and more importantly, they had been directed to avoid any escalation that could serve Russian propaganda. There were indications of the presence of Russian operatives whose objective was to stir unrest, particularly among the ethnic Russians who were settled in the area during the conflict, and subsequently to provide an excuse for a Russian incursion into the region.

Michael started feeling deep uneasiness. He found it unusual. The presence of these crowds made him nervous, but this was different. It was an overwhelming and strange sensation. He told himself that it was nothing and tried to focus on the road ahead of him. However, the uneasiness remained. If anything, it started changing into an outright feeling of anxiety and fear. Michael found it strange. He was not normally a fearful, anxious person. However, this time he could not suppress or overcome the fear. What concerned him even more was that the fear and anxiety seemed to have gripped his crew as well. And the voices of the other crews in his headset had this uneasy undertone too. Michael did not know what to do. It was not like him. Anxious, undecisive and seemingly unable to get a grasp on himself, and the feeling was becoming stronger and stronger. He felt a growing desire to jump out of the vehicle, to run away, to disappear. The surrounding crowds appeared more and more threatening. Michael turned to his crew and commanded them to ensure that the weapon station, consisting of a heavy machine gun, supported by an optical and acoustic warning device, and a small, short-range active denial system, was in working order.

Suddenly, his vehicle's engine died. Michael's panic became uncontrollable. As he turned to his gunner, he saw that the corporal was pale. He grasped the controls of the remote weapon station. Michael was trying to think, but his brain was fogging up. A sense of panic was overtaking him. The crowds on the street looked terrifying to him. Suddenly, a group of people started gathering around the convoy vehicles. A moment later, the gunner grabbed the controls and aimed at the crowd. His intent was to use the Active Denial System (ADS),[1] but he too was overwhelmed by panic and had difficulties focusing on the task. Seconds later, the engine restarted, and the vehicle jerked forward. A burst of machine gun fire rang out and several people fell. Everything happened so fast. The sense of panic was replaced by dread and Michael

1 Active Denial System is a millimetre wave directed energy system that creates a feeling of intense heat in personnel, forcing them to step away from the beam. See for example S. Levigne, *The Active Denial System: A Revolutionary, Non-lethal Weapon for Today's Battlefield*, NDU Press DTP-065, 2009.

was trying to process what had just happened. He could not understand what caused his fears, and he was confused. His crew looked equally puzzled.

Several minutes passed by. Michael's headset rang with a voice from his Headquarters: "What are you doing? Social media is full of the videos of your convoy mowing civilians!" Michael froze. He realized that the crowd was running away in all directions, but there were young men on balconies and in doorways all visibly recording events on their phones. Right in front of his truck were the bodies of civilians, including women and children.

In his report, Michael mentioned the overwhelming feeling of panic that came over him and his crew. However, he could not explain it and had to admit that there was no real reason for it, and no good explanation for the use of excessive force. The NATO task force, together with the Ukrainian government and local authorities, launched an investigation; the pro-Russian civilian authorities in the area dismissed the claims of overwhelming fear and panic as empty excuses and insisted on prosecuting Michael and his crew for injuring and killing civilians. Not surprisingly, the Russian propaganda machine exploited the situation and started further magnifying the story; reports inflated the numbers, manipulating videos and creating additional stories on NATO brutality. The Russian media claimed that NATO forces, with the complicity of the Ukrainian government, targeted the Russian minority population in an act of genocide. This would have profound strategic consequences for the negotiations regarding control of the disputed territory, as will be discussed below.

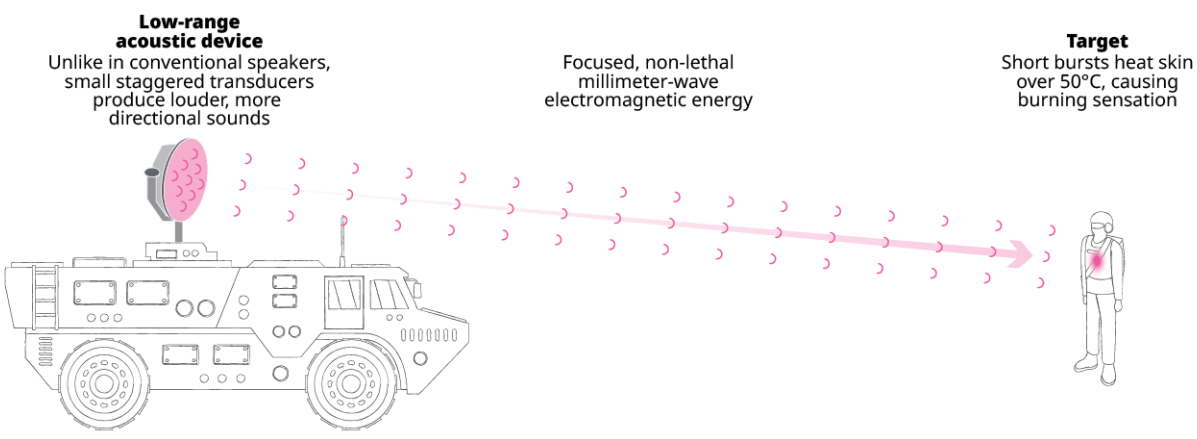
Consequences

Russia gained exactly what they were seeking. While disinformation using generative artificial intelligence that they would normally rely on could eventually be disproven, this incident provided their propaganda machinery with real events that they could use to feed their narrative of NATO aggression against Russia, highlighting the need to protect Russian minorities from genocide by NATO and the complicit Ukrainian regime.

Russian media gloated over the incident; media in unaligned countries also took Russia's side, and even in NATO countries there was a lot of questioning of what happened and why the soldiers opened fire. Nobody was interested in the military's report of the strange panic that overwhelmed the soldiers. The Russian government made full use of their massive narrative advantage. They called for an emergency UN Security Council meeting where they presented a resolution condemning the NATO-Ukrainian genocide against the Russian minority in Ukraine and seeking an immediate withdrawal of NATO troops, to be replaced with Russian troops. While the U.S., the UK and France vetoed the resolution, pressure in support of Russia was mounting in many unaligned countries. Russia leveraged this pressure to push for a summit to discuss the situation of the Russian minorities more broadly; in the meantime, it started a military buildup at the border with Ukraine.

In contrast, Allied governments went on the defensive. Since their own reporting confirmed the authenticity of the videos, they could not simply dismiss the incident as a fake. This placed them in a precarious situation globally, as other autocratic regimes used the incident to call out "Western hypocrisy" and questioned any moral rights of the West to criticize their own oppressive actions. Demonstrations across many NATO countries called

Acoustic Weapons



for an immediate withdrawal of all Allied forces from Ukraine, and for a public investigation of the incident. Nobody was interested in the soldiers' side of the story. Most media outlets ridiculed the idea that the soldiers had been affected by "an unknown non-lethal weapon affecting their cognitive abilities."

The Ukrainian government's position was significantly weakened, and, with increasing domestic opposition to the support to Ukraine within NATO and mounting international pressure, they were forced to negotiate with Russia from a position of weakness as they were becoming more and more isolated. Russia used the incident as a justification to push for independence of the disputed territory from Ukraine in a bid to ensure protection of its minority, and to demand other concessions, including giving up "buffer" territories, as well as security and cultural guarantees to Russians across Ukraine.

How did we get here?

Closely watching NATO's research and development programme, and, prior to the 2014 suspension of collaboration due to the invasion of Ukraine[2], accessing Allies' intellectual property through the Partnership for Peace programme, Russia conducted its own non-lethal weapon programme to contribute to narrative warfare.[3] One of the areas of interest for Russia was acoustic weapons (in the infrasound spectrum). These weapons could be used to cause fear and panic, while remaining outside of the audible spectrum.[4] Russia may have used some directed energy weapons against U.S. officials in Havana (causing the so-called Havana Syndrome).[5]

In the pervasive information environment, any mishap, any incident potentially undermining NATO legitimacy would be used by Russian (and other adversaries') propaganda machine. NATO must therefore anticipate that in the event of a potential confrontation with Russia, Moscow will not shy away from using such weapons, especially if they could leverage the reactions induced in NATO soldiers for their propaganda purposes.[6] Combining it with the ubiquitous presence of video-recording and the instant streaming capabilities of cell phones, an adversary could trigger apparently unreasonable reactions (panic, flight, or violence, as in this story) that could provide with them visual evidence they could use to paint NATO forces in a negative light, to gain global sympathy for their own propaganda, and even to influence public opinion within NATO countries.

NATO had pursued research – albeit limited – into non-lethal capabilities since the late 1990s.[7] This effort, mandated by NATO policy,[8] initially started with a focus on force protection and policing actions by NATO forces (especially crowd control measures). It was later expanded and included a conceptual breakdown of silos between different types of capabilities (i.e. legacy and directed energy non-lethal weapons, cyber and electromagnetic warfare) below the lethal threshold.[9] These efforts, however, remained largely in the domain of research and development, and the acquisition and fielding of non-lethal capabilities remain lacking, despite numerous trials and even some legal studies arguing in their favour.

Therefore, what could NATO have done to prevent an incident like this from occurring? Up to now most research and analysis focused on NATO's own use of non-lethal capabilities to minimize impact on civilians. However, very little effort was invested into addressing the question of countering adversaries' non-lethal capabilities if the latter were to be used against NATO forces. This is especially true for the technologies that NATO itself would not use for ethical or legal reasons, but which our adversaries would employ (for instance, riot agents banned by the Chemical Weapons Convention[10] were used by Russia against Ukrainian soldiers[11]). Hence, to avoid this scenario from happening in the first place, NATO would have had to support research into countering a wide range of non-lethal capabilities, including acoustic and directed energy weapons that could potentially be used against NATO forces.

2 NATO Website, Relations with Russia, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50090.htm, accessed 27 November 2024.
3 Timothy Thomas, "Russian Non-Lethal Weapons," *Report*, MITRE Center for Technology and National Security, December 2020, https://www.mitre.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/pr-20-0145-russia-nonlethal-weapon-concept.pdf.
4 "Such weapons use sound and cause fear, panic and terror among enemy soldiers. Even internal human organs can be damaged, leading to death," Boris Egorov, "A Farewell to Traditional Arms: Russia Develops Weapons for the Future, Russia Beyond," July 2017, https://www.rbth.com/defence/2017/07/12/a-farewell-to-traditional-arms-russia-develops-weapons-for-the-future_801080.
5 Scott Pelley, Aliza Chasan, et al., "Russian Nexus Revealed During 60 Minutes Havana Syndrome Investigation Into Potential Attacks on U.S. Officials," CBS 60 Minutes Overtime, 31 March 2024, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/havana-syndrome-russia-evidence-60-minutes/.
6 Russian Non-Lethal Weapons, December 2020.
7 Cees M. Coops, "NATO and the Challenge of Non-Lethal Weapons," *Research Paper no 39*, NATO Defense College, Rome, September 2008.
8 NATO Policy on Non-Lethal Weapons, NAC, 13 October 1999, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_27417.htm, accessed 27 March 2024.
9 Peter Dobias and Kyle Christensen, "Intermediate Force Capabilities: Countering Adversary across Competition Continuum," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, USMCU (2023), https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/JAMS%2014_1_Spring2023_Dobias.pdf.
10 Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, Chemical Weapons Convention, https://www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention/articles/preamble/, accessed 27 November 2024.
11 U.S. Department of State, "Russia Spreads Disinformation to Cover Up Its Use of Chemical Weapons in Ukraine," Global Engagement Center, https://2021-2025.state.gov/russia-spreads-disinformation-to-cover-up-its-use-of-chemical-weapons-in-ukraine/, accessed 27 November 2024.

3

What if...

a nuclear weapon detonated in space?

Thomas Withington

Friday, 10 May 2030, should have been a normal day for Dr Esma Yildirim, who lived in an apartment in Inecik, a suburb of Kayseri, in central Türkiye. Dr Yildirim worked at Kayseri's Memorial Hospital and that day she woke at 03.50 local time as her shift was due to start in just over an hour. She left her apartment at 04.35. Four minutes earlier, at 04.31, a rocket was launched from a space centre outside Tehran, supposedly carrying an environmental monitoring satellite to aid agriculture. Despite the prevailing tensions in the Middle East, neighbouring nations were notified of the time and date of the launch. This openness and transparency were reassuring. Missile defences around the region detected and tracked the rocket, but no further action was necessary, for this was a peaceful use of space. Reaching speeds of 4,470 knots (8,280 kilometres per hour) by the time the rocket was 704 nautical miles (1,304 kilometres/km) into its flight, it was at an altitude of 65nm (120km). The rocket disappeared from radar screens at 04.40. The satellite was a misnomer. The rocket was in fact carrying a 900-kiloton nuclear warhead which detonated in space 3.7nm (two kilometres) northeast over Agdere, in Adana province, eastern Türkiye.

The detonation triggered an Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP). As the warhead exploded, it produced gamma rays that travelled away from the explosion at the speed of light. Gamma rays are a form of electromagnetic energy that can be absorbed by metallic objects like antennas and power cables. The rays produced high voltages. Strong currents can overwhelm connected electronic and electrical systems. Current levels can be millions of times more intense than systems were designed to use. Power generation and transmission grids, telecommunications, radio, radar, telecommunications systems and computers were all at risk from the EMP.[1] The higher a nuclear detonation occurs, and the more powerful the warhead, the further the EMP will travel: A one megaton airburst at an altitude of 43nm (80km) could produce an EMP affecting systems 965km (600 miles) away. The detonation above Agdere triggered an EMP with effects felt up to 1,118km (695 miles) away.[2]

Dr Yildrim was 80km (50 miles) away from Agdere, but the consequences were immediately felt. Her apartment building's carpark was in darkness because the exterior lighting failed. Her car doors could not be unlocked as the remote control was not working. Realising she would be late, Dr Yildrim reached for her cellphone to call the hospital but there was no point, it was dead too. The landline in her apartment had no dial tone. Moving around her home was potentially dangerous as no indoor lights were working. With no other choice, Dr Yildrim began her long walk to work. It was pointless trying to take the bus, no public transport was operating.

At least the hospital had power and the lights were on. The hospital's backup generators were protected from the EMP by their Faraday cages.[3] The cages also helped prevent the high-voltage energy caused by the EMP from entering the hospital power grid. This stopped vital medical equipment from getting destroyed or damaged, which would have cost lives. Hospital computing systems were

1 Samuel Glasstone, Philip J. Dolan, *The Effects of Nuclear Weapons, Third Edition* (Washington DC: The United States Department of Defense and the United States Department of Energy, 1977), p. 516.
2 *Ibid*, p. 519.
3 A standard method of protecting an electrical or electronic device or system against the effects of the EMP is to enclose it with a Farraday cage. Named after its inventor, the physicist Michael Farraday, a Farraday cage disperses an electrical charge caused by an EMP away from the object inside. Source: Jay Speakman, "The Ultimate Guide to Faraday Cages for Emergency Preparedness," 10 August 2024, https://www.mirasafety.com/blogs/news/faraday-cages-guide?srsltid=AfmBOopiE68t8RRuTbHX82RZBVtSmpJa-ppNIet7PRuhE2d3dydDupcb, accessed 1 February 2025.

also protected. As Dr Yildrim started her shift, patchy reports appeared on the internet from outside the region. Some sort of catastrophic power cut seemed to have taken place. Had an atmospheric event caused this?[4] Analysts began to make a correlation with the rocket launch earlier that morning. Had the rocket detonated a nuclear warhead in space triggering an EMP affecting electrical and electronic systems throughout the region?

The immediate aftermath

A consensus emerged among scientists, engineers and nuclear weapons experts from across the world that the events of 10 May resulted from an EMP caused by a nuclear detonation in space. Solar phenomena were ruled out as possible causes. The time between the rocket reaching space and the EMP could not be ignored. Earth observation satellites at altitudes far above the point of detonation recorded a bright flash of heat consistent with a nuclear explosion. Despite the evidence, the perpetrators never admitted their actions, arguing they were as badly affected as everyone else in the region. This was true, but the Iranian regime had scant regard for the effects of the EMP on its own society.

The disruption caused by the EMP was profound, damaging or destroying electrical and electronic appliances at distances of 1,236km (768 miles) from the explosion.[5] Power generation and transmission grids were badly damaged. Critical National Infrastructure (CNI) ranging from public transport to oil refineries were severely disrupted. Food shortages set in as logistics management systems failed. Banking services were non-existent. Millions of consumer and commercial electronics were ruined. In some cities, public order broke down as looting and rioting took hold. Law enforcement's response was hampered by badly damaged radio communications. It took weeks before affected countries in the region could start repairing the damage. The dislocation the EMP caused on Friday, 10 May 2030, would be known as Black Sky Day.

NATO members took two major courses of action: The first was to commission enquiries into national CNI EMP preparedness. For many Allies, the results were alarming. Nations near areas of geopolitical tension embarked on programmes to harden CNI against electromagnetic pulse effects. Farraday cage specialists enjoyed brisk business. However, the response was far from uniform. Some rich countries made impressive strides protecting their CNIs; poorer nations struggled as the costs of hardening infrastructure become an issue.

Alliance governments embarked on concerted public information drives. People were encouraged to plan for EMP events. Sales of consumer Farraday bags increased to protect computers and cellphones.[6] However, EMP hardening for electronics and electrical devices typically added up to three percent to procurement costs. Hardening existing systems against the EMP could add up to ten percent to operating costs.[7] Companies invariably passed these costs onto the consumer. Manufacturers began charging a premium for system EMP hardening. Rising prices and increased government regulation fuelled EMP disinformation: social media was awash with allegations that Black Sky Day never happened. Arguments were made that EMP preparation was a ploy to increase government involvement in people's lives.

The time before

Several events led to Black Sky Day. By 2025, efforts to stem nuclear proliferation in the Middle East were moribund. Israel had consolidated its position as the dominant power in the Middle East. The end of President Bashir al-Assad's regime in Syria in 2024 saw the country plunge into sectarian conflict. Deprived of its Hamas and Hezbollah proxies in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria, Iran could only harass U.S. and allied interests in the region. Tehran's actions triggered a regular tempo of retaliatory air strikes by Israel, the U.S. and some NATO members against targets in Iran. These air strikes helped galvanise the Iranian polity. Internal political unrest gave way to public displays of Iranian nationalism. Dispersed, buried and fortified Iranian nuclear facilities withstood the air strikes. The U.S., Israel and several NATO nations had strongly protested Iran's planned satellite launch. However, previous U.S. and allied actions against Iran had not enjoyed worldwide support. India, the People's Republic of China, Russia and South Africa led a caucus of nations arguing the satellite launch should go ahead

4 Between 1 and 2 September 1859, a geomagnetic storm caused what became known as the Carrington Event. Named after Richard Carrington, one of the astronomers who witnessed a solar flare on 1st September, the flare caused a massive ejection of electromagnetic energy from the sun's corona. This collided with the Earth's magnetosphere triggering an EMP. Although the world was far less electrically and electronically dependent than it is today, the Carrington Event caused major disruption to global telegraph services.

5 The reach of an EMP can follow a line-of-sight range from the point of detonation. For this scenario, the weapon was detonated at an altitude of 65nm resulting in a line-of-sight range of 1,236km (768 miles). See Samuel Glasstone, Philip J. Dolan, *The Effects of Nuclear Weapons, Third Edition*, (Washington DC: The United States Department of Defense and the United States Department of Energy, 1977), pp. 47-48.

6 Farraday bags can be used to store devices like computers, laptops and tablets and exploit the principles of a Farraday Cage by surrounding the device with a metallic mesh which absorbs the incoming EMP.

7 Congressional Research Service, *High Altitude Electromagnetic Pulse (HEMP) and High Power Microwave (HPM) Devices: Threat Assessments*, (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 21st July 2008), p. 12.

Rocket from Tehran

Electromagnetic footprint of the detonation in the village of Agdere, Adana Province

unhindered. Not wishing to further inflame diplomatic opinion, NATO nations with missile defence assets in the Middle East would not interfere with the launch.

Türkiye, a NATO member, was badly affected by Black Sky Day and argued that it warranted an Article 5 response from the Alliance. The North Atlantic Council convened immediately regarding what response the Alliance should take. Did a nuclear explosion in space that caused widespread disruption warrant a similar NATO response? Would a large-scale conventional operation against Iran not trigger Iranian nuclear attacks across the region and beyond? These were the vexing questions that NATO's membership would tackle in the aftermath of Black Sky Day.

4

What if...

friendshoring defence production backfired?

Mark McQuay

Major Horváth flinches as he hears the sudden, sharp crack of a sonic boom tear through the quiet skies above. He looks up and sees three sleek French-made Rafale warplanes streaking overhead in tight formation. As the commander of a EUFOR Liaison and Observation Team (LOT)[1] in Bosnia, his job is to stay one step ahead of events on the ground. But as he watches the three planes shoot towards the horizon, he realizes that in the skies at least, they are one step behind.

Not long earlier, the President of the Republika Srpska (RS), Siniša Karan, gave a televised address announcing the entity's secession from Bosnia & Herzegovina. But the Republika Srpska doesn't have Rafales - it doesn't even have an army of its own. This must be Serbia.

Major Horváth's suspicions are quickly confirmed when he receives word from EUFOR Command that Serbia has launched a surprise attack on Bosnia with simultaneous incursions across multiple border points, and an aerial assault on Sarajevo airport. He is informed that NATO's Joint Force Command in Naples received intelligence on the situation some hours before, but due to the complexities of NATO-EU cooperation, the intelligence was slow to get through to EUFOR's Operational Commander.[2]

Tensions between Bosnia and Serbia have been high for some time, but EUFOR had focused its energies on gathering intelligence about local rather than international threats. Even in the event of RS secession, it was expected that Serbia would offer covert and political support, not armed aggression. That former RS president - and power behind the throne, Milorad Dodik was in Moscow on the day of the announcement, was a fact Sarajevo registered only belatedly. Moreover, Serbia's connections to NATO had been getting stronger in recent years, and its remilitarization had been rationalized as long-overdue modernization rather than preparation for war.

Serbian forces advanced quickly into the territory of Republika Srpska, accelerated by support of the entity police force and mass defection of Serb battalions from the Bosnian army.[3] EUFOR troops on the ground struggle to respond amid indecision from above. LOT teams in eastern Bosnia are ordered to stand by, hopelessly outmatched by Serbian forces, and EUFOR's multinational battalion focuses on securing its headquarters in Camp Butmir and the adjoining Sarajevo Airport, key positions for receiving reinforcements.

EUFOR's Commander requests reinforcements from NATO, and troops are quickly deployed. Serbia is warned that should it attack NATO troops, Article 5 will be invoked, and European leaders call for an immediate withdrawal of Serbian troops. But the attempt to deter Serbia is undermined when European troops receive orders not to engage directly, limiting their involvement to the provision of operational assistance to their Bosnian counterparts.

NATO troops' efforts to coordinate with the Bosnian army prove challenging. Bosnia's engagement with the Alliance has waned in parallel with its diminishing hopes for membership, and this has had a noticeable effect on interoperability. It has been more than five years since Bosnian armed forces participated in NATO joint exercises and not only are the two forces unaccustomed

1 EUFOR Operation Althea is an EU-led mission which has access to NATO planning capabilities under the Berlin Plus Agreement.
2 Cooperation between NATO and EUFOR is complicated by restrictions on military intelligence sharing that mean any intelligence gathered by JFC Naples cannot be shared directly with the EU Command Element (located in JFC Naples) or EUFOR without first passing through the European External Action Service.
3 While Bosnia's armed forces have been integrated at a brigade level since 2006, its individual battalions are segregated by ethnicity, with one Bosniak, Serb and Croat battalion per brigade.

to working together, they lack a shared vocabulary or a common understanding of doctrines and procedures. A lack of interoperability means that logistics, in particular, are fraught, leading to delays in the provision of much-needed supplies.

Technical interoperability has also taken a step back. Bosnian forces now use locally produced weapons and equipment, much of which is not compliant with NATO standards. This has a direct effect on the front line, where new NATO UAVs are unable to swarm with their Bosnian counterparts, rendering large-scale remote attacks all but impossible. Worse still, AI-powered counter-UAV systems provided by NATO Allies consistently target friendly Bosnian UAVs, while failing to counter the NATO-compliant ones used by Serbia to overwhelm Bosnia's defences.

Rather than providing Bosnia with expensive upgrades to make their systems more interoperable, European NATO Allies simply reroute Soviet-standard weapons originally meant to be shipped to Ukraine and purchase more non-compliant UAVs, reasoning that providing more expensive NATO equivalents is a waste of resources. Serbia, by contrast, is fighting using modern NATO-standard equipment, some of it locally produced, but most sourced directly from Europe in the years leading up to the war.

With the Bosnian armed forces significantly overmatched, NATO operational assistance floundering and Serbia making steady gains in the east of the country, European Allies push for a speedy ceasefire and negotiations. Belgrade is open to talks but makes it clear that the price for withdrawal from Bosnia will be a significant revision of the country's constitution – a new framework made up of three ethnically based entities, each with equal status, separate armies, and the right to secede after five years. A coalition of European Allies advocate for Bosnia to accept this proposal. Serbia frames this as recognition of the "new reality" created by the RS declaration.

Consequences

In the aftermath of the invasion, public debate in Europe focuses on NATO's inability to muster the necessary political will to mount a credible defence of Bosnia in response to Serbian aggression. There is a widespread perception, especially on NATO's eastern flank, that the era of sustained and meaningful support for its partners is over. Even with European troops already on the ground in Bosnia, the Alliance showed it had little appetite for direct engagement and the assistance it provided was half-hearted at best.

What receives much less public attention is the operational aspect of NATO's ham-fisted defence of Bosnia. Rather than providing Bosnia with the expensive upgrades to military capabilities of the type that were made in the early days of the war in Ukraine, European Allies had contented themselves with sending leftover Soviet-standard arms and ammunition, and cheap UAVs that did not comply with NATO interoperability standards.

NATO's contention that support was necessarily limited and ineffective as a result of Bosnia's own retreat from NATO standards are not well received in the East, where NATO partners with limited funds have been struggling to finance expensive adaptation. Rather than staking their hopes on future NATO membership, small states with even smaller budgets increasingly choose to diversify their arms and ammunition stockpiles, hedging between interoperability with NATO and other more cost-effective suppliers.

European companies with investments in extra-NATO defence firms also begin lobbying for a more permissive approach within NATO to the use of Soviet-standard and other non-compliant weapons systems. With a new era of interstate wars taking shape, even some small NATO members in the Balkans begin to diversify their stockpiles, importing cheap Soviet- and even Chinese-standard weapons just in case. The Alliance's progress towards total interoperability takes a step backwards as states prioritize military resources over military cooperation.

Source: Ministry of Defence of Serbia (via Euro Prospects)[4]; Indirect Taxation Authority of Bosnia & Herzegovina (via Dnevni Avaz,[5] Večernji List[6])

How did we get here?

Facing criticism for overpromising and underdelivering on weapons and ammunition for Ukraine, European Allies hit on the idea of "friendshoring" defence production to the Western Balkans, where NATO partners Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia, once the main suppliers of Europe's fourth largest army, had promising defence industries. What was especially interesting was that they were able to produce both NATO and Soviet-standard arms and ammunition, meaning they could help refill European stockpiles and be used to supply Ukraine.[7]

European Allies coordinated their efforts to invest in Bosnia and Serbia's defence industries through the EU and the European Political Community (EPC). The EU took the step of expanding its European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and initiatives such as the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) to incorporate candidate states, while the EPC sponsored a new Western Balkans Defence Industry Forum[8] to facilitate major investments in the region from large European defence firms.

In the years that followed, Bosnia and Serbia's defence industries grew precipitously, with the influx of investment, expertise in streamlining and integrating supply chains, and technology transfer proving decisive particularly in Bosnia, which had been ripe for investment. Private defence firms began to modernize, innovate and expand into new areas such as armed drone production and even state-owned companies that were mainly focused on Soviet-standard weaponry began to innovate, producing new models at far lower prices than their NATO counterparts.

But, as ever, boom was followed by bust. Once European Allies' stockpiles began to refill, their demand for Balkan-made NATO-standard weapons started to drop off. With profits dwindling, some firms switched to producing cheaper Soviet equipment for which there was still a market in Eastern Europe, particularly in Ukraine, whose initial drive to adopt NATO standards had been largely reversed by European Allies' decision to bankroll the production of Balkan-made Soviet-standard equivalents instead.

In Serbia, the government made up for the fall in demand for NATO-standard arms and ammunition by making large purchases of its own as part of its ongoing programme of military modernization.[9] Having convinced European partners that cut-price military contracts were the way to end its flirtation with Russia and China, Serbia had already begun adopting NATO standards, and while the government was still officially opposed to NATO membership, behind-the-scenes cooperation was increasing.[10] Government defence spending masked wider economic stagnation, and rising domestic pressure on Vučić's beleaguered successor. With corruption scandals and disputed elections weakening his grip

4 Serbia's Lucrative Global Arms Trade: A Glimpse Into its Secrecy, Scheme, and Double-Edged Sword," Aleksander Dragic, Euro Prospects, 3 July 2024. https://europrospects.eu/serbias-lucrative-global-arms-trade/.

5 "Za pola godine izvezeno robe za 146,9 miliona KM: Eksplodirao izvoz municije iz BiH," Alen Bajramovic, Dnevni Avaz, 19 July 2024. https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/918520/za-pola-godine-izvezeno-robe-za-146-9-miliona-km-eksplodirao-izvoz-municije-iz-bih.

6 "BiH ruši rekorde u izvozu oružja i streljiva, evo što najviše izvozimo," Večernji List, 7 October 2024. https://www.vecernji.ba/vijesti/bih-rusi-rekorde-u-izvozu-oruzja-i-streljiva-evo-sto-najvise-izvozimo-1806132.

7 Both Bosnia and Serbia have laws prohibiting sales to active war zones. Nonetheless, weapons and ammunition from both countries have already made their way to Ukraine, mainly via backchannels. When drawn on the question, Serbia's president Vučić said his role is only to sell, not to dictate what buyers do with the weapons they purchase.

8 A similar initiative has been proposed by Ukraine but hampered by the fact that both Bosnia and Serbia have laws prohibiting direct sales to war zones such as Ukraine.

9 Serbia has already initiated Project 5000, which looks to significantly boost the country's military muscle by expanding special forces from 1,500 to 5,000, alongside significant investment in advanced military weaponry and the reintroduction of mandatory military service.

10 There is already a discrepancy between the Serbian government's declared and actual positions on NATO. Government-controlled media is virulently anti-NATO, but in 2015 the government agreed to an Individual Partnership Action Plan, and the army regularly participates in military manoeuvres and joint exercises, even hosting a civil protection exercise in 2018.

on power, the President fell back on ethnonationalism - a pattern so familiar that NATO had largely discounted its potential strategic effect.

European Allies' enthusiasm for arms deals with Serbia and their heavy investment in the country's domestic arms production meant that by 2029 Serbia exceeded the arms control limits agreed to in the 90s.[11] Given that Croatia was close to doing the same, the response from NATO Allies was muted, although additional troops were deployed in Kosovo in order to bolster deterrence. Bosnia, on the other hand, was assessed to be more vulnerable to political rather than military threats, so it fell to the EU, not NATO, to take the lead.

In Bosnia, however, the threat of Serbian rearmament was acutely felt, and the federal government appealed once more to NATO to finally accept it as a member in order to deter the Serbian threat. Bosnia, they argued, had long since achieved all the formal requirements for membership.[12] NATO's Secretary General quietly reiterated the position that Bosnia's current constitutional set-up was incompatible with membership of the Alliance.[13] More to the point, however, was that the Alliance was wary of creating new vulnerabilities by expanding to include potential flashpoints.

Following NATO's rebuff, Bosnia's government began to limit its participation in Alliance activities and exercises, reasoning that these placed unnecessary strain on the military's limited resources. It also put an end to efforts to adopt NATO standards, which had been expensive and came at significant political cost given the systematic obstructionism of the Republika Srpska. Settling for expedient half-measures, the government began purchasing domestically produced Soviet-standard arms and ammunition, much cheaper and more readily available than the NATO-standard equivalents.

11 The 1996 Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control placed limits on the numbers of tanks, armoured combat vehicles, artillery, combat aircraft and attack helicopters allowed for the armies of Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro.

12 "Bosnia meets all formal requirements for NATO membership: Bosnian leader," Andalou Agency, 8 April 2024, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/bosnia-meets-all-formal-requirements-for-nato-membership-bosnian-leader/3186670.

13 There have been suggestions that this was already communicated by Secretary General Stoltenberg in his 2024 visit to Bosnia & Herzegovina.


Looking East

5

What if...

Ukraine wants to go nuclear?

Olesya Vinhas de Souza

2023

It was a typical grey, drizzly and cold morning on 21 February 2030 in Brussels. A procession with a black limo carrying U.S. President John Haddock was slowly approaching the steel and glass building of NATO Headquarters. Haddock was heading to meet a newly appointed NATO Secretary General. He kept checking the time impatiently on his wristwatch – a clear sign of anxiety. Haddock's mind was preoccupied with recent elections in Ukraine that brought to power a president who vowed to restore Ukraine's nuclear deterrence capabilities. The prospect of a nuclear Ukraine cast the world in a completely new light but there was no consensus, either in Washington, DC, or in other capitals, on the best course of action because of the glaring gap in the way Western nuclear policy experts had conceptualized the implications of Ukraine becoming a nuclear state again. "Again?…" The flashback to 8 December 1991, that pivotal moment in world history, took Haddock back to Capitol Hill. Back then, working as a junior staffer, he had heard the shattering news that the Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian heads of state had signed the Belovezha Accords dissolving the USSR.

As an heir to the Soviet Union, Ukraine inherited the third largest nuclear arsenal of tactical and strategic weapons in the world – after the U.S. and Russia – comprising slightly more than 4,000 strategic and nuclear weapons stationed on its territory,[1] all of which Ukraine eventually transferred back to Russia, in spite of internal pushback from the hawks within the Kravchuk administration, including Prime Minister Kuchma,[2] and ominous voices within the Clinton administration against doing so, proposing instead to leverage Ukraine's nuclear arsenal in order to contain Russia's imperialist ambitions. Denuclearizing Ukraine would increase the likelihood of a conventional conflict between two powers that already had a long history of hostile relations, warned the realists.[3]

The doves, who embraced the non-proliferation argument, prevailed.[4] By 1996, both the tactical and strategic nuclear arsenals – which also included 46 SS-24S produced in Ukraine – had been transferred back to Russia. Then U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry travelled to Ukraine to commemorate the completion of the nuclear threat reduction process and planted sunflowers where silos used to be. "Sunflowers… what an ironic metaphor for how perennial peace in post-Cold War Europe would be," thought Haddock.

The limo slowly parked at NATO's main entrance. "We have arrived, Sir," Haddock heard a voice saying, "the Secretary General is waiting for you outside."

1 William C. Potter, *The Politics of Nuclear Renunciation: The Cases of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine*, Stimson Center, (April 1995), pp. 8-10; Mariam Budyerim, *Inheriting the Bomb: The Collapse of the USSR and the Nuclear Disarmament of Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University Press 2022).
2 Ibid, pp. 19-27.
3 J Mearsheimer, "The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent," *Foreign Policy* (Summer 1993, pp. 50-66.
4 Steven Pifer, "The Trilateral Process: The United States, Ukraine, Russia and Nuclear Weapons," Brookings (11 May 2011); Nuclear missile frenzy. Ukraine Got Rid of Nuclear Weapons for 11 Years: How It Was | Ukrainska Pravda; *Ukraine's Nuclear History: A Non-Proliferation Perspective*, SpringerLink, Chapter 2; Steven E. Miller, "The Case Against Nuclear Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993).

The consequences

Haddock felt irritated by the lack of clarity on the best course of action. He dismissed a large body of research produced after the annexation of Crimea about the implications of a nuclear Ukraine for stability in Europe as not particularly insightful in the current circumstances because of a misplaced focus. First, using a flawed analogy with the early 1990s, scholars and policymakers assumed that Ukraine, somehow, could again become a nuclear-armed state overnight.[5]

Only a handful of voices pointed out that developing nuclear weapons is a process, rather than a dichotomous yes-or-no outcome.[6] Namely, there were historical instances when states had effectively used a credible threat of "becoming nuclear" as a bargaining chip to extract security guarantees or other policy concessions from nuclear-armed powers. This strategy of "nuclear latency" had allegedly paved the way to NATO membership for Spain[7] and had also been tried in vain by then President Zelenskyy during the full-scale conflict back in 2024. It had been dismissed as non-credible by the West based on expert assessments of Ukraine's limited capabilities to set up a nuclear weapons production programme on its own at that time. This immediately implied that only the U.S. could restore Ukraine's nuclear deterrence by either positioning its own nuclear warheads on Ukraine's territory or transferring its own capabilities under Ukraine's command and control structure, thus implicitly assuming that there would be no nuclear rearming of Ukraine without U.S. backing. The possibility of Ukraine acquiring nuclear weapons by itself without the United States' or other Western powers' assistance had never been properly considered, and thus the effectiveness of the existing toolbox was never properly assessed. "Impose economic sanctions on Ukraine? Freeze economic assistance? Covertly sabotage the process? Kick the can down the road to the next administration? Call an urgent consultation within NATO's Nuclear Planning Group? Convene an extraordinary NAC session? Or, instead of using sticks, make the bilateral assistance package even more attractive but conditional on Ukraine's return to the non-proliferation path?"

Haddock mapped the implications of each of these options for the U.S., for NATO and for wider stability in Europe and beyond, but the biggest question for him was what the extent of NATO's involvement should be. The denuclearization experience of the 1990s had demonstrated that the trilateral approach could be rather effective. A near-nuclear Ukraine was a serious blow to the nuclear arms control architecture that could trigger a proliferation spiral with NATO Allies following suit. Given that the Kremlin had always perceived a nuclear Ukraine as a red line, the risk of conventional response was very high. However, a nuclear Ukraine would pose a strategic challenge not only for the Kremlin but also for Beijing, and the latter would likely provide Russia with military assistance in order to prevent Ukraine from acquiring nuclear capabilities. This could subsequently lead to a greater Chinese military footprint near NATO's Eastern flank. And thus a multilateral approach was preferable.

On the other hand, involving NATO entailed obtaining consensus from all Allies, and some of them could seize on Ukraine's violation of the NPT as an opportunity to launch their own nuclear programmes and thus might prove reluctant to agree on effective measures.[8]

Both arguments were equally plausible and the lack of consensus in Washington, DC, placed this difficult choice squarely onto Haddock's shoulders.

How did we get there

Was Ukraine's return to the nuclear path a "grey rhino event," i.e. a foreseeable risk with high consequences?[9] There had been several weak signals indicating that the rhino might be in the bushes, including recent trends in public opinion, a shift in Ukraine's strategic culture, as well as the de facto re-nuclearization of Belarus. There had been a disconnect between the rationale for Ukraine giving up its nuclear arsenal in the early 1990s and the explanations provided in the midst of the full-scale invasion as to why Ukraine would not try to obtain them again when facing an existential threat from Russia. The United States' frustration with a circuitous negotiation process in the 1990s was well documented in numerous accounts, with scholars agreeing that domestic institutional discord between President Kravchuk and Prime Minister Kuchma had slowed down the process and subsequently delayed receiving financial assistance from the United States. In contrast, the explanations in 2024, sparked by President Zelenskyy's statement calling for either Ukraine's

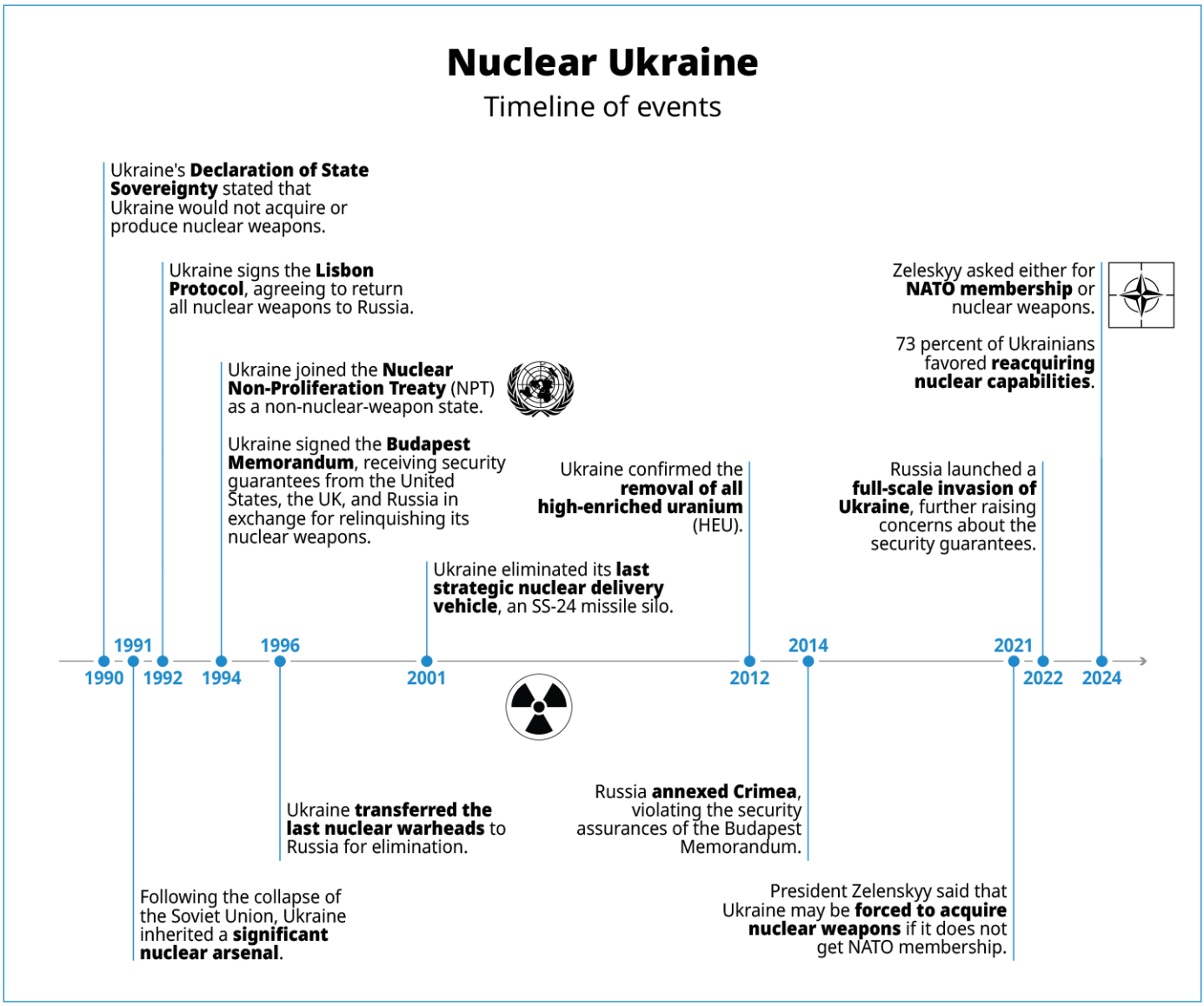
5 Robert Einhorn, "Will Russia's War on Ukraine Spur Nuclear Proliferation?" Arms Control Association (October 2022) at: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-10/features/will-russias-war-ukraine-spur-nuclear-proliferation; Mariana Budjeryn, Matthew Bunn, "Ukraine building a nuclear bomb? Dangerous nonsense," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist (9 March 2022) at https://thebulletin.org/2022/03/ukraine-building-a-nuclear-bomb-dangerous-nonsense/; Mariana Budjeryn, "'NATO or Nukes': Why Ukraine's nuclear revival refuses to die", Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (1 November 2024) at: https://thebulletin.org/2024/11/nato-or-nukes-why-ukraines-nuclear-revival-refuses-to-die/.

6 Matthew Fuhrmann, *Influence Without Arms: The New Logic of Nuclear Deterrence* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

7 Clara Portella, "The Rise and Fall of Spanish Nuclear Exceptionalism," *European Security*, (Ian 2014) at: https://www.nonproliferation.eu//wp-content/uploads/2018/09/claraportela52f39.pdf.

8 Alexander K. Bollfrass & Stephen Herzog, "The War in Ukraine and Global Nuclear Order", *Survival* 64:4, 7-32, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2103255.

9 Michele Wucker, *A Gray Rhino: How to Recognize and Act on the Obvious Danger We Ignore* (New York, NY, St. Martin's Press, 2016).



NATO membership or nukes,[10] had focused primarily on external factors, particularly the danger of escalation by Russia and the risk of alienating the United States and other NATO Allies for reneging on Ukraine's obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation framework. In so doing, they implicitly denied agency to Ukrainian decision-makers and voters, both of whom had gradually become increasingly pro-nuclear. The share of the population in support of restoring nuclear capabilities had been growing steadily since the occupation of Crimea. While in 1994 only about 33 percent of the population favoured having nuclear weapons, the share grew to 49 percent in 2014 and reached 73 percent in 2024.[11]

Besides these public opinion data, two other indicators of support were noteworthy. A crowdfunding initiative to raise capital for restoring the nuclear capacity raised 23 million Ukrainian hryvnias (USD 554K) in less than one week, with 70K people contributing to it.[12] Although this amount is a drop in the ocean, the grassroot financing of nuclear weapons was an unprecedented and remarkable development in itself, especially as it took place in the midst of an intensive military conflict that created great uncertainty for the future.

10 Tim Zadorozhnyy, "Ukraine Should Receive Nuclear Weapons if NATO Entry is Delayed, Zelensky Says," *Kyiv Independent*, 5 February 2025, https://kyivindependent.com/if-nato-membership-delayed-ukraine-should-get-nuclear-weapons-instead-zelensky-says/.

11 "More Than Two-Thirds of Ukrainians Favor Idea of Restoring Nuclear Arms Arsenal, Poll Shows", *Kyiv Independent*, 23 December 2024, https://kyivindependent.com/73-percent-of-ukrainians-favor-restoring-nuclear-arms-arsenal-poll-shows/; Chy Potribna Ukraini Yaderna Zbroia? pravda.com (2020), https://www.pravda.com.ua/cdn/nukem/.

12 "Spivvlasnyk Monobank Oleh Horokhovskyi pochav zbir hroshei 'na yadernu zbroiu'," BBC News Ukraine, 1 March 2025, Співвласник Monobank Олег Гороховський почав збір грошей "на ядерну зброю" - BBC News Україна.

At the same time, an online petition to restore nuclear status amassed almost 10K signatures, but less than the 25K required by law to receive any further consideration by the legislators.[13]

Ukraine's strategic culture was an important driver as well. The Ukrainian elites have always sought to have the same level of political clout with the West as Russia has. In the early 1990s, many of them believed nuclear weapons were the means to that end. They used the nuclear arsenal as a bargaining chip when negotiating financial assistance with the United States.[14] So giving up nuclear weapons was in effect tantamount to a decline in prestige.[15]

Twenty years later, this expectation to be treated on equal terms with Russia, well encapsulated by President Zelenskyy as "No discussion about Ukraine without Ukraine," shaped Ukraine's expectations regarding the U.S. approach to ceasefire negotiations with Russia. As this expectation was not met during the ongoing ceasefire negotiations it may have contributed to a growing sense of betrayal among the Ukrainian population that could be skilfully exploited by those who support restoring nuclear capabilities. Growing apprehension of the logic of nuclear deterrence was another important development in the strategic culture, which apparently had been missing in the 1990s, when the nuclear discourse was dominated by arguments that focused on the gap between the Russian and Ukrainian arsenals and did not find the correlation of forces as favouring Ukraine.[16] Since then the Ukrainian elites had become conversant with the logic of strategic nuclear deterrence and evoke it to justify their nuclear claims.

Recent re-nuclearization of Belarus did not remain unnoticed by the Ukrainian elites, but the efforts to prevent it from happening were not fruitful.[17] Five days after the beginning of the large-scale invasion, Belarusian President Lukashenko had held a referendum to repeal the nuclear-free state provision in the constitution. Shortly thereafter, he had announced the construction of nuclear storage facilities for Russian nuclear warheads and Russia started deploying tactical nuclear weapons for joint exercises with Belarus.[18] A year later, a security pact was signed that extended Russia's nuclear umbrella to Belarus.[19] This further exacerbated the security dilemma for Ukraine and made owning its own arsenal a conceivable prospect.

13 Vidnovlennia yadernoho statusu Ukraini (Petition №22/235838-en), 21 October 2024, https://petition.president.gov.ua/petition/235838.
14 Steven E. Miller, "Ukraine's Flawed Nuclear Diplomacy," *Nonproliferation Review*, Spring / Summer 1994, https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/ukraines-flawed-nuclear-diplomacy.
15 Polina Sinovets, "Strategic Culture of Ukraine and its Non-Nuclear Status," in *Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy of Ukraine*, edited by I. Koval, O. Brusylovska, and V. Dubovyk. Odesa: Odesa Mechnikov National University Press, 2017, http://odcnp.com.ua/ukraine-and-npt-regime/232-strategic-culture-of-ukraine-and-its-non-nuclear-status.
16 Polina Sinovets and Mariana Budjeryn, "Interpreting the Bomb Ownership and Deterrence in Ukraine's Nuclear Discourse," Odesa Center for Non-Proliferation, December 2017, http://odcnp.com.ua/ukraine-and-npt-regime/190-interpreting-the-bomb-ownership-and-deterrence-in-ukraine-s-nuclear-discourse.
17 Ian Lovett and Ann M. Simmons, "Ukraine Calls for U.N. Security Council Meeting Over Belarus Nuclear Threat," *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 March 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-warns-against-russian-threat-to-put-nuclear-weapons-in-belarus-fd94ae39.
18 Olga Karach, "Nuclear Weapons in Belarus: What We Know," ICAN.org, 22 November 2024, https://www.icanw.org/nuclear_weapons_in_belarus_what_we_know; Jack Detsch, "Russia's Nuclear Weapons Are Now in Belarus," *Foreign Policy*, 14 March 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/14/russia-nuclear-weapons-belarus-putin/.
19 Maria Yeroma, "Belarus-Russia Ratify Security Pact Examining Nuclear Umbrella," *Kyiv Independent*, 7 March 2025, https://kyivindependent.com/belarus-weekly-belarus-russia-ratify-security-pact-expanding-nuclear-umbrella-military-integration/.

6

What if...

Russia and Georgia patch things up?

Artur Leșcu

The event

14 May 2030 – Georgia's new-old Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili is received with a standing ovation as he ascends the stage at the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) summit, chaired by the aging yet still vigorous 75-year-old Alexander Lukashenko, recently re-elected as Belarusian president. Ivanishvili's speech, delivered in the grand main hall of the Palace of the Republic in Minsk, is not pompous. To the unaccustomed, it might even seem dull, as his rare public addresses are always delivered in a calm and composed manner.

Ivanishvili's address emphasizes both current achievements and future ambitions. He lists the facts and describes the future. One fact is that from that moment Georgia is officially the sixth member state of the EAEU. Another fact highlighted by the Prime Minister is that Georgia's Parliament adopted a new foreign policy resolution a few months prior, with Article 5 boldly declaring that the Georgian government sought to "deepen relations with the Russian Federation as Georgia's major strategic partner." One more fact is that Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution, which mandated full integration into the European Union and NATO, was annulled by the Georgian Constitutional Court as contrary to the "spirit of the Constitution."

Speaking about the future, Ivanishvili allows himself a short lyrical digression and describes tomorrow's Georgia as a Caucasian Switzerland where Ossetians and Abkhazians will have wide-ranging freedoms. His plan is to transform Georgia into a Confederation where Ossetia and Abkhazia will enjoy wide political autonomy, based on a common financial and economic system, free movement and direct communication between officials.[1]

Meanwhile, over 2,000 kilometres away from Minsk, long queues form at the Nizhniy Zaramag checkpoint on both sides of the Russia–South Ossetia border. Starting from 20 May, Russia will unilaterally revoke Ossetian and Abkhazian citizenship unless acquired by birth. The stunning views of the Caucasus Mountains go unnoticed by the people waiting in these endless lines, which stretch all the way to the Roki Tunnel. Tensions are high. The newly installed facial recognition system is indifferent to human anxiety; the turnstiles at the checkpoint are not released without its "consent." These are not ordinary metro turnstiles – they are seven metres high, with inaccessible mountains on one side and a bottomless gorge on the other.

Overhead, swarms of drones provide round-the-clock optical and infrared surveillance, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, including national and religious holidays. There are no uniformed officers, no officials – only civilians waiting in frustration. Negotiating with familiar FSB border control officers who could "understand the situation" is no longer an option. The human element has been eliminated. Since people were replaced by a facial recognition system to "speed up customs control," there is no one left to negotiate with. There is no one to discuss Alania Vladikavkaz's last-minute reprieve from relegation from premier league to first league, and there is no-one to quarrel with. The "Apparatus," as the locals call the facial recognition system, is not into football.

1 Inal Khasig, "Gruzinskaya mechta" o konfederatsii | Vzglyad iz Abkhazii" ("Georgian Dream" on Confederation | A View from Abkhazia), *Georgian-Abkhaz Context*, 31 August 2024, https://geabconflict.net/ru/grwzinskaja-mechta-o-konfederatcii-vzgljad-iz-abxazii/.

Consequences

While Russia tightens controls at the border, Georgia seizes the moment[2] and extends a diplomatic olive branch to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, reaffirming its vision for a confederation. Official delegations are sent to Abkhazia and South Ossetia with a proposal to integrate these regions into Georgia, while preserving broad political and cultural autonomy.

Negotiations immediately reach a dead end, since the first demand of the separatist regions is public recognition by Georgian leaders of ethnic oppression in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the trial of the Georgian political leaders responsible for unleashing the conflicts.

A cascade of events unfolds rapidly, dominating international headlines. Within a single day, on 20 May, both the Russian Federation Council and State Duma adopt resolutions urging President Vladimir Putin to retract recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia's independence. The 77-year-old Putin has lost his once-robust image but at key moments the intervention of the whole retinue of medical specialists helps him to regain vigour. The next day, he signs a decree revoking recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The leaders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are thrown into turmoil. They denounce Russia's betrayal and reaffirm their commitment to independence. Nationalist groups call for resistance and advocate forming militias to defend their territories against potential Georgian encroachments.

Over the years, these territories had relied heavily on Russia's military presence and economic support. Moscow's sudden withdrawal leaves them vulnerable, sparking fear and anger among local populations. Many feel deeply betrayed after decades of loyalty to Russia.

In this vacuum, Abkhazia tries to strengthen ties with Türkiye, which had been dormant in recent years. A ferry connection between Ünye in Türkiye and Sukhum in Abkhazia resumes full-scale operations, with every trip fully booked. Landlocked South Ossetia, meanwhile, accelerates long-delayed plans to build an airport that Russian overseers had blocked in the late 2010s. Financial support is provided by prominent North Ossetian entrepreneurs.

Further conciliatory overtures from Georgia are rejected by the separatist regions. They suspect it is a veiled attempt to reassert Georgian control and fear losing the autonomy they have enjoyed under Russian protection. Leaders in Tskhinval and Sukhum establish "National Resistance Councils" to coordinate potential military efforts. Volunteers from North Ossetia cross the border to support their ethnic kin.

With carte blanche from the Russian authorities to resolve the situation, Ivanishvili decides to isolate the two separatist regions economically. Sporadic clashes soon escalate. Militias in South Ossetia and Abkhazia ambush Georgian convoys and patrols, while the Georgian artillery responds by targeting Tskhinval, located closest to the border. The conflict morphs into guerrilla warfare, with militias leveraging the mountainous terrain to launch hit-and-run attacks against the Georgian special forces sent to regain control of the situation in Tskhinval and Sukhum.

By winter 2030-31, a humanitarian crisis unfolds. South Ossetia suffers acutely, with its sole power transmission line having been damaged in the summer and food deliveries hindered by frequent closures of the Transcaucasian Highway – the only artery to the outside world – due to snow avalanches.

The international community reacts with alarm and calls for mediation. Growing international interest in transport corridors through the South Caucasus,[3] triggered by the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, has also increased China's engagement in the region. China, reliant on the Caucasus segment[4] of its Belt and Road Initiative's Middle Corridor, pushes for a resolution.[5]

Meanwhile, Russia understands that the separatist regions are not going to submit to the agreements reached by Moscow and Tbilisi if their interests are not taken into account. Simply leaving this problem for Georgia to resolve on its own would only lead to an escalation of the conflict. In these circumstances, Moscow seeks to act as a peacekeeper. Due to the unsuccessful end of the war in Ukraine for Russia and to ongoing Western sanctions, the South Caucasus has emerged as a critical hub for Russian efforts to redirect trade and communication routes away from Europe. Weakened by the sanctions and eager to stabilize its relations with the West, Moscow is negotiating a deal aimed at satisfying all parties involved.

Notably, these negotiations progress at lightning speed. Consequently, Abkhazia is forced to reintegrate into Georgia as an autonomous republic, with extensive sovereignty granted by Georgia[6] under Russian security guarantees. Russia's recently built Ochamchira naval base,[7] its foothold in the region, provides local hardliners with sufficient reassurance to allay fears of losing control. In addition to security guarantees, Abkhazians are given privileges in managing the region's tourism industry,

2 Statement by Foreign Minister Lavrov, reported by the official Russian news agency TASS, 28 September 2024, https://t.me/tass_agency/275850.
3 Neil Melvin, "Retying the Caucasian Knot – Russia's Evolving Approach to the South Caucasus," *Occasional Paper*, RUSI, p. 26, https://static.rusi.org/retying-the-caucasian-knot-russias-evolving-approach-to-the-south-caucasus.pdf.
4 Albert M Kumukov and Sergey G Luzyanin, "China's Foreign-Policy Strategy in the South Caucasus – A Transit Window to Europe?," *Russia in Global Affairs* (Vol. 22, No. 1, 2024), pp. 176-193.
5 Caucasus Watch, "The Rebirth of the Middle Corridor," 22 June 2022, https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/the-rebirth-of-the-middle-corridor.html
6 Gabriel Gavin, "We Don't Want to Join Russia, Breakway Georgian Region Warns," *Politico*, 25 August 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-breakaway-region-abkhazia-joining-russia-south-caucasus/.
7 "Rossiya Planiruyet Sozdat' Voenno-Morskuyu Bazu v Abkhazii. Pri Chom Tut Ukraina?" (Russia Plans To Eestablish A Naval Base in Abkhazia. What does Ukraine Have To Do With It?), BBC News Russian Service, 5 Otober 2023, https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cy91vydj445o.

which is the primary source of income for locals. Under these agreements, Georgian businesspeople can only operate in the autonomous republic with prior approval from the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry. For Georgia, the deal represents an opportunity to advance its goal of restoring territorial integrity. Furthermore, Georgia will benefit financially from Russia's commitment to pay an annual lease to the Georgian government for the use of Ochamchira port. The prospect of economic gains from closer ties with its nearest geographical neighbour – with whom Georgia shares strong economic, cultural and historical connections – makes the offer particularly appealing.[8] Moreover, from now on, Georgian goods can enter the vast Russian market duty-free. This marks, in some respects, a normalization of relations, where Russia, Georgia's largest neighbour, reassumes its role as Georgia's primary trading partner. The final aspect of the deal includes the supply of Russian energy resources to Georgia at domestic Russian market prices.

Negotiations with South Ossetia result in the loss of its sovereignty (limited as it was) and its decision to unify with North Ossetia within the Russian Federation. This fulfils the long-standing Ossetian aspiration to unification, even though Ossetians feel betrayed by Russia for withdrawing its backing for their first national state in centuries.

In sum, Georgia's reintegration of Abkhazia is hailed as a strategic victory, despite the loss of South Ossetia. The establishment of a Georgian confederation, comprising Sakartvelo (Georgia's territory excluding Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and Abkhazia, represents a significant step toward resolving long-standing territorial disputes. While Georgian nationalists may object to the concession of Tskhinval, the overall outcome is widely regarded as a success in reasserting control over most of the country's disputed territories. Additionally, securing its energy needs through preferential contracts with Gazprom is seen as a crucial achievement, laying the foundation for economic sustainability.

International organizations offer cautious support for the deal, commending it for reducing tensions in the region. While NATO remains wary of Russia's naval presence in Abkhazia, the negotiated settlement and the peaceful reintegration of Abkhazia into Georgia are viewed as significant positive developments.

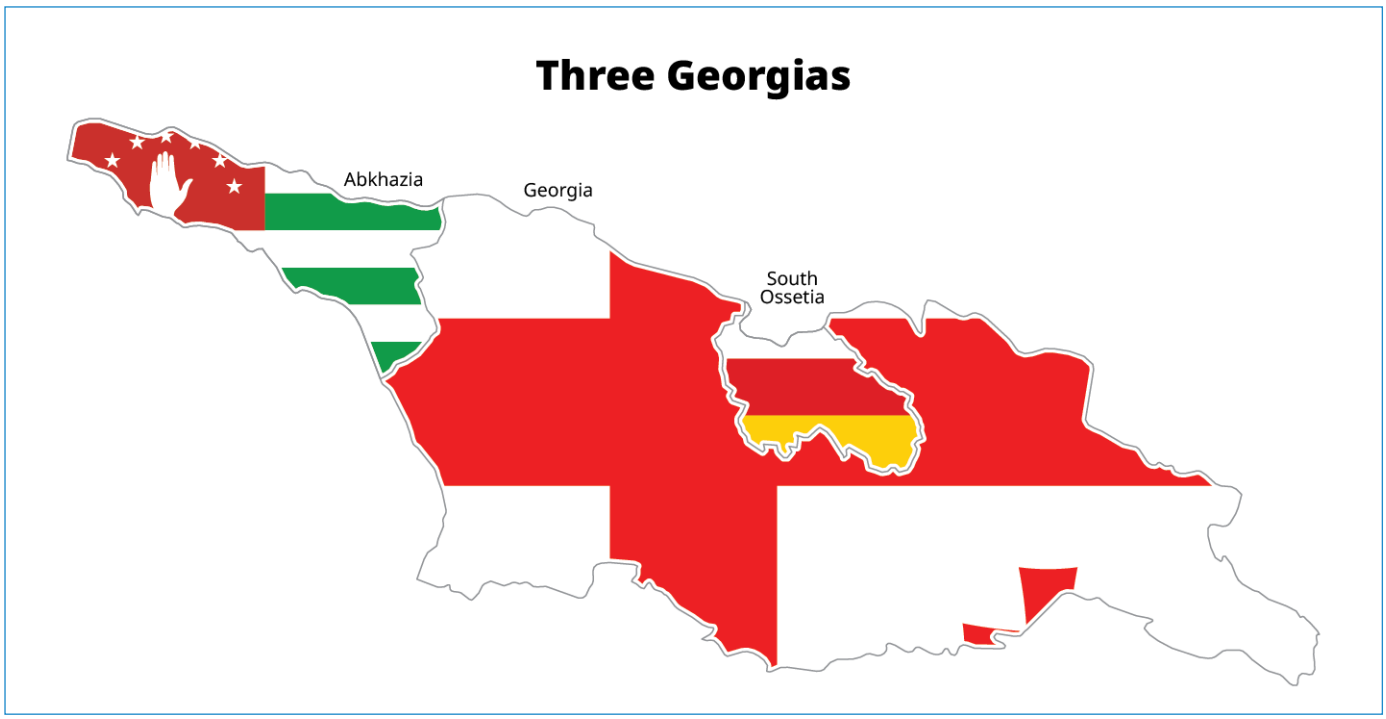
How did we get there

The relations between Georgians, Ossetians and Abkhazians developed in a rather typical way for any neighbouring nations. Confrontation often arose, but even more often alliances did. The rise of a new force in the region – the Russian Empire – in the 18th century changed the age-old status quo. Until the beginning of the 20th century, anti-Russian and anti-Georgian riots would take place regularly, always brutally suppressed by the Russian troops. After the Sovietization of the region, the same *divide et impera* principle continued to apply, cementing the roots of future confrontations. Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine gave a new unexpected push to the historical process in the region. Pro-Russian politicians in Georgia saw it as an opportunity. First, by not joining the sanctions regime,[9] Georgia became an important hub for Russia's parallel import scheme, reaping the economic benefits.[10] Against this backdrop, good Russo-Georgian relations[11] started to become increasingly enticing.[12] Indeed, at the press conference following the 79th UN General Assembly, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated: "The current Georgian leadership is simply taking an honest look at the past. They said they want historical reconciliation."[13] In October 2024, Putin expanded the visa-free regime for Georgian citizens entering the Russian Federation for work purposes or for a period of more than 90 days, and other such examples confirmed this trend.[14]

The evolving geopolitics of the South Caucasus presented a significant challenge for the Euro-Atlantic community. The South Caucasus experienced a pivotal geopolitical shift, with Russian-style authoritarian politics gaining traction in Georgia. This transformation cast doubt on the region's aspiration to Euro-Atlantic integration, and especially on Georgia's prospects for EU and NATO membership. After years of presenting Tbilisi as a key Euro-Atlantic partner, Georgia was notably absent from NATO's 2024 Washington Summit Declaration. Furthermore, an EU report released in the wake of Georgia's October 2024 elections suggested that its membership process had effectively stalled.

This weakening of the Euro-Atlantic position in Georgia spurred efforts to pivot toward Armenia and Azerbaijan, especially as these countries needed to move towards reconciliation. The Euro-Atlantic community crafted a

8 Transparency International Georgia, "Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Summary of 2023."
9 Joshua Kucera, "Georgia Says it Won't Join International Sanctions Against Russia," Eurasianet, 25 February 2022, https://eurasianet.org/georgia-says-it-wont-join-international-sanctions-against-russia.
10 https://www.facebook.com/shpapuashvili/videos/1619632348652451.
11 OC Media, "Russia Offers To Help Georgia 'Normalize Relations' with Abkhazia and South Ossetia," 30 September 2024, https://oc-media.org/russia-offers-to-help-georgia-normalise-relations-with-abkhazia-and-south-ossetia/.
12 Civil Georgia, "Russia To Pursue 'Normalization With Georgia' Despite Absence of Diplomatic Relations," 12 February 2024, https://civil.ge/archives/581918.
13 Irakli Oragvelidze, " Moskva predlagaet "Gruzinskoy mechte" novyy mir" (Moscow offers "Georgian Dream" a new world), *Ekho Kavkaza*, 30 September 2024, https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/moskva-predlagaet-gruzinskoy-mechte-novyy-mir/33140955.html.
14 "Putin Rasshiril Bezvizovyy Rezhim Dlya Grazhdan Gruzii Na Tekh, Kto Priezzhaet Rabotat' i Uchit'sya" (Putin Has Extended The Visa-Free Regime For Georgian Citizens To Those Who Come To Work And Study), *Meduza*, 10 October 2024, https://meduza.io/news/2024/10/10/putin-rasshiril-bezvizovyy-rezhim-dlya-grazhdan-gruzii-na-teh-kto-priezzhaet-rabotat-i-uchitsya.



policy that aligned with emerging regional realities, aiming to counter Russia's attempts to reassert its influence in the South Caucasus. At the heart of this strategy were efforts to mitigate Moscow's presence in the region and promote regional cooperation among the South Caucasus countries. Such cooperation, long undermined by Russia, could serve as a counterbalance to its policies and create a more balanced regional dynamic.

Armenia ceased to be a reliable[15] stronghold for Russia after it was effectively abandoned by Moscow,[16] in violation of all agreements and their joint participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), during Armenia's confrontation with Azerbaijan.[17] As a result, Moscow has turned to a new/old ally in the South Caucasus – Georgia – which is more valuable to Russia than the small, isolated South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

15 "Armenian Official Steps Up Criticism Of Russia," *Azatutyun*, 26 June 2024, https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33011103.html.
16 Narine Chukhuran et al, "A Shift Away From Russia," German Marshall Fund of the United States, 31 July 2024, https://www.gmfus.org/news/shift-away-russia.
17 Arshaluis Mgdesyan, "Russia's Powerful Economic Levers Over Armenia," Eurasianet, 1 November 2023, https://eurasianet.org/russias-powerful-economic-levers-over-armenia.

7

What if...

it came to a Black Sea standoff between Russia and Romania?

Clarisa Nelu

The event

It is the summer of 2030, Captain Mihai Drăgan felt the gravity of his position as he looked over the Black Sea out from the bridge of the Romanian Navy's frigate *Regele Ferdinand*. Control of the sea had been contested for centuries and had played a critical role in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.[1] In the last weeks, Russian naval patrols had intensified, tracking every NATO military movement in the region. Days earlier, the Russian Ministry of Defence declared a 200-nautical-mile "exclusion zone" around Crimea, extending far beyond what international law permits. This aggressive move, under the guise of "protecting Russian assets," signalled an attempt to tighten control over key Black Sea shipping lanes, a strategy that used by the Soviet Union against U.S. allies during the Cold War.[2]

As the Romanian frigate entered the outer edge of the zone on a routine patrol, radar detected a Russian missile launch from the Crimean coast. An S-300 missile arced over the horizon, calculated to miss, but landing close enough to be a deliberate warning shot. The missile's radar signature and trajectory aligned precisely with Russia's known use of S-300s for area denial from Crimea, a strategy that Russia had employed to assert territorial claims in disputed waters near Ukraine during the years of the war.[3]

Immediate action was required without risking a war with Russia. Without delay, Captain Mihai Drăgan reported the incident to the base. As a precautionary measure, NATO Allies convened under Article 4 to discuss the escalation.[4] As Romania is an important actor to NATO's operations in the Black Sea, the Alliance rapidly reinforced Romanian defences. Within hours, U.S. F-35s were stationed at Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base and began 24-hour patrols, joined by Romanian F-16s and air surveillance systems to monitor Russian movements. Romanian ground forces mobilized as NATO moved additional assets to bolster the airbase's defences and support Romania's overstretched naval capabilities. For Romania, this incident underscored the Black Sea's transformation into an increasingly militarized arena, with Romania at the nexus of NATO's strategic response.[5]

1 Colin Flint, "Bottled Up in the Black Sea: Russia is Having a Dreadful Naval War, Hindering its Great Power Ambitions," The Conversation, 3 October 2024, https://theconversation.com/bottled-up-in-the-black-sea-russia-is-having-a-dreadful-naval-war-hindering-its-great-power-ambitions-238195.
2 *Ibid*.
3 Adam Bartley, Tom Saxton, "We Tracked Secret Russian Missile Launchers in Ukraine Using Public Satellite Data," The Conversation, 21 May 2024, https://theconversation.com/we-tracked-secret-russian-missile-launchers-in-ukraine-using-public-satellite-data-230424#:~:text=The%20S-300%20is%20widely%20regarded%20as%20Russia%E2%80%99s%20counterpart,confirmed%20destroyed%20over%20the%20course%20of%20the%20war
4 NATO webpage, "NATO-Topic: The Consultation Process and Article 4", https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49187.htm.
5 Madalin Necsutu, "Romania To Host Largest NATO Military Base in Europe," Balkan Insight, 21 March 2024, https://balkaninsight.com/2024/03/21/romania-to-host-largest-nato-military-base-in-europe/#:~:text=The%20new%20base%20will%20give%20Romania%20an%20increased,resources%20from%20Ramstein%20to%20the%20Mihail%20Kogalniceanu%20base.

The consequences

Following the missile incident in the Black Sea in 2030, NATO deployed additional Patriot and SAMP/T air defence systems to Romania, reinforcing its capabilities against potential Russian strikes from Crimea. The Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base, strategically located near the Black Sea and NATO's closest airfield to Crimea, became the central hub for U.S. and NATO F-35 fighter patrols. These deployments are grounded in NATO's long-standing strategy to bolster defences on its eastern front following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and further supported by Romanian acquisitions of F-16 fighters to strengthen regional air capabilities. U.S. Navy destroyers with Aegis missile defence capabilities were diverted to the Romanian port of Constanța, providing essential protection for Romanian waters and shielding Allied vessels from potential Russian missile launches.[6]

Romanian and NATO forces immediately commenced joint operations focused on intercepting and countering Russian aerial and naval threats. These exercises reflect NATO's expanded Black Sea strategy, developed in response to Russia's multi-layered anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) architecture in Crimea. Russia had developed air defence systems to create an A2/AD "bubble" to prevent Russia's enemies from establishing air supremacy in strategically significant regions. Inside the zone, Russian forces would be able to operate with impunity.[7] The NATO-Romania alignment in these operations showcased an integrated response designed to counter Russian capabilities, which relied heavily on electronic jamming and precision strikes as part of their A2/AD strategy.

The operational tempo and coordination requirements placed immense logistical demands on Romania, stretching its existing infrastructure. Mihail Kogălniceanu, now a high-value NATO installation, required additional runway capacity and hardened shelters for new NATO aircraft. While these reinforcements strengthened Romania's defences, they also effectively placed the nation on the frontline, exposing it to targeted Russian hybrid and conventional threats. Romania significantly increased its investment in defence, with a budget of over 20 billion euros in 2024, 45% higher than in previous years.[8]

In response to NATO's enhanced strategy, Russia employed advanced sea-denial tactics, creating a naval blockade that challenged Romania's shipping lanes to Constanța. Russian Kilo-class submarines, which were silent and difficult to track, operated within these lanes, disrupting commercial transit and increasing the security risks for vessels navigating Romanian waters.[9] Known for their ability to launch Kalibr cruise missiles, these submarines posed a high threat to Romanian commercial and military ships as they are the same type of submarine-based Kalibr attacks that Russia demonstrated in previous operations targeting Ukrainian infrastructure. Russia's blockade used sophisticated sonar-triggered mines deployed along major trade routes, restricting commercial movements and increasing operational risks for Romanian and Ukrainian exports. The high insurance premiums that followed in this scenario limited trade access, and disrupted Romania's economy – particularly its vital agricultural exports, which rely heavily on Constanța's access to the Black Sea routes.

The economic impact went beyond Romania. Ukrainian grain exports, already affected by the conflict, were further restricted, impacting European and Middle Eastern economic markets that depend on those grain supplies. NATO's response included deploying mine-clearing capabilities, such as Remotely Operated Underwater Vehicles (ROUVs) and Allied patrols, to reopen critical routes. Romania's naval forces, supported by NATO assets, began operations to safeguard Constanța's access, though Russia's persistent sea denial tactics required continuous vigilance and resources, drawing Romanian forces into prolonged engagements.

To tackle these threats, NATO integrated Romania into its broader Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) network, creating a multi-layered defence capable of intercepting Russian missile threats. This network, anchored by the Aegis Ashore missile defence system in Deveselu, expanded to include Patriots and SAMP/T batteries positioned strategically around Romania's airbases and coastal areas. These deployments, supported by NATO's AWACS surveillance aircraft, provided Romania with a robust, continuous air surveillance capability over the Black Sea.[10]

Romania's air defence infrastructure became a critical NATO asset, offering both detection and interception capabilities against Russia's S-400 system stationed in Crimea. This Russian system was designed to target NATO's aerial assets, particularly those deployed in close proximity to Russian-controlled territory. F-35 jets from the U.S., Norway, and other NATO Allies stationed in

6 John Gradi, "Navy Aegis Ashore Installation Will Play Key Role in NATO Missile Defense, Officials Say," USNI News, 15 July 2024, https://news.usni.org/2024/07/15/navy-aegis-ashore-installation-will-play-key-role-in-nato-missile-defense-officials-say.

7 "Russian Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2AD) Range," Institute for the Study of the War, 30 August 2016, https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-anti-access-and-area-denial-a2ad-range/#:~:text=Russia%20has%20altered%20the%20security%20balance%20in%20the,August%202016%20and%20to%20Syria%20in%20November%202015.

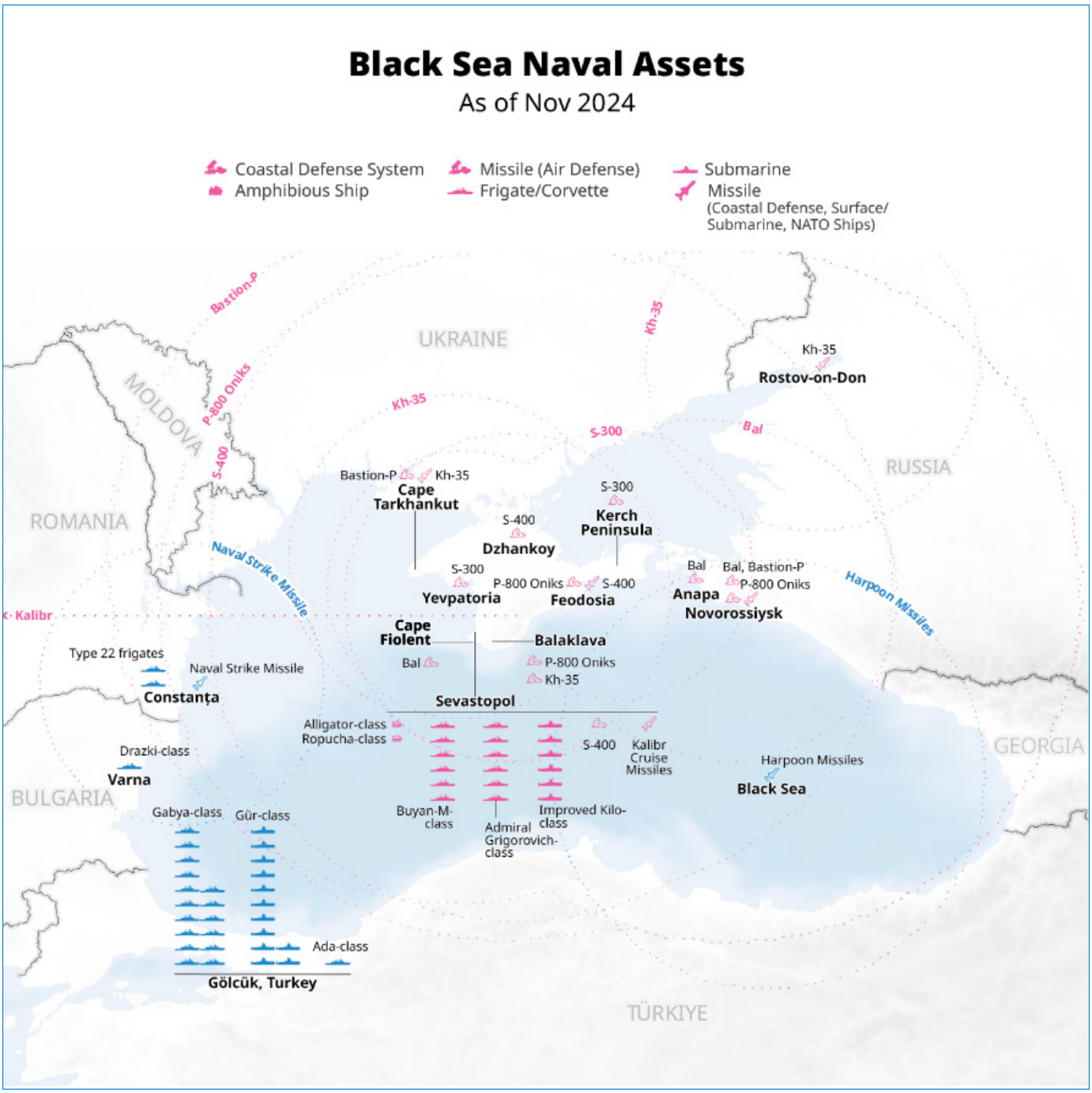
8 Necsutu, "Romania To Host Largest NATO Military Base in Europe."

9 Vladyslava Kovalenko, "Russia Moves Ships Into Black Sea: Potential Kalibr Missile Strike Size," RBC Ukraine, 9 November 2024, https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/world/russia-moves-ships-into-black-sea-potential-kalibr-missile-strike-size/ar-AA1tMJwq?ocid=BingNewsSerp.

10 Edward H. Lubndquist, "Aegis Ashore Is Anchored in Romania," Defense Media Network, 1 June 2016, https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/aegis-ashore-anchored-romania/#:~:text=The%20Aegis%20Ashore%20Missile%20Defense%20System%20%28AAMDS%29%20installation,coming%20from%20the%20Middle%20East%20%E2%80%93%20namely%20Iran.

Romania coordinated with Romanian F-16s, establishing 24-hour air patrols over the Black Sea.[11] These patrols responded to Russian provocations, deterring Russian overflights and ensuring rapid interception capabilities. The air defence network extended across NATO's eastern flank, creating a fortified line capable of responding to potential missile launches from Crimea.

While these advanced defences provided Romania with unprecedented security, they also escalated Russia's scrutiny. Russian missile sites in Crimea, with S-300 and S-400 anti-air systems, targeted Romania's air defence installations. NATO's investment in Romania's defence infrastructure demanded constant coordination and strategic response to evolving threats, anchoring Romania as a core component in NATO's Black Sea and eastern Europe defence posture.[12]



11 Marcel Gascón Barberá, "U.S. To Turn Romanian Airbase Into NATO Black Sea Hub," Balkan Insight, 18 May 2021, https://balkaninsight.com/2021/05/18/us-to-turn-romanian-airbase-into-nato-black-sea-hub/.

12 Necsutu, "Romania To Host Largest NATO Military Base in Europe."

How did we get here

The Black Sea region's transformation into a hotspot began with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which fundamentally altered the strategic landscape. Since 2014, Russia's military modernization efforts have turned Crimea into an A2/AD fortress, equipped with S-300 and S-400 missile systems, coastal defence installations, and surface and submarine assets in the Black Sea. This militarized outpost allows Russia to exert control over Black Sea access, challenging NATO's freedom of navigation and directly affecting the maritime interests of neighbouring countries.[13]

As one of NATO's few Black Sea members, since 2022 Romania has become central to NATO's efforts to counter Russian presence and provide critical support to Ukraine. NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, originally focused on the Baltic region, was extended to Romania, with Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base serving as a staging ground for exercises and deployments aimed at countering Russian expansionism. The base's proximity to the Black Sea and Ukraine transformed it into NATO's most strategic installation for projecting power into the Black Sea.[14] Romania's integration into NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) system, which expanded significantly post-2014, was a response to Russia's threats into the region. The Aegis Ashore site in Deveselu represented NATO's commitment to defend its eastern flank against ballistic and cruise missile threats. Romania's location and infrastructure made it ideal for expanded NATO deployments, securing a Black Sea presence that Russia viewed as a direct threat.

Since 2023, Russia had intensified its hybrid warfare beyond Ukrainian borders, targeting Western democracies democracy, disrupting infrastructure or the economic stability. Allied strategic focus was therefore primarily centred on the Baltic Sea.[15] The new NATO Integrated Cyber Defence Centre established in 2024 promoted collaboration on cybersecurity training, intelligence, and technology, developing centralized response teams for rapid countermeasures that could prevent or mitigate attacks on critical infrastructure among NATO Allies. The use of AI to analyse disinformation trends and detect cyber intrusions also improved NATO's capacity to anticipate hybrid actions before they become significant threats.

13 Tobias Kollakowski, "Interpreting Russian Aims To Control the Black Sea Region Through Naval Geostrategy (Part II): Establishing Full Control Over Southern Ukraine and the Donbas is One of the Tasks of the Russian Army," The Journal of Slavic Studies 36(2): 11-38, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13518046.2023.2251306.

14 NATO webpage, "NATO's Military Presence in the East of the Alliance," https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm.

15 Doug Livermore, "The West Must Respond to Russia's Rapidly Escalating Hybrid Warfare," Atlantic Council, 7 November 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-west-must-respond-to-russias-rapidly-escalating-hybrid-warfare/.


Looking South

8

What if...

there was another Suez Crisis?

Roderick Parkes

At the stroke of midnight, the space-based satellite navigation systems that guide cargo ships into the Suez Canal shut down. Specialized tankers transporting hydrogen-rich ammonia are rushing to beat the July 26 deadline and linger at the Canal's entrance. Cargo vessels carrying lithium compounds, neodymium, and dysprosium – critical to the global energy transition – dropped anchor, blocking one of the world's most vital trade arteries.[1] And after an indecent interval, the European Space Agency issues a statement so short and cryptic it seems almost designed to fuel speculation: "Technico-legal issues" meant the EU's Galileo system could no longer provide coverage for this particular geography, apparently. Whispers of a deliberate denial of service, of geo-fencing by the EU, have already begun circulating.

The timing and nature of the outage surely could not be a coincidence. Only a month earlier, the EU had ended the unnatural coexistence of its space-based suite of services – IRIS³X for sovereign communications,[2] Galileo+ for precision navigation, and Copernicus Next for real-time orbital surveillance—with Aghora, a private, US-based conglomerate operated by Victor Vekta, the Anglo-Indian tech mogul. The end of this consortium was routinely acknowledged in NATO's reconstituted Economic Security Committee.[3] But in hindsight, the EU's move to restore autonomy[4] now looked like deliberate preparation to free its hand just before Egypt's new transit fees came into force. Egypt had justified the energy tariffs as necessary to fund its own green transition, having failed to attract U.S. investment. But the move came at the cost of European energy security.

The outage triggers a global traffic jam,[5] choking supply chains, roiling energy markets, and sparking accusations of bad faith. In Brussels, the EU Commission spokesperson conspicuously refuses to deny that Europe ordered a temporary satellite shutdown to pressure Cairo into reversing its decision. But as tensions escalate, China accuses the U.S. of complicity, pushing the crisis to a dangerous brink. Then, faster than anyone expects, Europe folds – the service is quietly restored, the backlog clears, and the world moves on. However, the balance of power has shifted, and not in Europe's favour. Brussels had hoped to showcase its geo-economic clout. Instead, it had miscalculated, underestimating the fury of Asian and African nations, who saw the move as coercion, not strength. The EU had played its hand, and lost.

Europeans had evidently underestimated how carefully Egyptian diplomats would build coalitions to frame their tariffs as equitable, rather than selfish or preferential. In a world racing to reduce energy costs and with states transitioning to new sources, some renewable, some retrograde, Egypt's tariffs could have tipped the geopolitical balance – vis-à-vis Egypt's neighbours still heavily reliant on hydrocarbon exports; vis-à-vis regional powers like Türkiye that were developing regional trade and energy networks of their own and between China and the U.S. However, Cairo had treaded carefully, explaining the nature of the 26 July tariffs, its own vulnerabilities, and the benefits of its domestic energy plans for the region. By

1 G. Allen Brooks, "Shipping and the Energy Transition," *The Maritime Executive*, 18 October 2024, https://maritime-executive.com/magazine/shipping-and-the-energy-transition.
2 Adrienne Harebottle, "IRIS² – How the EU Constellation is Taking Shape," *Via Satellite*, August 28, 2023, https://interactive.satellitetoday.com/via/september-2023/iris-how-the-eu-constellation-is-taking-shape.
3 Anna M. Dowd and Dominik Jankowski, "Developing an Economic Security Agenda for NATO," *War on the Rocks*, 28 May 2024, https://warontherocks.com/2024/05/developing-an-economic-security-agenda-for-nato/.
4 European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies, *The European Space Sector as an Enabler of EU Strategic Autonomy*, December 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/653620/EXPO_IDA(2020)653620_EN.pdf.
5 King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center, *The Importance of the Suez Canal to Global Energy Flow*, December 2023, https://www.kapsarc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/KS-2023-CO33-The-Importance-of-the-Suez-Canal-to-Global-Energy-Flow.pdf.

torpedoing these efforts, the Europeans exposed themselves to massive international criticism and confronted the limits of their autonomy.

Fall-out: bandung rebooted

Weeks after the incident, NATO officials are still ruefully assessing the damage. Angry Allies feel blindsided by the action. They demand new obligations to coordinate out-of-area operations in NATO's economic security committee, clarifying that if members' space infrastructure were destroyed during such operations, such events would not fall under Article 5 protections. But fair or not, all Allies are tarred with the same brush by the outside world, suffering a loss of authority. In the aftermath of the July debacle, the Alliance has lost its capacity to build wider allegiances and cooperation, particularly in Afro-Asia, even as its adversarial relations to Russia and competition with China remain.[6] "This isn't just a trade dispute," the Secretary General will warn. "It is the beginning of a new order, one where none of us is calling the shots."

As NATO continues to argue behind closed doors, the public debate is raging. This may not be the first truly global conversation, but it is certainly the first where Afro-Asia is doing most of the talking. Victor Vekta's Aghora social media platform (named after the fierce Hindu goddess of creative destruction, not the Greek meeting place for polite debate) is already a cornerstone of communications infrastructure in Afro-Asia. And Vekta has emerged as a pivotal figure, peppering his social media with pithy rhetoric. Until recently, analysts spoke of the Instagramming or TikTokification of conflict.[7] Now it is all about "Vektrafication". Aghora's neurotech allows users to share emotions and even memories, choose the intensity of empathy they wish to elicit and create solidarity among disparate movements. Aghora's top theme: "How to recognise a neo-imperialist".

Europeans had wanted to show the world that they could "behave out of character" with a display of muscle: "For too long, we have behaved like vegetarians in a jungle full of meat-eaters." It fell to India, a quiet observer of the rivalries between East and West, to argue that Europeans were simply reverting to type. Its Prime Minister now presents a fully worked-out plan to manage such geo-economic ructions on Afro-Asian terms, diversifying trade routes, managing choke points like the Straits of Malacca and the Suez Canal, and marrying nations' renewable energy sources with rare earth resource sharing, efficient manufacturing hubs, and skilled workforces. Hers is not a global vision. With cartel-like structures, India's plan is designed to constrain coercive behaviour from China, the U.S., Europe, and Russia in a bid for what she calls "cooperative security."

India, invoking the 1955 Bandung Principles,[8] is now reclaiming its role as a champion of Afro-Asian solidarity, showing how these regions can reshape global affairs. South-South partnerships take root, sponsored by diaspora bonds, private wealth, and regional development funds. Kenya and South Africa collaborate with India on EV manufacturing and green hydrogen, merging Africa's minerals with Indian technology. Nigeria and Indonesia build a battery supply chain, linking Nigeria's energy infrastructure with Indonesia's nickel reserves. An Indian-Egyptian axis advances automation and AI, establishing regional tech hubs. As Indo-Egyptian cooperation defines new rules of engagement, Europe and Russia, once central to the "World Island,"[9] find themselves increasingly side-lined. The U.S. and China feel their peripheral geography.

The run-up: a world rewritten by the fourth industrial revolution

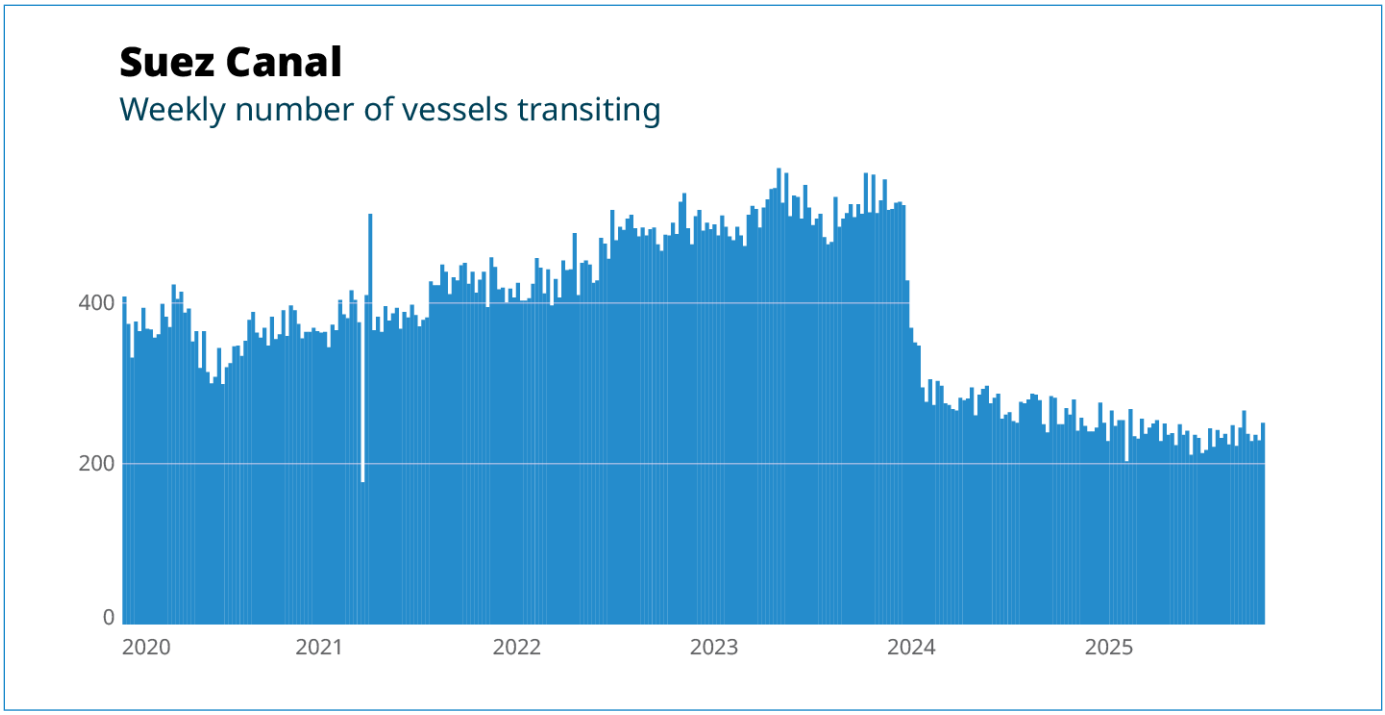
Back in 2025, it was hard to miss the historical rhymes of the new energy revolution. First coal, then oil, then nuclear energy, and now hydrogen and the scarce resources needed for renewables: Once every couple of generations since the late 1780s, an efficient new wonder-energy turbocharges technological breakthroughs and production processes; these energy resources, unevenly spread, then trigger anxiety amongst the great powers of being left behind; this leads to land grabs for resources, control of vital trade routes and chokepoints, and eventually a global war in which these new technologies and production methods reshape military organisation and are

6 Andriy Korniychuk, *"New Allies? Ukraine's Diplomatic Battle in the Global South,"* Clingendael Institute, October 2023, https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/new-allies-ukraines-diplomatic-battle-global-south.

7 Mark Scott, Giovanna Coi, and Giulia Poloni, *"Anatomy of a Scroll: Inside TikTok's AI-Powered Algorithms," POLITICO Europe*, 7 May 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/anatomy-scroll-inside-tiktok-ai-powered-algorithm-israel-palestine-war; Sheila Deng and Elizabeth Culliford, *"TikTok War: How Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Played to Social Media's Youngest Audience," Reuters*, 7 March 2022, https://www.reuters.com/technology/tiktok-war-how-russias-invasion-ukraine-played-social-medias-youngest-audience-2022-03-01.

8 Christopher J. Lee, *"When Asia and Africa Envisioned a New World Order: The 1955 Bandung Conference Created a 'Unifying Myth of Decolonization' and a Renewed Ethos of Self-Determination," Zócalo Public Square*, 7 March 2023, https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/bandung-spirit.

9 Kyrylo Cyril Kutcher, *"The Russo-Ukrainian War and Mackinder's Heartland Thesis," Geopolitical Monitor*, 23 September 2024, https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-ukraine-war-and-mackinders-heartland-thesis/.



unleashed by the powers against each other. In 1805,[10] 1914[11] and 1950,[12] three previous industrial revolutions had fuelled global conflict, and the fourth looked likely to do the same.[13]

NATO strategists had clearly seen the danger. That year, Europeans began discussing the need to revamp NATO's cooperative security pillar.[14] The idea was to help resource-rich Afro-Asian states resist neo-imperialism: protecting shared energy and data pipelines with Africa and Asia, and building EU-NATO cooperation to adapt to the need to meld military and economic power in Allies international relations. A mapping exercise identified ways to link resources, energy, and production for mutual benefit with Afro-Asia,[15] thus countering China's Belt and Road and Russia's African mercenaries. By putting the emphasis on the local management of Afro-Asian resources, Allies would be constraining themselves, as well as their adversaries.

But this logic of self-restraint was hard to defend in Brussels. Pessimistic Europeans had become convinced that they were being locked out of the future – despite the success of ASML, BioNTech, Siemens, Klarna, Ørsted, Ubisoft and ArianeGroup. Tensions with more bullish Allies crystallised in the divisive figure of Victor Vekta, a tech Svengali who had built his "empire of the future" by acquiring struggling European entrepreneurs to create Aghora-Logic (AI), Aghora-Fusion (renewable storage), Aghora-Orbitals (space tech), Aghora-City/Grid (smart urban solutions), and Aghora-Add (3D printing and manufacturing). When Vekta also boasted of "acquiring struggling political entrepreneurs," it horrified Europeans, leading them to develop autonomous systems like IRIS3. The result was costly co-existence within NATO, with Allies wasting resources on duplication.

The EU, by subordinating its foreign policy to geo-economics, lost its freedom of action. Members became servants of their commercial interests, and the EU found itself compromising its international standing to gain market access. European industrial policy – focused on autonomy and control – alienated potential allies. By prioritising short-term gains and protectionist strategies, members neglected Afro-Asia, except as a source of natural resources and civil conflict. The seeds of the Suez crisis were sown in these missed opportunities, as

10 Stephen D. Billington, *"War, What Is It Good For?": The Industrial Revolution!* QUCEH Working Paper Series, no. 2018-12 (Belfast: Queen's University Centre for Economic History, 2018).

11 Stefanie Prezioso, *"Globalisation, Internationalism and the Great War," Labor History* 63, no. 4 (2022): 492–502, https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2022.2055750; Stuart Parkinson, *"The Industrialisation of War: Lessons from World War I," SGR Newsletter* no. 44, 5 April 2016), https://www.sgr.org.uk/sites/default/files/SGRNL44_Lessons_from_WWI.pdf.

12 Michael T. Florinsky, *"Soviet Industrialization and the Cold War," Current History* 37, no. 219 (1959): 262–66, http://www.jstor.org/stable/45313714; Abraham Escudero, *"The Importance of the Cold War and Its Ending," Portland State University Economics Working Papers*, no. 82, 14 June 2023, https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1084&context=econ_workingpapers.

13 Dan Ciuriak, *"US-China Economic Rivalry and Prospects for Peace in the Middle East," The Journal of Peace and War Studies* (forthcoming, October 15, 2023), available at SSRN, https://ssrn.com/abstract=4397443 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4397443.

14 Nicolò Fasola, *"Reforming and Enhancing Partnerships to Strengthen NATO's Strategic Posture,"* U.S. Army War College Publications, 21 November 2024, https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/News/Display/Article/3974674/reforming-and-enhancing-partnerships-to-strengthen-natos-strategic-posture/.

15 Katie Auth, *"Our Shared Energy Security: Why the U.S. and Its Energy-Poor Allies Must Coinvest in Solutions—and How," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 13 January 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/01/our-shared-energy-security-why-the-us-and-its-energy-poor-allies-must-coinvest-in-solutions?lang=en.

Allies clung to outdated frameworks at a time of massive transformation. The world's Fourth Industrial Revolution demanded a new vision for cooperative security – to avoid the old cycle of great power land grabs and global war. The Allies failed to make the break with history, and it fell to India[16] and others.

16 Meera Venkatachalam and Renu Modi, *"India's Africa Policy and Drivers of Diplomacy in the Global South," Australian Outlook*, 15 February 2024, https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/indias-africa-policy-and-the-drivers-of-modern-diplomacy/; Chinedu Asadu, *"Indian and Nigerian Leaders Pledge Stronger Security Ties and Support for Global South," AP News*, 17 November 2024, https://apnews.com/article/nigeria-india-tinubu-modi-b4ff7377642edf4bb7ceb0f750c8612e.

9

What if...

Egypt and Ethiopia go to war over water?

Marwa Wasfi

The event

In August 2030, around 10:00 AM in Cairo, people woke up to the news that "war over the Nile" had just begun. The hot and dry season had hit Egypt in July. The Nile's water levels were shockingly low – this in a country that was known as "the gift of the Nile." Motivated by its ambitions to boost hydroelectric production, Addis Ababa diverted water otherwise destined for Egypt and the Sudan. In addition, Khartoum, motivated by fears of drought, decided to use its Merowe Dam to reserve its share of the water before it reached Egypt. As a result, Egyptians were left in a severe situation. Young people organised massive protests to increase pressure on Cairo to solve the water crisis.

Two days later, the Egyptian president appeared on TV, framing Ethiopia's actions as a threat to peace and security, insisting that Egypt's water security was "a red line." Addis Ababa responded by ignoring the Egyptian claims, calling Cairo's actions "aggressive." Only few hours later, Egypt launched a deep air strike, integrating its French Rafal jet fighters and the U.S. F-16. The aim: to halt the operation of the Great Renaissance Ethiopian Dam, also known as the GRED. To convey a sense of honour and entitlement, the operation was named "Our Water, Our Life" and was launched from the Berenice military base in Ras Banas on the Red Sea, located just 1,360 km from the Ethiopian dam.

Addis Ababa soon realised that it was under attack and prepared to respond with fighter jets equipped with anti-missile defence systems. The Ethiopian air force, with its old-fashioned MIG-23S, was unable to withstand the Egyptian strikes. It took Egypt a few days to stop it from operating on August 20, citing civilian injuries. The Ethiopian Prime Minister had been calling on the international community to sanction Egypt, while also threatening to attack the Aswan Dam if Cairo did not retreat. Egypt was aware that destroying the dam could lead to a massive flooding in Khartoum, which would also affect Cairo. Therefore, the goal was to attack the dam's 13 turbines temporarily halting its operation and forcing Addis Ababa to sign a new agreement and guarantee water-sharing for downstream countries.

The consequences

With Egyptian military superiority over Addis Ababa, Egypt eventually succeeded in achieving this goal, while Ethiopia received no military support from strong regional or international actors. Overall, the Egyptian Armed Forces were superior to the Ethiopian national defence forces. Egypt was ranked 15 out of 145 and Ethiopia was in 49th place. The Egyptian army was three times the size of the Ethiopian army, and Cairo was, moreover, superior in air power with 11 times more aircraft than Ethiopia (1080 vs 91).[1]

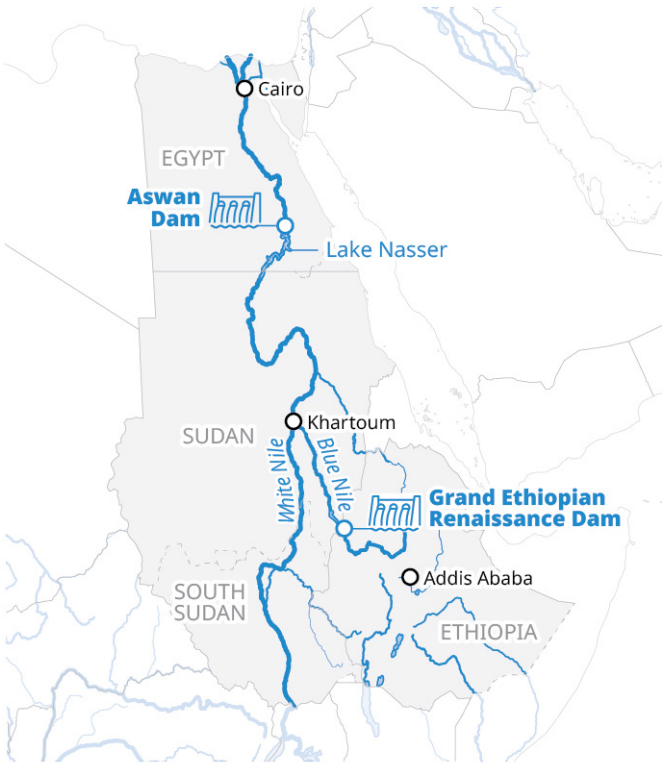
1 Estimations are based on the 2024 data available via the Global Firepower website at Comparison of Egypt and Ethiopia Military Strengths (2024) (no date) Global Firepower - World Military Strength. Available at https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-comparison-detail.php?country1=egypt&country2=ethiopia, accessed on 25 December 2025.

While Ethiopia rejected the diplomatic solution, Cairo benefited from its several defence agreements[2] over the last decade with Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea and Nigeria. These countries sided with Egypt's in the war. Although they did not get involved militarily, they allowed Egypt to pass through their borders when necessary.[3] Sudan was caught between the benefits of the GRED that could help organise the flows of the Nile and boost its agriculture, and the fear of a possible failure of the dam, which was located in an area prone to earthquakes. Eventually, Sudan's military government, motivated by fears over the dam's safety, decided to allow Egypt to pass through its airspace, in the hopes of persuading Ethiopia to sign a legally binding agreement that would give its share of the water while ensuring the safety of the dam.

At the global level, the U.S. did not contribute any heavy military weight to the conflict, but it sided with Egypt and decided to suspend development aid to Addis Ababa unless it agreed to sign a new agreement. Through its senior military officer at the headquarters of the African Union in Addis Ababa, NATO urged the AU to convene an emergency meeting to discuss the alternatives to the conflict. But the summit ended without an agreement, with Egypt claiming the right to defend its water security, and Ethiopia accusing it of violating its sovereignty.[4]

In the end, the Egyptian air strikes succeeded at halting the dam's operation, but also caused damage to Ethiopian infrastructure, and injured some civilians. The case was taken to the UN, but the international community's leverage in this dispute was very limited as none of the countries concerned (Egypt, Sudan, or Ethiopia) had ratified the UN Convention governing the sharing of water resources.[5] As a result, the case was referred back to the African Union since it had played a significant role in mediating the negotiations which resulted in Ethiopia agreeing to discuss a new agreement on 01 September 2030 that would not recognise the historical rights of Egypt and Sudan, but would guarantee a fair share of the water, and allow international and regional committees to review the safety measures of the GRED. However, the likelihood of the signed agreement yielding any concrete results was doubtful. Conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia could escalate at any time.

Egypt-Ethiopia-Sudan geography



How did we get there?

With its fast-growing population that reached 121 million in 2030, Egypt relied heavily on the Nile for almost all its freshwater resources. The Nile was also used to fill the high dam at Naser Lake, the reservoir of Egyptian hydroelectric power. The Nile water remained a source of tension between the upstream and downstream countries, and these tensions intensified due to the lack of a comprehensive mutually agreed upon international agreement.

Historically, the rights granted to Egypt and Sudan were known as "acquired rights." The downstream countries acquired such rights by way of two agreements: the first was signed between Great Britain on behalf of Egypt and Sudan in 1929, granting them 48 and 4 billion

2 In an effort to counter Ethiopia's dam measures, Egypt and Somalia signed a "Defense Pact" following a meeting in Cairo on January 24, 2024. The defense pact aimed at "bolstering the security cooperation between the two countries." Moreover, the change in the peace-keeping forces in Somalia, with Cairo contributing with more forces to the AU mission there; has triggered more tensions with Addis Ababa.

3 Shahira Amin, *Egypt is cozying up to Somalia to thwart Ethiopia*, *Atlantic Council*, Atlantic Council, 19 September 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/egypt-somalia-ethiopia-gerd/ (Accessed: 22 December)

4 For more info on the NATO operations and missions in the Horn of Africa see NATO website, *Operations and missions*, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52060.htm accessed on 26 December 2024.

5 See also the UN press release on that: *Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan should negotiate mutually beneficial agreement over management of Nile Waters, top official tells Security Council | Meetings coverage and press releases* (2021) *United Nations*, available at https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14576.doc.htm, accessed on 29 November 2024.

cubic metres (BMC) respectively of the Nile annual flow. It also gave Egypt the right to veto any project that threatened its interests. The second agreement of 1956 ensured the preponderance of the downstream countries by granting them 55.8 BCM for Egypt and 18.5 BCM for Sudan, while also allowing Cairo to build the Aswan High Dam.[6] While Cairo and Khartoum regarded the two agreements as legally binding, Addis Ababa and other upstream riparian countries perceived them as colonial and unfair.[7]

Driven by its ambitions for economic development, Ethiopia began to challenge these historical rights to the Nile and started to build the GRED (The Great Renaissance Ethiopian Dam) 500 km south-east of Addis Ababa, closer to the Sudanese border. Egypt and Sudan projected their opposition of the dam. The GRED technically meant that Ethiopia would have a full control over the Nile's water flow to the downstream countries, and so Cairo and Khartoum asked Addis Ababa to sign a legally binding agreement that would regulate the filling time of the GRED reservoir, while also ensuring safety measures to assuage fears of massive floodings if the GRED were to fail.

Ethiopia, for its part, had refused to sign any binding agreement, calling the Egyptian-Sudanese request an interference on its sovereignty. Various institutions such as the Word Bank, the UN, and the AU had all tried to facilitate the negotiations, but no agreement was reached except for the Declaration of Principles (DOP) signed in 2015. But it lacked clarity and enforcement mechanisms. Tensions escalated further in 2023 when Addis Ababa completed the fifth stage of filling the dam.[8] The negative impacts of the dam were further exacerbated by Egypt's climate and demographics. The result was that the country reached the threshold of water scarcity defined as 500 cubic metres per person per year, and the Ethiopian dam had worsened the situation by reducing water flow and agriculture by 25% in 2030.[9]

Consequently, wartime rhetoric and threats were exchanged between the Egyptians and the Ethiopians. The Ethiopian Prime Minister declared that, "no force could stop Ethiopia from building a dam" and that "if it comes to war, we could put millions on standby."[10] Cairo on the other hand, began to project its military power in the Horn of Africa by signing defence pacts with state such as Somalia with the aim of encircling Addis Ababa with its rivals.[11] Additionally, Cairo began to form a new South Fleet in the Red Sea and renovated its military base at Ras Banas, which is closer to Ethiopia.[12] As a result, the Ethiopian Prime Minister said in 2024 that anyone thinking of invading his country should "think 20 times."[13]

Finally, with the completion of the fifth and final filling of the GRED, the dam inflicted varying degrees of damage to Egypt, resulting in a 72% reduction in the arable land, leaving more people unemployed and saddling even more political and social problems on to Cairo. Attempts to bring the issue to the Security Council failed several times. By early 2030, it became clear that Egypt was moving away from the diplomatic track and was prepared to take the tough and risky decision of military action, particularly after the massive protests by farmers and other activists demanding that the government solve the problem. The Egyptian president appeared later in August 2030 to say that "all options are open" and that the Egyptian people were ready to shed their blood in the name of protecting their rights to the Nile.

6 Alexis Carles, *Power Asymmetry and Conflict over Water Resources in the Nile River Basin: The Egyptian Hydro-hegemony*, dissertation submitted as a part of the MA in Environment and Development Degree in Geography, King's College London, 2006, available at https://www.readkong.com/page/power-asymmetry-and-conflict-over-water-resources-in-the-1453168.

7 "Bridging the gap in the Nile Waters dispute," Crisis Group, 2019, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/271-bridging-gap-nile-waters-dispute, accessed on 31 October 2024.

8 Mohamed Kheir Omer, "Ethiopia's quest for a seaport, Egypt and the geopolitics of the Nile Basin, African Arguments," African Arguments, 6 October 2024, https://africanarguments.org/2024/10/ethiopias-quest-for-a-seaport-egypt-and-the-geopolitics-of-the-nile-basin/, accessed on 3 December 2024.

9 Eliora Goodman, "Dual Threats: Water Scarcity and Rising Sea Levels in Egypt," The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 20 August 2021, https://timep.org/2021/08/20/dual-threats-water-scarcity-and-rising-sea-levels-in-egypt/, accessed on 7 November 2024. On the definition of water scarcity see also: "Absolute water scarcity," United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2015 available at https://archive.unescwa.org/absolute-water-scarcity, accessed on 7 November 2024.

10 "Abiy Ahmed: No force Can Stop Ethiopia From Building Dam," BBC News, 22 October 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50144451, accessed on 30 October 2024.

11 "New War Looms Over Nile Water," The Independent, 9 September 2024, https://www.independent.co.ug/new-war-looms-over-nile-water/, accessed on 3 December 2024.

12 Alan Nicol, Mamdouh Shahin, "The Nile: Moving Beyond Cooperation," UNESCODOC digital library, 2023, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000133301, accessed on 29 October 2024.

13 Farouk Chothia, "Ethiopia Warns Rivals Against Invasion as Regional Tensions Rise," BBC, *8 September 2024,* https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3vxqk9g43no, accessed on 3 December 2024.

10

What if...

the Palestinian State is recognized at the United Nations?

Silvia Colombo

The event

15 May 2030 was a historic day in the United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York: Palestine was fully recognized as a state. 82 years after the birth of the State of Israel (on 14 May 1948) and on the anniversary of the *Nakba* (the catastrophe, i.e. the forced displacement of Palestinians following the creation of Israel), Palestinians formally got a place around the table at the UN.

No noise, no speeches, no pictures. In the age of AI-driven, instant communication technologies, in which everything is artificial but at the same time so real, the event initially went down as surprisingly quiet and low-profile. It was as if history had rolled back 82 years, and what was not done then had eventually been achieved. As simple as that. Exhausted by almost seven years of conflict, Palestinians were hesitant to take to the streets to celebrate. Israelis breathed a sigh of relief at the new possibilities for peace, coexistence and cooperation opening in front of them. Both looked forward to healing their mutual wounds after many decades of violent fighting and political deadlock. Radicals on both sides beat a retreat.[1] Countries in the Middle East, ranging from Jordan and Egypt to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), all of a sudden found themselves on the right side of history, having been – together with a diverse and truly multipolar coalition of other players – the ones that had made all this possible. For all of them, what happened on 15 May 2030 was more than historic.

It was the culmination of a slow but powerful process, akin to snowballing, whereby an increasing number of European nations – and the United States – came to realize that in order to support Israelis and Palestinians in finding a sustainable solution to their crisis, they needed to be placed in the right conditions for some kind of political horizon to emerge. What better way to do that than by levelling the playing field, recognizing the Palestinian state and thus kick-starting a political process? Once the snowballing effect had kicked in, the critical mass grew bigger and bigger day after day, meeting after meeting. In the end this critical mass became overwhelming: 189 nations out of 193 recognized the Palestinian state at the UN. And Palestine became the 194th member of this institution. Back to square one.

The consequences

Compared to the slow motion of the previous years, developments after May 2030 occurred at an unprecedented pace and received increased media coverage and visibility. The surprise factor of the 15 May event contributed to injecting new momentum on a number of levels, a tangible sign of how interlinked issues were, from the domestic to the international dimension through the regional one. At the micro level, the acute violence of the previous years seemed to confirm that the situation on the ground had to get worse before it got better, as the saying goes regarding human history. With Palestine eventually fully recognized as an independent and sover-

1 Khaled A. Hroub, "New Hamas" through Its New Documents, in *Journal of Palestine Studies*,Vol. 35, No. 4 (2006), 6-27.

eign state, many foreign-policy makers and analysts were left scratching their heads about some vital questions: what should the borders be? Where should the capital be located? In order to provide an answer to such questions, a new generation of young Palestinian civic leaders, who had their formative years during the most intense phase of the last Israeli-Palestinian conflict after returning to their country in 2023-2024, were more determined than ever to distance themselves from both Fatah and Hamas. In early October 2030 – as the Israeli population and their new leadership commemorated the deaths of the 7 October (2023) attacks – Palestinians held new elections, something that had not happened for 24 years.[2] The new "moderate" Palestinian representatives, parties and governing institutions, inspired and guided by a rights-based approach, found well-disposed interlocutors in Tel Aviv. Negotiations lasted for one year and were structured around concrete, time-bound goals so as to provide positive, incremental incentives to prevent a relapse into violence and deadlock. The 1967 borders were reinstated and only a limited number of Israeli settlement blocs were kept on the basis of 1:1 land swaps. A shared capital in Jerusalem, with Jewish areas under Israeli sovereignty and Arab areas under Palestinian sovereignty, became a reality under the watchful eye of an international Implementation and Verification Group (IVG).

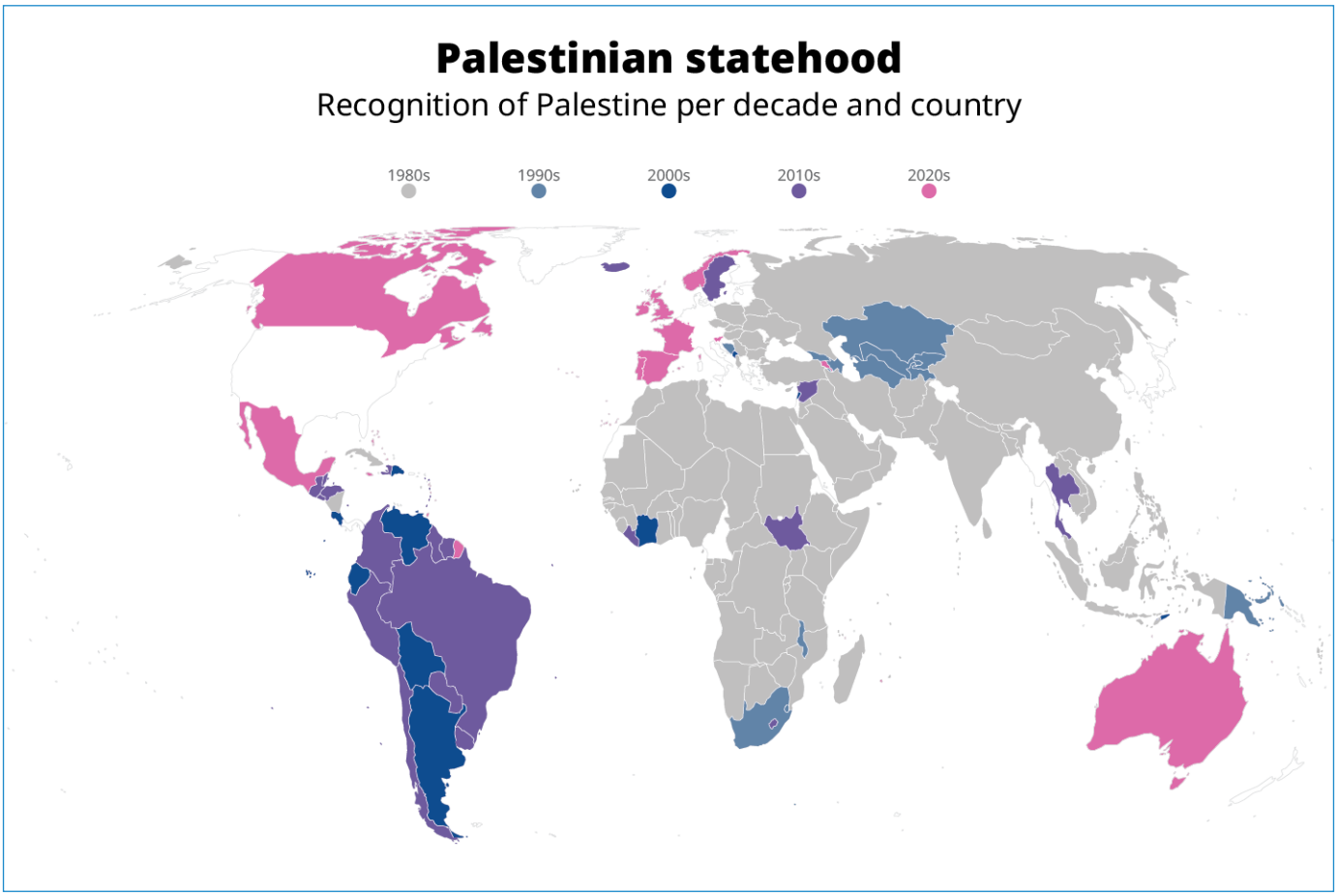
Turning to the meso level, although negotiations were conducted almost exclusively by Palestinians and Israelis themselves, the same regional players whose actions had paved the way for the breakthrough of May 2030 continued to provide political clout and to exercise pressure in order to keep the two parties and the whole process on track. Among these players, Saudi Arabia stood out as particularly active. By leveraging the web of pragmatic relations built over the course of the previous decade, Riyadh acted to increase its strategic leverage in the region, while contributing to advancing the normalization agenda. First, as early as June 2030, it convened a special meeting of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution – a format that had been meeting biannually since 2024 bringing together a number of Arab and Muslim countries and European partners with a view to concretely incentivizing Palestinian state-building, reconstruction, and regional security and cooperation – to discuss the operational details of the IVG.[3] Second, Saudi Arabia brought its dialogue with Iran to the next level, entailing diplomatic exchanges, trade and energy regional cooperation, as well as taking steps to set up a regional security architecture. Third, in parallel to that, the cherry on the cake was the signing of a normalization deal with Israel, something Riyadh had refused to do without the recognition of the Palestinian state and a halt in Israel's actions against the Palestinians. This demonstrated the success of Riyadh's diplomatic pressure and principled policy of engagement, particularly in relation to its important but no longer only partner, the United States. By combining carrots and pressure, Palestine's 15 May 2030 victory was hailed as the first success of a strategy carefully nurtured by the new Saudi King – Mohammed bin Salman – to mitigate negative perceptions of him abroad, to provide a stable regional environment conducive to reaping the benefits of Saudi Vision 2030, and to address some lingering domestic imbalances (e.g. the shrinking youth bulge and the lack of managers and professionals) through cooperation and partnerships.[4]

Finally, at the macro level, the most disqualified institution – the UN – rose, as on few other occasions in its history, as the true pillar of the rules-based international system and, for the first time in many decades, seemed to be genuinely alive and kicking.[5] Turning to the role of NATO in the Middle East as part of the second cycle of its Southern Neighbourhood Action Plan (SNAP), the Alliance experienced new-found military activism with the establishment of a humanitarian and ceasefire monitoring operation during the first year (2030–2031), followed by a stabilization force in Palestine and on the borders between Israel and Lebanon, Palestine and Syria starting from 2031, working side-by-side with the UN-led IVG. Politically, NATO's stepping out of its irrelevance on the Middle Eastern chessboard also provided new grounds to revamp its partnerships within the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) countries, including starting new political and security dialogues with potential new partners such as Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine itself. A highly welcome development for an 80-year-old Alliance and for the Middle East.

How did we get there?

On 18 September 2024, as world leaders were gathering in New York to participate in the annual high-level General Debate in the UN General Assembly, the very same Assembly voted overwhelmingly to adopt a resolution demanding that Israel "brings to an end without delay its unlawful presence"[6] in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, directly stemming from the advisory opinion

2 "Mapping Palestinian Politics," https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_palestinian_politics/introduction_political_actors/.
3 Claudia Tanios, "Saudi Arabia forms global alliance to push for Israeli-Palestinian two state solution," Reutuers, 27 September 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-forms-global-alliance-push-israeli-palestinian-two-state-solution-2024-09-27/.
4 Julian Borger, "Why Trump's Lavish Saudi Courtship Leaves Israel On The Back Foot." *The Guardian*, 23 November 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/news/ng-interactive/2025/nov/23/trump-lavish-saudi-courtship-leaves-israel-on-backfoot.
5 Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*, Beacon press, 2007.
6 UN General Assemby, Tenth emergency special session, Agenda item 5, Illegal Israeli actions in Occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/ltd/n24/266/48/pdf/n2426648.pdf.



issued by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on 19 July of the same year.[7] In spite of an initial ceasefire reached on 19 January, starting from mid-March 2025 the situation in both Gaza and the West Bank dramatically escalated again. On the military side, dozens of severe air strikes by Israel resumed on a daily basis causing the skyrocketing of the death toll (with over one hundred casualties among the Palestinians per day) on the civilian side and the sheer devastation of the territory. The announcement of the Trump Peace Plan on 13 October 2025 – a few weeks after the recognition of the Palestinian state by some important European countries, including France and the United Kingdom – did bring some respite on the ground following the release of all the Israeli hostages and the halt of the shelling of the strip. However, continuous violations on the Israeli side and the precarious, unviable and imbalanced process and political and security conditions of the truce led to a revamp of the hostilities soon thereafter. The Middle East as a whole became yet again rife with conflicts and precarious political instability – ranging from renewed unrest in Syria following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime to Jordan's fragile situation due to the inflow of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fleeing the West Bank and placing a further burden onto already strained resources.[8] More dangerously, the long-awaited dialogue and rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran seemed to collapse. Re-surfacing tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE also paralysed regional initiatives for de-escalation. Finally, Qatar also found itself caught in the Israeli fire targeting Hamas.

Growing chaos and tensions in the Middle East also reverberated onto Europe and some NATO Allies in view of their proximity. After a short-lived downward trend along the Eastern Mediterranean route, irregular migration to Europe picked up again at the end of the following year as a result of the saturation of internal displacement in both Gaza and Syria/Lebanon.[9] The same applied to warnings of jihadi terrorist attacks in Europe, with the number of foiled plots in European cities, particularly in Germany, rising by 30 percent on a yearly basis. Last but not least, mounting concerns were

7 International Court of Justice, Summary of the Advisory Opinion of 19 July 2024, Case 186 – Legal Consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, https://www.icj-cij.org/node/204176.

8 Roman Haddad, "The Threat of Climate Change in Jordan," Carnegie Endowment, 27 April 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2023/04/the-threat-of-climate-change-in-jordan?lang=en and James M. Dorsey, "Jordan Struggles to Stay Out of the Middle East's Increasingly Precarious Fray," South Asia Journal, 12 September 2024, https://southasiajournal.net/jordan-struggles-to-stay-out-of-the-middle-easts-increasingly-precarious-fray/.

9 "ICMPD Migration Outlook 2025, Ten Migration Issues to Look Out For in 2025: Origins, Key Events and Priorities for Europe," https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/63373/file/ICMPD%2520Migration%2520Outlook%25202025.pdf.

expressed about Russian and Chinese malign activities in the Middle East, especially of hybrid nature, coupled with heightened tensions between some MENA partners, most significantly Jordan – where NATO opened its Liaison Office in September 2025 – and Egypt, on the one hand, and NATO, on the other, with the former accusing the latter of being paralysed when faced with grave violations of the rules-based order and major security risks.

The situation started to change, first gradually, then more decisively, in late 2026 as a result of both domestic, regional and international political developments. On the domestic front in Israel, Netanyahu was defeated by a newly created coalition of centre-left parties that came together to form a cohesive bloc.[10] In Palestine, upon the death of Mahmoud Abbas in June 2026 at the age of 90 and under pressure from Abu Dhabi, intense political activity led to the creation of a brand new Transitional National Palestinian Authority (TNPA), as a necessary step towards full international recognition of Palestine, negotiations and peace-making, as well as new elections.[11] At the regional level, regional powers including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Türkiye, Egypt and Jordan joined forces and used their combined diplomatic weight to advocate for an end to the conflict between Israel and Palestine.[12] Shaking off their long-standing hesitancy, these countries chose to give substance to their aspiration to "strategic autonomy,"[13] and went as far as to claim that they were prepared to protect Israel if it only recognized the Palestinian state.[14] Although this initiative did not bear fruit immediately, it led to a watershed in relations in the years 2028-2030.

The EU was able to enjoy greater room for manoeuvre in foreign policy, thus leading to a decisive push in its geopolitical role ahead of the 2029 European Parliament elections. In advancing its foreign policy ambitions, the EU found a good partner in NATO – within which European countries themselves acquired a much more robust role in security and defence matters – and in some countries belonging to what was formerly known as the "Global South" – most importantly South Africa – and now part of an active cooperative bloc made up of middle and small powers.[15]

Leadership changes proved once again to be a key factor in advancing the often touted but never seriously and constructively implemented peace agenda.[16]

10 Laura Silver, Maria Smerkovich, "How Israeli Society Has Unified, and Divided, in Wartime," Pew Research Center, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/06/pg_2024.06.20_israel-june-24_report.pdf.

11 Crisis Group, "The UAE, Israel and a Test of Influence," 14 June 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/united-arab-emirates-israelpalestine/uae-israel and Toi Staff, "UAE Vows it Won't Take Part in Gaza's 'day after' Without Palestinian State," *The Times of Israels*, 15 September 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/uae-vows-it-wont-take-part-in-gazas-day-after-without-palestinian-state/.

12 Financial Times, "Saudi Foreign Minister: A Two-State Solution Is More Urgent Than Ever," https://www.ft.com/content/06a1f31d-7cf9-4559-a7d4-8f0f19f2aced.

13 M. Nurullah Gulec Abdullah Yasir Atalan, "GCC's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy: Localizing Defense Industries," Al Sharq Strategic Research, 10 January 2023, https://research.sharqforum.org/2023/01/11/gccs-pursuit-of-strategic-autonomy-localizing-defense-industries/.

14 Jacob Magid, "Jordanian FM: Arab World Willing to Guarantee Israel's Security If Palestinian State Established," *The Times of Israel*, 30 September 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/jordanian-fm-arab-world-willing-to-guarantee-israels-security-if-palestinian-state-established/.

15 See Amitav Acharya, et al., "Multipolar or Multiplex? Interaction Capacity, Global Cooperation and World Order," in *International Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 6, November 2023, 2339-2365.

16 Carmela Lutmar and Lesley Terris, "Leadership Changes and Civil War Agreements: Exploring Preliminary Links. Peace Economics," in *Peace Science and Public Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2016), 439-448.

Research Division

NATO Defense College
Via Giorgio Pelosi 1
00143 Rome – Italy

www.ndc.nato.int
Follow us on
Twitter (@NATO_DefCollege)
Facebook (NATODefenseCollege)
LinkedIn (@nato-defense-college)

ISSN: 3006-5380 (print)
ISSN: 3006-5399 (online)