Austral: Brazilian Journal of Strategy & International Relations
e-ISSN 2238-6912 | v.10, n.19, Jan./Jun. 2021 | p.298-332

NERINT STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

Taliban and Foreign Interference in Afghanistan

Gabriela Ruchel[1]

The shocking scenes of thousands of citizens trying to leave Afghanistan through Kabul airport in the last months dominated the media. The collapse of the national government and the (re)take of power by the Taliban were preceded by the withdrawal of US troops after two decades of occupation in the country, leaving behind evidence not only of the costly human tragedy of the "War on Terror", but, above all, of its more than proven failure, whether in the political, economic or military sphere.

Discussions about the US withdrawal started during the administration of Barack Obama, whose questioning revolved around increasing the number of armed forces and completing objectives on Afghan soil or ending the war for good. Extended to Trump's republican administration, it was there that negotiations took place directly with the Taliban, initiated in 2018 and concluded with the signing of the Doha Agreement, in February 2020, in Qatar. The agreement did not have the participation of the Afghan government, one of the demands made by the Taliban. The negotiations provided a timetable for the departure of the United States, but there was, on the other hand, no safeguard that the North American demands would be met in the near future. The fact is that the recognition and political legitimacy, so emphasized by the mainstream media after the recent Taliban-China dialogue, was bestowed by Trump on the armed group long before he went to Beijing. Today, Biden just finishes, in a hurry, what was started more than a year ago.

In political and strategic terms, it is necessary to consider the contemporary demands that the situation may impose on the Taliban. Among them is the need to establish a dialogue with the other States, either with the objective of avoiding the isolation of the end of the 20th century, or to ensure the flow of foreign aid, a preponderant factor for the country's stabilization. In this context, another regional power play arises in Central Asia. With

1 Master's student in Political Science at IFCH/UFRGS. Graduated in International Relations from UFRGS. Assistant Researcher at NERINT/UFRGS, Brazil. E-mail: gabriela.ruchel@gmail.com.

a strong role played by China and Russia, followed by the other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, these countries are in favor of recognizing the new regime and establishing pragmatic relations. China has been carrying out major infrastructure works in Pakistan, Iran and other Asian nations, essentially linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or its New Silk Road, which places it in the position of main power on the Asian continent.

However, beyond the naive predictions of a new moderate Taliban, which now provides a more palatable discourse for external consumption, the truth is that the Afghan domestic reality will possibly follow the same guidelines of the late 1990s, period of the first coming to power by the group. This includes the imposition of Sharia, the Islamic law, on the entire population, with especially harmful effects for women.

As the title of one of the works by Colombian Gabriel García Márquez suggests, "Chronicle of a Death Foretold", it cannot be said that the result of external interference would be unpredictable in the Afghan case. A highly fragmented country, with local loyalty ties and historically the target of disputes due to its geostrategic position, what can be said is that Afghanistan has never had a centralized and cohesive national State. The country has always been susceptible to the setbacks of its own regional forces and the political interests of those who lead them. Furthermore, all his attempts at modernization were frustrated. From the secular monarchy of Mohammed Zahir Shah, through the period of "New Democracy" and the Republic in 1973, to the Marxist government of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1978.

In the latter's case, the interview given in 1998 by Brzezinski, former National Security Adviser to President Jimmy Carter, made clear the path followed. From the perspective of the Cold War, the objective was, according to him, "to give the Soviet Union its Vietnam". The conventional narrative of diffusion of democratic ideals falls apart when confronted with the reality of US support given to extremist militants with the intention of provoking Soviet intervention in 1979, which would radicalize the civil war. Support for the mujahideen, then called freedom fighters, began six months before the USSR intervened in the country, when Carter signed the first secret aid directive to opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. That same insurgency would be the basis for the Taliban, now considered a terrorist group, which would rule Afghanistan for the first time between 1996 and 2001, until being deposed by US forces.

After twenty years of conflict and with the Taliban once again taking control of Afghanistan, the failures of the western model and policies of State-building – the attempt to build nation-states from the outside in – are

clear. Especially when the State itself assumes forms of organization that are different from Western models, as it is and always has been the example of Afghanistan, but also in the cases of Iraq, Syria and Libya. The question remains whether the US withdrawal will generate chaos that will negatively affect China or give it the opportunity to create stability in Central Asia.

Kabul Syndrome: The New American Century and Old Geopolitics (2001-2021)

Paulo Fagundes Visentini[2]

Afghanistan equated Vietnam as a peripheral nation that has defeated three powers. In Vietnamese forests the French, Americans and Chinese were defeated, while in Afghan mountains and deserts the British, Soviets and Americans (with their NATO allies, Australia, New Zealand and others) were defeated. In the early morning hours of July 2nd 2021, American troops withdrew from Afghanistan, without previously communicating the regime they had implanted two decades earlier. The regime ended up falling on August 15th, with the entry of the Taliban in Kabul. And on September 11th, the terrorist attacks to the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington completed twenty years. Despite all the American presidents of the period (Bush, Obama, Trump and Biden) having signaled their desire to withdraw troops, everything happened in an unexpected and unusual way. The outcome of the United States' longest lost war, and the uncertainty that opens up in the region, unfortunately, did not give rise to strategic, prospective, objective or well-founded analysis. After all, what really happened and what are the future perspectives? It is, therefore, necessary to observe the short, medium and long term processes.

How the West politicized Islam against modernization

The Greater Middle East, of which Afghanistan is part, is a region poorly understood by the West. Ideological-cultural and geopolitical issues can only make sense within the socioeconomic evolution context and considering respective local and global power relations. After World War II, the contradiction between the local backwardness and the growing external connection of a region of vital geopolitical and energetic importance (oil)

2 Founder and Coordinator of the Brazilian Centre for Strategy & International Relations (NERINT), Brazil.

generated new forms of conflicts. There were republican, modernizing, secular and developmental revolutions, by political forces such as Nasserism (Egypt, North Yemen, Libya), Baathism (Syria, Iraq) and communism (South Yemen, Afghanistan). In addition, there were the Algerian and Iranian revolutions (religious but republican) and the Palestinian radicalization after the Six-Day War (1967).

In addition to the Anglo-Americans fearing the geopolitical impact of such a phenomenon, which implied the rupture of old alliances and dependencies, within the framework of the Cold War, Arab conservatives panicked. King Faruk of Egypt went into exile, King Fayçal of Iraq was slaughtered by mobs in the streets of Baghdad, and Emir Badr fled North Yemen. The Persian Gulf/Arab absolutist petromonarchies were the most concerned, as was the Kingdom of Jordan, which was vital to Israel's security. However, the country that felt most threatened was Saudi Arabia, an absolutist, patrimonial and theocratic monarchy, where Islam was vital to the regime's legitimacy and control of society. The King was guardian of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and established an institutionalized political alliance with the fundamentalist Wahhabi (Sunni) sect. These monarchies, sparsely populated and kept in archaic structures by a billionaire elite, feared the unrest of tens of millions of people in the Middle East. The divide between modernization versus conservatism in the Arab world overcame the preponderance of the conflict with Israel, which considered Arab modernization more threatening than the fragile monarchies, also allies of the West.

The Anglo-American and petromonarchy reaction was to use the religious sentiment of the more conservative population for political ends. To this goal, in 1962, the World Islamic Organization was founded in Mecca and, in 1973 (with the vast resources of petrodollars), the Islamic Development Bank, responsible for conservative financial diplomacy. In addition to supporting political groups and armed opposition organizations, there was the promotion of educational-religious policies (construction of Quranic Schools, the Madrasas), social assistance to the Islamic faithful and the hiring of workers and technicians from the Arab world to work in petromonarchies. All of this led to the formation of solid internationalized networks. The Socialist Revolution in Afghanistan, in 1978, and the Iranian Revolution, a year later, served as catalysts for the action of a kind of "Islamic-Sunni International". Even when the Iranian Revolution became Islamic-Shiite, it was republican, enemy of Anglo-Americans and especially of petromonarchies, disputing the Muslim narrative, as others were pro-Western and would have corrupted Islam. Finally, the decline of Nasserist Egypt allowed the Saudis to play the cards at the Arab League, using their financial and "religious" resources.

The First Afghan War: From Socialism to Theocracy (1978-2001)

The social instability of the Greater Middle East resulted from the erosion of traditional power structures in the face of the advance of urbanization and literacy, without any socioeconomic alternatives for the potential emergence of a modern middle class. This was the case with Afghanistan, an archaic but neutralist monarchy, which was the first state to recognize the Soviet Union (1919) and receive technical and economic support from it since 1924. A society based on clans, strongly isolated by the mountainous configuration of the country and, due to the absence of transport infrastructure, it constituted a kind of tribal confederation with a central government limited to the few urban centers. The attempt to modernize the monarchy only produced its downfall in 1973, but the problems only got worse during the government of President Daud (who was a Prince). In addition to its authoritarianism, the growing dependent alliance with the Shah's monarchy in Iran, and its interference in the country, along with the Pakistani projection of General Zia ul-Hak in the region, have exacerbated the crisis.

The small but dynamic People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA, Marxist, founded in 1965), was made up of civil servants, students (who could not find jobs after graduating), school teachers, union members, intellectuals and, last but not least, the military. Although the moderate faction of the PDPA (Parcham) collaborated with the government, it was excluded and, in early 1978, the party began to be persecuted and its leadership killed or imprisoned. Officials linked to the Khalk faction, in collaboration with civilian leaders, then attacked the palace and, after heavy fighting, the president was killed. It was the "Saur Revolution" (of April), which created a PDPA government, in alliance with some opposition groups. Although many soldiers had been trained in the USSR or by Soviet advisers, the coup was an internal reaction, as the arrests would reveal the soldiers linked to the PDPA, who would be purged. According to the specialized bibliography, the Soviet ambassador had only been warned of the improvised action a few hours before, and Moscow had been watching the events with apprehension.

The government was dominated by the Khalk faction (which wanted "Revolution now"), initiating land reform policies, nationalizations, compulsory education, emancipation of women and youth. Although it did not attack religion, rural regions reacted badly, for sociological reasons and because of the reckless and unprepared attitude with which public policies were implemented. The patriarchal family used young men for herding and planting work and women for domestic work, and felt "expropriated" of their power and labor. The agricultural situation demanded a multiple and gradual model, as the situation was different in each region. Over time, village or

religious leaders murdered "atheist" officials sent by Kabul, torched schools, beat women who attended them, and punished teachers.

The regime's reaction, where the military component was strong, was to react to violence with more violence, as is the logic of vendetta in clan societies. Soon, the gradualists of Parcham, more attentive to Soviet prudential advice, were being removed from important positions, while Pakistan (which had declared itself "Islamic"), began to guide and materially help the rebels and refugees. And the United States, through Pakistan and with its logistical support, began supporting the seven mujahidin (combatant) parties, counting on financial resources from the petromonarchies. In February 1979 the Shah of Iran was overthrown by the Revolution led by Khomeini and the situation got even more complicated. Finally, in the government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, Taraki was being supplanted by the most radical, Amin. Extremely concerned about the possibility of another Islamic regime taking root on the borders of the (culturally Muslim) Soviet republics, Moscow tried to support the declining Taraki, who was assassinated by Amin in September, upon returning from a meeting with Brezhnev.

The Soviets saw no alternative but to depose Amin and replace the moderate Karmal of Parcham and intervene to save the regime and rebuild the state, which was about to collapse. The decision to intervene was very difficult and by a narrow margin, as shown by the minutes of the Kremlin meetings, now available. On December 27th, the Soviet army entered the country, eliminating Amin. The American reaction, despite the narrative of outrage, was rather one of elation than one of apprehension, as the bear had come out of the woodwork and "now the Russians would have their Vietnam", according to Carter's advisers. China also began to support the guerrillas, both directly and via Pakistan, its ally. There was never an all-out war, as the Soviets and regime forces controlled the cities and highways, leaving the guerrillas at the far end of the country. The mujahidin were legitimized as "Freedom Fighters," according to Reagan, despite extreme cruelty to prisoners and school-going women. But the diplomatic, military, and financial cost was great, as counterinsurgency was not a Soviet specialty, and the suicidal rivalry between the Khalk and Parcham continued. Finally, Gorbachev insisted on a political solution and, in February 1989, the Soviets withdrew.

Afghanistan was to socialism what the Vendée was to the French Revolution: the poorest and most backward, which would benefit from modernization, but fought against it. However, to everyone's surprise, the regime held out alone for three years and did not fall until after the USSR did, in April 1992. The seven mujahidin groups then took over Kabul and started a fratricidal war, which destroyed the (until then intact) city and fragmented and razed Afghanistan, which was no longer among US priorities. Faced with

the prevailing chaos, Pakistani intelligence (Inter-Service Intelligence/ISI) prepared the Taliban, a militia of "religion students", orphans raised in the Madrasas of refugee camps, who entered the country in 1994 and conquered Kabul and 90% of the country in 1996. Finally, an order emerged, initially well received at home and abroad, because transnational corporations needed the new ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia to have access to the sea to export oil. But soon the Taliban showed the hard side of a theocracy, which revealed its sociocultural primitivism and alienation in the face of international reality and political complexity.

In its ranks were thousands of volunteers from Arab fundamentalists, Pakistanis and terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda. Bin Laden, its leader, came from a millionaire Saudi family, had fought the Soviets and began to preach a fight against the West, gaining audience when the US sent troops against the Iraqis in Kuwait: "they are occupying Islamic lands to steal oil", denounced at the time. After attacks in the region and in East Africa, came the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 in New York and Washington, marking the turn of the century and the millennium. The origins and intricacies of the plot still remain somewhat obscure, but it is undeniable that the powerful symbolic impact of the attacks shook, right at the beginning, the announced "New American Century" that would follow the end of the Cold War. A feeling of insecurity has gripped international society, especially in the North Atlantic world, after a decade of the optimistic panacea of the post-Cold War New World Order. The Taliban's refusal to hand over Bin Laden allowed the United States to gain broad international legitimacy to intervene in the country and launch the War on Terror.

The Second Afghan War: From Terrorism to "Democracy" (2001-2021)

American intervention to defeat the Taliban required the support of Pakistan (on which enormous pressure was exerted), the Northern Alliance mujahideen, and ground and air access through the ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia for their special forces. Spectacular missile and aviation bombardment against the Taliban militia was associated to the advancing Northern Alliance (fueled with new weapons), air support, and punctual special forces action. The Taliban, a militia, made the mistake of waging a conventional war and lost, but managed to disperse into remote regions and into the Pashtu populated region (the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan and the Taliban base) in Pakistan. The Bonn Conference sought to establish a new regime, reviving the Loya Jirga Tribal Council as an interim government,

which nominated a compromise candidate, Hamid Karzai (King Zahir, exiled in Italy, declined). Subsequently, elections were held, which confirmed Karzai in the presidency (until 2014) of a regime that the occupier molded as a liberal democracy, in a primitive and completely devastated country.

The deposed Taliban and Al-Qaeda fugitives tried to demonstrate that they still existed, in sporadic actions, but they could do very little. With the situation apparently under control and the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the US transferred troops to the new front. They made the mistake of fighting two wars simultaneously, as well as trying to promote nation-building in both. The economic, military and political-diplomatic cost proved unbearable in both cases. In Iraq, they put in power Shiites unable to stabilize the country and who, later, became allies of Iran, with the American exit. In Afghanistan, the corruption of the regime and the American tactical-strategic failures in the military field allowed the return of the Taliban insurgency and generated conflicts with Pakistan, when they tried to reach them in its territory ("Drone Wars").

To exemplify, the supply of military forces (which reached the figure of 140,000 soldiers in 2011) and civilians was basically done by truck convoys across Pakistan, being targets of attacks that caused huge losses and logistical disruptions. To such an extent that they had to request permission from Russia to cross their territory, disembarking in Riga or Vladivostok, covering more than 5,000 km. Another problem is that the aforementioned "surgical attacks" by NATO and allies killed as many civilians as the Taliban, increasingly turning the population against them and in favor of the insurgents. There were also several massacres of Afghan villagers, which undermined the strategy of "winning hearts and minds". While building the state and the Afghan National Army (training, equipment, and pay), the United States paid local chiefs not to cause trouble, and they accepted as long as they exercised local power. Thus, the emancipation of women remained restricted to large urban centers.

To complicate matters further, the government was extremely authoritarian, corrupt and incompetent, being virtually dominated by the Warlords of the Northern Alliance and characterized by internal struggles for power and resources. The Afghan army was molded in the image of the American, with tactical-strategic conceptions that were not suited to the country, whose people and culture had never been understood. Their numbers were artificially inflated to get US resources, much of which was siphoned off. It is worth watching the North American documentary "Turning Point" (Netflix), which shows the waste of resources by the Afghan State, NGOs, occupation forces and Reconstruction Brigades. Thus, soon the Taliban was no longer seen in the interior as the worst option, also because it protected

the cultivation of poppies for the production and export of opium and heroin (which the US was trying to eliminate), which allowed the survival of the peasants and the partial financing of the Taliban militia (see article by Maria Gabriela Vieira).

Conflicts have become increasingly harsh, with Western forces seeking to transfer the combat mission to the Afghan Army and begin a gradual retreat. The regime became the target of suicide attacks and ambushes, especially against the security forces, as well as national and foreign civil cooperators. NATO and allies had 7,500 dead (half of them were soldiers and the others hired by security companies, mercenaries), the Afghan army had 66,000 dead, the Taliban 51,000 and the civilian population 47,000, in addition to wounded and mutilated. As in the case of Iraq, traumatized American war veterans today pose a political-economic problem similar to those of the Vietnam War. Between $2 and $3 trillion USD were spent, according to Brown University. In 2001, seeking to achieve international legitimacy, the Taliban had practically eliminated the production of opium and heroin, but in 2021 the country was responsible for 80% of world production.

Over 20 years of conflict, two very different realities have emerged. A part of the population, especially the urban middle class, worked for NATO (translators, guides, advisors), Non-Governmental Organizations, United Nations and foreign companies, receiving in dollars, in addition to those employed by the State and government. Women in this segment, for example, enjoyed a status similar to that of the West, working, studying and, at least legally, having the same rights as men. The urban poor lived off small services for the elite and the squatters. But there were those who remained subordinate to traditional local pro-government chiefs in rural areas, excluded from economic benefits and legal rights, as, mainly, in the case of women. In addition to them, there were those who lived in areas gradually controlled by the Taliban. Poverty, oppression, war and violence were an incentive to migrate to the cities or abroad, especially those crossing Iran and Turkey on foot to try to enter the European Union as refugees. Living with the occupiers gave them a sense of Western prosperity, their way of thinking and migration policy, as well as at least a rudimentary knowledge of the language.

The "Neotaliban" in the face of the geopolitical dispute in Eurasia

In 2008 the Taliban had severed its ties with Al-Qaeda and in 2011 it was announced that an American Special Force had killed Bin Laden in Pakistan, throwing his ashes into the sea. Meanwhile, Ghani, Karzai's successor since 2014 through a deflated election, deepened the patrimonialist

behavior of the ruling elite, while the occupiers transferred more power and resources to them, preparing to withdraw. This situation spawned a fanciful perception and attitude among the urban elite and middle class: the belief that the United States was their ally and that they were part of the West. But meanwhile, the Trump administration established direct negotiations with the Taliban in 2018, without official government participation. Such contacts would result in the Doha Agreement, in February 2020, where, again without government participation, the American withdrawal and the vague promise of a coalition government by the Taliban and concrete one not to attack the American forces were agreed.

Before completing the 20th anniversary of September 11th, the US withdrew in the early hours of July 2nd, 2021, without even notifying the Afghan government and national army. Taliban members, mostly wearing flip-flops, moved forward quickly without encountering resistance, and on August 15th they occupied Kabul, triggering a rush to the airport, of mostly cadres working for the occupiers and the government. Obtaining US or European citizenship would be the salvation for this group, but their departure will undermine the country's economy, governance and modernity. The president apparently fled carrying government money, and the Americans abandoned large amounts of weapons and equipment. There have been comparisons of the situation with the fall of Saigon and the collapse of the socialist regime in 1992. But then the PDPA regime resisted for three years without Soviet support, because it existed before the intervention, while the regime based on Western democracy was built entirely from scratch by the US and its artificiality was obvious. The army's downfall, on the other hand, has a very simple explanation: the end of American financing and the abandonment of the regime by Washington. Why fight and die for a lost cause?

For many American strategists, the idea was to leave the Afghan problem to China's management, undermining the Belt and Road Initiative. But the Chinese were already negotiating with the Taliban (there was a public meeting in China a few weeks earlier) and the Pakistanis, allies of Beijing, were supporters of the Taliban. Russia and Central Asian countries, which also predicted the fall of the regime established by the West, also had contact with the Taliban, which tried to show itself "mature and moderate". China has promised investments and there are projects to build infrastructure and economic development. An immediate consequence was the elevation of Iran's status from Observer to Full Member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (OCX), which includes China, Russia, four Central Asian states and, since 2017, Pakistan and India. The objective is not to prevent the United States from penetrating Asia, but to ensure the stabilization of Afghanistan, which will not be a simple task.

Undoubtedly, the events reinforce the arguments about the American decline, but the US immediately reinforced actions for the maritime containment of China (UKUSA Agreement). And the sudden resurrection of the Islamic State (ISIS) against the Taliban deserves the attention of analysts. It is paradoxical that Afghanistan, a weak and primitive nation that has always resisted the great powers, continues to play a crucial role in geopolitics not only in Asia, but perhaps in the global balance, where the American-Chinese dispute becomes crucial. While scholars focus on analyzing the great vectors of postmodernity and its cutting-edge technology, actors who seem to be part of an outdated past are still capable of disturbing the Grand Strategy of the 21st century. And, finally, history and the Afghan case demonstrate that without socioeconomic development, conditions for the construction of democracy do not arise.

Opium Production, Livelihood, and Conflict: Where do Taliban Resources Came From?

Maria Gabriela Vieira[3]

Who finances the Taliban? Since the group took control of Afghanistan after 20 years, such questioning has been recurrent among those seeking to understand the current situation in the country. In addition to international remittances from countries like Saudi Arabia, the Taliban collects resources by taxing a large part of the industries that are in territories under their control, such as the mining and telecommunications industries. But it is in the illicit opium market that the Taliban finds its main source of funds. According to a 2020 report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)[4], Afghanistan was responsible for approximately 84% of the world's illicit opium production in recent years. This data allows us to measure the financial importance of taxing the production and trafficking of the substance for the group.

It was through the involvement of militants with international drug trafficking networks that the group was able to resume the armed struggle for control of the country from 2006 onwards. Participation in the illegal opium economy, however, is not exclusive to the Taliban. There is evidence

3 Master's student in International Relations from San Tiago Dantas Program at UNESP/ UNICAMP e PUC-SP. Graduated in International Relations from UFRGS, Brazil.

4 UNODC, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. 2020. World Drug Report 2020. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Vienne).

that other groups, such as the Northern Alliance (an Islamic political-military organization opposed to the Taliban), and even members of the Afghan government have been involved in the illicit activity. The connections between the illicit opium market and armed groups in conflict, however, did not emerge in the 2000s. Authors such as Cornell (2007)[5] explore the dynamics of illicit drug production and trade in countries (or regions) in conflict: generally speaking, the outbreak of an armed conflict does not give rise to the illicit drug market, but it quantitatively and qualitatively transforms an already existing crop.

Thus, in the case of Afghanistan, the illegal opium market that has existed since the early 1960s with the promulgation of the 1961 UN Single Convention on Drugs, until the Soviet intervention it was limited to meeting regional demands for the drug. The first expansion in the opium production in Afghanistan, inserted in the dynamics of the Cold War, took place during the Soviet occupation, with the active participation of the US Intelligence Agency, as detailed by Alfred McCoy (2003)[6]. US complicity in the production and trafficking of opium allowed the mujahideen groups to obtain the necessary resources to fight Soviet forces. As a result, the Afghan opium industry has come to meet global demands, especially from European markets.

During the period following the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, until the Taliban took control of the country for the first time in 1996, Afghanistan was gripped by the widespread violence of the civil war and opium production once again flourished, reaching the mark of 3,400 tons in 1994. Although the consumption of intoxicants is prohibited in Islam, poppy cultivation was not and, therefore, production continued to expand, achieving the position of largest illegal producer of opium in the world in 1998, with 4,500 tons produced the following year (UNODC 2005)[7]. When in power, the group opted, at first, to tax the opium trade; however, faced with the difficulty of obtaining international recognition of the regime's legitimacy, the Taliban promoted, in 2000, the most efficient ban on opium – the last effort, for Mansfield (2016)[8], in the search for legitimizing the regime. The US intervention after September 11th, 2001, and the ensuing armed conflict between NATO and Northern Alliance forces against Taliban forces enabled

5 Cornell, Svante E. 2007. "Narcotics and Armed Conflict: Interaction and Implications." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30 (3): 207-227. https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100601148449.

6 McCoy, Alfred W. 2003. *The Politics of Heroin:* CIA complicity in the Global Drug Trade. 2nd ed. Illinois: Chicago Review Press.

7 Mansfield, David. 2016. *A State Built on Sand:* How opium undermined Afghanistan. London; New York: Oxford University Press.

8 UNODC, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. 2005. *Afghanistan Opium Survey* 2005. United Nations (Vienna).

the resumption of production to pre-prohibition levels.

Even with the momentary withdrawal of the Taliban to Pakistan, the production of opium and its derivatives remained at around 4,000 tons a year. When, in 2006, the Taliban returned to Afghanistan and resumed the armed struggle against the troops of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), it became involved again with drug trafficking. According to Sufizada (2020)[9], the group charged a 10% tax on each of the links in the opium production chain. Between 2007 and 2009, the average annual production of opium was the equivalent of 7,600 tons, allowing the Taliban and other non-state political-military forces to benefit from the illicit resources. It became increasingly urgent for the intervention forces to stem the source of resources that allowed the insurgents to remain in the conflict.

Thus, if between 1980 and 1990 the illegal opium market was viewed with some tolerance by the US government, as of 2009, the eradication of poppy crops and the ban on people involved in drug production and trafficking became a central component of the Afghanistan strategy – namely, ensuring that the Taliban does not regain control of the already pacified provinces (Afghanistan Study Group 2010; Jalali 2016)[10]. According to data from the 2018 UNODC report on opium produced in Afghanistan, farmers reported paying US$29 million to non-state political-military forces, with the largest portion of this amount paid to the Taliban. It is true that opium production and trafficking contributed to the continuation of the armed conflict, making the connection between illicit activities and insecurity explicit. However, observing such activity only as a source of resources for financing the conflict hides the social and political complexity in which opium is inserted.

The deterioration of the economy in Afghanistan, a direct consequence of more than four decades of conflict, has led the Afghan population to resort to poppy cultivation for the production of opium and its sale on the illicit market as a way to guarantee their livelihood. In the 2019 UNODC[11] report it is pointed out that that year more than 190,000 workers were directly

9 Sufizada, Hanif. 2020. "The Taliban are megarich – here's where they get the money they use to wage war in Afghanistan." *The Conversation*. Acesso em: 05 set. http://theconversation.com/the-taliban-are-megarich-heres-where-they-get-the-money-they-use-to-wage-war-in-afghanistan-147411.

10 UNODC, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. 2019. *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2018:* Challenges to sustainable development, peace, and security. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Vienne).

11 Afghanistan Study Group. 2010. A new way forward: Rethinking US Strategy in Afghanistan and Jalali, Ali Ahmad. 2016. *Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces:* Mission, challenges, and sustainability. United States Institute of Peace (Washington D.C.). https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW115-Afghanistan-National-Defense-and-Security-Forces-Mission-Challenges-and-Sustainability.pdf.

employed in planting and harvesting poppies and that the resources obtained were responsible for 44% of farmers' income. Jonathan Goodhand (2005)[12] proposes that the analysis of the production and trafficking of opium in Afghanistan be made from the intersection of the conflict economy, responsible for maintaining the armed struggle; the economy of illicit activities, that is, drug and arms trafficking; and the cooping economy, related to the income of individuals involved in poppy cultivation. This interpretation implies that the elaboration of policies aimed at confronting one of the economies considers the impacts on the other two.

The Taliban, in this context, benefited from involvement in the production and trafficking of opium; Financially it can get the resources needed to finance jihad against the US and politically it can weaken Karzai's government by offering protection against the eradication and combat efforts. Now, however, the militants' goal is to turn Afghanistan into a drug-free country. The announcement was made at a press conference by Zabihullah Mujahid days after the takeover of Kabul. In the statement, the Taliban spokesman admits that international collaboration will be necessary for the opium ban to succeed (CNN 2021)[13].

Even if the group now has access to the country's legal resources, the general situation of the Afghan economy must be considered, which is based on agricultural activity and highly dependent on international currency (75% of public spending is financed by foreign donations). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the opium economy represents between 8% and 11% of Afghanistan's GDP. In this scenario, the prohibition of opium without economic alternatives that account for the amount generated in the illicit market and without the support of international powers, it seems, will not be sustainable for the Taliban regime.

12 Goodhand, Jonathan. 2005. "Frontiers and Wars: the Opium Economy in Afghanistan." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 5 (2): 191-216. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0366.2005.00099.x

13 CNN. 2021. "Porta-voz do Talibã diz que 'Afeganistão será livre de drogas'". Access on Set 06. 2021.https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/internacional/porta-voz-do-taliba-diz-que-afeganistao-sera-livre-de-drogas/.

AUKUS and Iran's entry into SCO: Asia closer to war or stability?[14]

José Miguel Quedi Martins[15]
João Gabriel Burmann da Costa[16]

This article deals with three relevant events for analyzing the international situation and understanding Asian International Relations. These are: (1) the creation of AUKUS; (2) Iran's entry into SCO; (3) the existence of a confidence channel between the US and China – operated by General Mark Milley and his Chinese counterpart, General Li Zuocheng. Despite the intrinsic value of each of these events, the main purpose of bringing them together is to allow an analysis of the international polarization.

Preliminarily, it should be clarified that AUKUS is a military alliance formed by the USA, UK and Australia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), initially formed to de-limit borders, ended up being a regional governance forum for issues related to security and infrastructure integration. Finally, confidence channels are contacts established between senior officials to exchange sensitive information without legal or formal authorization from their superiors – the term was popularized by Anatoly Dobrynin, Soviet ambassador to the US, to describe this type of exchange maintained with Advisors of National Security or US Secretaries of State[17].

The creation of AUKUS – The question that arises is what changes? After all, these countries were already united by security ties for a long time. It is worth mentioning: (i) The ANZUS Treaty, signed in 1951, as a collective defense agreement in the context of the Cold War. It brought together Australia, New Zealand and the United States. (ii) And the UKUSA, an intelligence cooperation agreement also known as the Five Eyes, originally signed between the United Kingdom and the USA (1946). And which ended up incorporating other Commonwealth countries, namely: Canada (1948), Australia and New Zealand (1956). It is, therefore, 70 years of regular, permanent and institutional cooperation involving the signatories of the current AUKUS. Here we must

14 The authors are grateful for Igor Estima Sardo, bachelor in International Relations, for his help in translating this article into English

15 Professor of International Relations from DERI/UFRGS and PPGEEI/UFRGS at Universidade Federal do io Grande do Su, Brazil.

16 PhD student from PPGEEI/UFRGS and Professor at Centro Universitário Ritter dos Reis (UniRitter), Brazil.

17 Dobrynin, Anatoly. 1988. En Confianza: *El embajador de Moscú ante los seis presidentes norteamericanos de la Guerra Fría (1962-1986)*. México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica,1988.

return to the question: what's new?

The answer can be found in the amount of investment and the new capacities planned for Australia. In this year's US budget, $280 billion has been earmarked to "contain" China. Naturally, the figure covers several agencies and the forecast of assistance to a countless number of countries, among which Australia is included as one more. Even so, the amount – almost a trillion dollars –, greater than the GDP of a considerable number of countries, serves to form an idea of the scale of the effort in global terms.

As far as Australia is concerned, only the business involving the construction of nuclear-powered submarines – an agreement originally signed with France in 2015 – jumped from an amount of to 43 to 66 billion dollars[18]. To honor its commitments, the Australian Parliament passed a law providing for the mandatory allocation of $1.5 billion annually for military acquisitions and modernization.

At first glance it seems to be just another big defense contract – were that the case, still, given its value, it would deserve a place in history. But, it's not just about that. After all, Australia has a profile characterized by the export of primary products and raw materials. With the ban on the Chinese market, the impact will be felt throughout Australian society. The idea seems to be to promote accelerated industrialization, and to replace low-paid and skilled jobs, related to agriculture and the mining sector, by high-paid, skilled jobs, promoting a high degree of social division of labor. Apparently, it is expected that this new middle class, although not very expressive from a numerical point of view, will serve as a basis for sustaining an anti-China sentiment. And, in the name of "nationalism" and the "defence of freedom", manage to convince, intimidate or even coerce those harmed with the diplomatic and economic realignment.

To get an idea of the depth of intended change, one has to bear in mind the vision of the broader "package" of military spending. Nuclear-powered submarines are just one more among the various businesses related to Defense – which, in addition to acquisitions, also involves costing items. It is worth mentioning: (i) The operation of the Helicopter Dock Ships[19]. (ii) The acquisition (with partial local production) of fifth-generation F-35 Lightning II fighter jets, worth $11.5 billion. For now, the country has purchased only the A version, but this type of contract involves additional terms, and it may purchase the B version, with vertical take-off, to equip these dock ships. This

18 Fowdy, Tom. 2021. "The stunning betrayal of France by America over nuclear subs for Australia signals a huge geopolitical shift in US strategy". *RT*. 16 setembro, 2021. https://www.rt.com/op-ed/534991-geopolitical-shift-france-us-australia/. Access on Nov 09. 2021.

19 LHD – *Landing Helicopter Dock*.

idea had been raised when the Defense White Paper was drafted in 2015, but was declined to keep the amphibious assault capability intact, since the operation of on-board fixed-wing aircraft would involve the modification of decks used for cargo personnel and equipment. Even so, the possibility of these modifications being carried out in the future to operate with US or UK F-35Bs remains open. In this hypothesis, endowing Australian LHDs with equivalent value to a conventional aircraft carrier. Similarly, the capabilities held by the US Navy (Wasp and America class) when operating with its LHA[20]. (iii) Acquisition of the F/A-18E SuperHornet and EA-18G Growler, valued at USD 9 billion. (iv) Acquisition of the F/A-18E SuperHornet and EA-18G Growler, valued at USD 9 billion. (v) The acquisition of all-terrain utility vehicles, which provide motor-mechanization components for the Ground Forces; (vi) The acquisition of Loyal Wingman drones worth 115 million dollars. (vii) And most importantly, the acquisition and development of hypersonic cruise missiles.

It is therefore a question of converting Australia not just into a mere US or UK beachhead. But in an authentic industrial hub, producer of high technology, with the capacity to export materials for military use to ASEAN countries and India itself. With this, it is expected to compensate, at least partially, the loss of the Chinese market, making the movement sustainable. Given the characteristics of Australian society, which it is not worth discussing at the moment, it is plausible to believe that the movement will be successful. It matters little that it produces more miserable people than the middle classes. The overall result appears to be viable: Australia should not include the list of countries threatened by upheaval or social chaos.

Capabilities also matter. Nuclear-powered submarines, despite not carrying nuclear weapons, will be able to deliver cruise missiles. These, in turn, able to destroy targets on land. Currently the US Navy operates Tomahawk missiles either on its SSBN[21] (modified Ohio class) or their SSCN [22] (Los Angeles, Seawolf and Virginia classes). Like all cruise missiles, the Tomahawk is subsonic and therefore vulnerable to interception by anti-aircraft defenses when adequate radar coverage is available – the case in China. However, the local development of hypersonic missiles makes credible interdiction attacks, carried out in depth against high-value targets (economic or military) in mainland China. More than that, it makes plausible the deniability of a direct involvement of the US – which have not yet commissioned its hypersonic missiles – making Australia a wild card, which can be launched against China

20 LHA – *Landing Helicopter Assault*.

21 SSBN – Nuclear-powered Ballistic Missile Submarine.

22 SSCN – Nuclear-powered Cruise Missile Submarine.

in retaliation for an eventual forced unification of Taiwan.

However, the most obvious is that all maritime trade and China's maritime lines of communication will become vulnerable. Merchant traffic matters here. China is certainly capable of efficiently and competently moving merchants into its strategic environment. But the high degree of autonomy provided by the nuclear propulsion of Australian submarines will allow the interdiction of Chinese maritime traffic at any point. In this way, it will endow Australia not only with deterrent capacity, but also with some degree of intimidation of China. So, what's new in AUKUS are the new capabilities and the degree of strategic autonomy that is intended to be delegated to Australia.

But, contradictorily, the AUKUS brings with it stabilizing elements. The first is contained in the treaty's name: it limits the anti-China alliance, originally envisioned to encompass all US allies in Asia – even Bangladesh was invited – to three countries, only two of which are genuinely from the Pacific (US and Australia). More than that, the existence of the treaty – which should correspond to some type of organization, whether intergovernmental or supranational – will serve for the US to monitor the movements of the United Kingdom in Asia. Thus, acquiring veto power to initiatives that the US deems more risky or destabilizing – such as the Hong Kong's "Colour Revolution". Furthermore, it keeps France and Germany out of the Pacific. The first, clearly had already profiled itself to join the "NATO of Asia", and now finds itself doubly barred: it lost the deal with Australia, and found itself excluded from the range of military alliances in the Pacific.

There is an additional element, without which nothing can be gauged beyond the immediate appearance: the role of military competition. It lends itself to explaining the paradoxically stabilizing effect of AUKUS. It is about the understanding that the substitute for war (substitute good or succedaneum) is not peace, but military competition. The AUKUS will force China to invest more in Defense, which – due to the "security dilemma"[23] – will horizontally elevate the region's capabilities. Making the deterrence of each of the Units more effective and, thus, the war more costly and reckless. Thus, the net result seems to be closer to strategic stability than to the possibility of conflagration itself – although the latter can never be ruled out.

AUKUS indicates that the US does not intend to wage a Cold War against China on the same terms as that against the USSR. On the contrary, if on the one hand it indicates a clear intention to limit China's movements, on the other hand it signals that this will not be done at any cost. And, most importantly, it presents a credible and sustainable alternative to direct military

23 Herz, John. 1950. "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma". *World Politics 2,* no. 2 (jan. 1950): 157-180. https://doi.org/10.2307/2009187

confrontation. It uses Australia as a proxy, which has an additional benefit. This time it will be the UK and Australia who will pay for the bill. It will be the Commonwealth countries that will "export" jobs and taxes, which will be used for the reindustrialization of the USA. This is an inversion, from the times of unipolari-ty and unilateralism, when, to maintain the Qualitative Military Edge (QME)[24] and the high-tech demands of the "stealth" fleet in the air and at sea, the US saw itself forced to import high-tech elements from the Commonwealth.

Iran's entry into SCO – this is an event that, in polarization, has a functionality similar to that of the AUKUS. Apparently, it seems to be an attempt to "interdict" Asia from the US presence. The image grows stronger if compared to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. In the imagination of some it appears a Moscow-Tehran-Beijing Axis, united and cohesive to act against US interests. The problem with this kind of perception is that the US is more important to each of them individually than the alliance as a whole can offer. In short, this is not an insurmountable front, but arrangements that, ultimately, aim to increase bargaining power with the Americans.

Additionally, by hindering direct military action against the Persian country, it strengthens the US willingness to re-enter the Nuclear Agreement with Iran (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action - JCPOA). This is done by reducing the veto power of Israel, whose bargaining element lies precisely in threatening the US to take direct military action against Iran. At the same time, by inserting Iran into a shared security mechanism, Russia and China acquire some veto power over the foreign and security policy of the ayatollahs. Together, these two elements help the willingness of the new Israeli cabinet, Naftali Bennett, to reduce the pressure against the rapprochement between the US and Iran setting up a rigid framework of alliances, such as that which preceded World War I, in its final outcome paves the way for strategic stability.

Confidence Channel – Finally, the element without which every picture is inconclusive: the channel of confidence between the US and Chinese military. Whatever the personal goals, or internal policy, involving the disclosure of the fact[25] the unmistakable truth remains: there is a channel

24 Qualitative Military Edge (QME) – Originally associated with Second Offset Strategy. It is an idea that the US took from the Israeli war experience in the Middle East. About this, see Friedman, Marcela F. 2016. A doutrina da Vantagem Militar Qualitativa (VMQ) e as relações entre Israel e os Estados Unidos. 104 f. TCC (Graduação) - Curso de Relações Internacionais, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. https://lume.ufrgs.br/handle/10183/166152. Access on Nov 09. 2021.

25 Motivations to Publicize the Confidence Channel – There are those who say that Gen. Mark Milley only wanted to preserve his position after the setbacks surrounding the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Others assert that it is Biden's move to weaken Trump with the military and make him ineligible – with the accusation that he intended to unleash a nuclear war. In

of confidence between Chinese and American seniors to prevent an accidental confrontation or to regulate the escalation, should it break out[26]. Given that these are military-to-military contacts, there seem to be more confidence-building measures between China and the US these days than what was seen between the USSR and the US during the Cold War.

How does this relate to the preceding themes? First, they emphasize that the US is more important to China than Russia and Iran. On the other hand, China is also more important to the US than Germany, France or England. After all, if General Mark Milley was willing to warn the Chinese if President Trump were willing to carry out a nuclear strike, it is even more reasonable to assume that the US will warn China of any reckless action by England or from Australia.

Thus, it is clear that the Americans do not seem willing to undertake any kind of adventure involving the "containment" of China. In fact, since the announcement of the pivot for Asia in 2011 there was no benchmark to gauge the extent to which the US willingness to carry out such a policy was going. For the first time, there is an indicator that, despite the resounding rhetoric and the often irresponsible denunciations, there is no willingness to go as far as possible. Thus, although the central war is still within the threshold of the horizon, the transition to strategic stability seems to be more likely.

What is left for Brazil? The perception that the "existence of western civilization" is not at stake. And that, therefore, opens a period of intense competition between the Great Powers, in which Brazil can exercise diplomatic and pragmatic bargains[27] in order to achieve its own national policy objectives – fundamentally, reindustrialization.

Will Negotiations in the Korean Peninsula Lose Momentum?

Luana Margarete Geiger[28]

After recent speculations about his health status, Kim Jong-Un once again draw attention of the international community in 2021, marking his 10th

systemic terms, the motivation does not matter, it is necessary to analyze the consequences.

26 Chappel, Bill. 2021. "Gen. Milley Defends His Call To A Chinese General About Trump's Rhetoric And The U.S." *NPR.org*. 15 setembro, 2021. https://www.npr.org/2021/09/15/1037454733/milley-defends-call-to-chinese-general-about-trump. Access on Nov 09. 2021.

27 Visentini, Paulo G. F. 1995. *Relações Internacionais e Desenvolvimento*. Petrópolis: Vozes. pp. 33; 63.

28 Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (PPGCP-UFRGS), Brazil. E-mail: luanageiger0@gmail.com

year in power with the resumption of military weapons tests, participating in celebrations and parades in Pyongyang and reaffirming a dynamic, active and healthier-looking personal image. The September 9th parade, held around midnight, marked the 73rd anniversary of the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and featured paratroopers, aircraft overflights, as well as medium-sized weapons and soldiers wearing hazmat suits and gas masks – probably to demonstrate the announced success in the fight against the covid-19 pandemic, since the country has not reported any cases of infection to the World Health Organization (WHO) yet. Also in September, both Koreas conducted ballistic missile tests, in addition to North Korean cruise missiles and a hypersonic missile tests.

North Korea maintains the gradual development of its weapons system amid the stalled negotiations with the United States regarding stabilization in the peninsula. The rounds of dialogue, initiated by former president Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un in 2018, made no progress since 2019 (Shin; Smith 2021)[29]. Negotiations around, mainly, the North Korean nuclear program, happen recurrently, but hardly advance in a significant way. Among the reasons for this is the centrality of the nuclear program for the North Korean regime – reason why the country has not seriously considered the concessions so far offered in exchange for its dismantling –, in addition to the low practical effectiveness of international sanctions in this case.

South Korean President Moon Jae-In, who has committed his administration to the pursue of reconciliation between the Koreas since he came to power in 2017, once again signaled his willingness to encourage and facilitate the execution of cooperation projects with the North. South Korea has an important role in the negotiation processes involving the North, as well as great interest in the stability of the peninsula. Seoul is responsible, on many occasions, for pushing for dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang. During his tenure, Moon held three inter-Korean summits and helped organize the historic first summit between North Korea and the United States in 2018. After the second Trump-Kim summit, however, negotiations stalled, obtaining – again – minimal results.

During his speech at the UN General Assembly in September, Moon proposed the adoption of a declaration to formally end the Korean War (1950-1953) (The Korea Herald 2021)[30] which, to this day, has only obtained an armistice, without the signing of a Peace Treaty. The change in tone is related

29 Shin, Hyonhee; Smith, Josh. 2021. "North and South Korea conduct missile tests as arms race heats up. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/nkorea-fired-unidentified-projectile-yonhap-citing-skorea-military-2021-09-15/.

30 The Korea Herald. 2021. "Moon calls for co-prosperity with N. Korea after restoration of cross-border hotlines". http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20211005000782.

to the political calendar in Seoul, which elects a new president in March 2022, exhausting Moon's possibility of leaving a legacy of more consistent inter-Korean engagement. Having invested important efforts of its administration on the normalization of the peninsula, there is hurry in the sense of managing to implement some kind of approximation before the end of his term. Thus, it is speculated that the Winter Olympics to be held in February 2022 in Beijing could be the background for a last attempt at engagement (Herskovitz 2021)[31].

North Korea sees the upcoming elections as a chance to gain concessions from the South, as well as help in terms of putting pressure on the United States to offer concrete incentives to the country (Kelly 2021)[32]. The recent tests of military devices, in addition to being an essential part of the development of defense capabilities, are also part of a strategy historically used by Pyongyang to remain relevant on the international agenda and draw attention to the need to resume negotiations, increasing its bargain power.

Originating in the decades following the Korean War, North Korea's nuclear and missile development projects maintains its gradual advance and are a central part of the country's survival strategy. Considering that the dialogue restarted in 2018, after a period of significant development of North Korean nuclear and missile programs – especially in 2016 and 2017 –, it can be presumed that tensions will continue to increase until another gap for dialogue is opened. The tests also represent a response to military exercises carried out jointly by the United States and South Korea, which are seen as acts of hostility in Pyongyang (Pereira; Geiger 2017)[33].

Based on Byungjin policy since 2013, the country pursues the parallel development of the economy and its nuclear program. Due to the pandemic, the suspension of a considerable part of the exchange with China, carried out across the land border between the cities of Dadong (China) and Sinuiju (North Korea) – added to international sanctions and climate problems – the economic advances projected for the period between 2016 and 2021 have not been reached, as stated by Kim Jong-Un at the 8th Party Congress in January 2021. In the same speech, Kim Jong-Un reiterated the need to reinforce self-sufficiency, a concept expressed in the policy that governs the country since

31 Herskovitz, Jon. 2021. "North Korea trades scorn for flattery to win benefits from Moon". *The Japan Times*. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/10/05/asia-pacific/north-korea-moon-approach/.

32 Kelly, Robert E. 2021. "One More Korean Summit Before Moon Jae-In's Term Ends?". *National Interest*. https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/one-more-korean-summit-moon-jae-%E2%80%99s-term-ends-194902.

33 Pereira, Analúcia D.; Geiger, Luana M. 2017. A Coreia do Norte e o Dilema Securitário do Leste Asiático. *Boletim de Conjuntura NERINT*. p. 9-18. https://www.academia.edu/43409594/A_Coreia_do_Norte_e_o_Dilema_Securit%C3%A1rio_do_Leste_Asi%C3%A1tico.

its founding in 1948, Juche. Since coming to power in 2011, the population's standard of living has been raised with the proliferation of markets and the availability of consumer goods (Smith 2021)[34], investment has also been made in modern and futuristic works, such as the planned city of Samjiyon, in the North of the country (BBC 2019)[35]. The poor economic performance comes after a phase of growth in North Korean GDP, which grew by 3.9% in 2016, despite sanctions (Kim; Chung 2017)[36].

Sanctions imposed by the United Nations (UN) have not compromised the country's survival because its economy is not globalized (Visentini; Pereira; Melchiona 2015)[37], in addition to not impeding the development of its nuclear program – noting that important advances have been made during periods of famine and extreme economic hardship (Lankov 2016)[38]. Considering the low practical effectiveness of sanctions in curbing nuclear and missile advances, Pyongyang's bargain in the face of negotiations with Washington is growing.

The images transmitted abroad by the North Korean regime are usually calculated and loaded with symbolic value. After departing from public activities for some periods of time in 2020 and 2021, Kim Jong-Un returns to attending large events looking thinner and wearing light-toned, Western-style suits – with different cuts than the Maoist-inspired tunics. In addition to the idea of a mature, energetic and charismatic leader who resembles his grandfather Kim Il-Sung, the clothing choice seeks to emphasize the image of a leader willing to negotiate, as well as a modern and connected North Korea, in oposition to the notion of a "hermit" often associated with the country in the West.

Despite the increased intensity in military testing, Pyongyang is still complying with its moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile testing established in 2018 - thus keeping the diplomatic track officially open. The absence of a clear and detailed policy towards North Korea from the Biden administration, however, worries both Koreas. The North Koreans are left with following the handbook on hot and cold politics as a way of pressing for

34 Smith, Josh. 2021. "Kim Jong Un's big plan to grow North Korea's economy faces harsh reality". *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-politics-analysis-idUSKBN29F04T.

35 BBC. 2019. "North Korea unveils town hailed as 'epitome of civilization'". https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50640033.

36 Kim, Christine; Chung, Jane. 2017. "North Korea 2016 economic growth at 17-year high despite sanctions: South Korea". *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-economy-gdp-idUSKBN1A607Z.

37 Visentini, Paulo F.; Pereira, Analúcia D.; Melchionna, Helena H. 2015. *A Revolução Coreana: o desconhecido socialismo Zuche*. São Paulo: Editora Unesp.

38 Lankov, Andrei. 2016. "North Korea has Nothing to Lose". *Aljazeera*. https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2016/3/8/now-north-korea-has-nothing-to-lose.

a definition to the Washington-Pyongyang relationship agenda – especially in the face of increased competition with Beijing – in order to overcome the vague official posture of "open to dialogue" from the White House and obtain concrete offers that will last beyond Moon's term in South Korea. It is important to note that, in case of a conservative and anti-China victory in South Korea, Biden will no longer feel forced to accommodate Moon's engagement policies as a way to secure South Korean support for US initiatives in the Indo-Pacific (Khang 2021)[39], diminishing negotiation prospects.

Kim Jong-Un's media appearances and Moon Jae-In's diplomatic nods indicate both Koreas' intention to not risk losing momentum and to draw attention to the importance of returning to the negotiating table, especially considering the transitions of power to presidents who are less willing to prioritize engagement with Pyongyang in the United States and, possibly, in South Korea. The rush on Pyongyang's part is also tied to the need of obtaining immediate concessions, as the country faces climate and energy problems, while a winter of upcoming food shortages approaches. Once again, the effective advancement of new attempts at dialogue depends on concessions that go beyond diplomatic rhetoric or vague expectations of a unilateral denuclearization of North Korea.

Uzbekistan and Its Thirty Years Later: Ruptures or Continuities?[40]

Guilherme Geremias da Conceição[41]

Located in the heart of Central Asia, Uzbekistan is the only Central Asian state that shares borders with all other countries in the region, namely Kazakhstan (north), Kyrgyzstan (east), Tajikistan (southeast), Turkmenistan (southwest) and Afghanistan (south). Despite having a small territory, the country has the largest population in Central Asia (with Uzbek ethnic groups also present in the neighboring territories) and, since its independence, it has developed the most professional military force of the region. Even not directly

39 Khang, Vu. 2021. "With Biden's lukewarm diplomacy, North Korea runs hot and cold". *Lowy Institute*. https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/biden-s-lukewarm-diplomacy-north-korea-runs-hot-and-cold.

40 The author is grateful for Professor Paulo Fagundes Visentini guidance and João Pedro Mascarello Funck qualified revision and translation of this fragment.

41 Undergraduate from the last semester of International Relations at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). Member of the Brazilian Center of African Studies (CEBRAFRICA) and of the Brazilian Centre of Strategy and International Relations (NERINT), Brazil.

accessing the seas, we can consider that the "isolationist" character generally attributed to Uzbekistan is actually misleading, as this country is responsible for bringing together all the historical, cultural and political centers of Central Asia. Aside from Tashkent, ancient Silk Road itineraries like Bukhara and Samarkand in the south, Khiva in the West and Khoqand in the East were once capitals of great empires of the past. These characteristics, added to the important regional role of host of Islamic doctrine, of heir to the Central Asian sedentary trajectory and the status of "bridge" between West and East, made Uzbekistan perceive itself as a regional power strongly committed to its national sovereignty.

There are a total of five political parties officially accepted in the country They are the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (O'zXDP)[42], the Justice Social Democratic Party/Adolat (ASDP)[43], Uzbekistan Liberal Democratic Party (O'zLiDeP)[44], Uzbekistan National Revival Democratic Party/Milliy

42 The O'zXDP was one of the first contemporary political organizations in the country, being founded by the former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan and former President, Islam Karimov, after independence in 1991. On the national political spectrum it can be said that the party occupies the left position, in addition to being the second largest party in terms of number of seats in Parliament (Oliy Majlis) and an opposition to the governing bloc in the Legislative Chamber. The O'zXDP defends the consolidation of the State as a robust authority, which guarantees the protection of the most vulnerable strata of society and the development of a regulated and socially oriented market economy.

43 The Justice Social Democratic Party Adolat, which defines itself as a center-left movement, acts in the Oliy Majlis similarly to the O'zXDP as an organized opposition. The party, also founded in the context of independence, defends the creation of a welfare state for all, the consolidation of the principles of freedom and equality and the strengthening of judicial transparency in the country.

44 O'zLiDeP, also created by Karimov after his departure from the O'zXDP, has been the ruling party since 2007, and can be considered a center-right political organization. The priorities of the party, which represents the largest caucus on the Oliy Majlis, include the diversification of the economy, the simplification of procedures and the reduction of prices in the registration of business entities and in customs clearance.

Tiklanish (O'zMTDP)[45] and the Ecological Party of Uzbekistan (O'zEP)[46] [47]. In the 2021 general elections, held at the end of October, the current president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev (O'zLiDeP), secured re-election with 80.31% of the registered votes. The candidates competing against the representative were Maksuda Vorisova (O'zXDP, 6.65%), Alisher Kadyrov (O'zMTDP, 5.49%), Narzullo Oblomuradov (O'zEP, 4.15%) and Bakhrom Abdukhalimov (ASDP, 3.40%). It is estimated that around 20 million voters participated in what was the sixth presidential election held since the country's independence from the USSR[48], in August 1991[49].

Even though allegations of fraud have never gone beyond the aspect of political rhetoric, Uzbekistan's electoral processes are constantly viewed with some suspicion by Western media and organizations[50]. Although for some

45 The O'zMTDP is classified as a right-wing conservative movement. The party, founded in 1995 and whose number of seats in the Legislative Chamber is the second highest, pays special attention to the issue of the Uzbek nationalist renaissance and the strengthening of national identity. In the sociopolitical sphere, it is intended for the preservation and development of the State and public life historically shaped according to the country's moral and family traditions. The Milliy Tiklanish Democratic Party and O'zLiDeP form the Democratic Forces Bloc in the Uzbek parliament.

46 The young Ecologist Party, formed in 2008, but operating in the country since 2019, distinguishes itself from the rest by emphasizing mainly environmental issues and the wider use of renewable energy sources in production. The party recently obtained new seats in the Legislative Chamber.

47 The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Nations. 2016. "What ideas do political parties advance?" Available at: https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/fr/news/what-ideas-do-political-parties-advance. Access in Nov 11. 2021.

48 Aljazeera. 2021. "Uzbek president secures second term in landslide election victory". Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/25/uzbek-president-secures-second-term-in-landslide-election-victory. Access in Oct 25. 2021.

49 The first Uzbek presidential elections took place in 1991, when Muhammad Solih, the leader of the Democratic Party/Erk (EDP), lost the race to former Soviet leader Karimov, then president of the O'zXDP, by 12.7% to 87.1% of the votes respectively. The second presidential race, in 2000, also had only two candidates, Karimov (independent) and Abdulkhafiz Jalolov (O'zXDP), with Karimov winning reelection with a percentage of 95.7%. Karimov (O'zLiDeP), who had constitutionally extended his term, won again in 2007, this time against opponent Asliddin Rustamov (O'zXDP), with 90.7% of the votes, and, in 2015, he won in the fourth election against presidential candidate Akmal Saidov (O'zMTDP), with a similar percentage. After being victimized by a cerebrovascular accident (CVA) in 2016, Karimov was succeeded by the country's former Prime Minister Mirziyoyev (O'zLiDeP), later elected to the post with a 90% approval rating in that year's emergency elections.

50 After the 2007 presidential elections, a law established restrictions on party registration, which ended up making not viable the recent presidential candidacies of Jahongir Otajonov (EDP), Khidirnazar Allakulov (Truth and Progress Social Democratic Party/Hakikat va Tarakkiyot - HTSDP) and Mahmud Yuldashev unfeasible (Halq Manfaatlari Party), leaders of independent organizations not recognized by the Electoral Court. On the other hand, the

analysts there is no significant ideological difference between the country's parties to the point of making them "effective oppositions"[51], we must take into account the national political particularities. The fact that Oz'XDP, for example, continued to support some initiatives of former President Islam Karimov (after his departure from the organization), mainly those related to the recrudescence of the State in the social life of the country, does not automatically place it in a position of ally. On the contrary, it reaffirms the impact that temporary political alignments have on the decision-making process. Furthermore, in general, all parties consider Uzbekistan's economic independence to be a priority on their agendas, as well as the technical renewal of production, the development of tourism as a tool for promoting local culture and history, and support to the principles of peaceful cooperation in the external sphere. In this sense, instead of "puppets" used by the Karimov administration to simulate a "multi-party system", it is understood that the common characteristics between these institutions were perceived and gathered in a pragmatic way by the former President and his direct successor, Mirziyoyev.

It is also important to emphasize that the preamble to the Constitution of Uzbekistan affirms its commitment to the ideals of democracy and social justice. Article 7 of the Constitution of the Republic states: "The people are the only source of state power" meanwhile, articles 32 and 117 guarantee the right to vote, equality and freedom of expression[52]. It was with the aim of strengthening these prerogatives that, during the 2019 legislative elections, held under the motto "New Uzbekistan - New elections", the Uzbek State adopted a new Electoral Code, which regulated the procedures related to the preparation and conduct of national elections from the Electoral Management Information System (EMIS) and the Unified Electronic List of Voters (EECI), which ensured the viability of the unified voter title and the "one voter - one vote" principle. In 2021, continuing the process of political liberalization, Uzbek citizens living abroad were included in the voters' list, regardless of being registered in the consulates of diplomatic missions. In order to guarantee the fairness of funds allocated to the campaign, in accordance with the Law on Financing of Political Parties, an audit was carried out by the

regulation of these restrictions prevented the political validation of radical groups operating in the country and guaranteed the secularity of the Uzbek State, which, in its Constitution, prohibits the formation of religiously based parties.

51 OSCE. 2021. "Despite recent reforms Uzbekistan's presidential election lacked genuine competition, international observers say". Available at: https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/uzbekistan/502206. Access in Oct 31. 2021.

52 Uzbekistan. 1992. *Uzbekistan Constitution*. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20081205075249/http://www.eicee.org/pix/pdf/uzbekistan.pdf. Access in Nov 11. 2021.

Accounting Chamber on the activities of the parties involved in the process[53].

According to the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), around 1,000 journalists and international observers were present at the October election. As expected, the position papers of the European Parliament - ODIHR and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, which for the first time established a joint mission to observe the progress of elections in the country, converged with the US statement, identifying violations in the electoral process. However, these statements went against those issued by Sergei Lebedev, head of the monitoring mission of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), who not only did not identify violations in the conduct of the elections, but also praised the Uzbek authorities for the good organization of the election. President of China, Xi Jinping, President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, were among the first world leaders to congratulate Mirziyoyev on his victory. Other names such as Narendra Modi (India), Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (Kazakhstan), Sadyr Japarov (Kyrgyzstan), Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow (Turkmenistan) and Imran Khan (Pakistan) also joined the chorus of greetings to the Uzbek ruler[54].

The result of this year's presidential elections, therefore, represents the overwhelming popularity of the changes brought about by the Mirziyoyev administration, which, at least from an economic point of view, symbolize a real break with the past of the country, whose average per capita income was once lower to 75 rubles per month. Published in 2017, the 2017-2021 Development Strategy had the objective to "modernize and liberalize all spheres of life". Some of the steps proposed by the Development Strategy included lifting exchange controls, reducing tariffs and liberalizing the visa regime. Through the interaction of fiscal and monetary policies, it was observed that there has also been a dynamic growth of the economy in recent years, which, despite the slowdown caused by the coronavirus pandemic, is recovering its breath. In the first years of independence, the export capacity of the entire industry was only US$ 7 million, while today the volume of supplies of textile products for the foreign market exceeds US$ 1 billion. GDP in the first three months of 2021 increased by 3% and the World Bank forecasts that economic growth in

53 Europoter.co. 2021. "Electoral process transformation in Uzbekistan: Achievements and challenges during 30 years of independence". Available at: https://www.eureporter.co/world/uzbekistan/2021/09/13/electoral-process-transformation-in-uzbekistan-achievements-and-challenges-during-30-years-of-independence/. Access in Oct 1st. 2021.

54 Belta. 2021. "CIS observers describe Uzbekistan presidential election as competitive, free, open and transparent". Available at: https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/cis-observers-describe-uzbekistan-presidential-election-as-competitive-free-open-and-transparent-144405-2021/. Access in Oct 26. 2021.

Uzbekistan in 2021 and 2022 will reach 4.8% and 5.5%, respectively[55].

It should also be emphasized that, over its thirty years of independence, its self-perception as a regional power and its commitment to its national identity on the external level, strengthened even in the Soviet period and continued by Karimov, guaranteed to the country an autonomous international behavior, in contrast with neighboring states that tended to automatically align with great powers. In terms of foreign policy, Tashkent sought to develop cordial relations with Rússia, while it also bet on parallel partnerships, seeking to balance its influence in the region, such as Turkey, India, South Korea, Japan and China. In its strategic environment, the performance of Uzbekistan, conditioned by the notion of vulnerability to external threats[56], prioritized good bilateral relations with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, of which the trilateral Kazakh-Turkman-Uzbek agreement in the energy sector stands out, and kept under observation the intention of neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to build new dams on the rivers on which Uzbekistan depends[57]. Also in the regional context, the situation in Afghanistan, seen as a major threat to its security, led to the support of US military operations there[58], but, more than that, it stimulated the country to formulate multilateral alternatives to find a solution to the crisis, proposing a 6 + 3 resolution that would involve consultations among all of Afghanistan's neighbors as well as the United States, Russia and NATO. Recently, the country's regional role was reinforced through its performance, previously kept in the background, in the scope of international

55 Word Bank. 2021. "The World Bank in Uzbekistan-Overview". Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/uzbekistan/overview#context. Access in Nov 12. 2021.

56 The Fergana Valley, situated between eastern Uzbekistan, southern Kyrgyzstan and northern Tajikistan, considered the cradle of Islam in Central Asia, was on high alert as the Tajik Civil War and Taliban control of Afghanistan enabled Islamic radicalism to find a friendly environment for its spread. The Karimov Administration, in this sense, was trapped between a more active model of international insertion and one focused on its domestic security.

57 The so-called "Water War" is one of the most controversial in the region, as Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan depend on the river resources of the Amu and Syr Darya rivers for the irrigation of plantations (both with their sources in neighboring states). Caution towards Tajikistan was even greater especially in the late 1990s, when former President Karimov blamed Islamic extremists based in Tajik territory for explosions at the Uzbek government headquarters in 1999.

58 Although Uzbekistan has supported, albeit pragmatically, American involvement in the Afghanistan issue, the country pursued a policy that maximized its sovereignty through its bargaining power. However, Western criticism of Uzbekistan's internal policies and enthusiasm for regime change in both the Middle East and post-Soviet countries have led to "sour" relations with the West. In 2005, after US government criticism of the conduct of Uzbek domestic policies, Karimov expelled the US military from the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Air Base, used as a logistical point for operations in the neighboring country.

organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), security and economic institutions, respectively, which increasingly reaffirm its global relevance[59].

We can thus consider that Uzbekistan's stance has been the critical factor in determining Central Asian geopolitics since the independence of the country[60]. Tashkent, under the Karimov and Mirziyoyev governments, resolutely maintained the primacy of its sovereignty and ensured that Central Asia remained an open geopolitical space, preventing the constant influence of foreign powers over the region, just as the country's rigid stance was crucial to denying Islamic radicalism fertile ground in which to flourish. Tashkent assumed the leadership in the formulation of policies that, while they drew criticism for their restrictive nature, helped maintain secular governance and enabled them to address regional security challenges. Thus, the 2021 elections can be understood as a positive signal for the conciliatory global insertion model adopted by Mirziyoyev and for the maintenance and continuity of a national project that started already in the Soviet period. The nod to "reforms", especially in the field of economy and "political transparency", more than just making the country an "attractive" trading partner for the European Union and the United States in light of the growing Sino-Russian presence there, emphasizes the leading role that Uzbekistan's political evolution has for the future of Central Asia.

The End of the Merkel Era and the Future of Germany

Guilherme Thudium[61]

Germany's 2021 federal election, held in the last week of September 2021, marked the end of the Merkel Era and the reign of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). After 16 years in the position of head of government, Merkel became the first chancellor in German political history to not seek re-election. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) emerged as the largest party for

59 Starr, S. Frederick and Cornell, Svante E. 2018. "Uzbekistan's New Face". *American Foreign Policy Council*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

60 Especially if we consider that, despite its size in territorial extension and the remarkable economic achievements since independence, Kazakhstan, having a relatively small population and a long border with Russia, has a limited capacity to independently define an agenda for the region.

61 PhD Candidate in Strategic Studies (PPGEEI/UFRGS). President of the South American Institute for Politics and Strategy (ISAPE) and member of the Center of German and European Studies (CDEA) at UFRGS and PUC-RS, Brazil.

the first time since 2002, although it did not receive enough votes to form a new government autonomously – which is common in the German electoral system.

Thus began the complex negotiation process for the formation of a governing coalition. In the last federal election, held in 2017, this process lasted about four months. It is in this scenario that smaller but well performing parties, such as The Greens and the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP), acquire relevance. Merkel's party, however, led by Armin Laschet, had its worst performance in the historic series of the CDU/CSU alliance[62], despite the chancellor's high approval ratings. On December 8, Olaf Scholz was sworn in as the new chancellor in a three-party coalition with the Greens and the Liberals.

Merkel did not elect a successor, but that does not diminish her personal and political legacy. In a polarized and unpredictable international system, Angela Merkel has become synonymous with stability and pragmatism. The Merkel Era is paradigmatic for several reasons, but it is noteworthy that, in addition to becoming the first woman to hold the position of chancellor of Germany, she was also the first East German-raised politician to become head of government after reunification in 1990.

Although she was born in Hamburg, her family moved to the East when she was less than one year old, in 1954. With stints at the University of Leipzig and the GDR Academy of Sciences, both her academic background and the first stages of her political career trace back to the former German Democratic Republic. For this very reason, her rise was determinant in easing inter-German stereotypes, helping to balance asymmetries and inequalities between East and West that have persisted since the fall of the Berlin Wall[63]. Her political trajectory, for that, had to be conducted with flexibility, a predicate that also marked her foreign policy.

The long Merkel government, especially the second (2009-2013) and third (2013-2017) of her four terms as chancellor, were marked by a multitude of crises in the European Union (EU): in 2009 there was the Euro crisis, in 2015 the European migration crisis, and in 2016 the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum. If the Eurozone crisis also revealed a serious social problem in Europe, and not just of the public debt, the migration crisis had, on the other hand, significant political contours beyond the humanitarian issue, with the rise of populist movements and Eurosceptic forces across the continent.

The crises put additional pressures on the already fragile integration process, making Merkel's Germany its main articulator. The country's

62 According to German Federal Electoral Law, Angela Merkel's party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), competes in all German states except for Bavaria, where its affiliate party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), operates.

63 Ther, Philipp. 2016. *Europe since 1989*: a history. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

undisputed economic superiority had to be matched with equivalent political responsibilities, reaffirming its centrality on the European geopolitical chessboard. Apparently hesitant to play a role of greater international responsibility, it is frequently argued that Merkel was forced, more by circumstances than power politics, to take a position of continental leadership – and thus forming an 'accidental empire' which overlaps European integration itself[64].

German leadership within the EU, however, is not merely accidental: it is the result of an evolving process of state capacity and economic expansion since reunification. It is also inserted in the broader context of reconfiguration of the modern world-system: the European crises, while effects of a structural crisis of the world-system, also boosted German tutelage over slow performing countries. Thus, Berlin became the main actor dealing with the recent problems experienced by the EU.

In this sense, it is important to remember that Germany was little affected by the Euro crisis – its economy, on the contrary, was strengthened during the period, largely due to the diversification of its foreign relations with emerging economies distant from the Anglo-American financial matrix that conceived the global financial crisis in 2008. It was in the context of this crisis that Germany became the biggest creditor among the member countries of the Eurozone, a stand that granted Merkel's administration decision-making capacity over the monetary future of other sovereign but debtor nations.

The political response to the migration phenomenon, in turn, was observed in the rise of far-right parties across Europe, such as the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland – AfD*), which stood out in the 2016 (state) and 2017 (federal) elections, but dropped from third to fifth largest political force in the country after the 2021 federal election. While heavily criticized, it is argued that Merkel's open-door policy was the only proactive approach proposed from within the EU towards the crisis, in a context of deficit of regional leaderships and consensus[65].

If the Euro crisis and the migration crisis elevated the German regional stance, Brexit helped strengthen it. Paradoxically, while it meant an institutional setback to the integration efforts that Berlin seeks to safeguard above all else, the UK's departure highlighted the importance of an even greater cohesion among the remaining members which, ultimately, enhanced German leadership. In the context of the pandemic – Angela Merkel's final challenge as 'crisis manager' –, the European bloc, headed by Germany, led the diplomatic concert in the scope of the World Health Organization (WHO),

64 "Ulrich Beck: 'Germany Has Created an Accidental Empire.'" *EUROPP*, April 11, 2013. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/03/25/five-minutes-with-ulrich-beck-germany-has-created-an-accidental-empire/.

65 Greenstein, Claire, and Brandon Tensley. "The Strongwoman of Europe: Germany's Principled Leadership." *Foreign Affairs*, September 24, 2021. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2016-04-06/strongwoman-europe.

seeking to establish itself as a stabilizing actor in the international system.

Germany's role in international politics has undergone considerable transformation over the past two decades, as former foreign minister and later president Frank-Walter Steinmeier has argued – and it must, therefore, keep pace with the evolution of its regional and global position.[66] If there is a criticism to be made of the Merkel administration, it would be precisely the fact that it did not take advantage of the acquired political ascendancy to formulate a more assertive and long-term grand strategy, beyond the civil-normative rhetoric[67].

In a context of multiplication of crises, weary transatlantic relations and the rise of the Indo-Pacific, German diplomacy needs to be equipped with a long-term vision in order to articulate their interests and face the challenges that surround the European integration project – what the German public debate has been calling *Zukunftsfähigkeit*, or the ability to face the future.

Nordic Elections and Social Democracy

Cristina Soreanu Pecequilo[68]

In the last few months, social democrats regain of power in a set of Nordic countries (defined in a comprehensive manner as Scandinavia- Sweden, Norway and Denmark- plus Finland, Iceland and Greenland) is being presented as a victory of social progressive forces, which would signal a profile change of the European electorate as a dismissal of extreme right-wing views. However, the alternance of different power projects and the reframing of party coalitions are a phenomenon that could be associated to any political dynamics.

In this sense, they should not be seen as almost unprecedent moves that overnight will transform the fate of any other nation. These logics, which needed to be seen as "part of the game" are less and less understood, and evaluations regarding electoral results tend to be faced as "all or nothing". The recent Nordic experience cannot be seen neither as a consolidation of the

66 Steinmeier, Frank-Walter. "Germany's New Global Role: Berlin Steps Up." *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (2016): 106–13. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43946937.

67 Kurbjuweit, Dirk. "A First Look at Angela Merkel's Legacy: The Era of Missed Opportunities." *DER SPIEGEL*, September 6, 2021. https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/a-first-look-at-angela-merkel-s-legacy-the-era-of-missed-opportunities-a-3cdef2e3-e451-4e6b-91b5-c89f97acb9df.

68 Professor of International Relations at UNIFESP and the Graduate Programs of International Relations San Tiago Dantas UNESP/UNICAMP/PUC-SP and of International Political Economy/UFRJ. NERINT/UFRGS and CNPq Researcher, Brazil. E-mail: crispece@gmail.com

far-right in the past or as rebirth of social-democracy. It is an expression of the contemporary volatility, generated by the shock of distinct positions, and that none of them is strong enough to become or to maintain itself as a majority.

As an example, we can remember that even though these nations were never left out in international indexes as the "happiest countries in the world", or "the best places to live", and are portrayed as a model of a more sustainable and empathic way of living, as symbolized in the Danish "hygge" concept, they gained relevance for less positive facts: the increase in suicide and alcoholism numbers, attacks against minorities, the spread of xenophobic, misogynist, fundamentalist, and fascist agendas.

In the last two decades, in the real world, these contradictions are electorally expressed precisely in the rise of additional right wing and conservatives groups to power, putting aside social democrat forces. Previously envisioned as one of the last pillars of resistance against the neoliberal project of State in Europe and the World, Nordic nations and their social protection and inclusion mechanisms seemed to collapse whereas facing the conservative wave.

Nevertheless, these new projects were less focused in the general dismantling of the welfare State and more on some key issues linked to identity, nationality, the European Union (EU) and as a reaction to the demands of opening frontiers and including immigrants. The COVID-19 pandemic management, vaccination, the anti-vax movements were added to this agenda. Moreover, some of these countries such as Norway, even though not a member of the EU, gained geopolitical relevance due to their role in the gas and oil energy markets. On the eve of winter, the European continent and the recently departed from the bloc, the United Kingdom, are facing a major energy crisis due to the shortage of resources and their inflated prices. Any abrupt changes tend to generate more fears of unbalance that could lead to new trends of instability. So, it is natural to welcome this fresh political scenario with a certain relief.

The recent path indicates that the instrumentalization of all these themes by the extreme right, added to the fragmentation of the center-left and a part of social democrat forces revolving around the environmental and identity agendas helped an electorate from the center to move towards the right. This is the product of a perfect storm that combined the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the US, the 2008 economic recession in major advanced nations and the refugee crises caused by the Arab Spring from 2011 onwards, which led to a substantial increase of Islamic migration. Episodes such as BREXIT, Donald Trump´s election in the US, the conservative rise in Hungary and Poland, the continuity of the extreme nationalist right influence in France and Germany, portrayed an image of strength for this movement. France, by the

way, will face an election in 2022, which looks uncertain.

But the social democrats coming into power is an exception or a trend? The Nordic experience is not an exception as it reflects the electorate answer to the inefficiency of present coalitions in dealing with the government day-to-day challenges. The right wing wins based on populist promises and the externalization of problems to any group or State, be it the immigrants, China, the EU, and the COVID-19 pandemic are quickly deconstructed as the nature of the crisis is structural and multidimensional: political-strategic, social, and economic. Would it be, then, a trend and a reason for optimism as the German election also validated a moderate agenda with social democratic roots?

Not necessarily, the noisy presence of the extreme right, the difficulties in unifying the fragmented progressive center and extreme left coalition, remains. After all, as the Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen (2019-current) said in a 2017 interview to the Financial Times[69], "I believe that most important in being a Social Democrat Party is, truthfully, to be relevant. Are we capable to find solutions for the problems that people are facing?".

Current electoral results that demand comprehensive coalition negotiations to form governments indicate that Frederiksen question has not been properly answered. Therefore, one does not understand that, deeply, the core question that defined the electorate vote is less romantic and more pragmatic: which political party or candidate is fighting for a project that complies with my interests?

69 Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/f73883a6-621e-11e7-91a7 502f7ee26895. Access on Dec 10. 2021.