

# HOW COVID-19 CHANGED THE FUTURE

Geopolitical implications  
for Europe

By  
Florence Gaub and Lotje Boswinkel



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## The EUISS Chaillot Paper series

The *Chaillot Paper* series, launched in 1991, takes its name from the Chaillot hill in the Trocadéro area of Paris, where the Institute's first premises were located in the building occupied by the Western European Union (WEU). The hill is particularly known for the Palais de Chaillot which was the site of the signing of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and housed NATO's provisional headquarters from 1952 until 1959.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In analyses of the geopolitical implications of Covid-19, two schools of thought have emerged: one suggesting that the pandemic will merely accelerate pre-existing trends, and the other arguing that the crisis will create a world profoundly different than before. The reality will have elements of both these perspectives. This has to do with the nature of crises: they are embedded in (and often the result of) a certain context that remains the same, but are so disruptive that they open up possibilities for change across a broad spectrum of sectors. This *Chaillot Paper* examines both dimensions of the pandemic's impact: it assesses the geopolitical trends the pandemic is perceived as having accelerated, and examines the scope for action and change created by the disruption. Finally, it explores the interplay of trends and uncertainties in three distinct scenarios.

Covid-19 erupted into a landscape of change: even before the pandemic unfolded, 'uncertainty' had become the defining feature of our times. This perception of heightened uncertainty and unpredictability was the result of several trends occurring simultaneously: from relations with China to those with the US, from a change in international trade patterns to a rise in disinformation campaigns and a global decline in democracy, several building blocks of European foreign policy appeared to shift dangerously. In the case of some of these trends, the pandemic gave an opportunity for accelerated linear continuity, while it merged into other trends without necessarily being connected to them. As for others, Covid-19 had a transformative impact, creating an opening for change.

The pandemic will potentially be a game-changer in the following ways: (i) a new awareness of supply chains and their vulnerabilities, and their importance for the provision of critical goods, may lead to a shift towards diversification and relocalisation; (ii)

the crisis may create a window of opportunity for reinforced scientific cooperation and the emergence of a global approach to health; (iii) the surge in the use of online tools and technologies is likely to accelerate the digitalisation of diplomacy; (iv) changes in lifestyle and consumption patterns induced by the crisis may lead to more sustainable economic practices, paving the way for action on climate change and environmental issues; and (v) there will be an increase in political activism and demands for democratic reform.

In the final section, this *Chaillot Paper* draws three scenarios set in 2025, situated in the wider trend context and charting possible trajectories the identified uncertainties can take. The main drivers behind each set of uncertainties are the lessons decision-makers have learned from the pandemic so far: in the scenario *Strategic Distancing* a number of decisions and developments lead to greater distance between all global players including the EU (with the exception of Russia and China, who grow closer to each other in all three scenarios). The scenario *Lockdown World* projects a situation where the world is evenly divided between two camps that have very little contact with each other. Lastly, in the scenario *Europe in Self-isolation*, the pandemic shock leads to Europe withdrawing from a global role and turning inwards. If none of the scenarios is the obvious 'best' one, then this is because there is no 'best' possible outcome. Decision-makers will have to weigh up the pros and cons, reorder their priorities and commit funds accordingly.

The pandemic does not fundamentally alter several trends that preceded it, yet uncertainty exists when it comes to the choices decision-makers will make in this context, both within Europe and elsewhere. To proactively shape the future, European decision-makers have strategic choices to make – with the role that Europe wants to play in a world shaped by

Sino-American antagonism being the most important. While this choice will depend partly on developments and rhetoric in Washington and Beijing, it is ultimately a European one to make

and should, as such, be based on a discussion of how Europe envisions its place in the future international order and how it intends to set about accomplishing its goals.

# INTRODUCTION

## PROFILE OF A PANDEMIC

For an event predicted by so many, the Covid-19 pandemic was shockingly surprising. Since the early 2000s, studies had warned of the increasing probability of a communicable disease going global, but neither states nor citizens had internalised the threat.<sup>1</sup> As the virus spread around the world, shutting down borders and supply chains, sending oil prices crashing and grounding aircraft, it appeared to change everything – or nothing, depending on the analysis. To many, the pandemic was not a geopolitical ‘game-changer’<sup>2</sup> as it would merely accelerate previously existing trends. But to others, an event so global and pervasive was inevitably going to create a ‘new normal’: a world profoundly different than before.

The reality will, of course, have elements of both perspectives. This has to do with the nature of crises in general, which on the one hand are always embedded in – and often the result of – a certain context that remains the same, but on the other are so disruptive that they create possibilities for change by exposing previously unnoticed vulnerabilities (and strengths), upending priorities and creating a heightened sense of emergency. Covid-19 has already changed the future that we once expected – the question now is, to what extent?

This study explores both dimensions of the pandemic’s impact: how does it affect the geopolitical context into which it erupted, and what new possibilities does it open up? Whereas the first chapter assesses the geopolitical trends the pandemic is perceived to have accelerated, the second chapter explores the scope for action and change created by the disruption induced by Covid-19. In the third chapter, we explore the interplay of trends and uncertainties in three distinct scenarios.

Seeing that the crisis is all-encompassing, complex, and still evolving, the following chapters are only an assessment of the first year of the pandemic, and the outlook will require updating as the crisis continues to unfold. At the time of writing, the virus had fully infected Asia, Europe, North and South America, but had not yet fully penetrated Africa. In addition, the future evolution of the pandemic depends on a number of variables: the virus could mutate and become less or more lethal, acquired immunity against it could fade away, or vaccines could be rolled out sooner or later. Depending on what restrictive measures states impose, the pandemic’s evolution could follow broadly three different patterns – but in

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1 Bill Gates, “We’re not ready for the next epidemic”, *GatesNotes*, March 18, 2015, <https://www.gatesnotes.com/Health/We-Are-Not-Ready-for-the-Next-Epidemic>; “Coronavirus Researchers Tried to Warn Us”, *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/06/scientists-predicted-coronavirus-pandemic/613003/>; Richard E. Clarke and R.P. Eddy, *Warnings: Finding Cassandras to Stop Catastrophes* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017); “‘Prepare, Prepare, Prepare’: Why Didn’t the World Listen to the Coronavirus Cassandras?”, *Vanity Fair*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/03/why-didnt-the-world-listen-to-the-coronavirus-cassandras>.

2 In foresight, game-changers are developments that fundamentally alter the course of events; other terms that are used are ‘disruption’ or ‘turning point’.

all three scenarios the disease will continue to spread well into 2021, and possibly even 2022.<sup>3</sup>

## Three crisis components

This analysis charts the three escalatory stages of the crisis: in a first instance, the pandemic is a *health crisis*, as it sickens and kills human beings. In the process, it overwhelms, or threatens to overwhelm, national healthcare systems.

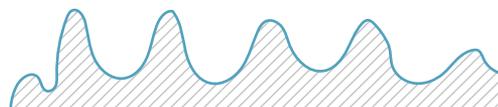
As a result and in a second instance, states all over the world impose various types of measures *restricting human mobility* in order to reduce transmission and maintain the operability of their healthcare systems.

In a third instance, *economic activity is depressed* as a consequence of this reduced mobility.

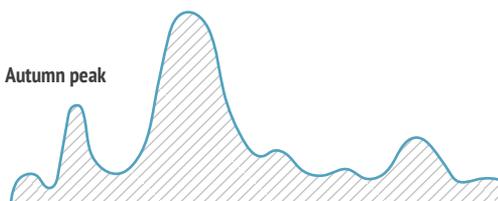
## Coronavirus

Three potential scenarios

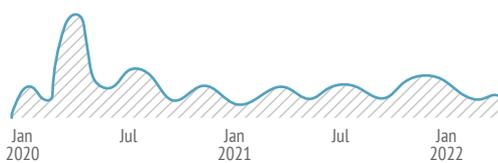
### Peaks and valleys



### Autumn peak



### Slow burn



Jan 2020 Jul Jan 2021 Jul Jan 2022

Data: CIDRAP, 2020

<sup>3</sup> Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, “COVID-19: The CIDRAP Viewpoint”, April 30, 2020, [https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/sites/default/files/public/downloads/cidrap-covid19-viewpoint-part1\\_0.pdf](https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/sites/default/files/public/downloads/cidrap-covid19-viewpoint-part1_0.pdf).

## CHAPTER 1

# ACCELERATION? THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON EXISTING TRENDS

Covid-19 erupted into a landscape of change: even before the pandemic unfolded, 'uncertainty' had become the defining marker of our times.<sup>1</sup> This perception of heightened uncertainty and unpredictability was the result of several changes occurring simultaneously in the international system: from relations with China to those with the United States, from a change in international trade patterns to an increase in disinformation campaigns and a global decline in democracy, several building blocks of European foreign policy appeared to shift dangerously. Because these shifts occurred over several years consistently in a certain direction, they can be called trends: amounting to a pattern of change.

Trends are not immune to change themselves: they can evolve because attitudes towards them alter, because collective action to counter them is taken or, even more unpredictably, because a new trend supersedes them. A crisis such as that induced by the pandemic has the potential to impact on pre-existing trends in a variety of ways, as it can upend priorities, offer an opportunity to review underlying tensions, mobilise unknown capabilities and deplete others. As a result, a crisis can redirect trends, suspend them, or indeed accelerate them.<sup>2</sup> Because of their fluid nature, trends can easily be misread: from taking a solitary signal as a trend via linear extrapolation, lumping together non-repetitive events or forgetting the context, there are several ways that they can be misinterpreted.

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1 See for instance the Economic Policy Uncertainty Index, <https://www.policyuncertainty.com/index.html>.

2 "Comment le Quai d'Orsay pense l'après-coronavirus, entre « compétition âpre » et « emprise de la Chine », *Le Monde*, March 31, 2020, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/03/31/coronavirus-comment-la-diplomatie-francaise-pense-le-jour-d-apres\\_6034979\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/03/31/coronavirus-comment-la-diplomatie-francaise-pense-le-jour-d-apres_6034979_3210.html); Bruno Tertrais, « L'année du Rat. Conséquences stratégiques de la crise du coronavirus », Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, *Notes de la FRS*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.frstrategie.org/publications/notes/annee-rat-consequences-strategiques-crise-coronavirus-2020>; International Crisis Group, « COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch », *Special Briefing no.4*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/sb4-covid-19-and-conflict-seven-trends-watch>; Dani Rodrik, « Will COVID-19 Remake the World? », *Project Syndicate*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/will-covid19-remake-the-world-by-dani-rodrik-2020-04>; Herman Van Rompuy, « COVID-19: A turning point for the EU? » European Policy Centre, April 16, 2020, [https://wms.flexious.be/editor/plugins/imagemanager/content/2140/PDF/2020/Covid-19\\_Turning\\_point.pdf](https://wms.flexious.be/editor/plugins/imagemanager/content/2140/PDF/2020/Covid-19_Turning_point.pdf); Andrés Ortega, « The deglobalisation virus », Elcano Royal Institute, March 17, 2020, <https://blog.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/the-deglobalisation-virus/>; Javi López, « Coronavirus: un terremoto político », *Política Exterior*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.politicaexterior.com/coronavirus-terremoto-geopolitico>; John Allen et al., « How the World Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic », *Foreign Policy*, March 20, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/world-order-after-coronavirus-pandemic/>; Mathew J. Burrows and Peter Engelke, « What world post-COVID-19? Three scenarios », April 23, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/shaping-post-covid-world-together/what-world-post-covid-19-three-scenarios/>; Thomas Carother and Andrew O'Donohue, « Polarization and the Pandemic », Carnegie Endowment, April 28, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/28/polarization-and-pandemic-pub-81638>; Heiko Borchert, « Looking Beyond the Abyss Eight Scenarios on the Post-COVID-19 Business Landscape », *21 Strategies*, April 19, 2020; « Has Covid-19 killed globalisation? », *The Economist*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/05/14/has-covid-19-killed-globalisation>.

In this chapter, we assess how the pandemic has affected previously existing geopolitical trends.

The analysis finds that Covid-19's impact has been felt at multiple levels: while it gave an opportunity for accelerated linear continuity to some, it merged into other trends without being directly connected to them, leading to a misreading of not just the respective trends but indeed the pandemic's impact on them. It also led to a suspension in other trends, creating an opening for new trends to emerge.

## A NEW NORMAL? RELATIONS WITH CHINA

### Pre-pandemic trend

China's 'rise' has been a long time in the making: since 1993, analysts have noted that its spectacular economic growth would eventually have repercussions for the international system.<sup>3</sup> The true starting point for this was 2012, when Xi Jinping became first the Secretary General of the Communist Party, and in 2013 also the President of China. Under Xi, China embarked on a series of reforms and initiatives designed to propel China into the future. In autumn 2013, China launched an

ambitious project now known as the 'Belt and Road Initiative' – on the surface, an infrastructure project with international reach, but in fact a project designed to “promote ... a new form of globalisation”.<sup>4</sup> As part of the initiative, China gained footholds in a series of countries in Europe, but also in Asia and Africa. In Europe alone, Chinese direct investments increased from €1 billion in 2008 to €35 billion in 2016.<sup>5</sup>

The real turning point in the Western perception of China was, however, 2017. That year, Xi presented his *Vision 2050*, in which he outlined the way ahead for China. By 2035, China was set to become a leading innovative nation, and by 2050, a nation with global influence. It was also the year when the United States' National Security Strategy of 2017 labelled China a “revisionist power”: a state seeking to change the international system as we know it.<sup>6</sup> In 2018, this antagonism leaked into the economic realm, with the US banning Chinese companies from its territory and imposing tariffs on Chinese products.

Although Europe did not emulate the US either in rhetoric or in measures, it, too, began to display a shift in perception with regard to China. In 2018, it published its Connectivity Strategy for Europe and Asia in response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), focusing on regulatory and legal aspects of economic and digital connection.<sup>7</sup> That year, it was revealed that Chinese government hackers had tapped into the email system of the European External Action Service (EEAS), exposing an increasingly

3 “The Rise of China”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1993, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1993-12-01/rise-china>.

4 Alice Ekman (ed.), “China's Belt and Road and the World: Competing Forms of Globalisation”, *Etudes de l'Ifri*, Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri), Centre for Asian Studies, 2019, [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ekman\\_china\\_belt\\_road\\_world\\_2019.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ekman_china_belt_road_world_2019.pdf).

5 Erik Brattberg and Etienne Soula, “Europe's Emerging Approach to China's Belt and Road Initiative”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 19, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/19/europe-s-emerging-approach-to-china-s-belt-and-road-initiative-pub-77536#:~:text=China's%20global%20rise%20and%20its,the%20rules%2Dbased%20international%20order.>

6 The White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America”, Washington D.C., December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>.

7 European Commission, “Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU Strategy”, September 2018, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint\\_communication\\_-\\_connecting\\_europe\\_and\\_asia\\_-\\_building\\_blocks\\_for\\_an\\_eu\\_strategy\\_2018-09-19.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_connecting_europe_and_asia_-_building_blocks_for_an_eu_strategy_2018-09-19.pdf).

active China also in the cyber domain.<sup>8</sup> A few months later, in 2019, the EU issued a joint declaration declaring China to be simultaneously a cooperation partner, a negotiating partner, and a “systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.”<sup>9</sup>

The growing perception of China as a global player with potentially conflictual intentions began to spread also at the level of international public opinion. In Canada, for instance, unfavourable views of China increased from 40% in 2017 to 67% in 2019. In the United States, unfavourable views increased from 36% in 2011 to 60% in 2019. Negative views were particularly pronounced in China’s regional neighbourhood, where 58% of citizens had a negative view of it. On the other hand, favourable views of China in Russia increased from 64% in 2014 to 71% in 2019.<sup>10</sup>

## The impact of the pandemic

China was at the strategic epicentre of the pandemic from the outset: the fact that it was there that Covid-19 first emerged gave it both an advantage as well as a disadvantage. Being the first in line meant that it was already through the first wave when others were still struggling with it, giving it an opportunity to position itself as a helper and as a crisis management role model.

**C**hina was at the strategic epicentre of the pandemic from the outset.

Conversely, the fact that it was the epicentre of the outbreak also put China on the defensive and vulnerable to accusations of poor communication with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and politicised delayed response times. Other aspects, such as a breakdown in supply chains, particularly with regard to medical supplies, only aggravated the already tense situation (for more on this, see chapter 2).

As a result, China deviated from its normally diplomatic communication style and went on the offensive – but remained unwaveringly focused on its broader geopolitical objectives of systemic competition. While this changed little in its already tense relations with the United States, it negatively affected its relations with Europe.

In early March, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party boasted that “the advantages of the Chinese system have once again been demonstrated”, pitting democratic systems against the Chinese governance model.<sup>11</sup> On Twitter, Chinese officials engaged in an aggressive campaign aimed at diverting attention from China, pointing fingers at others and sowing doubt about the origins of the virus – a campaign that the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell described as a “battle of narratives.”<sup>12</sup> This went beyond regular public outreach:

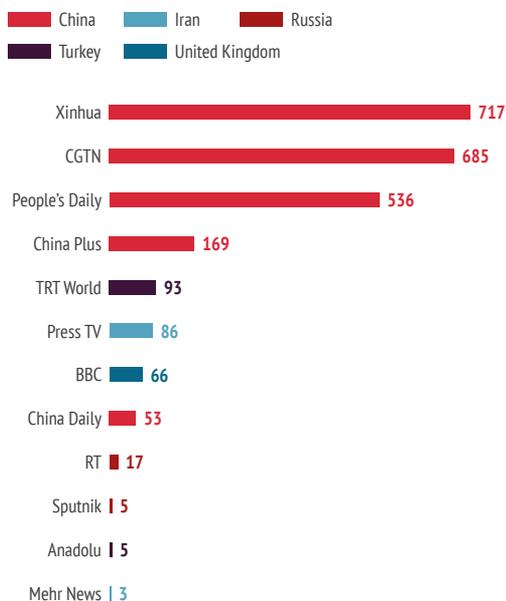
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- 8 “Chinese government hackers penetrated EU communications network, cybersecurity firm concludes”, *Politico*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/12/19/chinese-hackers-eu-communications-network-1040166>; Jake Wallis et al., “Retweeting through the great firewall: A persistent and undeterred threat actor”, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, International Cyber Policy Centre, 2020, [https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-asp/2020-06/Retweeting%20through%20the%20great%20firewall\\_o.pdf?zjV5JfAOYGRKguAbufYr8KRSQ610SfRX=](https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-asp/2020-06/Retweeting%20through%20the%20great%20firewall_o.pdf?zjV5JfAOYGRKguAbufYr8KRSQ610SfRX=).
- 9 European Commission, “EU–China – A Strategic Outlook”, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council, *Join(2019) 5 final*, Strasbourg, March 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.
- 10 Pew Research Center, “Attitudes toward China”, December 5, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/12/05/attitudes-toward-china-2019/>; Pew Research Center, “International publics divided on China”, October 1, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/10/01/international-publics-divided-on-china/>. Pew Research Center, “Global Attitudes Toward China and the U.S.”, September 21, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/09/21/global-attitudes-toward-china-and-the-u-s/>; Pew Research Center, “Chinese Public Sees More Powerful Role in World, Names U.S. as Top Threat”, October 5, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/10/05/chinese-public-sees-more-powerful-role-in-world-names-u-s-as-top-threat/>; Pew Research Center, “Russians warm to China as relations with U.S. cool”, July 8, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/08/russians-warm-to-china-as-relations-with-u-s-cool/>
- 11 Dong Yuzhen, *People’s Daily Online*, March 4, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0304/c98649-9664589.html>.
- 12 “Behind China’s Twitter Campaign, a Murky Supporting Chorus”, *New York Times*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/08/technology/china-twitter-disinformation.html>.

a Serbian study into 30,000 tweets between 9 March and 9 April that contained the keywords *Kina* (China) and *Srbija* (Serbia) found that 71.9% of the content was produced by bots, praising China's aid, its friendship with Serbia, and the Serbian government's response to the coronavirus outbreak, or highlighting a lack of solidarity from the EU.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, a large-scale fact-checking campaign was launched in Serbia verifying information related to Covid-19 and the June elections simultaneously,<sup>14</sup> while Facebook put misinformation warning labels on about 50 million posts relating to the pandemic.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, studies found that a Chinese information campaign was ramped up in Italy in March 2020, with possibly thousands of bot accounts spreading content not just highlighting China's aid during the pandemic but also EU inaction.<sup>16</sup>

These campaigns have not been without impact: polls have shown that for instance in Italy, perceptions of China quickly improved. According to one survey, one in four Italians thought that China was their biggest ally during the pandemic.<sup>17</sup> In Serbia, 39% thought that they received most aid from China – when in reality, it was the EU that supplied the bulk of the aid.<sup>18</sup> Two studies showed that media outlets backed by China (but also Russia, Iran and Turkey) resonated very effectively with their audiences: during the second half of March, the average

## Social media engagement

Median engagement for all Facebook and Twitter posts between 18 and 31 March 2020



Data: Oxford Internet Institute, 2020

engagement with English-language content published by Beijing-backed outlets *Xinhua News Media* and *CGTN* was ten times as high as that of the BBC. As for French-language content, the median engagement per shared article for *RT* and *Xinhua* was fivefold and almost

13 Digital Forensic Center, "A bot network arrived in Serbia along with coronavirus", April 13, 2020, <https://dfcme.me/en/dfc-finds-out-a-botnet-arrived-in-serbia-along-with-coronavirus/>

14 Tara Kelly, "Istinomer fact-checked COVID-19 and the Serbian national election at the same time. Here's how", *Poynter*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.poynter.org/business-work/2020/istinomer-fact-checked-covid-19-and-the-serbian-national-election-at-the-same-time-heres-how/>

15 Olivia Solon, "Facebook says it labeled 50 million pieces of coronavirus misinformation in April", *NBC News*, May 12, 2020, [https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/facebook-says-it-labeled-50-millions-pieces-coronavirus-misinformation-april-n1205316?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=newsletter\\_axiosfutureofwork&stream=future](https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/facebook-says-it-labeled-50-millions-pieces-coronavirus-misinformation-april-n1205316?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosfutureofwork&stream=future)

16 Valbona Zeneli and Federica Santoro, "China's disinformation campaign in Italy", *The Diplomat*, June 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/chinas-disinformation-campaign-in-italy/>; Francesco Bechis e Gabriele, "How China unleashed Twitter bots to spread COVID-19 propaganda in Italy", *Formiche*, March 31, 2020, <https://formiche.net/2020/03/china-unleashed-twitter-bots-covid19-propaganda-italy/>

17 Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "Europe's pandemic politics: How the virus has changed the public's worldview", European Council for Foreign Relations (ECFR), June 24, 2020, [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europes\\_pandemic\\_politics\\_how\\_the\\_virus\\_has\\_changed\\_the\\_publics\\_worldview](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europes_pandemic_politics_how_the_virus_has_changed_the_publics_worldview)

18 "Who Gives The Most Aid To Serbia?", *Radio Free Europe*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/who-gives-the-most-aid-to-serbia-/30660859.html>

fourfold, respectively, that of *Le Monde* in the period between 18 May and 5 June.<sup>19</sup>

Thereafter, the tone of international rhetoric shifted markedly: after originally praising China's handling of the virus, President Trump began to routinely refer to it disparagingly as the "Chinese virus".<sup>20</sup> In June, India banned more than 60 Chinese apps (including TikTok) from its territory following a military clash between the two states. A month later, the US followed suit. In an interview in mid-April, French President Emmanuel Macron said: "Let's not be so naive as to say [China has] been much better at handling this. We don't know. There are clearly things that have happened that we don't know about."<sup>21</sup> A bit further on in the crisis, the EU became increasingly vocal about China's increasingly assertive stance, with various EU high-level officials speaking up: at a press conference following the EU-China summit, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen described the EU's relationship with China as "challenging."<sup>22</sup>

The use of disinformation in particular was criticised in Europe, with Věra Jourová, Commissioner for Values and Transparency, arguing that Europe "should not shy away from naming and shaming" those responsible for the "surge in narratives undermining our democracies" and "response to the crisis", "spread by both pro-Kremlin outlets, as well as Chinese

officials and state media".<sup>23</sup> In a joint statement in March 2020, the members of the European Council welcomed the Commission guidelines on the screening of foreign direct investment and called on the member states to take all necessary measures to protect strategic assets with a view to safeguard the "EU's strategic autonomy, during the crisis and afterwards."<sup>24</sup>

Following the EU-China summit in June 2020, held by video conference, Council President Michel and Council President Von der Leyen issued a joint declaration that was markedly more positional than the previous one, stating: "We have to recognise that we do not share the same values, political systems, or approach to multilateralism."<sup>25</sup> At the meeting, China was also accused of being behind cyberattacks targeting European hospitals during the pandemic.<sup>26</sup>

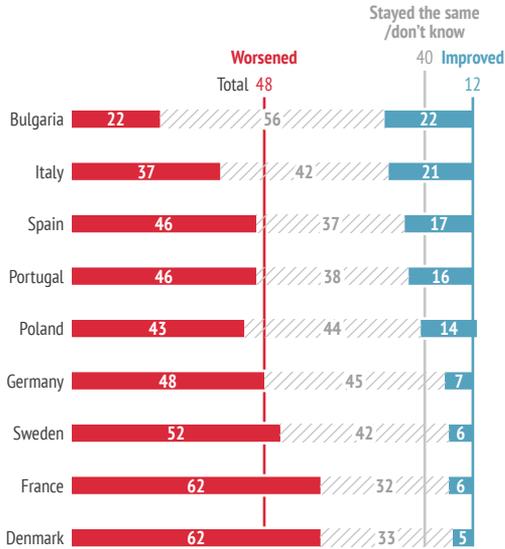
## What does this mean for Europe?

Relations between China and the EU were characterised by a delicate balance of interests before the pandemic struck. This balancing act has been made more difficult to maintain as a result of several pandemic-related developments: the aggressive posture of China, along with the exposed supply chain dependency (particularly with regard to medical supplies) has led to

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- 19 Jonathan Bright et al., "Coronavirus coverage by state-backed English-language news sources", Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, 2020, <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2020/04/Coronavirus-Coverage-by-State-Backed-English-Language-News-Sources.pdf>; Katarina Rebello et al., "Covid-19 News and Information from State-Backed Outlets Targeting French, German and Spanish-Speaking Social Media Users", Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, 2020, <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2020/06/Covid-19-Misinfo-Targeting-French-German-and-Spanish-Social-Media-Users-Final.pdf>.
  - 20 "Donald Trump's 'Chinese virus': the politics of naming", *The Conversation*, April 21, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/donald-trumps-chinese-virus-the-politics-of-naming-136796>.
  - 21 "FT Interview: Emmanuel Macron says it is time to think the unthinkable", April 16, 2020, *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/3ea8d790-7fd1-11ea-8fdb-7ec06edeef84>.
  - 22 European Commission, "Statement by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with President Michael, following the EU-China Summit videoconference", June 22, 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/statement\\_20\\_1162](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/statement_20_1162).
  - 23 "EU says China behind 'huge wave' of Covid-19 disinformation", *The Guardian*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/10/eu-says-china-behind-huge-wave-covid-19-disinformation-campaign>.
  - 24 European Council, "Joint statement of the Members of the European Council", March 26, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43076/26-vc-euco-statement-en.pdf>.
  - 25 Council of the European Union, "EU-China summit via video conference, 22 June 2020", June 22, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2020/06/22/>
  - 26 "Von der Leyen: Chinese cyberattacks on EU hospitals 'can't be tolerated'", *Euractiv*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/von-der-leyen-chinese-cyberattacks-on-eu-hospitals-cant-be-tolerated/>

### European views of China become more critical

Responses to the question: 'Has your view of China changed during the coronavirus crisis?'



Data: ECFR, 2020

a markedly negative perception of China in Europe. While the pandemic might have continued a trend of hostility between China and the US, it heralded a new diplomatic era between China and the EU that was perhaps not inevitable. After all, it was due to the pandemic and its repercussions that a new negative, even acrimonious, tone crept into exchanges previously focused on constructive matters such as trade and cooperation on issues like climate change.

For Europe, this means that its relationship with China is henceforth one that requires even more careful management of issues that require contradictory types of engagement: whereas trade and climate change are topics of mutual interest, disinformation and cyberattacks are intrinsically adversarial and hostile. Streamlining these two approaches is not

impossible, but requires a concerted European effort encompassing all policy areas.

## OUT OF LOVE? TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

### Pre-pandemic trend

Transatlantic relations entered a turbulent period with the arrival to power of President Trump in early 2017. Although several of the issues raised by his administration had also been raised by previous ones, the tone and style differed significantly, making it a particularly challenging relationship.

One of the main points of contention was defence spending: since 2014, allies are expected to reach the 2% defence spending target by 2024. While some allies have met this target, the majority, including Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany and Portugal, have not.<sup>27</sup> Throughout 2017 and 2018, denigrating comments by President Trump (such as branding NATO “obsolete”) and leaks from his entourage raised fears of an American withdrawal from the Alliance.<sup>28</sup> By the end of 2019, this had led to increased defence spending among NATO allies in an unprecedented way – but European disillusionment with American commitment remained, leading French President Macron to declare in a forthright interview with *The Economist* that the United States “doesn’t share our idea of the European project” and that therefore, “what we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO.” He added that “If we don’t wake up [...] there’s a considerable risk that in the long run we will disappear

27 NATO, “Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2012–2019)”, June 2019, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2019\\_06/20190625\\_PR2019-069-EN.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_06/20190625_PR2019-069-EN.pdf).

28 “Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns Over Russia”, *New York Times*, January 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html>.

geopolitically, or at least that we will no longer be in control of our destiny.”<sup>29</sup> These tendencies in NATO had ripple effects for European security, too: in December 2017, the EU launched the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PeSCo) initiative, its framework to deepen defence cooperation, and in 2019, it established the European Defence Fund (EDF).

Despite increased European defence commitments, the relationship remained fraught – in part, because transatlantic relations suffered not just from disagreements over defence spending; trade, too, was a contentious issue. In the first months of his mandate, President Trump singled out the EU ahead of China and Russia as “a foe” and competitor because of the trade deficit.<sup>30</sup> From 2018, the US imposed several tariffs on Europe, including a 25% tariff on steel imports and a 10% tariff on aluminium imports.<sup>31</sup> But more generally, the Trump White House displayed a general antipathy towards the EU that was difficult to frame, or indeed resolve, with political means. Indicative of this attitude were President Trump’s support for a no-deal Brexit, the downgrading of the EU delegation from its embassy status, or Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s questioning of whether the EU “is ensuring that the interests of countries and their citizens are placed before those of bureaucrats here in Brussels?”<sup>32</sup>

While European leaders met these developments with stoicism or humour (such as then

Council President Donald Tusk who tweeted “America and the EU are best friends. Whoever says we are foes is spreading fake news.”<sup>33</sup>), Washington’s behaviour did trigger a shift in European attitudes hitherto unseen: the Union’s envisioning of itself as a sovereign, autonomous or self-reliant pole independent of the US. In the summer of 2019, the European Council’s Strategic Agenda 2019–2024 noted that “in a world of increasing uncertainty, complexity and change, the EU needs to pursue a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act autonomously to safeguard its interests, uphold its values and way of life, and help shape the global future.”<sup>34</sup>

## The impact of the pandemic

The pandemic did not open an opportunity to review the underlying causes of the pre-existing tensions; as a result, relations unfolded along the same lines as in the pre-Covid era. In addition to his attacks on China, President Trump blamed the EU’s “failure to take the same precautions” for “a large number of new clusters in the United States”.<sup>35</sup> On 12 March, the US imposed travel restrictions on passengers coming from the Schengen area – a move the EU criticised as taken “unilaterally and without consultation”.<sup>36</sup> Although surprising, the move followed the same pattern as other decisions taken pertaining to Europe, in the absence of

29 NATO, “NATO Secretary General announces increased defence spending by Allies”, November 29, 2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_171458.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_171458.htm); “Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead”, *The Economist*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>.

30 “Donald Trump: European Union is a foe on trade”, *BBC News*, July 15, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44837311>.

31 Maria Demertzis and Gustav Fredriksson, “The EU Response to US Trade Tariffs”, Bruegel Intereconomics, 2018, <https://www.bruegel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/EU-Response-US-Trade-Tariffs.pdf>.

32 “U.S. Downgraded E.U.’s Diplomatic Status (but Didn’t Say Anything)”, *New York Times*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/world/europe/eu-us-diplomatic-status.html>; “Pompeo Questions the Value of International Groups Like U.N. and E.U.”, *New York Times*, December 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/04/world/europe/pompeo-brussels-speech.html>.

33 “EU Leaders Respond As ‘Friends’ After Trump’s ‘Foe’ Remarks”, *Radio Free Europe*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/trump-eu-friend-foe-tusk-timmermans/29366996.html>.

34 European Council, “A new strategic agenda for the EU: 2019–2024”, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/eu-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/#group-EU-in-the-world-zh3uey0ErW>.

35 New Atlanticist, “Trump hits out against Europe in coronavirus speech: The transatlantic alliance suffers”, *Atlantic Council*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/trump-hits-out-against-europe-in-coronavirus-speech-the-transatlantic-alliance-suffers/>

36 “Coronavirus: Trump suspends travel from Europe to US”, *BBC News*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51846923>.

consultation and accompanied by incendiary rhetoric. By the summer of 2020, the US proved to be one of the worst-hit countries in terms of cases and mortality. It also suffered severe economic impacts, with 30 million new unemployment insurance claims filed in the first six weeks of the pandemic, and a contraction of GDP by 9.5%.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, outrage exploded in May 2020 over the killing of an African-American citizen by a police officer. In the subsequent clashes, President Trump threatened the application of the Insurrection Act, a law authorising the use of military force against civilian unrest.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout the spring and summer of 2020, the US continued to escalate tensions with Europe, including on issues that preceded the pandemic. With regard to China, Secretary of State Pompeo urged it to choose “between freedom and tyranny” while adding that “democracies that are dependent on authoritarians are not worthy of their name”.<sup>39</sup> The decision to withdraw 12,000 troops from Germany, where they were seen as a deterrent force against Russia, was seen as another blow to transatlantic cooperation. As President Trump stated: “We spend a lot of money on Germany, they take advantage of us on trade and they take advantage on the military, so we’re reducing the force...

## **The Trump White House displayed a general antipathy towards the EU that was difficult to frame, or indeed resolve, with political means.**

they’re there to protect Europe, they’re there to protect Germany, and Germany is supposed to pay for it... We don’t want to be responsible anymore.”<sup>40</sup> In July, Europe was threatened, once more, with tariffs after proposing ways in May to find a commonly acceptable solution.<sup>41</sup> More generally, President Trump repeated his statement that the EU had been established to “take advantage of the United States.”<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to previous years, Europe responded strongly to some of these provocative statements. HR/VP Borrell called American leadership “weak”, adding: “They were not at all prepared to face the problem and now they are seeing the consequences.”<sup>43</sup> When the EU issued a list of states from which travel was banned until further notice in July, the inclusion of the US was seen as a payback for the unilateral ban on European travellers in March.<sup>44</sup> While this might have very well been for sanitary rather than political reasons, the way the decision was communicated certainly displayed a new assertiveness in European diplomatic behaviour.

In the second half of the year, the US was absorbed by its presidential election campaign. Covid-19 affected the elections in a variety of ways: 46% of voters are estimated to have cast

37 Sophia Chen, Deniz Igan, Nicola Pierri, and Andrea F. Presbitero, “Tracking the Economic Impact of COVID-19 and Mitigation Policies in Europe and the United States”, IMF Working Paper, July 2020, file:///C:/Users/fgaub/Downloads/wpiea2020125-print-pdf.pdf.

38 “What Is the Insurrection Act of 1807, the Law Behind Trump’s Threat to States?”, *New York Times*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/insurrection-act.html>.

39 Mike R. Pompeo, Secretary of State, “Europe and the China Challenge”, Speech at the Virtual Copenhagen Democracy Summit, June 19, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-at-the-virtual-copenhagen-democracy-summit/>

40 “US to withdraw nearly 12,000 troops from Germany in move that will cost billions and take years”, *CNN*, July 29, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/29/politics/us-withdraw-troops-germany/index.html>.

41 “Trump threatens EU, China tariffs over lobster duties”, *Euractiv*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/trump-threatens-eu-china-tariffs-over-lobster-duties/>

42 “Trump says the European Union was ‘formed in order to take advantage of the United States’”, *Business Insider*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.fr/us/donald-trump-says-european-union-formed-take-advantage-united-states-2020-7>.

43 Andrew Rettman, “EU bluntly criticises US handling of pandemic”, *EU Observer*, April 21, 2020, <https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/148130>.

44 “Cracks in the Trump-Europe relationship are turning into a chasm”, *CNN*, July 4, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/04/europe/trump-europe-relationship-intl/index.html>.

votes by postal ballot to avoid contact at voting stations.<sup>45</sup> At the time of the elections, the US was experiencing another surge in cases, but refrained mostly from implementing restrictions. Reactions to the pandemic were also mirrored in politics: voters supportive of President Trump (who had caught the virus in October but recovered within a week) were less concerned with the pandemic and generally content with the president's handling of the economy. Supporters of his opponent, Democrat Joseph Biden Jr., tended to be much more concerned about the pandemic and to have suffered personally from it.<sup>46</sup> Biden won the elections, and Trump's attempts to contest the result did not change the outcome.

## What does this mean for Europe?

The behaviour of President Trump and his administration during the pandemic led to a new focus among Europeans on notions of self-reliance, sovereignty and autonomy. In his concluding remarks to the European Council, President Charles Michel noted in April 2020 that "it is of utmost importance to increase the strategic autonomy of the Union" – a statement repeated in the European Commission's communication outlining a way out of the crisis.<sup>47</sup> In June 2020, the EU defence ministers agreed to develop a 'Strategic Compass' for security and defence, a document that would synthesise the threats facing Europe and the ambitions and needs of European defence. Although the trend towards more European self-reliance preceded the pandemic, Washington's attitude during the crisis clearly precipitated this process.

The change of administration following the presidential elections is unlikely to reverse this reflection process or lead to a return to pre-Trump transatlantic relations. In fact, while a Biden White House is likely to bring back a more cordial and diplomatic tone, it is expected that the new president's demands on European defence, and his attitude towards China, will be much the same as those of the Trump presidency (see more in the scenarios presented in chapter 3). This means that for Europe, cooperation with the United States can only be deepened if its own strategic self-reliance is strong.

## MORE TROUBLE: RUSSIA AND THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

### Pre-pandemic trend

Up to 2014, Russia was considered a partner to the EU, albeit a difficult one. Although cooperating on a range of files such as trade, energy and climate change, Russia's posture on a host of issues stood in stark contrast to that of the EU. First cracks became apparent at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, when Russian President Putin lamented the domineering – and negative – role of the US and its allies in

45 Pew Research Center, "The voting experience in 2020", November 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/11/20/the-voting-experience-in-2020/>

46 "Exit Polls Showed the Vote Came Down to the Pandemic Versus the Economy", *New York Times*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/03/us/politics/exit-polls.html>.

47 European Council, "Conclusions of the President of the European Council following the video conference of the members of the European Council", April 23, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/04/23/conclusions-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-video-conference-with-members-of-the-european-council-on-23-april-2020/>; European Commission, "Europe's moment: Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation", May 27, 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0456&from=EN>.

world politics.<sup>48</sup> In 2011, then prime minister, Putin described the Libya intervention by NATO allies as a “crusade”.<sup>49</sup> Following the 2013 chemical attacks in Syria, he cautioned strongly against an American strike in retaliation, instead mediating the removal of the arsenal under the supervision of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).<sup>50</sup> What was seen as Russian de-escalation and mediation would, however, later pave the way for a string of actions that would propel Russia back onto the world stage as a global actor on a collision course with the EU.

In 2014, Russia annexed parts of Ukraine; a year later, it sent military support to the Syrian government, and embarked on an outreach campaign across the Middle East and North Africa that led it to first support Libya’s Khalifa Haftar politically, and later on with military assistance in the shape of the Wagner Group, a private militia.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, it became increasingly prolific in the use of cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, most famously during the American presidential election campaign of 2016, but also the French presidential elections of 2017. Russian campaigns are not just focused on elections, they are part of a broader effort to shape public opinion abroad and undermine

**F**or Europe, cooperation with the US can only be deepened if its own strategic self-reliance is strong.

democracy and the rule of law in the US but also in Europe.<sup>52</sup> Just before the Brexit referendum, 150,000 Russia-tied Twitter accounts posted both pro-Brexit and pro-EU membership messages – suggesting the campaign aimed at sowing division.<sup>53</sup> *RT* and *Sputnik*, meanwhile, posted 261 articles with anti-EU messages, reaching up to 134 million viewers.<sup>54</sup> Evidence of Russian interference in domestic political affairs elsewhere in Europe, too, has accumulated over the past few years, ranging from the Baltic States to the Netherlands and France. Meanwhile, Russia grew closer to China.<sup>55</sup> The two align their positions in multilateral fora, share a similar perspective on domestic unrest at home and abroad, and conduct ‘diplomacy by numbers’: already, their circle of ‘friends’ is reaching majority-levels in many UN bodies. In 2019, President Xi called Putin his “best friend” during a state visit, and the two agreed to double trade over the coming five years, particularly in sectors such as energy, industry and agriculture.<sup>56</sup>

At the same time, Russia’s neighbourhood saw an increase in violence: in Ukraine, where it occupies the Crimean peninsula and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, violent incidents increased by 12% in the year preceding

48 “Putin Says U.S. Is Undermining Global Stability”, *New York Times*, February 11, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/world/europe/11munich.html>.

49 “Putin likens U.N. Libya resolution to crusades”, *Reuters*, March 21, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-russia/putin-likens-u-n-libya-resolution-to-crusades-idUSTRE72K3JR20110321>.

50 “A Plea for Caution From Russia”, *New York Times*, September 11, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html>.

51 “Russian Snipers, Missiles and Warplanes Try to Tilt Libyan War”, *New York Times*, November 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/world/middleeast/russia-libya-mercenaries.html>.

52 See for example: Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, “Putin’s asymmetric assault on democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US national security”, January 10, 2018, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>; House of Commons, Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, “Disinformation and ‘fake news’: Final Report”, February 14, 2019, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomeds/1791/1791.pdf>.

53 Op.Cit., “Putin’s asymmetric assault on democracy in Russia and Europe.”

54 European Parliament, Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs, “Disinformation and propaganda – Impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States” February 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL\\_STU\(2019\)608864\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL_STU(2019)608864_EN.pdf).

55 Alice Ekman, Sinikukka Saari and Stanislav Secieru, “Stand by me! The Sino-Russian normative partnership in action”, EUISS Brief no. 18, EU Institute for Security Studies, August 2020, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/stand-me-sino-russian-normative-partnership-action>.

56 “Xi Jinping’s Visit to Russia Accents Ties in Face of Tensions with U.S.”, *New York Times*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/05/world/europe/xi-jinping-china-russia.html>.

the pandemic, indicating an escalatory trend.<sup>57</sup> While Russia signalled readiness to make concessions on Donbas, a closer look revealed underlying intentions irreconcilable with Ukrainian stability and territorial integrity.<sup>58</sup>

In the years before the pandemic, the Western Balkans' prospects for EU membership appeared to have receded: terms such as 'democratic backsliding' and 'state capture' described worrying developments in Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Republic of North Macedonia.<sup>59</sup> Declining freedoms, collusion with criminal networks and increasing corruption over several years together led to a gradual erosion of progress, dampening hopes for accession to the EU or NATO.<sup>60</sup> In 2018, the Sofia Summit declaration remained vague on the accession perspective, with European leaders such as the French president voicing concerns over enlargement generally. While the European Commission was in favour of initiating membership talks with Albania and (what has since become) North Macedonia, member states did not follow suit. The growing influence of Russia, directly aimed at undermining the possible European accession of Western Balkan states, became particularly visible in the rise of disinformation campaigns and the sponsoring of separatist and incendiary rhetoric.<sup>61</sup>

## The impact of the pandemic

EU-Russia relations remained largely the same during the pandemic – that is, not particularly good. Unsurprisingly, Russia embarked on a disinformation campaign as soon as the crisis unfolded, targeting European states. French and German content produced by Russian outlets highlighted the weakness of democratic institutions and civil disorder in Europe. It also pushed anti-American narratives to Spanish-speaking audiences across the Americas.<sup>62</sup> President Putin claimed that Russian handling of the virus was superior to the US, and, like China, credited Russia's political system with its "success" – although the veracity of Russian case numbers has been contested.<sup>63</sup> Russia went ahead with a constitutional referendum allowing Putin to stay in power until 2036, and – despite a spat over the Vladivostok celebrations – signalled further *rapprochement* with China.<sup>64</sup> At the beginning of the crisis, Putin took a stance against criticism of China's handling of the crisis, calling "the attempts by some people to smear China" on the origin of the virus "unacceptable."<sup>65</sup> Xi and Putin promised to fight "unilateralism" together and support each other in their respective paths of political development.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, the pandemic has not led to social unrest – with the exception of some online activity – in Russia,

57 Roudabeh Kishi, Mel Pavlik and Sam Jones, "Year in Review: The armed conflict location and event data project 2019", Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 2020, [https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/dlm\\_uploads/2020/03/ACLED\\_AnnualReport2019\\_WebVersion.pdf](https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2020/03/ACLED_AnnualReport2019_WebVersion.pdf).

58 Karen Madoian, "Devil in the detail: local versus regional approaches to peace in Donbas", EUISS Brief no. 2, EUISS, February 2020, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/devil-detail-local-versus-regional-approaches-peace-donbas>.

59 European Commission, "Key findings of the 2016 Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", November 9, 2016, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO\\_16\\_3634](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_16_3634).

60 Marko Čeperković and Florence Gaub (eds.), "Balkan futures: Three scenarios for 2025", *Chaillot Paper* no. 147, EUISS, August 2018, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP\\_147%20Balkan%20Futures.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_147%20Balkan%20Futures.pdf).

61 Stanislav Secieru, "Russia in the Western Balkans: Tactical wins, strategic setbacks", EUISS Brief no. 8, July 2, 2019, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/russia-western-balkans>.

62 Katarina Rebello et al, "Covid-19 News and Information from State-Backed Outlets Targeting French, German and Spanish-Speaking Social Media Users", University of Oxford, Oxford Internet Institute, 2020, <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/covid19-french-german-spanish/>

63 "Putin says Russia's handling of coronavirus is superior to U.S.", *Reuters*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-russia-cases/putin-says-russias-handling-of-coronavirus-is-superior-to-u-s-idUSKBN23L07U>.

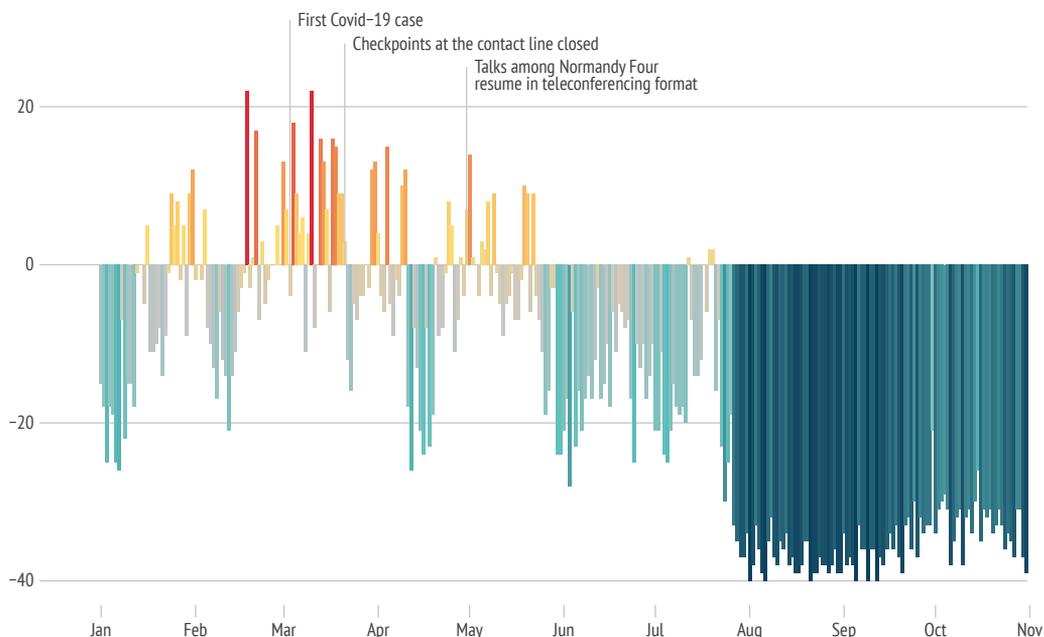
64 "Putin wins right to extend his rule until 2036 in landslide vote", *Politico*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-wins-right-to-extend-his-russia-rule-until-2036-in-landslide-vote/>

65 Chen Qingqing and Yang Sheng, "X-Putin call shows joint stance against politicising pandemic", *Global Times*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1185880.shtml>.

66 "Xi Jinping tells Vladimir Putin: China and Russia should stand firm against unilateralism", *South China Morning Post*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3092395/xi-tells-putin-china-and-russia-should-stand-firm-against>.

## Violence in Ukraine

Daily number of violent incidents in Ukraine in Jan-Nov 2020 in comparison to the median daily number of such incidents in 2019 (baseline = 41)



Data: ACLED, 2020

although its economy has contracted by 6%.<sup>67</sup> As in other states, restrictive measures temporarily affected some human rights such as freedom of movement as well as privacy, but several others are permanent, such as the March 2020 law on ‘fake news’, allowing for measures targeting activists, journalists, bloggers and politicians disseminating information considered false by the government.<sup>68</sup> In August, Russia surprised the world by announcing the first Covid-19 vaccine, Sputnik V. But concerns over its safety, efficacy, and production meant that it met with a cool reception from the start. By November 2020, Russia, too, was caught by another surge in cases.

In Donbas and the Eastern regions of Ukraine, the pandemic appeared to induce a slight

decrease in violent incidents – but this is likely the effect of lockdown measures rather than an indication of a positive change in attitudes or behaviour on the part of the conflict parties.

This assumption is further substantiated by developments in Belarus in August 2020. Following the contested presidential elections, protests erupted that were met with force by the government. While France, Germany and the EU urged restraint, President Putin warned against foreign interference, effectively supporting Alexander Lukashenko, Russia’s long-time ally in power, who has ruled the country for over a quarter of a century. Russia’s activity in Libya also intensified during the pandemic, with 14 warplanes deployed in May and violence further escalating throughout the

<sup>67</sup> World Bank, “Russian Economy Faces Deep Recession Amid Global Pandemic and Oil Crisis, Says New World Bank Report”, July 6, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/07/06/russian-economy-faces-deep-recession-amid-global-pandemic-and-oil-crisis-says-new-world-bank-report>.

<sup>68</sup> International Partnership for Human Rights, “Human rights impact assessment of the COVID-19 response in Russia”, August 2020, <http://afew.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Covid-19-RU-upd.pdf>.

summer.<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile in Azerbaijan, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh flared up after years of a stable ceasefire.

In the Western Balkans, Russia and China used the pandemic to expand their foothold in the region: the aid that Beijing and Moscow delivered to Serbia and the Serbian part of Bosnia-Herzegovina<sup>70</sup> was accompanied by aggressive disinformation campaigns, aimed at discrediting the EU. The US, in turn, exploited the crisis in Kosovo<sup>71</sup> to push for negotiations with Serbia. But countries in the region, too, used the pandemic for nation-branding purposes: both Serbia and Albania sent equipment and doctors to Italy in March and April.<sup>72</sup> Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic severely criticised the EU – calling European solidarity a “fairy tale”<sup>73</sup> – for allegedly banning medical exports, even though the Commission quickly explained that this was not the case.<sup>74</sup> Soon the EU launched an ambitious €3.3 billion financial rescue package, consisting of €38 million in funds for the health sector, access to EU instruments and medical equipment (including Western Balkan countries in the joint procurement of medical equipment), €750 million in macro-financial assistance, and €1.7 billion in preferential loans by the European Investment Bank. In addition, the European Commission announced an

## In the Western Balkans, Russia and China used the pandemic to expand their foothold in the region.

Economic and Investment Plan which was subsequently launched in October, as well as the start of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia.

While the EU is by far the region’s largest partner – not only in terms of aid but also trade, which adds up to €43 billion annually<sup>75</sup> – its communication efforts could have been better. A poll in March showed that 39.9% of Serbians thought that most Covid-19 aid came from Beijing, followed by 17.6% who

thought it came from the EU and 14.6% who thought it came from Russia. Communication and information in general pose a challenge in the region: since the pandemic, conspiracy theories have skyrocketed, harming institutional trust and damaging already fragile democracies.<sup>76</sup> But even before the pandemic hit, a majority in the region were of the opinion that disinformation is a problem.<sup>77</sup>

## What does this mean for Europe?

While the crisis did not open an opportunity for new relations between Russia and the EU, the *rapprochement* of Russia and China is a trend that will likely have negative implications.

69 “Russia expands war presence in Libya”, *Deutsche Welle*, May 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-expands-war-presence-in-libya/a-53623666>.

70 Maxim Samorukov, “Ventilator diplomacy in the Balkans”, Carnegie Moscow Center, July 8, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/2020/07/08/ventilator-diplomacy-in-balkans-pub-81895>.

71 This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

72 “Vucic: ‘Italy has always offered open support to Serbia on its path to the EU’”, *Euractiv*, April 27, 2020, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short\\_news/vucic-italy-has-always-offered-open-support-to-serbia-on-its-path-to-the-eu/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short_news/vucic-italy-has-always-offered-open-support-to-serbia-on-its-path-to-the-eu/)

73 “Serbia turns to China due to ‘lack of EU solidarity’ on coronavirus”, *Euractiv*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/serbia-turns-to-china-due-to-lack-of-eu-solidarity-on-coronavirus/>

74 European Western Balkans, “Export of medical equipment not banned by EU, member states decide on authorisation”, March 17, 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/17/export-of-medical-equipment-not-banned-by-eu-member-states-decide-on-authorisation/>

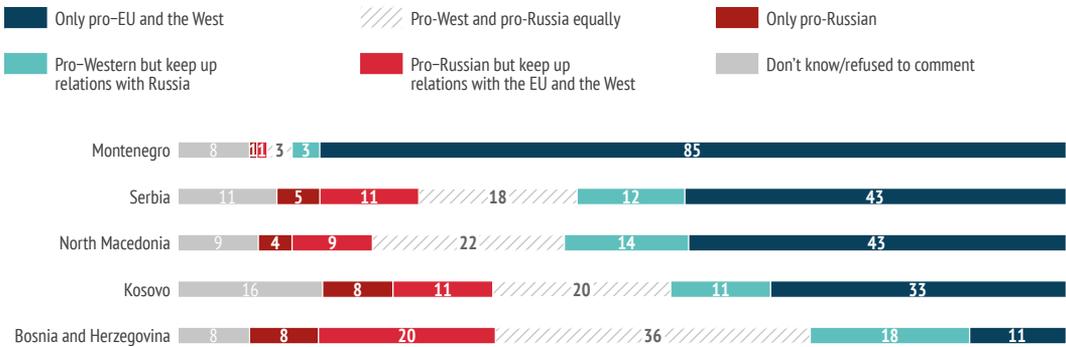
75 Vesko Garcevic, “Russia and China are penetrating Balkans at West’s expense”, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), August 18, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/18/russia-and-china-are-penetrating-balkans-at-west-s-expense/>

76 Marija Djoric, “Growth in conspiracy theories risks undermining democracy in Balkans”, *BalkanInsight*, August 14, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/14/growth-in-conspiracy-theories-risks-undermining-democracy-in-balkans/>

77 International Republican Institute, “Western Balkans regional poll, February 2 2020 – March 6 2020”, [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/final\\_wb\\_poll\\_deck\\_for\\_publishing\\_1.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/final_wb_poll_deck_for_publishing_1.pdf).

## Foreign policy attitudes in the Western Balkans

Responses to the question: what should our country's foreign policy course be?



Data: International Republican Institute's Center for Insights on Survey Research, 2020

This concerns particularly their joint action in multilateral fora, where the pair are already aligning to promote their geopolitical agenda. In July, they both vetoed a UN Security Council Resolution that would have extended aid deliveries to Syria, arguing that rather than transiting through Turkey, these provisions should be delivered by the Syrian government. Russia also continues to expand its presence in Europe's neighbourhoods, both East and South, countering EU efforts to promote peace in Syria, Libya and Ukraine. Emboldened by its relationship with China, Russia is likely to intensify these activities.

In the Western Balkans, the pandemic left the EU struggling with a rather negative image especially in the early days of the crisis. At the same time, China and Russia seized the opportunity to promote themselves – and their system of governance – during the crisis. Although Commission President von der Leyen stated that: “we have a special responsibility to assist in this pandemic our partners in the Western Balkans, as their future clearly lies in the European Union,”<sup>78</sup> public perception of

the EU in the region appeared to be somewhat negative. While surveys have indicated that the share of the population wishing to join the EU is 50% in Serbia, 63% in Montenegro, 74% in North Macedonia, 93% in Kosovo and 76% in Bosnia–Herzegovina, these numbers appear to be declining. The EU financial package has been viewed by some in the region as the EU “throwing money at a problem at the expense of its values and promises” – a sentiment which reflects a wider discontent with the EU's attitude to the region, which is sometimes perceived as opportunistic.<sup>79</sup>

The crisis has therefore exposed some of the most contentious elements of the EU's approach to the region. For instance, a campaign countering disinformation is clearly necessary but insufficient due to the limited use of social media in the region (between 15 and 23%).<sup>80</sup> Similarly, the EU could consider including the Western Balkans in its Green Recovery plan. In its efforts to diversify supply chains, the EU can find important trading partners in the Western Balkans. For instance critical mineral borates

78 European Commission, “Western Balkans’ leaders meeting: EU reinforces support to address COVID-19 crisis and outlines proposal for post-pandemic recovery”, April 29, 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_777](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_777).

79 Vanja Mladineo, “Could COVID-19 poison the EU's relations with the Western Balkans?”, Friends of Europe, May 27, 2020, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/could-covid-19-poison-the-eus-relations-with-the-western-balkans/>

80 Op.Cit., “Western Balkans regional poll, 2 February 2020 – 6 March 2020”.

can be found in Serbia and platinum deposits in Albania.<sup>81</sup>

## ARC OF INSTABILITY: THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

### Pre-pandemic trend

The Middle East and North Africa have been a cause of concern for the EU since 2013, when a series of developments led to the emergence of violent hot-spots in Libya, Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. The region has struggled to recover from these turbulent years in more ways than one. Terrorist attacks decreased in number and lethality in the years after 2015 – in Iraq alone, the incidence of such attacks fell by 75% – but the so-called Islamic State (IS), now no longer a territorial entity, is still believed to have 18,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria.<sup>82</sup> Terrorism also remained a concern for Egypt, where IS outlet Wilayat Sinai was chiefly responsible for Egypt being ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of terrorist incidents. War continued in Syria, Yemen and Libya before the pandemic hit, and tensions between Iran and its Gulf neighbours as well as the US gave maritime incidents in the Strait of Hormuz a dangerous undertone in 2019. From an economic point of

view, the region is still reeling from the disruption caused by the Arab Spring, with youth unemployment remaining consistently high at 29% and in some states, such as Egypt, reaching almost 32%.<sup>83</sup> In Iran, youth unemployment has steadily increased since 2016, reaching new heights in early 2020 with 28.6% of young people unemployed. After a failed coup attempt in 2015, Turkey has also become increasingly repressive, all the while struggling with economic concerns such as worryingly high youth unemployment levels of 24.6% in June 2020.<sup>84</sup> Despite the drift towards authoritarian control, social unrest increased in the years preceding the pandemic as a result of continuously poor governance. Compared to 2018, the number of demonstrations increased by 269% in Algeria, 112% in Egypt (with 161 demonstrations), 495% in Sudan, 9% in Iran, 207% in Iraq, and a massive 1,743% in Lebanon.<sup>85</sup>

### The social and economic effects of the pandemic were felt particularly acutely across the Middle East and North Africa.

The region has also undergone geopolitical shifts since the Arab Spring, making European efforts to achieve its own foreign policy

objectives difficult. The reduced engagement by the United States under the Obama administration – ranging from troop withdrawal in Iraq to inaction on the use of chemical weapons in Syria – left a vacuum that several players have since filled, notably Russia, Iran, but also Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Trump administration's regional focus has since been on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in disregard of several agreed principles, and to the exclusion of the rest of the Quartet (Russia, the EU and the UN). It recognised

81 "Europe joins the global scramble for critical minerals", *Reuters*, September 7, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/eu-metals-at-home/rpt-column-europe-joins-the-global-scramble-for-critical-minerals-andy-home-idUSL8N2G13WK>.

82 Institute for Economics and Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2019", <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2019-web.pdf>.

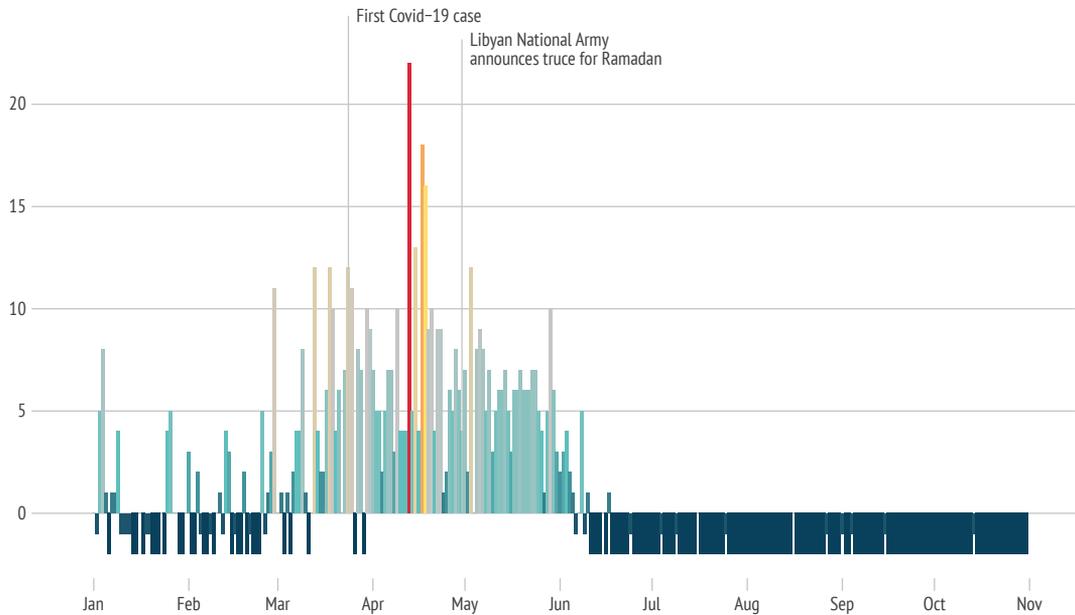
83 World Bank, "Unemployment, youth total (% of total labour force ages 15-24) (modelled ILO estimate) - Middle East & North Africa", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=ZQ>.

84 "Turkey's unemployment rate falls to 13.2% in March despite pandemic", *Daily Sabah*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkeys-unemployment-rate-falls-to-132-in-march-despite-pandemic>.

85 Roudabeh Kishi, Mel Pavlik and Sam Jones, "Year in Review: The armed conflict location and event data project 2019", ACLED, 2020, [https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/dlm\\_uploads/2020/03/ACLED\\_AnnualReport2019\\_WebVersion.pdf](https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2020/03/ACLED_AnnualReport2019_WebVersion.pdf).

## Violence in Libya

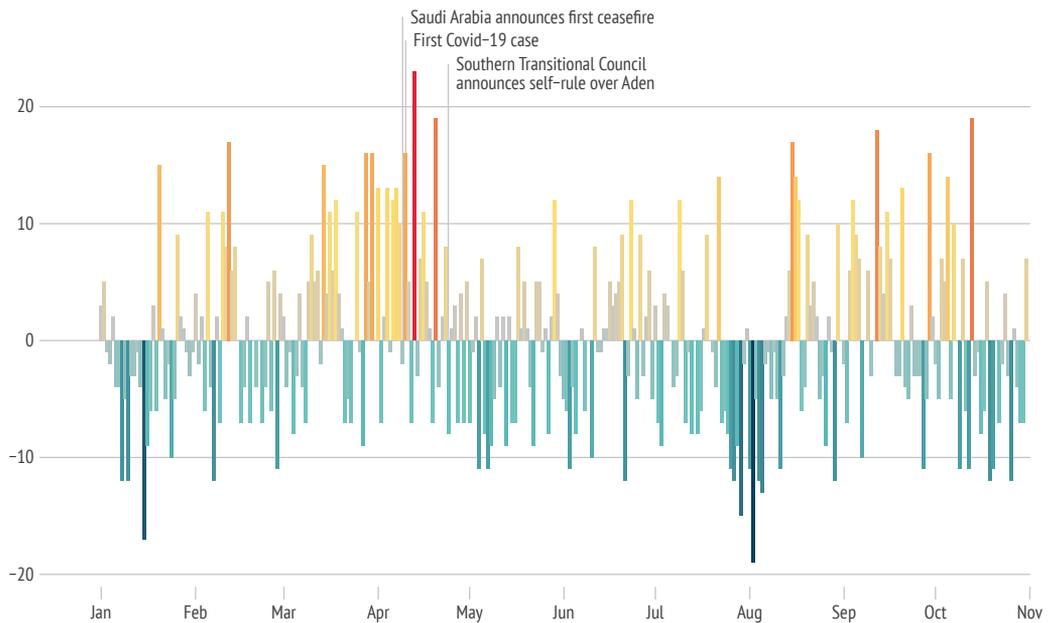
Daily number of violent incidents in Libya in 2020 in comparison to the median daily number of such incidents in 2019 (baseline = 3)



Data: ACLED, 2020

## Violence in Yemen

Daily number of violent incidents in Yemen in 2020 in comparison to the median daily number of such incidents in 2019 (baseline = 28)



Data: ACLED, 2020

Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and proposed a peace plan in January 2020 that was rejected by the Palestinian Authority because of its bias towards Israel. Regarding Libya, Germany repeatedly undertook efforts to mediate the conflict in the year before the pandemic struck, but lack of commitment by other outside actors undermined the objective of lasting peace.

## The impact of the pandemic

Given these negative trends, the social and economic effects of the pandemic were felt particularly acutely across the Middle East and North Africa. Across the region, GDP is expected to fall by 4.7%, but in states that are fragile or in conflict, this could reach 13%.<sup>86</sup> Lebanon, which was already mired in a political and financial crisis before the onset of the pandemic, and had to deal with a devastating explosion in its port in August, faces an economic crisis of unprecedented proportions. 45% of its population are projected to fall below the poverty line by the end of 2020, and its economy will contract by 12%. Iran, already struggling thanks to American sanctions before the pandemic, was the second state to be fully hit by the virus. Its economy suffers from high inflation, and is predicted to shrink by 6%. According to Iranian studies, as many as 6.43 million Iranians could lose their jobs because of the pandemic.<sup>87</sup> After a historic crash in March, the oil price has recovered but is still below pre-Covid-19 levels, while oil-exporting states across the region are facing severe financial constraints. As a result, fiscal support packages have been smaller

than in any other world region.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, in states such as Iraq, Egypt and Tunisia, the enforcement of lockdown measures was not a possibility. Governments faced protest and unrest, and were often forced to prioritise the economy over people's health. At the same time, several governments, such as Egypt but also Jordan, seized the opportunity to step up repressive measures and tighten their control over the population.<sup>89</sup>

In contrast to natural disasters, which can have reconciliatory effects on societies in conflict, health crises tend to be exploited by conflict actors that would normally face significant resistance from either societal or outside actors. The actors in the ongoing conflicts in the region did not heed the United Nations' call for a ceasefire: in Libya violence did not end, but instead increased. Throughout the summer of 2020, both parties escalated violence, without either side being able to claim a decisive victory. While violence decreased somewhat in Yemen, Syria, too, saw continuous violent incidents and renewed demonstrations in regions under government control.<sup>90</sup> The Islamic State, after initially advising its followers to avoid Europe, changed tune in June, instead calling on them to deliberately spread the virus (which it described as "God's smallest soldier"), to exploit the mood of unrest in Western countries, and to perpetrate attacks in Europe "similar to the strikes of Paris, London, Brussels and other places".<sup>91</sup> As it stepped up its attacks in the spring of 2020, the withdrawal of French and American troops from Syria and Iraq is a worrying development. The normalisation of diplomatic relations between the UAE and Israel, albeit touted

86 Garrett Nada, "The COVID-19 Blow to Iran's Economy", May 18, 2020, United States Institute for Peace, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/apr/29/covid-19-blow-iran-s-economy>.

87 "Iran's deteriorating economy, raging coronavirus have raised fears of renewed street protests", *Radio Free Europe*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-s-deteriorating-economy-raging-coronavirus-have-raised-fears-of-renewed-street-protests-/30741923.html>.

88 International Monetary Fund, "Five Charts That Illustrate COVID-19's Impact on the Middle East and Central Asia", July 6, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/07/14/na071420-five-charts-that-illustrate-covid19s-impact-on-the-middle-east-and-central-asia>.

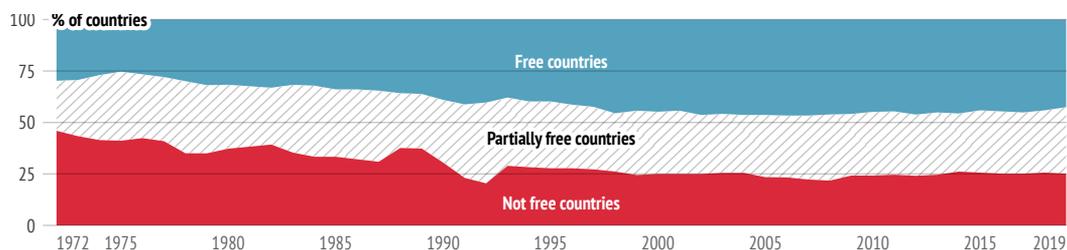
89 "Jordan arrests 1,000 teachers as government crackdown on trade union using coronavirus restriction measures", *The New Arab*, August 19, 2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/8/19/jordan-arrests-1-000-teachers-in-crackdown-on-trade-union>.

90 "Syria war: Assad under pressure as economic crisis spirals", *BBC News*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53020105>.

91 "Islamic State calls for followers to spread coronavirus, exploit pandemic and protests", June 23, 2020, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/islamic-state-calls-for-followers-to-spread-coronavirus-exploit-pandemic-and-protests-136224>.

## Democracy in flux

Share of 'Free,' 'Partly Free' and 'Not Free' countries in the world, 1972-2019



Data: Freedom House, 2020

as a “peace deal”, is unlikely to have any effect on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

## What does this mean for Europe?

States in the Southern neighbourhood that were already struggling with political and economic crises before Covid-19 are heading in a very difficult direction. For the EU, this means not just insecurity and instability in its vicinity, but also a long-term threat to its foreign policy goals of resilience, good governance and the rule of law. That said, the crisis occurs at a time, ten years after the Arab Spring, when renewed discontent is exerting pressure on decision-makers to deliver basic services, reduce corruption and violence. This small window of opportunity can be seized to support civil society actors and decision-makers willing to engage in dialogue and reform. Certainly, any type of engagement that signals even passive support for continuing on the path of the last decade would jeopardise the EU’s own objective of a peaceful and prosperous neighbourhood. To make matters more complex, it will be difficult to achieve these objectives without engaging with the other actors in the region, whose objectives are at times diametrically opposed to those of the EU.

This includes actors such as Saudi Arabia, but also Russia. “Learning the language of power”, as HR/VP Borrell put it, will be indispensable to this type of engagement – including military capabilities.<sup>92</sup>

## DEMOCRACY ON THE DEFENSIVE

### Pre-pandemic trend

For the first time since 2011, the number of democracies is lower than that of autocracies: 46% versus 54%.<sup>93</sup> The breakdown of democracy has been most visible in the region stretching from Central Europe to Central Asia: while it counted 15 democracies in 2010, today there are only 10.<sup>94</sup>

At the same time, elections have lost popular appeal: since the early 1990s, voter turnout around the globe has fallen dramatically. Between the 1940s and 1980s, the global average voter turnout remained stable: it decreased by only 2 percentage points from 78% to 76%

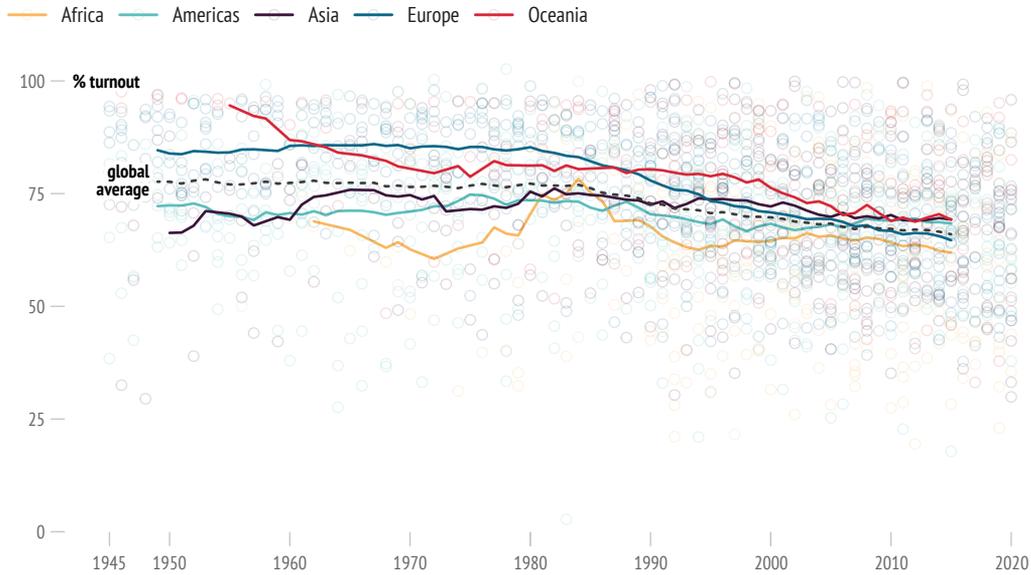
<sup>92</sup> Josep Borrell, “Embracing Europe’s Power”, Project Syndicate, February 8, 2020, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/embracing-europe-s-power-by-josep-borrell-2020-02?barrier=accesspaylog>.

<sup>93</sup> V-Dem Institute, “Autocratization Surges—Resistance Grows: Democracy Report 2020”, [https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer\\_public/de/39/de39af54-0bc5-4421-89ae-fb20d5c53dba/democracy\\_report.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/de/39/de39af54-0bc5-4421-89ae-fb20d5c53dba/democracy_report.pdf).

<sup>94</sup> Freedom House, “Nations in Transit 2020: Dropping the democratic face”, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>.

## Global voter turnout

In parliamentary elections across the globe, 1945-2020



Data: Vote Turnout Database, 2020

during the entire period. Then in the 1990s it fell sharply to 70%, and in 2015 it reached an all-time low of 66%. This decline is seen across most regions and in consolidated and semi-consolidated democracies alike, yet the pace differs: in Europe, established democracies have seen a drop of roughly 10% since the 1980s, whereas in post-communist countries voter turnout has fallen by twice that percentage since elections were first held.<sup>95</sup>

But at the same time, 2019 saw a major uptick in protest movements around the globe, as people took to the streets in 114 different countries – those that are demonstration-prone as well as those typically registering lower levels of activism. 71% countries saw an uptick in demonstrations compared to 2018. Ten major protest movements in 2019 are highlighted: Algeria, which with 2,090 demonstrations saw an increase of 269% since 2018; Egypt (with 161 demonstrations – 112% more compared to

2018); Sudan (1,148 – 495% more than in 2018); Iran (2,424 – 9% more than in 2018); Iraq (1,069 – 207% more than in 2018), Lebanon (2,138 – 1,743%), India (18,198 – 35% more than in 2018), Indonesia (1,030 – 41% more than in 2018), Kazakhstan (299 – 865% more than in 2018); and Russia (2,029 – 57% more than in 2018). But Serbia, Turkey and Bangladesh also saw significant increases in protests, as demonstrations went up by 403%, 198% and 80%, respectively. Countries in which peaceful protests frequently met with intimidation or excessive force include Egypt (18%), Sudan (22.3%), Kazakhstan (20.4%), and Russia (20.4%). The US was one of the countries that experienced the most activism in 2019: a three-month pilot study conducted during the summer counted 3,147 demonstration events. But (dis)satisfaction with democracy is not evenly distributed: satisfaction was on the increase everywhere in Central and Eastern

<sup>95</sup> Abdurashid Solijonov, "Voter turnout trends around the world", The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), 2016, <https://www.idea.int/es/publications/catalogue/voter-turnout-trends-around-world>.

Europe,<sup>96</sup> but in decline in the United Kingdom and France, and low in Italy and Spain.<sup>97</sup>

On a more positive note, democracy continued to expand in Africa: since 2015 the continent has experienced 32 peaceful transitions of power. In addition, low voter turnout does not mean low political engagement. 2019 marked a particularly remarkable year for political mobilisation against governments or particular policies: in democracies and autocracies alike and across six different continents, protestors took to the streets. In Algeria, Bolivia, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan, heads of government were forced to step back; elsewhere leaders were left with no choice but to reverse controversial policies. Democracy is becoming more and more a global affair, too. Movements such as the global climate strike led to mass protests everywhere: in March 2019 2,200 strikes were organised across 120 countries;<sup>98</sup> in May 2019, strike events took place in over 1,600 cities across 125 countries;<sup>99</sup> and in September 2019, 4,500 demonstrations took place in over 120 countries.<sup>100</sup>

## The impact of the pandemic

As measures against the pandemic restricted the gathering of people, this affected elections

and referenda worldwide. At least 75 countries postponed elections between 21 February and 13 December (of which at least 40 delayed national elections and referendums).<sup>101</sup>

But not all states followed this trend: at least 99 countries and territories decided to hold elections despite pandemic-related concerns (of which 76 countries held national elections or referendums).<sup>102</sup> Where elections did take place, abstention rates were unsurprisingly high – during the municipal elections in France, turnout was at a record low, with 60% of voters staying away from the polling stations.

Since March 2020, major protest movements have erupted worldwide. Many were related to Covid-19: in Germany, Russia, and the US, people demonstrated against lockdowns or other forms of restrictions in response to the virus, while in Brazil, Colombia, Israel, Lebanon, Ecuador and Spain, people demonstrated against their governments' handling of the pandemic. Prison protests took place in Colombia, Italy, the US and Lebanon, and in India migrant workers took to the streets to demand wages owed to them and the right to return home. In Argentina increased gender-based violence and femicide rates under quarantine sparked demonstrations, too. But not all protests that took place since March were virus-related: the death of George Floyd in the US sparked

**Emergency powers introduced since the outbreak as well as Western distraction have led governments to repress opposition and manipulate elections.**

<sup>96</sup> In Lithuania, up from 35% in 2009 to 69% in 2019, in Hungary from 21% to 45%, and in Czech Republic from 49 to 57%. In Poland and Ukraine satisfaction went up by 13 percentage points, and in Bulgaria by 6. Support for the transition to a multiparty system has risen over the last decade in this region, too: in Poland, from 70% in 2009 to 85% in 2019; in Lithuania by 15 percentage points to 70% in 2019; in Slovakia from 71% to 74%, and in Hungary by 16 percentage points to 72% in 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Pew Research Center, "European public opinion three decades after the fall of communism", October 15, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/15/european-public-opinion-three-decades-after-the-fall-of-communism/>

<sup>98</sup> Suyin Haynes, "It's literally our future.' Here's what youth climate strikers around the world are planning next", *Time Magazine*, March 20, 2019, <https://time.com/5554775/youth-school-climate-change-strike-action/>

<sup>99</sup> Suyin Haynes, "Students from 1,600 cities just walked out of school to protest climate change. It could be Greta Thunberg's biggest strike yet", *Time Magazine*, May 24, 2019, <https://time.com/5595365/global-climate-strikes-greta-thunberg/>

<sup>100</sup> Madeleine Carlisle, "'This is an emergency. Our house is on fire.' Greta Thunberg addresses New York's Climate Strike", *Time Magazine*, September 20, 2019, <https://time.com/5682318/nyc-global-climate-strike/>

<sup>101</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, "Global overview of Covid-19: Impact on elections", March 18, 2020 (updated December 2020), <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

protests against police brutality all across the globe, with major movements erupting in the US, Australia, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, Portugal and the UK.<sup>103</sup>

By May, 50% of incidents of violence and demonstrations in non-conflict countries in West Africa involved mobilisation over the pandemic. Government response was harsh: by mid-April in Nigeria, security forces had killed more people than Covid-19. Videos circulating on social media also showed police brutality in Togo, Benin and Liberia.<sup>104</sup>

Crucially, a number of West African states took advantage of the pandemic – or the lack of attention resulting from the pandemic – to crush opposition: in Sierra Leone, opposition protests have been banned under the pretext of public health safety; while in Benin and Côte d’Ivoire the government withdrew from protocols under the *Cour Africaine des droits de l’homme et des Peuples*, that allowed people to seek sub-regional justice. Moreover, emergency powers introduced since the outbreak as well as Western distraction have led governments to repress opposition and manipulate elections: in Guinea, President Condé pushed for parliamentary elections and a constitutional referendum in March, after which a nation-wide lockdown was announced and security forces gained additional powers. As the streets were empty, a controversial result with 92% of voters supporting the constitutional amendment could be declared and a coalition formed. In Togo, President Faure Gnassingbé availed of the Covid-19-curfew to arrest opposition leader Kodjo – previous attempts had been prevented by mobilisations of Kodjo supporters.

Meanwhile in Sierra Leone, a prison riot on April 29 that may have started following the discovery of a Covid-19 case in the overcrowded jail, was framed by the ruling party as an attempt to launch a coup, while the opposition claimed it was used as a pretext to crack down on them. In the weeks after, various opposition officials were arrested.

## What does this mean for Europe?

Although the postponement of elections has been interpreted as a threat to democracy, holding them during a pandemic is equally detrimental to democracy as it does not lead to legitimate results due to low voter turnout. It is therefore fair to say that the pandemic might have affected election procedures, but otherwise did not have an impact on the overall state of democracy as it existed before the elections. This is reflected in the increase in street demonstrations and online activism during the pandemic, sometimes in defiance of lockdown measures. For Europe, which sees itself as a defender of democracy, this means that no blanket statement on the status of democracy post-Covid-19 is yet possible. Instead, the challenges that democracy as a system faces should be understood in their entirety: while it is true that states such as Russia and China actively undermine democracies abroad, they are not alone responsible for the dissatisfaction citizens feel. A thorough review of how democracy needs to reform and adapt in the twenty-first century is long overdue.

<sup>103</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Global Protest Tracker”, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker>.

<sup>104</sup> Kars de Bruijne and Loic Bisson, “States, not jihadis, exploiting corona crisis in West Africa”, *Clingendael Spectator*, May 27, 2020, <https://spectator.clingendael.org/nl/publicatie/states-not-jihadis-exploiting-corona-crisis-west-africa>.

## CHAPTER 2

# GEOPOLITICAL GAME-CHANGERS IN THE MAKING

Every crisis opens up the possibility for change. This is because the onset of a crisis forces a re-think and redefinition of priorities, leads to the suspension of some activities while triggering others, paralyses some actors while empowering others, exposes structural vulnerabilities, and mobilises hitherto unknown or untapped resources and capabilities. While a crisis might not change everything across the board, it certainly opens up the *potential* for change by producing what we call game-changers: new developments affecting areas where decisions are yet to be taken, and where the future trajectory is therefore still uncertain.<sup>1</sup> Game-changers differ from trends in that we have less certainty when it comes to their scope, shape, and lifespan. But they, too are the result of drivers, factors that made them come about in the first place.

Covid-19, too, has produced game-changers that will have repercussions on geopolitics. In what follows, we outline the different possible trajectories they can take. Because game-changers open possibilities and uncertainties, they are formulated as questions – tentative answers to these are given in the scenarios presented in the next chapter.

## THE NEW FACE OF TRADE AND SUPPLY CHAINS

With the restrictions on mobility that were introduced to counter the spread of the virus, the pandemic negatively affected trade. This was less because of partial or full closure of borders, and more due to delays in production as factories were closed, as well as the severe downturn in air traffic, which made transport incredibly costly.<sup>2</sup> As a result, trade in goods shrank substantially all over the world to varying degrees: by 26.9% in Germany, by 33.9% in France and by 15.6% in the UK. Exports of services contracted, too, albeit to a lesser extent: by 15.5%, 23.9% and 8.8% in Germany, France and the UK, respectively.<sup>3</sup> In the US and Canada, merchandise export fell by 15.1% and 29.2% and imports by 13.6% and 25%, respectively – with imports of cars and car parts falling by 52.2% and 80%. As for trade in services, Canada witnessed a contraction of 21.1% for exports and 31.2% for imports; in the US exports contracted by 10.7% and imports by 14%. In Asia, services exports and imports contracted at slower rates:

1 Another term used in this context is ‘decision point’. Interestingly, the word ‘crisis’ comes from the Greek word *krisis* meaning ‘decisive moment’.

2 Between February and May, air freight rates per kg on routes from Hong Kong to North America had increased from \$3.19 to \$7.73 and to Europe from \$2.52 to \$5.88; on Frankfurt–North America cargo routes, freight prices per kg increased from \$1.84 in February to \$3.83 in April before falling again slightly to \$3.71 in May. Aircargo News, “Airfreight rates – TAC Index”, <https://www.aircargonews.net/data-hub/airfreight-rates-tac-index/>; World Bank, “Global Economic Prospects, June 2020”, Washington, D.C., 2020.

3 OECD, “International Trade Pulse, OECD – Updated: June 2020”, June 18, 2020, <http://www.oecd.org/sdd/its/international-trade-pulse-oecd-updated-june-2020.htm>.

in Japan exports fell by 7.1% and imports by 5.6%; in Korea exports contracted by 10.3% and imports by 5.4%. In China, services exports even increased by 4.2%. Merchandise exports fell by 10.6% in Japan and 21.7% in Korea during April, while imports fell by 0.1% in Japan and 9.5% in Korea. In China, merchandise exports picked up by 3.7%, nearly reaching 2019 levels, but imports fell by 7.9%.

This development was quickly dubbed the ‘reversal’ or ‘slowing down’ of globalisation as it appeared a continuation of the drop in the volume of trade in goods recorded the year before. There are two problems with this perception: firstly, it defines globalisation primarily as a phenomenon of trade in goods, when in reality it also includes trade in services, movement of people, and flow of information and capital.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, it interprets the decrease in trade geopolitically as a result of the Sino-American ‘trade war’.

A more accurate analysis shows a much more nuanced picture. To begin with, all other areas of the globalised economy continued to grow before the pandemic, with the exception of trade in goods which fell by 0.4% in 2019. What is worth noting is that this decrease cannot be labelled a trend because it happened only over the course of one year, while trends run over several years. In 2017 and 2018, global trade was expanding by 4.8% and 3.4%. A closer look also

shows that this dip was not so much due to the Sino-American ‘trade war’, but a combination of low oil prices, low global productivity and decreased demand for Japanese products in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Because of this, pre-pandemic expectations were high that global trade would return to pre-2019 levels from 2020.<sup>6</sup>

Where the pandemic *did* produce a potential geopolitical game-changer, however, was in the emergence of a new awareness of Western countries’ reliance on foreign-manufactured medical supplies and critical goods. Although the vast majority of disrupted production was in sectors such as electronics, computing and textile manufacturing, the disruption exposed in particular the extent to which Western countries were dependent on China and India for supplies of protective equipment and certain medicines.<sup>7</sup>

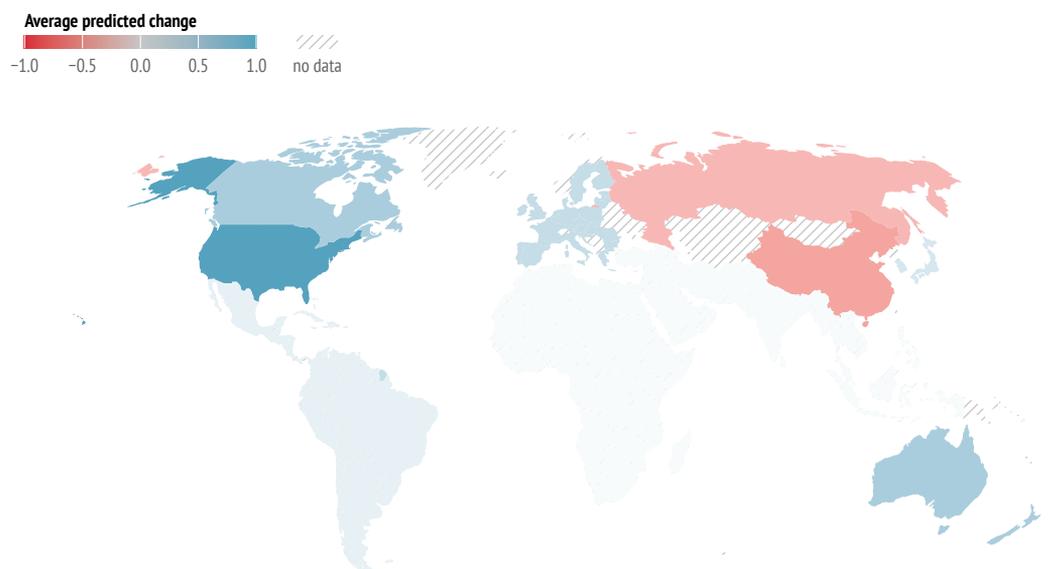
This realisation of a critical dependence on China in particular during a health crisis occurred in the context of the tense geopolitical climate already described in chapter 1, and led to a re-think of supply chain organisation and strategy. Looking at various expert polls, changes in supply chains are indeed foreseen – and attitudes are markedly different from those recorded before the pandemic. A survey of business leaders and tech experts demonstrates that while before the pandemic, 45% of respondents did not anticipate any changes in supply chains,

## Pre-pandemic expectations were high that global trade would return to pre-2019 levels from 2020.

- 4 “Special report on global supply chains”, *The Economist*, July 11, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2019/07/11/supply-chains-are-undergoing-a-dramatic-transformation>; Steven A. Altman and Phillip Bastian, “DHL Global Connectedness Index: Mapping the Current State of Global Flows”, 2019, p.7, <https://www.dhl.com/content/dam/dhl/global/core/documents/pdf/go-en-gci-2019-update-complete-study.pdf>.
- 5 As a result of China’s expanding domestic consumer market and a maturation of supply chains, its exports to the United States were in decline even before the spat over imports, falling from 7.4% of China’s GDP in 2006 to 3.6% in 2017. When the ‘trade war’ started, they decreased from 3.5% of China’s total economic output (GDP) in the first quarter of 2018 to 3.2% in the second quarter of 2019 – a mere 0.3%. The share of China’s total exports going to the United States fell from 19% in the first quarter of 2018 to 18% in the second quarter of 2019 – by 1%. The American share of Chinese imports meanwhile dropped from 8.0% in the first quarter of 2018 to 5.7% in the second quarter of 2019, reflecting a more dramatic drop. “Global trade growth is on its longest losing streak in a decade”, *Quartz*, January 2020, <https://qz.com/1791936/global-trade-plummeted-in-2019/>
- 6 “Global Growth: Modest Pickup to 2.5% in 2020 amid Mounting Debt and Slowing Productivity Growth”, World Bank, January 8, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/01/08/modest-pickup-in-2020-amid-mounting-debt-and-slowing-productivity-growth>; IMF, “The World Economy: Synchronized Slowdown, Precarious Outlook”, October 15, 2019, <https://blogs.imf.org/2019/10/15/the-world-economy-synchronized-slowdown-precious-outlook/>
- 7 World Economic Forum, “Managing COVID-19: How the pandemic disrupts global value chains”, April 27, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/covid-19-pandemic-disrupts-global-value-chains/>; Sam Lowe, “Securing Europe’s medical supply chains against future shocks”, Centre for European Reform, May 29, 2020, <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/bulletin-article/2020/securing-europes-medical-supply-chains-against-future>.

## Anticipated changes in supply chain presence

Expert survey on expected increase/decrease in supply chain components



Data: Atlantic Council/GeoTech Center, 2020

after the pandemic, this percentage was down to 15%. More than 60% of the respondents said that they expected significant or moderate changes to supply chains in the long run, with the most significant decreases in the presence of supply chain components expected in China and Russia, and the largest increases in the US, Canada, the UK and Australia.<sup>8</sup>

Governments have been encouraging companies to reshore: in April Japan announced subsidies and direct loans worth \$2 billion for companies shifting production from China back to Japan, and \$220 million for those reshoring from China to Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, too,

initiatives to increase autonomy from China are being launched: the UK initiated the idea of a '5G club' of ten democracies, including the G7 countries and Australia, South Korea and India, to create alternative suppliers of 5G technology and avoid excessive reliance on China.<sup>10</sup> In June, the EU put forward a proposal to curb foreign subsidies – a move that is generally interpreted as an attempt to push back Chinese companies' influence on the European market. In addition, on 12 June the EU imposed anti-subsidy tariffs on glass fibre from Chinese factories in Egypt,<sup>11</sup> marking the first explicit targeting of China's Belt-and-Road programme. And on 13 June the EU launched a review of its trade policy to address, *inter alia*, the reshoring of European

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Little Limbago, Stewart Scott, David Bray and Peter Brooks, "Expert survey series: Supply chains and the effects of Covid-19, geopolitics, and technological innovation", June 1, 2020, Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/geotech-cues/supply-chains-and-the-effects-of-covid-19-geopolitics-and-technological-innovation/>

<sup>9</sup> "Japan ditches China in multi-billion dollar Coronavirus shakeout", *Forbes*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2020/04/09/japan-ditches-china-in-multi-billion-dollar-coronavirus-shakeout/#42c102495341>.

<sup>10</sup> "Downing Street plans new 5G club of democracies", *The Times*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/downing-street-plans-new-5g-club-of-democracies-bfnd5wj57>.

<sup>11</sup> "EU imposes tariffs on Chinese makers of glass fibre fabric in China and Egypt", *Reuters*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-china-egypt-trade/eu-imposes-tariffs-on-chinese-makers-of-glass-fibre-fabric-in-china-and-egypt-idUSKBN23M27j>

manufacturing.<sup>12</sup> These developments are of course not novel: the 5G discussion was heated long before the coronavirus was first detected and the European Commission mentioned the need for measures to curb foreign subsidies already in March 2019 in its Communication on China; but the pandemic gave a new urgency to this debate.<sup>13</sup>

It should be added that while the pandemic served as a wake-up call that global supply chains are increasingly vulnerable to shocks, the necessity to rethink them extends well beyond this health crisis. The World Bank has established that that 80% of global trade flows through countries with declining political stability scores, and more global production happens in areas vulnerable to climate change.<sup>14</sup> For instance, companies sourcing leading-edge chips from Korea, Japan, Taiwan or elsewhere in the western Pacific can expect that hurricanes sufficient to disrupt supplies will become 2 to 4 times more likely by 2040. And the probability that heavy rare earths production in south-eastern China will be severely disrupted by extreme rainfall doubles by 2030.<sup>15</sup>

The first structural change that the pandemic could thus induce is a thorough reorganisation and reshuffling of value chains that reorient production processes towards countries sharing the same values. We may see sustained efforts by states and trading blocs to push companies to re-shore, and a spike in measures to curb foreign subsidies. Even if framed as efforts to counter unfair competition, the underlying goal of increased strategic autonomy and resilience will be crystal clear. These measures are unlikely to level the playing field, and countries

engaged in the BRI may find it increasingly hard to enter certain markets. The result will be a world increasingly divided into blocs, with supply chains reflecting political faultlines. Such a reconfiguration does not necessarily imply a regionalisation of trade: previous trade diversions caused by the US-China trade war saw a shift in US manufacturing imports to Mexico and Vietnam alike; there is no reason to believe this will be different now. Alternatively, we may see that the ‘nothing will ever be the same’ reaction typical to crises will prove exaggerated. As the pandemic winds down, but its economic effects reverberate, companies and countries alike will once again prioritise cost-efficiency. The sudden disruptions that exposed the vulnerabilities of just-in-time value chains can be quickly forgotten. Yet pre-pandemic trends such as rising global labour costs, technological advancements and maturing domestic markets in China, ASEAN countries and elsewhere will continue to drive a more gradual restructuring of global supply chains.

In addition, longer-term effects could include a strengthening of intra-African trade and supply chains, but also a rise in the importance of African manufacturing for European and Middle Eastern states.<sup>16</sup>

## Key uncertainties

- > To what extent will the reallocation of supply chains alter geopolitics? While this depends on the depth and scale of the changes, and the accompanying rhetoric, it could lead to ties between some countries being severed and

12 “Brussels forges new weapons to shield EU market from China”, *Politico*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/16/brussels-forges-new-weapons-to-shield-eu-market-from-china-325145>.

13 European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council, “EU-China: A Strategic Outlook”, *Join(2019) 5 Final*, Strasbourg, March 12, 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.

14 Kevin Sneader and Susan Lund, “COVID-19 and climate change expose dangers of unstable supply chains”, McKinsey Global Institute, August 28, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/operations/our-insights/covid-19-and-climate-change-expose-dangers-of-unstable-supply-chains?cid=other-eml-alt-mgi-mck&hlkid=02684107eccf48e29ce5a2001db06ce1&hctky=12149150&hdpid=43f33d3f-d57c-4ede-8b25-abfef610c1c5>.

15 Jonathan Woetzel et al, “Could climate change become the weak link in your supply chain?”, McKinsey Global Institute, August 6, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/sustainability/our-insights/could-climate-become-the-weak-link-in-your-supply-chain>.

16 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, “Digital Economy Report 2019”, [https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/der2019\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/der2019_en.pdf).

new ones being created elsewhere. It could also increase a European self-perception of autonomy and self-reliance, with important geopolitical ripple effects.

- > Will supply chains change permanently and comprehensively, or only temporarily and sectorally? Studies show that shocks to a system can induce different types of change – this means that the ongoing discussion on supply chains gives us no clear indication on how substantial the changes will be in the long run.
- > Will these changes bring economic impacts with them? There is a risk that reallocation of supply chains will be accompanied by financial costs and other negative economic effects, such as delays and lowered productivity. These, in turn could have adverse political consequences.

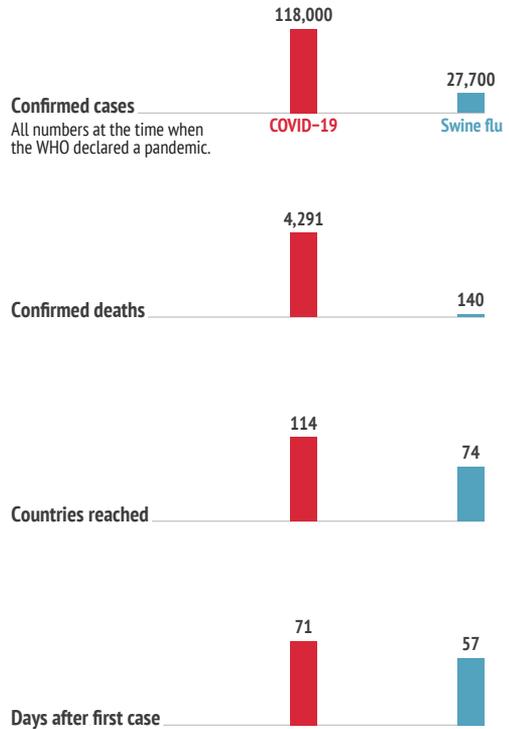
## HEALTH MULTILATERALISM

Until the advent of Covid-19, international healthcare was a largely national affair. The World Health Organisation, a body created to promote human health around the globe, was chiefly preoccupied by the eradication of diseases such as polio, and had a particular regional emphasis on Africa and Western Asia. A health problem that reached global proportions, such as Covid-19, had never been handled before by either the WHO or national states despite a widely shared expectation that a pandemic would eventually unfold.

That said, the WHO was much slower in declaring Covid-19 a pandemic than was the case with swine flu in 2009. Dissatisfaction over this delay was widely shared, and led the US

### Two pandemics compared

The WHO's response to Covid-19 and swine flu



Data: WHO, 2020

administration to announce that it would cut its funding to the UN agency responsible for international public health. But criticism was not limited to the WHO, and geopolitical tensions rose as leaders bickered over the origins of the virus and countries' respective handling of the outbreak. Various authorities hinted at malicious cyber activity targeting Covid-19 research and healthcare policies, and the emergence of 'vaccine nationalism' exacerbated international tensions and rivalries.<sup>17</sup>

Yet below the tensions, it quickly became clear that lack of international solidarity and the absence of a concerted approach to global health cooperation made managing the pandemic much more difficult.

<sup>17</sup> Jenny J. Lee and John P. Haupt, "Scientific globalism during a global crisis: research collaboration and open access publications on COVID-19", *Higher Education*, 2020, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-020-00589-0>.

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, various global funds were launched by the major multilateral organisations. The UN launched a \$10.31 billion inter-agency Global Humanitarian Response Plan – of which \$2.35 billion had been raised by late August – to support vulnerable countries in their responses.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile the WHO launched a solidarity fund to coordinate the global response. At the state level, too, global leaders underlined the need for global cooperation. Health ministers from the G7 agreed in February to coordinate travel regulations and precautions, research into the virus and cooperation with the WHO, the EU and China;<sup>19</sup> while in April G20 leaders pledged to accelerate cooperation on a vaccine and research, treatment and medicine.<sup>20</sup> In April, the WHO, France, the European Commission and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched the Covid-19 Tools Accelerator, aimed at a more timely and effective response at the global level.<sup>21</sup> And in June, \$8.8 billion was raised at the Global Vaccine Summit from 31 donor governments and 8 foundations and corporations to provide vaccines and support health systems in low-income countries.<sup>22</sup> Countries also joined forces in smaller coalitions, such as the ‘First Mover’ group consisting of Australia, Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Israel, New Zealand, Norway and Singapore, to compare notes on their pandemic responses.<sup>23</sup> Regional health cooperation initiatives were further undertaken by the African Union (AU),

## The global health crisis incited an unprecedented level of global cooperation at the scientific level.

the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile in Brussels, the European Commission proposed a 9.4 billion EU4Health programme for the period 2021-2027 to improve coordination among member states and better prepare for future health crises. The programme aims to tackle cross-border health threats, make medicines more available and affordable, and strengthen health systems – including support for global cooperation on health challenges. EU ministers of health broadly welcomed the initiative during a meeting in June 2020.

But perhaps even more importantly, the global health crisis incited an unprecedented level of global cooperation at the scientific level. In January, Chinese researchers rapidly published the first genome sequence of the coronavirus, and the genetic map was made freely available around the world. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) engineers, physicians and computer scientists made freely available a design for a low-cost ventilator – which was used by a group of Indian engineers racing to ease the country’s ventilator shortage. The Institut Pasteur in Dakar and the British biotechnology

18 OCHA Services, “COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (Humanitarian response plan)”, <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/952/summary>.

19 “G7 health ministers agree on coordinated approach to coronavirus: Germany”, *Reuters*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-g7-germany/g7-health-ministers-agree-on-coordinated-approach-to-coronavirus-germany-idUSKBN1ZX21Q>.

20 Patrick Wintour, “US stays away as world leaders agree action on Covid-19 vaccine”, *The Guardian*, April 24, 2020, Patrick Wintour, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/24/us-stays-away-as-world-leaders-agree-action-on-covid-19-vaccine#maincontent>.

21 World Health Organisation, “ACT-Accelerator update”, <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/26-06-2020-act-accelerator-update>.

22 GAVI, “World leaders make historic commitments to provide equal access to vaccines for all”, June 4, 2020, <https://www.gavi.org/news/media-room/world-leaders-make-historic-commitments-provide-equal-access-vaccines-all>.

23 “Inside the First Movers group of countries that turned virus around”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/inside-the-first-movers-group-of-countries-that-turned-virus-around-20200619-p554ft.html>.

24 Tom Evans and Alex Scott, “Global cooperation during Covid-19”, *E3G*, July 15, 2020, [https://www.e3g.org/wp-content/uploads/15\\_07\\_20\\_Briefing-Global-Cooperation-during-COVID-19-April-July-2020.pdf](https://www.e3g.org/wp-content/uploads/15_07_20_Briefing-Global-Cooperation-during-COVID-19-April-July-2020.pdf).

firm Mologic joined forces to develop rapid test kits to be made and distributed across Africa.<sup>25</sup> And the University of Pittsburgh works together in a consortium with the Pasteur Institute in Paris and the Austrian drug company Themis Bioscience, funded by the Norway-based Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovation – which is in turn funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and a group of governments. The consortium is in talks with the Serum Institute of India, one of the world's largest vaccine manufacturers. Meanwhile a group of Harvard doctors tested the effectiveness of inhaled nitric oxide on Covid-19 patients in Massachusetts General Hospital, in conjunction with Xijin Hospital in China and various hospitals in northern Italy. The scale of the current pandemic and today's technology have thus paved the way for a global scientific effort that is truly unprecedented and ground-breaking, especially when considering that academic medical research is usually shrouded in secrecy to secure grants, promotions and tenure.<sup>26</sup>

A study of scientific globalism during the pandemic indeed found that the proportion of international collaboration and open-access publications increased. The extent of international scientific collaboration – measured by the number of publications that included authors from more than one country – in Covid-19 research published between January and early May 2020 was higher compared to the pre-pandemic period (2015-2019) and compared to non-Covid-19 research conducted in 2020. Of the 3401 Covid-19 publications included in the study, one third were based on international collaborations, compared to 23.4% for studies

conducted in the pre-pandemic period and 27.9% of non-Covid-19 studies conducted in 2020. The same applies to open access: 75.7% of the publications on Covid-19 were open access, whereas this percentage is 28.9% for publications in the pre-pandemic period and 32% of non-Covid-19 publications in 2020. Interestingly, the more affected a country was by the pandemic, the more likely it was that it would participate in international collaboration and open access publications.<sup>27</sup>

That said, another study pointed out that in a time of crisis, the cost of research and coordination needed in internationally collaborative work increases. In the absence of an international organisation overseeing research, international cooperation operates as a network which takes time to put in place. This particularly applies to sciences of immunology and virology, where no central laboratory or common data set functions as an organising force. The need to increase efficiency during the pandemic

## **The pandemic has thus opened a window of opportunity for reinforced scientific cooperation and a global approach to health.**

therefore reduced the number of team members (and nationalities) involved in coronavirus research, this study suggested, and favoured pre-existing relationships to reduce the transaction costs of communication. However, findings also suggest that collaboration between China and the United States – the two countries at the centre of the global network of coronavirus research – strengthened: the two countries produced more

than 4.9% of global articles on Covid-19 together in contrast to 3.6% of research on coronavirus before the pandemic.<sup>28</sup>

Despite rising geopolitical tensions, the pandemic has thus opened a window of

25 World Economic Forum, "COVID-19: Collaboration is the engine of global science – especially for developing countries", May 15, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/global-science-collaboration-open-source-covid-19/>

26 "COVID-19 changed how the world does science, together", *New York Times*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/world/europe/coronavirus-science-research-cooperation.html>.

27 Op.Cit., "Scientific globalism during a global crisis."

28 Caroline V. Fry, Xiaojing Cai, Yi Zhang and Caroline S Wagner, "Consolidation in a crisis: patterns of international collaboration in early COVID-19 research", *PLoS ONE*, vol. 15, no. 7, July 21, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0236307>.

opportunity for reinforced scientific cooperation and a global approach to health. Not only has the pandemic spurred a sense of urgency for such a global scientific approach but furthermore today's technologies facilitate this – which for instance was not the case during the HIV epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s. This need has been acknowledged by leaders across the globe; for instance at a UNESCO meeting with representatives of ministries in charge of sciences in 122 countries as well as the EU, the AU and the WHO.<sup>29</sup>

The EU has all the bodies, agencies and financial resources in place to have a more comprehensive strategy on health. For instance, real-time information sharing of outbreak data and information on health infrastructures by member states, shared stockpiles, better control and autonomy of health supply chains and an EU-wide vaccine programme are all ideas on how the EU could do more together on health. But an international health approach could – and should – go further than the EU's borders. Especially in the absence of US and Chinese leadership in this regard, the EU can have a crucial role to play in advancing a global approach to health. The Union thus has an important balance to strike between protecting European health interests and pushing a global health agenda. The Commission's announcement on 31 August that the EU will participate in the COVAX Facility for equitable global access to vaccines and make a contribution of €400 million – in addition to the earlier pledge of €16 billion for the global response to Covid-19 – demonstrates that the EU is indeed opting for assuming a global role.<sup>30</sup>

## Key uncertainties

> To what extent will member states grant the EU new competencies to roll out health measures? At the moment, health is not a matter managed at either European or

international level. In fact, it is a matter mostly managed by individuals themselves, as lifestyle choices have been shown to play a more important role in the pandemic's impact than healthcare spending. Thus, healthcare could become a new area for global cooperation – or not.

- > To what extent will the EU assume a global role coordinating health efforts in multilateral forums? As the EU has no competencies in this regard, the extent to which the EU can or will play an influential role in this area will depend very much on how well it manages to merge its foreign affairs with its member states' healthcare competencies.
- > What geopolitical consequences will the vaccines have? Will states producing vaccines engage in 'vaccine diplomacy' and increase their leverage over states which do not have this advantage? Will the different speeds of the vaccine rollout have an effect on the economy, and lead to an asymmetric economic recovery?

## DIGITAL DIPLOMACY

Diplomacy at the beginning of the twenty-first century was already being conducted in a way that was distinctly different from the years before. A new style of language, along with the use of social media and the rise of disinformation, had created a diplomatic environment that appeared more conflictual, more antagonistic and less focused on what diplomacy was created for: communication, exchange of views and the development of common solutions among states.

On the surface, Covid-19 put an end to diplomacy as it had hitherto been known: the severe reduction of mobility, as well as the restrictions

<sup>29</sup> UNESCO, "UNESCO mobilizes 122 countries to promote open science and reinforced cooperation in the face of COVID-19", March 30, 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-mobilizes-122-countries-promote-open-science-and-reinforced-cooperation-face-covid-19>.

<sup>30</sup> European Commission, "Coronavirus global response: Commission joins the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility (COVAX)", August 31, 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1540](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1540).

on social contact and interaction, meant that face-to-face meetings, which are the cornerstone of diplomatic practice, were no longer possible, or only at a very limited level. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the ASEAN summit, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, the EU-China summit, the EU-India summit, the Council of Europe Congress, and a host of European Council meetings were postponed or cancelled in the first few months of the crisis. At the UN, Security Council meetings were cancelled along with a session of the Human Rights Council and a host of working group meetings.<sup>31</sup>

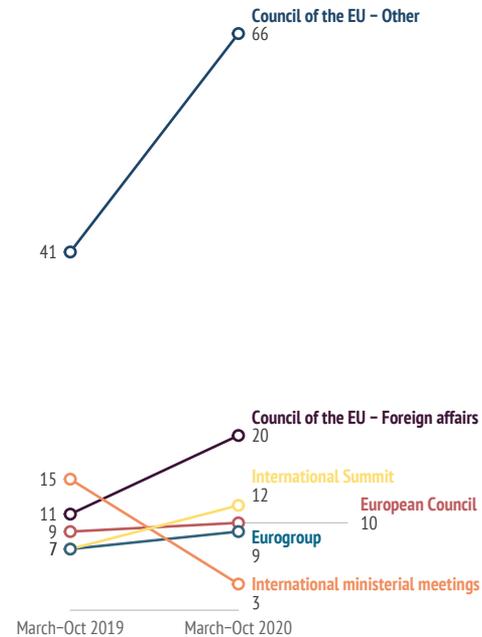
But by the second week of March, European Council meetings had already resumed via videoconference. The system, at first not adapted to the new requirements, originally allowed only for one videoconference a day, with a long break in between for technical reasons.<sup>32</sup> Although diplomacy lagged far behind in digital matters – for reasons of information security, confidentiality and tradition – it quickly adapted to the crisis along with other sectors that moved online.

When comparing 2019 and 2020, the EU did not just resume meetings at the pre-pandemic level, but indeed often increased the number of meetings among European officials, now held almost entirely remotely.

It also re-scheduled meetings with non-EU states, such as India and China, to be held via videoconference. In August, a month where traditionally no summits are held, Council President Michel called for an emergency summit as violence had erupted in Belarus,

### EU high-level meetings

Before and during Covid-19



a measure possible only because of the new practice of digital diplomacy. Meetings took also place between European and American foreign ministers.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, the EU was not the only international actor to use digital technologies to work around the pandemic: the G20 met in late March via videoconference, while at the United Nations, Security Council meetings resumed via videoconference, albeit with a few crucial weeks of delay.<sup>34</sup> The UNGA was held, in September 2020, for the first time online.<sup>35</sup> NATO meetings

31 “UN Security Council halts meetings due to coronavirus epidemic”, *France 24*, March 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200316-un-security-council-halts-meetings-due-to-coronavirus-epidemic>; United Nations, “Schedule of meetings of the General Assembly plenary and other related meetings”, <https://www.un.org/pga/74/wp-content/uploads/sites/99/2020/07/Schedule-of-meetings-of-GA-plenary-and-other-related-meetings-updated-6-July-2020.pdf>.

32 , “Deutscher EU-Botschafter schreibt Brandbrief ans Kanzleramt“, *Der Spiegel*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/corona-krise-deutscher-eu-botschafter-schreibt-brandbrief-ans-kanzleramt-a-90f62ece-5cdf-4a92-b720-16c051660ccb>.

33 “Trans-Atlantic homesick blues as Pompeo holds EU talks”, *Politico*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/15/pompeo-europe-video-call-320398>.

34 “The United Nations goes missing”, *Politico*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/08/united-nations-coronavirus-176187>.

35 “COVID-19: World leaders to stay at home, in first ‘virtual’ UN General Assembly”, *UN News*, July 23, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1068921>.

– from working groups to North Atlantic Council meetings – were also moved to video format from early April.<sup>36</sup> The AU, too, held video meetings from April, and the League of Arab States, somewhat lagging behind, from June.

To be sure, conducting diplomacy via video-conference has severe disadvantages: concerns over confidentiality, connection issues, lack of interpersonal relations, and difficulties with concentration apply to diplomacy as much as to any other sector relying on digital tools. Technical difficulties with interpreting, inadequate background information, and the lack of opportunities for informal exchange and discussion provided by the coffee break are all serious drawbacks that should not be underestimated. Some states, such as Russia and China, have weakened the format by declaring discussions held online to be only informal, and therefore no binding decisions are taken. For instance, the Security Council's sanctions committee has been paralysed and cannot take action on alleged violations of sanctions. As not all states are in favour of digitalisation, the UNGA has no electronic voting system, and therefore the regular procedure cannot be used. As a result, only consensus resolutions are passed. Of course, unanimity in international relations is rare, and even more so when personal face-to-face meetings are not possible to resolve issues. Furthermore, multilateral fora also provide an opportunity for states to meet that are not on friendly terms – an opportunity unlikely to arise online.<sup>37</sup> That said, in a time of crisis, the tool has proven invaluable in streamlining positions, pushing forward common decisions, and maintaining communication across distances. It also contributed to a reduction in travel costs, and to curbing CO2 emissions.

Digitalisation has also made inroads in the public relations aspects of diplomacy. Due to the fast pace of the crisis, communication moved towards those social media platforms and outlets capable of absorbing this speed, especially Twitter but also Instagram.<sup>38</sup> The EU, for one, has doubled down on its actions to counter disinformation, quickly adding to an already growing number of initiatives designed to boost media literacy, while the WHO organised an “infodemiology” conference to study and highlight the ‘infodemic’ around the coronavirus. According to one study, English-language fact-checks increased by over 900% between January and March.<sup>39</sup>

## Key uncertainties

- > Will the inherent weaknesses of video conferencing, such as security and connection concerns, be addressed sufficiently to establish digital diplomacy permanently as a complement of regular diplomacy? If yes, this could improve the pace of decision-making and decrease response time to crises.
- > Does the increase in communication improve or decrease the efficiency of diplomatic practices, particularly with regard to pressing issues such as conflict outbreaks and severe violations of international law? In the early months of the pandemic, this appeared not to be the case, as key elements of diplomacy, notably trust and communication, were not easily established. This could change, however.
- > Will an extended paralysis of the UN Security Council and General Assembly also hinder

<sup>36</sup> NATO, “Meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs”, April 1, 2020, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/events\\_174657.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/events_174657.htm?selectedLocale=en).

<sup>37</sup> “How COVID-19 Has Transformed Multilateral Diplomacy”, *World Politics Review*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28801/how-covid-19-has-transformed-multilateral-diplomacy>.

<sup>38</sup> “Digital diplomacy: States go online”, *Euractiv*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/digital-diplomacy-states-go-online/>

<sup>39</sup> J. Scott Brennan, Felix Simon, Philip N Howard, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, “Types, sources, and claims of Covid-19 misinformation”, Reuters Institute, April 7, 2020, [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=newsletter\\_axiosfutureofwork&stream=future](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosfutureofwork&stream=future).

conflict resolution and prevention efforts? Past experiences with paralysis of the Security Council – notably during the Cold War – showed that it correlated with an increase in conflict. The first phase of the pandemic seems to confirm this, but it could also prove to be an ephemeral phenomenon.

## EUROPE: THE GREEN SUPERPOWER?

The pandemic drastically altered global patterns of energy demand. Reduced mobility and the temporary closing-down of production sites caused an unprecedented decline in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Current estimations of the total impact on 2020 annual emissions vary between -4% and -7%, depending on the continued need for restrictions.<sup>40</sup> Yet these numbers give little reason for optimism: similar patterns were observed during the financial crisis of 2008-09, only for emissions to bounce back two years later. And to keep global temperature levels below 1.5 degrees, emissions would have to fall by 7.6% each year.

While the impact of pandemic-related consumption, production and mobility changes on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions will thus likely be limited, the

health crisis also influences policies and measures undertaken to mitigate climate change. An early assessment of how the pandemic has affected such efforts shows that both negative and positive effects have been observed. On the negative side, we have seen anything from cancelled climate negotiations<sup>41</sup> to a 55% upsurge in illegal deforestation in the Amazon, with states such as China, Brazil or the United States flouting environmental regulations.<sup>42</sup> Airlines in particular seized the chance to minimise their obligations under the carbon-offsetting scheme scheduled to start in 2021, helped by the fact that virtually no climate conditions were attached to the €32.9 billion made available in assistance to European companies.<sup>43</sup> In addition, as people were reluctant to use public transport, sales of used cars increased by up to 80% – but sales of new ones dropped by 30%, suggesting an expectation that this trend would be short-lived.<sup>44</sup>

Yet positive measures and changes in behaviour have also been observed. Micro-mobility for instance is one of the sectors projected to benefit the most from the crisis. Bicycle sales more than doubled, helped by the fact that many cities closed off car lanes to create additional space for cyclists and pedestrians, particularly in Europe (Berlin added 21km of cycle lanes, Rome 150km, Milan 35km, and Paris 50 km), but also in the United States (Oakland 120km, New York 64km) and elsewhere (Bogota 75km,

40 Corinne Le Quéré et al., “Temporary reduction in daily global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions during the COVID-19 forced confinement”, *Nature Climate Change*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-020-0797-x>.

41 The United Nations Climate Change Conference, the World Conservation Congress, the Convention on Biological Diversity (set to establish new rules for the protection of wildlife and plans from climate change), the UN Ocean Conference, High Seas Treaty. Earth Institute at Columbia University, “COVID-19’s long-term effects on climate change - for better or worse”, June 25, 2020, <https://phys.org/news/2020-06-covid-long-term-effects-climate-change-for.html>.

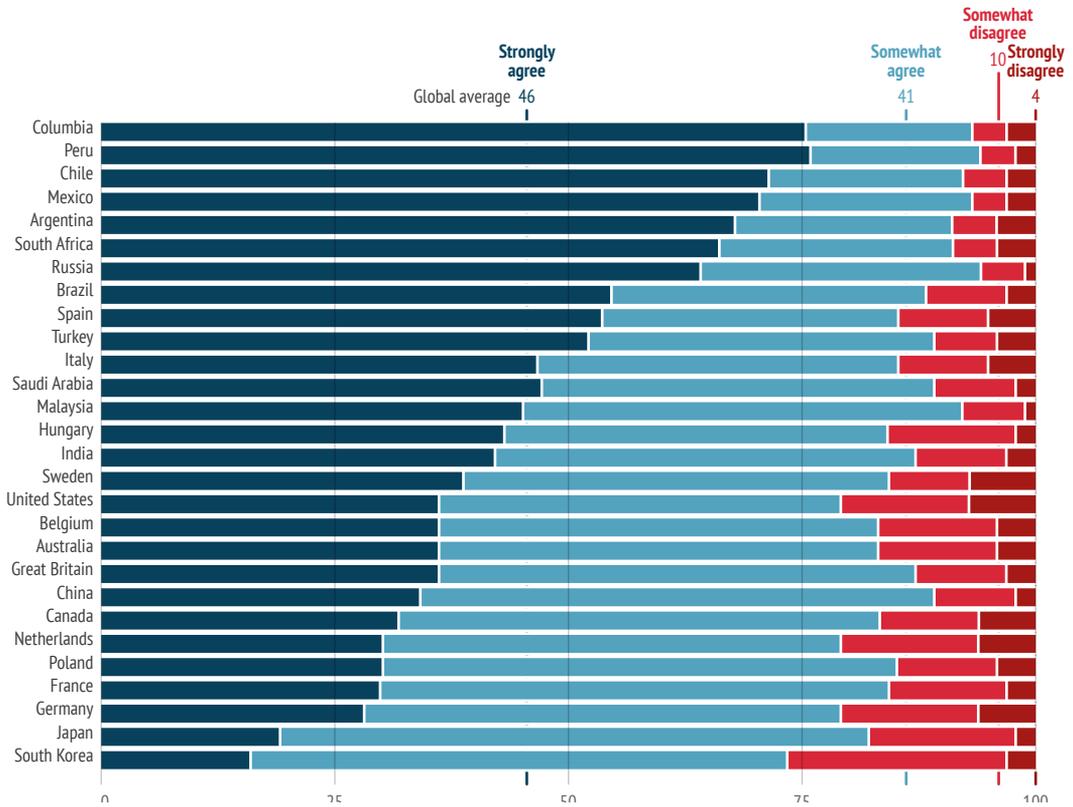
42 “Brazil scales back environmental enforcement amid coronavirus”, *Reuters*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-brazil-environment/exclusive-brazil-scales-back-environmental-enforcement-amid-coronavirus-idUSKBN21E15H>; Elaine Ruth Fletcher and Svet Lustig Vijay, “UN Climate Conference postponed until 2021 due to COVID-19; Experts debate pandemic’s impact on climate action”, *Health Policy Watch*, April 2, 2020, <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/un-climate-conference-postponed-until-2021-due-to-covid-19-experts-debate-pandemics-impact-on-climate-action/>; “China to modify environmental supervision of firms to boost post-coronavirus recovery”, *Reuters*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-environment/china-to-modify-environmental-supervision-of-firms-to-boost-post-coronavirus-recovery-idUSKBN20X0AG>.

43 “Airlines blame covid-19 for rowing back climate commitments”, *The Economist*, July 4, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/business/2020/07/04/airlines-blame-covid-19-for-rowing-back-climate-commitments>; Transport & Environment, “Bailout tracker”, June 26, 2020, <https://www.transportenvironment.org/what-we-do/flying-and-climate-change/bailout-tracker>.

44 “Covid effect: Delhi sees spike in demand for second hand cars”, *India Today*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/covid-effect-delhi-demand-for-used-cars-1687197-2020-06-09>; “Coronavirus pandemic fuels comeback of cars”, *Deutsche Welle*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-pandemic-fuels-comeback-of-cars/a-53759607>.

### Global support for sustainable recovery

Responses to: 'I want the world to change significantly and become more sustainable and equitable rather than returning to how it was before the Covid crisis', survey conducted between 21 August and 4 September 2020



Data: Ipsos for the World Economic Forum, 2020

Mexico City 130km).<sup>45</sup> And although airlines are unlikely to meet their climate commitments, a shift in travelling and vacation habits could very well become more permanent, ranging from more local tourism to nature holidays and ‘micro-holidays’. The longer the pandemic lasts, the more likely it is that it will induce lasting changes in behaviour.

The rail sector, too, is set to benefit from the pandemic. One study found that the European high-speed rail market is set to grow 10% every year this decade, as sweeping changes to infrastructure will open market opportunities worth €11 billion by 2022. Should these predictions materialise, there will be a significant drop in global air traffic growth.<sup>46</sup>

45 “‘Corona Cycleways’ become the new post-confinement commute”, *New York Times*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/business/paris-bicycles-commute-coronavirus.html>; “‘Cleaner and greener’: Covid-19 prompts world’s cities to free public space of cars”, *The Guardian*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/18/cleaner-and-greener-covid-19-prompts-worlds-cities-to-free-public-space-of-cars>; World Economic Forum, “Could the pandemic usher in a golden age of cycling?”, May 13, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/covid-19-usher-golden-age-cycling-coronavirus-pandemic-bike-cycle/>

46 “Planes vs trains: High-speed rail set for coronavirus dividend”, *Euractiv*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/railways/news/planes-vs-trains-high-speed-rail-set-for-coronavirus-dividend/>; “China-Europe Rail Is Set To Boom As COVID-19 Chokes Air, Sea And Road Transport”, *Forbes*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2020/03/31/china-europe-rail-is-set-to-boom-as-covid-19-chokes-air-sea-and-road-transport/#3083cab637db>.

In addition, the overall share of renewable energy in the energy mix increased during the pandemic from 36% to 44% in the EU, from 16% to 22% in India, and from 23% to 27% in China. The reasons for this increase were low operating costs and the fact that renewable energy technologies are granted priority access to the grid through regulations, so the trend could be reversed once regular activity resumes – but it does show that these renewable energy sources are less subject to market fluctuation.<sup>47</sup>

What is more, the pandemic has opened up an opportunity to direct investment and support towards those sectors that will help reduce the effects of climate change. For instance, the European Commission's €750 billion recovery plan includes earmarked grants and loan guarantees for energy-saving home improvements such as solar panels, insulation and renewable heating systems worth €91 billion per year – this is significant because 36% of European emissions come from poorly insulated housing. Renovated buildings can reduce the EU's total energy consumption by 5–6% and lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by about 5%.<sup>48</sup> One study calculated that stimulus measures invested in a climate-smart way will lead not only to job creation, but also a reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 15% to 30% by 2030.<sup>49</sup> The assumption that societies will have to choose between the economy and the planet is therefore wrong – instead they are two sides of the same coin.

**C**limate change is no longer a solely environmental problem, but a transnational one that is shaping geopolitics decisively.

Taken together, these uncertainties show that two elements will be decisive in how the interplay between the pandemic and climate change will unfold. On the one hand, governments play a role in how they allocate funds; on the other, collective changes in behaviour, too, can be decisive. In either case, however, environmental awareness and climate action will have positive effects for those states that can claim to have successfully reduced emissions, and therefore have geopolitical implications.

This is because climate change is no longer a solely environmental problem, but a transnational issue that is shaping geopolitics decisively. This has to do with growing awareness at both the decision-making level and that of the wider public. As always with geopolitical challenges, first-movers and shakers will reap the reward. It is therefore fair to say that climate change is the new frontier of the twenty-first

century: states that get there first will determine the shape of geopolitics – because they will be energy-independent, set the norms for climate-neutral and therefore sustainable growth, and increase resilience to extreme weather events.<sup>50</sup> The pandemic has created new incentives for countries to embrace climate change strategies and sustainable economic practices.

Europe is leading when it comes to coupling measures to revive flagging economies with efforts to tackle climate change. A Bloomberg NEF report found that European nations account for three-quarters of green stimulus

<sup>47</sup> IEA, "Covid-19 impact on electricity", May 2020, <https://www.iea.org/reports/covid-19-impact-on-electricity>.

<sup>48</sup> European Commission, "Europe's moment: Repair and prepare for the next generation", Press Release, May 27, 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_940](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_940).

<sup>49</sup> McKinsey & Company, "How a post-pandemic stimulus can both create jobs and help the climate", May 24, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/sustainability/our-insights/how-a-post-pandemic-stimulus-can-both-create-jobs-and-help-the-climate#>.

<sup>50</sup> E3G, "The Geopolitics of Climate Change", September 20, 2019, <https://www.e3g.org/publications/the-geopolitics-of-climate-change-ungsg-climate-action-summit/>; "How climate change will transform the global balance of power", *Financial Times*, November 5, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/27e6c7c8-ce5c-11e9-b018-ca4456540ea6>.

funding announced as of early June.<sup>51</sup> And this was before the EU reached its recovery deal – comprising of a €1.074 trillion EU budget for 2021–27 and a €750 billion recovery fund – which earmarks 30% of spending for measures aimed at tackling climate change.<sup>52</sup>

There is an opportunity for the EU to leverage the current crisis, not only to meet climate targets but also to strengthen its geopolitical position in the world. If it indeed succeeds in forging a coherent and global approach towards green recovery, it may succeed in becoming a ‘green superpower’ with significant global leverage. To achieve this, it should not be modest in its ambitions: the EU would need to phase out the use of fossil fuels, impose a carbon tax on imported goods, improve the regulatory framework and link conditionality to support for external actors, set common standards for the digital market, and demonstrate active global leadership.

## Key uncertainties

- > To what extent will states use the pandemic to advance measures against climate change? The analysis shows a very divergent response in the first six months of the crisis, but this could very well change – particularly if the EU steps up its climate diplomacy.
- > What are persistent changes in behaviour the pandemic produces that could impact climate change? Some early studies show that the pandemic appears to have triggered profound changes in the way citizens work, commute and travel. If these changes are permanent, this could generate ripple effects including a decline in tourism in the Southern neighbourhood, an increase in local production and a boost to the knowledge

economy in states that so far have lagged behind in digital innovation.

- > Will the EU’s Green Recovery plan succeed and forge a cohesive, EU-wide approach or will only a core group of member states move forward with this? Without European cohesion, it is unlikely that the EU will be a credible player in the arena of climate diplomacy. Thus, its own collective approach will be a determining factor in its efforts to persuade other states, too, to take measures against climate change.
- > Will the EU’s green ambitions extend beyond its borders and turn the EU into a green superpower with substantial global leverage? If yes, this could have important consequences not just for climate change, but also for the EU as a normative superpower.

## DEMOCRATIC ACTIVISM AHEAD

Global activism was not left unscathed by the pandemic: while in 2019 – labelled ‘the year of the street protest’ – the lowest number of protest events per week in all regions save North America, Europe and Australia was over one thousand, between mid-March and mid-April 2020 this number fell to approximately half of that.<sup>53</sup> Yet after this one-month slump, the number of demonstration events per week started to climb again.

Indeed, worldwide lockdowns and other forms of restrictions to curb the spread of coronavirus did not put an end to activism. Instead, people showed creativity and adaptability in making their voices heard while minimising the risk

51 “Green stimulus: life, but not as we know it”, *BloombergNEF*, June 10, 2020, <https://data.bloomberglp.com/professional/sites/24/BloombergNEF-Green-Stimulus-Life-But-Not-As-We-Know-It.pdf>.

52 “EU makes world’s biggest ‘green recovery; pledge – but will it hit the mark?’”, *Reuters*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-summit-climate-change/eu-makes-worlds-biggest-green-recovery-pledge-but-will-it-hit-the-mark-idUSKCN24N231>.

53 “Covid-19 Disorder Tracker – Spotlight: Demonstrations Interrupted”, *ACLEd*, April 18–20, 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/04/23/cdt-spotlight-demonstrations-interrupted/>

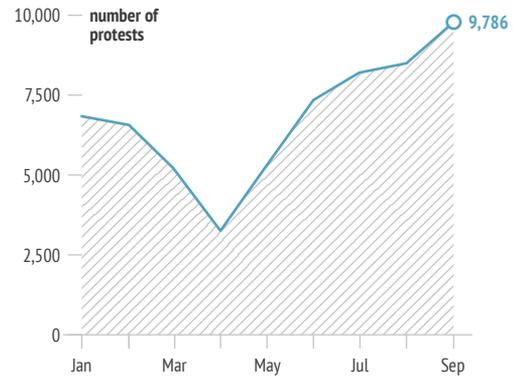
of infection: in Lebanon, protesters continued their demonstrations against the country's worsening economic and social conditions from within the safety of their cars; in the US, fans of Korean pop music blocked a Dallas police request to citizens to report on illegal actions during the Black Lives Matter protests, flooding the police department app with music videos instead; and by using a white supremacist hashtag these same K-pop fans disrupted supremacists' communications on Twitter. In Tel Aviv, thousands of Israelis protested against corruption while keeping two metres apart from one another, thereby complying with emergency restrictions on public demonstrations while visually magnifying the scale of the protest.<sup>54</sup>

Interestingly, a Pew Research Center study into political engagement in 14 countries conducted in 2018 demonstrated that (poor) healthcare is the primary issue that drives people into the streets or to engage in other forms of political action. Poverty and education come second and third, while freedom of speech, government corruption, police misconduct and discrimination come after. Healthcare and education are sectors that have been acutely affected by the pandemic, while poverty levels have risen, thus potentially opening space for increased political activism.<sup>55</sup>

So what might be the potential effects of the pandemic on democratic activism? One option is an uptick in demand for democratic reform. Tunisia, a country with one of Africa's highest public protest rates in recent years, saw a significant increase in protests in the second quarter of 2020. A study conducted in the first week of May showed that 60% of those absent from work for coronavirus-related reasons did

## Protest trends 2020

Total for Africa, the Middle East, Eastern and Southeastern Europe and the Balkans, Latin America and the Caribbean, Central Asia and the Caucasus, East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia



Data: ACLED, 2020

not receive any remuneration; among the two lowest income quantiles this percentage was as high as 80%.<sup>56</sup>

Rising levels of social discontent resulting from the pandemic and its economic consequences could thus potentially incentivise governments to adopt new measures aimed at reducing inequality and strengthening economic resilience. But protest movements do not necessarily lead to democratic reform, as people in Syria, Libya and Venezuela know all too well – nor indeed is this necessarily always the demonstrators' aim.

Decision-makers have not been passive faced with the increase in political activism, and the pandemic has made this even more apparent. Most world leaders now use social media to communicate directly with their audiences, be it through Facebook (the most popular

<sup>54</sup> "How Korean pop fans took on white supremacists - and won", *New Scientist*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg24632890-700-how-korean-pop-fans-took-on-white-supremacists-and-won/>

<sup>55</sup> Pew Research Center, "Many around the world are disengaged from politics", October 17, 2018, [https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/10/Pew-Research-Center\\_-International-Political-Engagement-Report\\_2018-10-17.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/10/Pew-Research-Center_-International-Political-Engagement-Report_2018-10-17.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> Banque Mondiale, "Suivi de l'impact socio-économique du COVID-19 sur les ménages tunisiens : Analyse des données de la première vague (29 avril 2020-28 mai 2020)", May 28, 2020, [http://www.ins.tn/sites/default/files/publication/pdf/note\\_synth%C3%A8se\\_covid19\\_final\\_o.pdf](http://www.ins.tn/sites/default/files/publication/pdf/note_synth%C3%A8se_covid19_final_o.pdf).

platform for such engagement), Twitter, Instagram or YouTube.<sup>57</sup>

## Key uncertainties

- > If political activism increases, what will be the impact on political systems and how much instability will be generated? Activism can have severely destabilising effects for societies and economies, but it can also be an important vector of change and indeed reform. Where activism is constructive and non-violent, its effects are most likely to lead to profound changes.
- > Can the pandemic spur a new way of conducting democracy? While it has become commonplace to describe democracies as systems in crisis, it is not the system itself that is being questioned but the way it is practised. The unrest the pandemic has generated could very well lead to important reforms in this regard.
- > Are restrictions on democratic principles irreversible? The democratic backsliding noticed before and during the pandemic could be the sign of a longer-term trend. On the other hand, the trend could be reversed in the coming years thanks to improved levels of citizen participation, reduced inequality and more responsive governance.

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<sup>57</sup> "World Leaders on Facebook 2020", *Twiplomacy*, April 28, 2020, <https://twiplomacy.com/blog/world-leaders-on-facebook-2020/>

## CHAPTER 3

# THE FUTURE: THREE SCENARIOS FOR 2025

In foresight, scenarios can have different purposes. Normative scenarios for instance imagine a future that we would prefer, and outline ways to get there.<sup>1</sup> But in a situation of crisis and great uncertainty, exploratory scenarios are our best helpers. They allow for an examination of a range of futures, each based on the potential trajectories of different drivers and their interaction with each other. Exploratory scenarios are not designed to predict the future or point out the most probable one. Instead, they are useful to identify high-level problems, and highlight knock-on effects, causalities and consequences of certain actions. Because they explore rather than set out with a clear idea of what they will find, these projections represent neither best-case nor worst-case scenarios: they just present a picture of different possible interactions. With these, the medium- and longer-term results of actions become clearer, and policy options more obvious.

All three scenarios below are set in 2025. They are part of the wider trend context identified in chapter 2. Each lays out different trajectories that the uncertainties identified in chapter 3 can take. The main drivers behind each set of uncertainties are the lessons decision-makers have learned from the pandemic so far: in the scenario ‘Strategic Distancing’ a number of decisions and developments lead to greater distance between all global players

including the EU (with the exception of Russia and China, which grow closer to each other in all three scenarios). In the scenario ‘Europe in self-isolation’, the shock of the pandemic and its economic repercussions leads Europe to withdraw from a global role and turn inwards. Lastly, the scenario ‘Lockdown world’ projects a situation where the world falls evenly divided between two camps that have very little contact with each other. If none of the scenarios is the obvious ‘best’ one, then this is because there is no ‘best’ possible outcome. Decision-makers will have to weigh up the pros and cons, reallocate priorities and commit funds accordingly.

## STRATEGIC DISTANCING

Perhaps more than anything else, the pandemic has served as a wake-up call that Europe relied too heavily on foreign manufacturers and supply chains in sectors considered existential such as healthcare. Never again, the continent’s leaders vowed at the conference inaugurating Europe’s renewed trade policy in early 2021,<sup>2</sup> would Europeans’ basic needs and safety be put at the mercy of other – not always so friendly – powers with their own populations and

<sup>1</sup> Florence Gaub (ed.), “What if...? 14 Futures for 2024”, *Chaillot Paper* no. 157, EUISS, January 2020, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/what-if-14-futures-2024>.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, “A renewed trade policy for a stronger Europe, Consultation Note”, June 16, 2020, [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2020/june/tradoc\\_158779.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2020/june/tradoc_158779.pdf).

interests to look out for. A reshoring of supply chains was thus set in motion, heavily incentivised by Brussels through subsidies and direct loans, but only in strategic sectors: healthcare, for one, but also new/emerging technologies such as AI, as HR/VP Borrell had pushed for right from the start.<sup>3</sup> In the defence sector, too, strategic diversification took shape, as Europe began to shift raw materials imports away from Russia and China, and towards Greenland and Africa.<sup>4</sup> But the reshuffling of supply chains was not as profound as some thought: the vast majority of supply chains for non-essential goods and items remained in place, and as a result, geostrategic relations did not shift profoundly, either.

The protracted uncertainty over the outcome of the American elections played perhaps a role in preventing a speedy *rapprochement* of the United States and the European Union. Although Joseph Biden Jr took office in January 2021, the avalanche of law suits and investigations launched by the Trump campaign team, as well as the riots and demonstrations, all meant that the US spent a good deal of 2021 focused on domestic rather than international matters. Although Europe had hoped for closer relations, the new administration was too busy with other matters – including relations with China, which continued on an acrimonious path. In this setting, Europe decided not to take sides, but to carve out a third way for itself.

Russia and China had observed these developments with a mix of surprise and wariness. In Beijing, Europe's reshuffling of supply chains in a number of sectors, coupled with measures targeting Chinese subsidies, as well as products coming from BRI countries,<sup>5</sup> was met with annoyance, but China stopped short of retaliation. Beijing's priorities lay elsewhere and the Chinese domestic market coupled with BRI countries provided ample consumers and business opportunities. In Moscow, the cooling of transatlantic ties was welcomed even if it left the Kremlin feeling somewhat aimless. In a sense, what Russia had so longed for finally materialised in the early 2020s: Europe let Russia be Russia.<sup>6</sup>

As Europe sought to maintain a position of equidistance between Washington and Beijing, the most intense geopolitical competition had been averted. These geopolitical shifts were reflected in the information warfare that had quickly gathered momentum in the late 2010s and early 2020s: while disinformation had become a common foreign policy tool that was here to stay,<sup>7</sup> it did not develop into the ever more ferocious beast that some had feared. Besides, Europe learned to live with this new reality, deploying efficient tools and strategies designed to build resilience among its population and keep the most blatant lies at bay.<sup>8</sup> In January 2021, just after negotiations with WhatsApp were finally concluded, the EU made the signing

3 Josep Borrell, "The post-coronavirus world is already here", European Council of Foreign Relations (ECFR), *Policy Brief*, April 2020, [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the\\_post\\_coronavirus\\_world\\_is\\_already\\_here](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_post_coronavirus_world_is_already_here).

4 Vasileios Theodosopoulos, "The Geopolitics of Supply: towards a new EU approach to the security of supply of critical raw materials?", Institute for European Studies, *Policy Brief*, July 2020, <https://www.ies.be/files/IES-PB-The-Geopolitics-of-Supply.pdf>.

5 "EU imposes tariffs on Chinese makers of glass fibre fabric in China and Egypt", *Reuters*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-china-egypt-trade/eu-imposes-tariffs-on-chinese-makers-of-glass-fibre-fabric-in-china-and-egypt-idUSKBN23M27>.

6 Julkia Curganus and Eugene Rumer, "Russia's global ambitions in perspective", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 20, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/20/russia-s-global-ambitions-in-perspective-pub-78067>.

7 Agnieszka Legucka, "Russia's long-term campaign of disinformation in Europe", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 19, 2020, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/81322>.

8 European Commission, "Action plan against disinformation", December 5, 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/action-plan-against-disinformation>; European Commission, "Tackling COVID-19 disinformation - Getting the facts right", June 10, 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0008&from=EN>.

of its Code on Disinformation obligatory for any platform operating in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Standardised games teaching media literacy<sup>10</sup> became a compulsory component of educational programmes across Europe, and older generations were offered free online courses. To encourage people, Brussels offered EU citizens €50 vouchers per completed 4-hour course at a maximum of one per year. Actually, not just EU citizens were eligible: after a successful trial among its member states, from 2024 onwards Brussels extended the offer to people in its neighbourhood. Despite scorn from Moscow and a derisive Russian ‘countertest’ in response, the programme was deemed an overwhelming success. Furthermore, in centres all across Europe teams of fact-checkers were deployed, adding to a total of approximately 50,000 full-time staffers. Helped by quickly evolving technology, by 2025 an estimated 95% of fake news reaching European audiences was removed within 5-7 minutes after appearing online.

But Europe was not just on the defensive; it also stepped up efforts to promote its own narrative. It did so by quickly expanding its communication tactics, and by actually improving the quality of democracy across the Union. In the minds of European decision-makers, this two-tiered strategy was most effective because what better way to strengthen democracy than by improving its efficiency and legitimacy? While these efforts enhanced the continent’s cohesiveness, abroad their use remained limited. Fatigue had set in on the continent that had once taken great pride in its status as defender of democracy. Abroad, Europe’s democratic resolve was now applied only sparingly and always with strategic imperatives in mind: following the routes of its most critical supply chains. Indeed, one could say that China’s

‘diplomacy by numbers’ strategy was increasingly adopted also in Europe.

Meanwhile, efforts to make the EU both climate-neutral and sustainable were ramped up. The adoption of the €750 billion economic stimulus package marked the EU’s first big step on a new path of sustainable growth. By 2025, it was well on its way to reaching its goal of 50% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared with 1990 levels, while all packaging in the EU market became reusable and recyclable 5 years earlier than scheduled.<sup>11</sup> One could say that in this domain, Europe was leading by example, except that the prevailing geopolitical circumstances did not leave much room for leading. China was very much doing its own thing: here, as in Europe, scientists and decision-makers were working around the clock to catch up on the time the world had lost in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. By 2023, it had reached its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions peak – seven years earlier than aimed for in the Paris deal.<sup>12</sup> Despite these successes by two of the world’s largest economies, one could not help but wonder how much progress was missed out on due to a lack of multilateral cooperation.

In Europe’s neighbourhood, things had remained mostly the same. The continued paralysis of the UN system had paved the way for regional peace efforts, with Europe deploying 5,000 police officers in Libya from 2022 onwards. In Iran, power imploded yet all-out civil war was avoided. Continuous skirmishes, protests and other forms of unrest put an end to Tehran’s nuclear and foreign policy ambitions, leaving Mohammad bin Salman king of the Gulf and Moscow the last close friend of Damascus. When Russia marked the tenth anniversary of

9 TechCrunch, “TikTok joins the EU’s code of practice on disinformation”, June 22, 2020, <https://techcrunch.com/2020/06/22/tiktok-joins-the-eus-code-of-practice-on-disinformation/>

10 EU Disinfo Lab, “Fight disinformation through gaming and education: the drog media literacy initiative”, <https://www.disinfo.eu/outreach/our-webinars/fight-disinformation-through-gaming-and-education-the-drog-media-literacy-initiative>.

11 European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, “The European Green Deal”, COM(2019) 640 final, December 11, 2019, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:b828d165-1c22-11ea-8c1f-01aa75ed71a1.0002.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:b828d165-1c22-11ea-8c1f-01aa75ed71a1.0002.02/DOC_1&format=PDF).

12 “China is on track to meet its climate change goals nine years early”, *New Scientist*, July 26, 2019, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2211366-china-is-on-track-to-meet-its-climate-change-goals-nine-years-early/>

its military intervention in Syria on 30 September 2025, Assad was still in power, the economy still crippled, and levels of internal displacement still high. Much to the satisfaction of Erdogan, who had carefully solidified Turkey's status as regional power, the Kurds had been officially sidelined. In particular, Hizbullah was negatively affected by Iran's descent into turmoil: dwindling revenues quickly weakened its international clout, and the group became a more or less normalised player on the Lebanese political chessboard, albeit still distinct due to its military branch. For Europe, Iran's semi-implosion meant a slight increase in the number of Iranian refugees at its borders – a small price to pay for no longer having to contend with Tehran's hegemonic ambitions and destabilising influence.

## Outlook

In Africa, China steadily continued its BRI expansion. In the second half of the 2020s Europe finally realised the continent's full potential, but somewhat too late. Russia, unable to catch up digitally – its economic challenges steadily rising as oil prices dipped – saw its international standing diminish significantly. Putin found himself cast in a subordinate role to Xi: an occasionally useful partner but one never really taken seriously. Analysts pointed to Russia's unwillingness – or inability – to relinquish its great power aspirations to explain its sustained 'scavenger diplomacy' in Syria and ceaseless meddling in Ukraine. Libya had turned into a sort of second Iraq: more or less peaceful, more or less stable, but otherwise there was much left to be desired. Throughout the 2020s unrest and discontent continued to fester in Egypt without bringing about real change or leading to a major rupture. Albeit far from ideal, things could be worse, Europe's leaders reasoned.

Coming of age in a fragmenting world, Europe became highly adept at performing a careful balancing act, thereby avoiding making bitter enemies but also finding itself short of true friends. Europeans did not mind, not too much at least, as they realised this was a small sacrifice to make: the alternative was a much grimmer world.

## LOCKDOWN WORLD

The re-election of Joseph Biden Jr. to the presidency of the United States in late 2024 did not come as a surprise. By then, the economy had recovered from the recession sparked by the pandemic, Americans were tired of domestic instability, and foreign policy had returned to a familiar pattern – familiar to those who remembered the 1980s, that is.

The launch of the Partnership to Defend Democracy in 2022 had more than just a whiff of the Cold War about it: in addition to the US, it brought together all consolidated democracies in Europe and elsewhere, including like-minded nations such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, India and Mexico, but also sub-state actors and the private sector.<sup>13</sup> The focus of the meeting was to defend democracy everywhere. This was a clear message to China, Russia and their supporters: from now on, the world was going to be divided into two camps, with as little contact between the two as possible. Although the flow of people and information was technically still possible, effectively tourism and communication, too, began to segregate – but since these sectors had been highly regional even before the pandemic, the term "World of Two Worlds" coined by Thomas Friedman proved to be another of that writer's hyperbolic statements.

For Europe, the choice came at a price. True, Biden had substantially repaired transatlantic

<sup>13</sup> Simona Soare, "What if... the EU and the US launched a partnership to defend democracy?", in Florence Gaub (ed.), "What if? 14 futures for 2024", *Chaillot Paper* no. 157, EUISS, January 2020, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP\\_157.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_157.pdf).

relations : the de-escalation on trade and co-operation on climate change, and the friendly rhetoric on NATO and shared values helped heal the wounds of the previous five years. But on security and defence, Europe would have to fend for itself. In part this was because of Biden's decision to pull American troops out of Afghanistan and Iraq, but more importantly, it meant Russian deterrence – to its East, but also South – was now entirely a European responsibility.<sup>14</sup> Washington remained focused on China, and if Europe wanted to be a decent ally, this meant following the path towards strategic segregation.<sup>15</sup>

While this used to be unthinkable for Europe, the pandemic and its aftermath had changed matters fundamentally – perhaps not so much with regard to how Europe felt about China, but about how vulnerable it felt in terms of its dependencies on foreign supply chains, ranging from all kinds of critical goods to energy. By 2025, both Europe and the US had undertaken far-reaching measures, diversifying supply towards states that were part of the democratic camp.<sup>16</sup>

But not all of these measures had been taken with decoupling in mind. Large-scale investments in climate change measures allocated in the pandemic recovery package, for instance, accelerated energy efficiency and boosted renewable energy – reduction of energy dependence occurred as a welcome side-effect.<sup>17</sup> Progress in the Ionian Adriatic Pipeline and the Klaipeda LNG terminal in Lithuania gave diversification a further boost. Similarly, a jump in technology and digitalisation propelled 3D

printing and robotics, relocating some manufacturing to Europe. While all three digital leaders – the EU, US and China – accelerated their progress in digital technology following the pandemic, the effective segregation of technological competition meant that the digital divide now took on an ideological tone. States now had to purchase technology in the same way as they used to buy defence equipment: to express solidarity.

In military terms, this world locked into two camps was a hostile one. Europe faced Russia in its neighbourhood, as well as Ukraine, and Libya and Syria further afield, at first struggling to muster the means and will to match Moscow's military might. By 2025, low-scale clashes in the Sea of Azov between European and Russian vessels had become a regular occurrence. In Africa, China, supported by Russia, made headway despite pushback from the Partnership to Defend Democracies. Only in Iran was some *détente* noticeable: following the large-scale protests in 2021, the return of the US to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and a lifting of sanctions meant that Tehran managed to at least see some economic improvements, and public discontent abated.<sup>18</sup> This also effectively led to Iran scaling back its involvement in Yemen, Syria and Lebanon – leaving a vacuum that Russia was only too happy to fill.

But the world in ideological lockdown had one side effect: as more ideological divisions were now clearly identified, disinformation campaigns began to subside. The middle ground that had been up for grabs disappeared. Targeted

14 Kori Schake, "Biden's Bad Foreign-Policy Ideas: The former vice president lacks a consistent philosophy of when and how to use military force", *The Atlantic*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/bidens-chance-disavow-his-bad-foreign-policy-ideas/612787/>

15 "How Biden Would Wage Great Power Competition", *Defense One*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/technology/2020/07/how-biden-will-wage-great-power-competition/166570/>

16 "The Great Decoupling", *Foreign Policy*, May 14, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/14/china-us-pandemic-economy-tensions-trump-coronavirus-covid-new-cold-war-economics-the-great-decoupling/>. "Biden's China Policy Starts With Building a Stronger America", *Defense One*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/politics/2020/06/bidens-china-policy-starts-building-stronger-america/166555/>

17 Richard L. Morningstar et al., "European energy diversification: How alternative sources, routes, and clean technologies can bolster energy security and decarbonization", *The Atlantic Council, Issue Brief*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/european-energy-diversification-how-alternative-sources-and-routes-can-bolster-energy-security-and-decarbonization/>

18 Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

states developed more forceful mechanisms to counter foreign interference, banning social media platforms and news outlets. And publics, too, became more resilient in the face of incendiary allegations and divisive information. Perhaps this was a ‘natural’ maturation in an age of information overload; or the more direct communication between elected leaders and their constituencies helped too. Instagram Live and Facebook Live became popular tools to engage with highly active audiences across the states that were part of the democratic camp.

The quest to combat climate change became the twenty-first century equivalent of putting a man on the moon: the race to carbon neutrality became a symbol of progress and systemic fitness. Although it had been feared that the bipolar world would lead to a reduction in climate change measures, the by now globally shared concern about increasing temperatures and environmental degradation made it a litmus test of systemic superiority.

## Outlook

The second half of the 2020s solidified the ‘new Cold War’ beyond trade. The re-election of Joe Biden in late 2024 confirmed that the American people supported his foreign policy posture, leading to increased defence spending, particularly in the naval domain. Before 2030, analysts were sure, there would inevitably be a military clash between the US and China, but where was anyone’s guess – Taiwan, or the Senkaku Islands appeared to be primary hotspots.<sup>19</sup> For Europe, this American focus on Asia meant that it was pushed further into a military role in its Eastern and Southern neighbourhood, a role with which it was not comfortable in the beginning. But another Russian attack, this time on an Italian vessel off the coast of Libya, turned the tide: European publics increasingly supported a more forceful defence posture, especially as part of a joint European endeavour.

## EUROPE IN SELF-ISOLATION

Hope for transatlantic reconciliation was high after the election of President Biden, but faded in the course of 2021. The new US administration failed to fulfil European hopes on more American engagement in conflict theatres close to Europe, or to push forward decisively on climate change, instead demanding more defence commitments and an aggressive stance on China that Europeans were not ready to adopt. Matters came to a boil over a military observer mission in Libya: whereas European public opinion was adamantly against the deployment of such a mission, Washington refused to step in for what it considered was a European problem.

This, and a slow American response to a cyber-attack on Estonia (presumably masterminded by Russia) brought back a familiar feeling: Europe, so its leaders felt, was alone in the world. While Biden’s rhetoric differed from his predecessor’s, his policies towards China were equally antagonistic. In the Formosa Strait off Taiwan, American and Chinese navies were locked in a dangerously delicate standoff from late 2021 onwards, with fears that this might lead to war anytime soon.

In this environment, those in Europe that had still dreamt of equidistance had to recognise that this was not a real option. Not only did Washington not leave it that choice, neither did European public opinion. The pandemic had taken a toll on public perception of China, now seen in Europe as the main culprit for not just the disease, but as responsible for a host of other blameworthy practices, too, such as repression, military sable-rattling and economic hostage taking. The hollowing-out of NATO following the suspension of Turkish financial contributions in 2022 only contributed to this broader trend. In an environment where the pandemic had exposed far-ranging vulnerabilities, Europe began to turn inwards to meet its main needs of trade, security and friendly cooperation.

<sup>19</sup> “How the U.S. could lose a war with China”, *The Atlantic*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/07/china-us-war/594793/>

This was not such a difficult choice to make: intra-European trade had steadily increased over the previous decade and now stood at approximately 60%. With the exception of energy, Europe could provide for itself – and now set out to free itself from this last dependency, too, thanks to advances made in terms of energy efficiency and renewable energy – advances not in small part the result of the recovery deal of 2020.<sup>20</sup> To reduce vulnerabilities, Europe relocated supply chains, but not along ideological or sectoral lines. Instead, diversification occurred mainly on the basis of geographic proximity – perhaps reflecting the broader emphasis on proximity and accessibility that now permeated Europe’s outlook on the world. The number of European citizens choosing to holiday in European destinations went up from a pre-pandemic level of 73% to 85% by 2025. Surveys revealed a general consensus among European citizens that Europe should not help other states but itself first, curtailing support for an interventionist foreign policy. ‘Leading by example’ became the cornerstone of policy thinking as a growing view took hold that Europe should not try to become a third pole in a multipolar world, but rather withdraw from such a multipolar order.

Europe’s absence from the world stage came at a price. For instance, while Europe turned inward and developed its own climate change measures, climate diplomacy efforts petered out, and as a result, an important impetus to reduce emissions everywhere also began to wane. Standards and norms for artificial intelligence (AI) and the use of big data, rigorously applied within the EU, were not adopted by rival powers, contributing in no small part to a world where China, Russia and the US embraced predatory data capitalism and became proficient in the development and use of repressive surveillance technology.

In the extended neighbourhood, Russia and China increased cooperation on military and economic matters. In Syria and Libya, Russian troops provided stability at the expense

of development and good governance. When Iran was rocked by unrest in 2021 and sanctions were maintained under the leadership of the United States, Moscow and Beijing joined forces to help Tehran to not just quell the protests, but make such demonstrations more difficult to organise in the future thanks to new technologies – and conditional economic assistance. The Egyptian authorities, who feared that they too were threatened by more unrest, watched with great interest and subsequently signed up for the same type of cooperation. Although protestors, both online and in the real world, had looked towards Europe for help in the beginning, by 2025 this was no longer the case. Democracies and democratic movements everywhere were beginning to feel the squeeze of best-practice sharing by repressive regimes. Nowhere was this clearer than in Africa, where the hopeful stirrings of democracy that emerged in the late 2010s were crushed.

## Outlook

Climate change measures became the first victim of a world without Europe. Although China pursued its own policies to curb emissions, the US did not re-join the Paris agreement under President Trump, or his successor. As a result, the world will be nowhere near where it ought to be in 2030 in order to become climate neutral by 2050. In other areas – particularly the use of AI and big data – authoritarian governments had made such progress that democracy would, for the first time since 1999, return to being a minority system in world governance. In Europe, it remained resilient thanks to a number of reforms undertaken in the aftermath of the pandemic, including more elements of direct democracy and a sustained effort to modernise European economies. It was only in the field of health that multilateralism survived: here, a reform of the WHO led to a pledge, in 2025, by 120 UN member states to establish a minimum global healthcare system by 2050.

<sup>20</sup> International Energy Agency, “Sustainable Recovery: World Energy Outlook Special Report”, June 2020, <https://www.iea.org/reports/sustainable-recovery>.

## CONCLUSION

# POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

We are faced with elements of both certainty and uncertainty when it comes to the world in the coming years. We know that the pandemic will stay with us until well into 2021, and quite possibly beyond that. We also know that the pandemic does not fundamentally alter several trends that preceded it, including a tense international environment, the weaponisation of trade, doubts about the future of globalisation and democracy, and an increase in disinformation and fake news. But we are uncertain about the choices decision-makers will make in this context, both within Europe and elsewhere. The novelty of the future will derive from these uncertainties. To proactively shape this future, European decision-makers, too, have choices to make – strategic choices.

The role Europe wants to play in a world shaped by Sino-American competition and strategic rivalry is the most important choice its leaders will have to make in this setting. As the three scenarios show, the choices vary between carving out of a new role for itself, turning inwards or a rekindling of transatlantic relations. While this choice will depend in part on developments and rhetoric in Washington and Beijing, it is ultimately a European one to make and should, as such, be based on a discussion on what role Europeans want to play in this world, at what cost, and with what tools. This is not an elite conversation: it requires broad public engagement and outreach at all levels, and above all, a sense of urgency. The Strategic Compass is an important starting point, but it is not the only component as this question is more than just strategic – it is also a question of European political and diplomatic identity with decade-long implications. The Conference on the Future of

Europe, too, will play an important role in this reflection process.

## Things to consider in particular are:

- > European foreign policy is entering an era of redefinition. Although this process is already underway, it requires more engagement with the public, and should go beyond the established norms and objectives. Ultimately, Europe's future is at stake – the width and depth of the discussion should reflect the importance of this issue, including different levels of society, assessing different tools that the Union has at its disposal, and re-prioritising goals and values.
- > Bilateral relations with the US, China, Russia, or neighbouring states have to be defined in the light of this conversation. Only when European publics and decision-makers alike know which role Europe is to play in a world that will be irreversibly antagonistic can objectives, procedures, tools and mechanisms be established and evaluated.
- > Democracy and human rights have been adversely impacted by the pandemic, too – both at home and abroad. In part, this is because authoritarian systems are taking advantage of the distraction caused by the pandemic, as well as of the opportunity presented by the emergency to impose restrictive measures, but it is also because the crisis has revealed flaws and shortcomings in the democratic system, which needs to become

more adapted to the twenty-first century. Younger people, while politically engaged, do not see elections as the most effective way of advancing societal goals. European systems need to adjust to this reality by inviting a conversation on the future-proofing of democracy.

- > Disinformation is entering a new era, too. Although the EU has made significant progress in this regard, so have its adversaries. The pandemic has shown that Russia and China in particular have taken advantage of the opportunities offered by the crisis to advance their objectives. Europe is still timid in its response, tending to be reactive rather than proactive. Recognising the power and importance of narratives will help it manage this challenge.
- > The definition of goods as strategic items, too, is a process that requires the involvement of other actors than those traditionally involved in trade matters. The potential financial costs and economic drawbacks of reallocating supply chains must be understood and supported by the public, or they will be questioned later. While important, the earmarking of certain goods as strategic should not lead to an extensive increase in trade-distorting measures – the progress of global connectedness is in the interest of Europe. Such a process will ultimately contribute to a broader strategic understanding of trade, and thereby help European foreign policy which has suffered, so far, from a disconnect between its commercial and political objectives.
- > Global health is perhaps the one area where a near consensus exists, beneath the geopolitical tensions, that there is a need for more international cooperation. But because health is not (yet) a foreign policy domain, it remains outside the realm of traditional actors in the field. This should change as soon as possible: we will need to be better prepared for the next pandemic to avoid further shocks in the years to come.
- > Climate change and the regulation of digitalisation are also not foreign affairs prerogatives, but should be. Neither can be tackled without international cooperation – but at the current point in time neither is proactively managed by foreign policy actors. Nowhere are multilateralism and multi-stakeholderism more in demand than in these fields.

# ABBREVIATIONS

**AI**

Artificial Intelligence

**ASEAN**

Association of Southeast Asian Nations

**AU**

African Union

**BRI**

Belt and Road Initiative

**EEAS**

European External Action Service

**GDP**

Gross Domestic Product

**HIV**

Human immunodeficiency virus

**HR/VP**

High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission

**IS**

Islamic State

**JCPOA**

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

**LNG**

Liquefied Natural Gas

**NATO**

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

**UAE**

United Arab Emirates

**UK**

United Kingdom

**UN**

United Nations

**UNGA**

United Nations General Assembly

**WHO**

World Health Organisation

Covid-19 erupted into a landscape of change: even before the pandemic unfolded, the world was already grappling with major challenges and the emergence of new geopolitical fissures and trends.

In the face of the economic and societal changes brought by the coronavirus, as well as the structural fragilities that it has exposed, some argue that the pandemic will merely accentuate pre-existing trends and dynamics, while others believe that the crisis will create a world profoundly different than before.

This *Chaillot Paper* examines both dimensions: it assesses the geopolitical trends the pandemic is perceived as having accelerated, and the scope for innovation and far-reaching change induced by the crisis. In the final section it explores the interplay of trends and uncertainties in three distinct scenarios. It concludes that to proactively shape the future, EU decision-makers have strategic choices to make – with the role that Europe wants to play in a world shaped by Sino-American antagonism being the most important.