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Rethinking Geopolitical Strategies: from Conflict Management to Conflict Resolution in the Middle East

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This policy brief is a plea to integrate conflict resolution, rather than conflict management, into geopolitical strategies. The Gaza war, the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Yemeni civil war, the Syrian civil war, and the Nagorno-Karabach conflict, to name a few conflicts on the edges of Europe, have one thing in common: the various actors, regional and international, opted, over decades, for conflict management rather than for conflict resolution. This has clearly failed.

The EU played an important role in conflict resolution in the Middle East under Javier Solana. They could do so again if conflict resolution and not management became part and parcel of the EU's internal and external policies. The EU and its institutions must reorganise to consolidate their Middle Eastern resources, expertise, and efforts to be able to engage, at a very practical and effective level, with attempting to resolve the southern neighbourhood's conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

Transactional geopolitics, history has demonstrated, almost always end up in armed conflicts erupting typically from the periphery of the contested geopolitical spheres of influence to subsequently make their way towards the centres of the competing powers. The 'July Crisis' of 1914 is a good example. Sergei Sazonov, the last tsarist Russian foreign minister, recorded in his memoirs that WW1 started in 1909 when Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia. The intervening five years (to the start of the war in 1914) amounted to no more than

attempts at 'conflict management' rather than 'conflict resolution'. Transactionalism is synonymous with conflict management and, in the view of this writer, almost always leads ultimately to armed conflict.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT FAILED, HIGH TIME FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

For decades, conflict management held sway over the diplomatic, political, military and development efforts with the aim of 'containing' (rather than resolving) irksome, irritating and 'old fashioned' conflicts in the backwaters of globalisation, as if geopolitics had disappeared, or, as a senior European adviser once caustically remarked, 'geopolitics is so 19th century'.

The warring parties were sedated on a rolling basis with a cocktail of financial incentives, arms deliveries, diplomatic support for pet regional issues, ephemeral political deals, protracted negotiations, placating the egos of the respective leaders, and when all else failed, a bit of hitting on the head, as in 'mowing the lawn' strategy of Israel in Gaza over the past two decades. This 'strategy', if one could call such an incremental approach a strategy, was bound to fail simply because it believed its own story line: a case of why spoil a good story with facts. It accepted the false appearance of relative calm, that was interspersed with intermittent violence, as a hopeful sign of durable peace and stability to come. In fact, such a state should have been considered no more than structurally unsuited to create stability, security, and prosperity as none of the core issues were actually resolved neither by force of arms, nor by negotiations.

We are all now facing the cost of ignoring the realities on the ground of these conflicts, as problems unresolved beget more unresolved conflicts over years. Conflict management belongs to the cult of ‘hope’ as a tool of strategy. Hope is not a strategy, and concern is not a policy. Managing conflicts merely allows problems to multiply over time and accumulate, creating in the process new problems born out of such accumulation, and rendering resolving the original conflicts nigh improbable.

IT WASN'T ALWAYS THUS... AS THE EU USED TO BE AN ACTIVE PLAYER

‘Comprehensive peace in the Middle East is a strategic objective for the European Union’ (Javier Solana, ‘State building for Peace in the Middle East: An EU Action Strategy’, 26 November 2007). The EU was deeply, patiently, expertly and with some degree of success, engaged in the Middle East peace efforts, particularly under Javier Solana, throughout the 1990s and 2000s. It correctly aimed at conflict resolution in a practical manner working with, and through, the realities on the ground. The failure of the Oslo Accords, and subsequently the Arab Spring, to deliver on a new system of regional security and governance, that is more aligned with the EU’s own values, seemed to have put paid to that deep engagement as the EU, and member states, took the high moral hectoring road of ‘values’-driven approaches, whilst ignoring hard geopolitical interests and realities on the ground.

A key EU interest should have remained to continue to engage in the tedious and practical details of an eventual conflict resolution outcome within an overall strategy. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this strategy was (and continues to be) the creation of a two-state structure. Having become disappointed and disillusioned, and believing that farming out conflict management efforts to regional actors would keep the wolf at bay, the EU turned its back on the Middle East conflict, and so did most of the foreign ministries of the member states. Lip service was paid to the two-state solution and the land for peace formula. The EU and member states’ focus shifted, however, to piecemeal thematics, e.g., Sahel, Iran’s JCPOA and illegal migration, to name a few. The

other entrenched conflicts were to be ‘ring-fenced’ and farmed out (to Israel, Turkey, Gulf States, among others) to be ‘managed’ and ‘contained’.

US DISENGAGEMENT: REGIONAL ACTORS ADOPT TRANSACTIONAL GEOPOLITICS

The disengagement of the US, under the Obama administration, exasperated regional tensions as it removed the single key geopolitical benchmark against which all regional actors positioned themselves since the end of the Cold war, and the collapse of the Soviet presence in the Middle East. All regional actors, state and non-state, scrambled to fill the vacuum of control created by the perception of the US’s disengagement, through transactional alliances to compete for tactical advantage in a dynamically complex and shifting geopolitical context. Such transactional alliances, sometimes literally on an issue-by-issue basis, served only to render any effort at ‘conflict resolution’ infinitely more complicated and remote, and created an ever-increasing reliance on tactical ‘conflict management’ measures. It is no wonder that all these conflicts reached dead ends - and the point of eruption. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict did not escape the impact of this evolving geopolitical transactionalism. In the absence of a determined conflict resolution strategy, eruption, as many have warned, was a matter of when, not if.

FOUNDING IDEOLOGICAL DRIVERS TRUMP INCENTIVES

This transactionalism was augmented by the short-sighted approach to ‘conflict management’ adopted by the successive Netanyahu cabinets. It believed that pacifying Hamas in Gaza with financial incentives and support for its rule will turn it ultimately into a docile lamb, totally ignoring its founding religio-ideological drivers. The twin founding pillars of Hamas never altered: the destruction of the State of Israel, and its Muslim Brotherhood roots.

Neither pillar was likely to be seriously undermined by incentives, both for ideological reasons, but also for existential imperatives: if Hamas loses its *raison d’être* it

would likely lose its support base as well, and that includes other regional state and not-state actors. PM Netanyahu had hoped that by continuing to offer incentives to Hamas he would keep the Palestinians divided: the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) governs the West Bank (and whose parties have recognised Israel's right to exist and abandoned their armed struggle in this regard) on the one hand, and Hamas, on the other hand, that continued to state that its aim is to destroy the State of Israel. PM Netanyahu, by doing so, was attempting to demonstrate that Israel has no counter credible Palestinian party with whom to negotiate a two-state solution. This tactic enabled him, over 15 years, to expand the settlements and create a de facto physical barrier to having a two-state solution. This is because any new Palestinian state would become almost territorially non-contiguous and would occupy an increasingly smaller share of the total territory.

Ignoring Hamas's religio-ideological tenets was a strategic mistake. In purely non-emotive international law terms, on 7 October 2023 it deliberately operated inside the internationally recognised borders of the State of Israel, not on disputed or occupied territory under international law. From a purely geopolitical perspective, transactionalism and conflict management were proven to have failed. To draw a general geopolitical conclusion: when the founding ideological tenets of a state or a non-state actor continue to be their key drivers, conflict management is bound to fail.

Lest we forget: Hamas was founded as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is an 'internationalist' organisation aiming to create a global Caliphate. Suspicions persisted that Hamas continued its links with the Brotherhood even though, in 2017, it announced that it was severing its allegiance to the Muslim Brotherhood. It is surprising that the EU, US, and Israel somehow overlooked these fundamental religio-ideological and organisational driving forces.

Moreover, they overlooked two other key geopolitical drivers in their quest for conflict management. The first was that the expected Saudi-Israeli-US peace agreement, that reportedly would have provided US security

guarantees for Saudi Arabia thus upending the regional balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran, was going to cause no reaction by other regional actors. Enter the 'Spoilers', the second geopolitical driver: Historically Spoilers, whether state or non-state actors, always wreaked havoc in the best laid plans in Middle eastern geopolitics. This time it was no different. Hamas and its backers, for their individual as well as shared reasons, found common cause to 'spoil' the direction in which Middle eastern geopolitics was heading.

WHAT IF OUR NEGOTIATIONS' MODEL IS NOT UNIVERSAL?

Underpinning much of the practical work of either conflict resolution or conflict management is embodied in the art and skillset of negotiations. This has been another area of misconception and inadequate practice.

The classic 'western' model of negotiations assumes that all parties around the table aim to achieve an outcome that calculates the 'wins' and 'losses' in the same way. Each party, it is assumed, aims to preserve what it can of its assets (e.g., but not limited to human life, property, integrity of institutions, privileges, concessions, etc.) expressed in the best possible and practically achievable outcome. But what if one or more of the parties does not define or perceive a 'win' in the same terms as the others?

A classic case that illustrates the importance of different perspectives on winning or losing is the famous visit of then India's premier Jawaher Lal Nehru, who reportedly flew to Peking (as it then was) in 1962 to meet Chairman Mao in an effort to end the bloody Indo-Chinese border war. He assumed, as they were both leading lights of the Non-Aligned Movement, that they would be able to come to a solution given their common status in said movement. The negotiations ended abruptly when Chairman Mao reportedly asked PM Nehru: 'I am ready to lose 50 million men - how many are you prepared to lose?' The definitions and perceptions of 'wins' and 'losses' were fundamentally different.



Crudely put, Hamas is very likely to be in the same camp as Mao rather than Nehru. In the recent interview with the Hamas's leader Khalid Mishaal with Al Arabiya TV channel, he cited the 'sacrificing of millions of Russians to gain the freedom for Stalingrad in WW2' as an example of how 'people retain or gain their freedom'. In choosing geopolitical negotiating partners to 'resolve' the conflict rather than 'manage' it, Israel would have been better served by dealing with the awkward PLO than to believe that a religio-ideological movement was going to change its colours. The PLO is a classic post-WW2 Arab nationalist secular political product with a clear nationalist secular agenda. It had, moreover, recognised the right of the State of Israel to exist. It accepted the two-state solution and had already entered into treaty obligations with Israel through signing the Oslo Accords. As a negotiating partner, the PLO would've at least started off from the same way of thinking about what negotiations were supposed to achieve for each party in a tangible, rational, and measurable manner (land size, control modalities, security arrangements, limits to sovereignty, refugees, rights in East Jerusalem, and so on). It is of course conceivable that the negotiations to achieve an actual and final resolution to the conflict might have failed. But they wouldn't have collapsed simply because the perceptions and assumptions of what constitutes 'wins' and 'losses' are situated in two completely different and irreconcilable universes.

WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE EU IN THE CURRENT CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

We are where we are as they say - and the course of events in the EU's southern neighbourhood will most likely become messier and more violent in the decade to come.

The EU and its institutions must urgently reorganise to consolidate their Middle Eastern resources, expertise, and efforts to be able to engage, at a very practical and effective level, with attempting to resolve the southern neighbourhood's conflicts. This effort should extend to Yemen given the EU's strategic interest in the connectivity to, and then maritime security of, the Red Sea, and the

Iran-backed Houthis ability to cause mayhem around the choke point of Bab Al Mandab. The Houthis have acted in support of Hamas by firing missiles on US ships, and by abducting an Israeli-owned, Japanese operated large cargo ship in the Red Sea. The EU, therefore, needs to organise its effort in an integrated regional strategy for conflict resolution, rather than piecemeal initiatives.

Naturally, the first stage will have to aim at taming the conflict now raging in Gaza and Israel to prevent it from spreading elsewhere, leading to a devastating regional war with serious consequences for Europe. The second stage (that should immediately follow the first) is to aim at resolving, rather than managing, the range of conflicts raging in the region.

The values-driven approach to the Middle East conflicts will need to be augmented with a large dose of clear-eyed and interest-based geopolitical and strategic assessments in order to enable the values, that the EU wishes to see develop across the region, to take hold. The assessments, and the approaches adopted to conflict resolution, will need to be based on expert-led advice, rather than on European ideological preferences, in order for them to be effective on the ground, and to successfully survive the social, political, cultural and economic stress tests to which they will unfoundedly be subjected.

These efforts should build on the solid work already undertaken by joint Israeli-Palestinian experts (including lawyers and political scientists) who have developed practical building blocks for how a two-state structure may be constructed against the background of demographic, ethnic, religious, historic/political, and geographic challenges. The EU should support the further development of these practical frameworks, rather than start from a blank sheet of paper, as well as engage with any future negotiations between the parties.

The key European guiding interest is the creation of a peaceful, stable and prosperous Eastern Mediterranean through resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that will engender stability, security and prosperity across the region, giving a values-based engagement by the EU a



better chance of success. The practical elements of this interest include (by way of example) well known security, connectivity, energy, and trading interests, such as the gas fields of the Eastern Mediterranean, the maritime security through, inter alia, the choke points and undersea cables and pipelines, migration pressures, and naval movements across the Mediterranean and into the Black Sea through the two straits of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus.

CONCLUSION: WHAT NEXT AFTER THE ISRAELI GROUND OPERATION IN GAZA?

The EU should seriously consider having a direct stabilisation role in any interim arrangement after the hostilities end, to provide a bridge between the pre-Hamas situation and the post-Hamas altered realities on the ground. Without diminishing the critical importance of any stabilisation operations through humanitarian aid, this role should not remain within the relatively less controversial realms of handing out money, aid and other support tool.

An active security and stabilisation role will bolster the mediating and convening power of the EU in any EU-sponsored negotiations. Such engagement can also involve cooperating with Egypt, including in the maritime domain, given Egypt's expertise and interests, some of which overlap with the EU's own interests, and given the broader strategic relationship that the EU has been building with Egypt. The EU and its member states have world-class expertise in the maritime domain which can provide not only security assurances during the interim phase, but also effective aid and reconstruction delivery routes.

The EU has a direct and immediate interest in thinking through these challenges in overwhelmingly geopolitical, rather than mere ideological, terms. Cyprus, the southeastern-most border of the Union, is only 200 km from Gaza - and that is in fact the actual geopolitical distance between the war zone (also in Syria, or in Lebanon, if the latter erupts) and Brussels, Berlin, Warsaw, or Helsinki.

In adopting a strong geopolitical approach to conflict resolution, rather than transactional conflict management,

it will be crucial that the EU, and the member states, develop a deep understanding of the myriad detailed aspects of the Middle East, and to avoid generalisations. This is crucial because the Middle East is a diverse universe, even across relatively small geographic distances. As the number of the Levantines (i.e., the Europeans of the Eastern Mediterranean) dwindled (ending centuries of European presence in the Middle East and Turkey), a potent east-west bridge that served as a key conduit of communication and expert detailed knowledge and advice, has also disappeared. Such consolidated pools of expertise need to be urgently recreated in the EU institutions and the chancelleries of the member states.

A critical factor in having a modicum of a successful start to any conflict resolution attempt is the urgent and necessary pre-condition in any conflict resolution model to sidestep the current polarisation and the urge to pick sides. This is chiefly because the conflict, from a purely strategic non-emotive perspective, is multi-layered, a factual description to which the discredited conflict management approach has greatly contributed. Any serious future effort at resolving the conflict will have to abandon polarisation. Consequently, and by definition, innovative approaches are required despite the fact that such approaches will make all parties, the EU included, uncomfortable. Such deliberate innovative approaches may have to include the Global South including parts of Latin America and Asia (Thai workers are also Hamas hostages in the current crisis). The need for any EU effort to include the Global South has practical dimensions, the first of which is the need to harness votes at the UN. The Global South has not, by and large, bought into the 'western' narrative on Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. China's 'neutrality' in both conflicts resonates with Global South narratives and China enhances its efficacy through various incentives. There are different perceptions of the realities of conflict, and it will behove the EU to collect different narratives. A key part of any serious conflict resolution effort will be to move beyond the big strategic issues, that are of course critically important, to the detailed technical matters that reflect historic narratives and thus feed their continuous relevance. Hence the need for genuine expertise beyond political ideologies and pet themes.

The Mediterranean is just as critical to our security as the Baltic Sea. It is a connector to regions that have a disproportionate share of conflicts, with restive and demographically growing populations. The Mediterranean is not a divider: recognising this fact has consequences in terms of the EU's security and prosperity interests, posture, and the way it engages with the Middle East. The war in Gaza can act as a trigger for the EU to re-engage actively, energetically, expertly, and strategically with the aim of achieving conflict resolution on Europe's doorsteps.

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