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Geopolitics and Geography: A Realigned EU Strategy for Stability in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean

Bernard Siman

The new EU Commission should commence its geopolitical thinking by acknowledging that geography is not kind to those who ignore her. The new European Parliament has the unique opportunity to become perhaps the first geopolitical parliament through a similar process. States, political leaders and societies ignore their geographic realities at their peril. Perceptions of location, distance and neighbourhoods can be dangerously distorted when they drift too far off from actual geographic realities. Digital technology, ease of air travel (bypassing the unpleasant geographic realities on the ground), combined with over three decades of peace in Europe, and 50 years in the Middle East, have created the distorted perceptions that somehow Israel's and Ukraine's neighbourhood was liberal Europe. These collective perceptions, untethered from their geographic realities, eclipsed perhaps the fact that both have neighbours with whom they have been at differing degrees of long-simmering conflicts. In reality, however, Israel and its neighbours have not succeeded at resolving the conflicts on its very borders, betraying the perception of peace. It is as if those neighbours with whom Israel has been in conflict had disappeared.

On 7 October 2023 (as indeed on 24 February 2022 in Ukraine) geography reasserted its primacy, unfortunately with a violent, illegal and criminal actions. The realisation must have dawned that Israel was still situated in a violent region, the Middle East, with unresolved conflicts with its closest physical neighbours. Geography continues to be generally seen as an anachronism. The truth is of

course different. Just because one could fly from one city to another in a few hours, to share a liberal democratic lifestyle with kindred spirits, to enjoy the privileges and dividends of peace, does not mean that geography has somehow altered a basic reality: that neighbours with different values and unresolved conflicts who are tethered to the geographic realities will continue to pose physical and other threats.

The lesson for the EU is a simple one: A values-based approach to geopolitics should be firmly anchored, first and foremost, in the realities of geography and the maps as they exist today. The incoming EU Commission should start by re-linking a values-based approach to the realities of geography and how the current maps actually interact on the ground. In other words, wishful thinking will lead to multiplying conflicts. It will also lead to weakening Europe's relative geopolitical position. It will create the false perception that the EU's challenges in its neighbourhood are less geographically relevant than its values. They are not.

THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF THE CURRENT ISRAELI CONUNDRUM

Applying the logic of the primacy of geography and maps in geopolitics, the incoming Commission should resist the temptation to deal one-dimensionally with the current crisis in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, i.e. focusing only on the Israeli-Palestinian/Hezbollah dimension. This is because there are four distinct, though strongly interlinked, concentric dimensions, or layers of, to the plethora of conflicts. The four layers, by order of their magnitude from the domestic to the global, are:

domestic Israeli politics, the Israeli-Palestinian-Hezbollah/Lebanon conflict, the Israeli-Iranian conflict, and the Israeli/US-Iranian conflict.

Domestic Israeli politics indicate that, for the foreseeable future there is little prospect of any significant change in either PM Netanyahu's position, or his coalition's. This is the Israeli counterparty with whom the international community will have to continue to deal, particularly that there is no incentive for PM Netanyahu to do any deal he doesn't like before the US elections. He has also steadfastly ignored developing a political vision as pertains to the various conflicts in the Middle East, relying on raw military power. From a purely military perspective, and for the foreseeable future, however, there is every incentive for Israel to continue its military operations in Gaza and Lebanon. Israel has achieved significant military successes since its operations that destroyed the top command structure of Hezbollah and Hamas, followed by the ground invasion of southern Lebanon. No military power will stop its advance when the wind is in its sails on the battlefield. So, the domestic Israeli political and military bias will remain in favour of pushing forward with the military option. PM Netanyahu's opinion polls seem to indicate that he has the support of the majority of Israelis in this course of action.

Just at Israel's borders, the dimension of the Israeli-Palestinian/Hezbollah armed conflict also favours a similar military scenario: that of achieving as much relative military advantage on the ground as possible, for the same reasons driving the domestic political choices, chiefly continuing with the military momentum as far as it goes before contemplating any cessation of operations. There is, moreover, little indication that PM Netanyahu will translate his current military advantage into lasting strategic political gains, which may be a missed historic turning point.

The Iran dimension fares in a similar stream. The ultimate confrontation in the Middle East was transformed from a pure Arab-Israeli conflict between 1948 and the mid-1990s to a more complex Iranian-led, Israeli-Iranian shadow war since then. Critically, Iran managed to be

a virtual geographic military "neighbour" of Israel's by being present, through its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as in the south of Damascus adjacent to the Golan Heights, through its IRGC or proxy militias. It armed, financed, trained and actively worked with Hezbollah as was specifically stated in a speech by Hassan Nasrallah. Iran also actively supported Hamas in Gaza, again an armed force physically at Israel's gates, committed to the destruction of the State of Israel, a commitment shared by Iran. Now that Israel is dominant militarily in Gaza, in a conventional sense, and as it pushes relatively successfully through Southern Lebanon, the military logic dictates that momentum will be maintained to achieve maximum advantage. Again, there is no end in sight in this dimension to the military option from Israel's perspective.

How sustainable such a course of action is over time given the extreme difficulty in "destroying Hamas", and the realities of demographics, is an open question. Moreover, a more radical and violent Hamas and Hezbollah mark II may well emerge from the rubbles of the war in Gaza and Lebanon. Technology may again be distorting perceptions of geography: the supreme technological capabilities of Israel are truly impressive, but they will not alter the realities of geography, including in its demographic form. To alter the demographic map will mean, in all likelihood, that massive domestic pressure in both Jordan and Egypt will negatively impact the status of the peace treaties both Arab countries currently have with Israel. The populations in both countries will become disenchanted with how Israel is ignoring their interests under the treaties, in particular the question of pushing Palestinian refugees to settle in these neighbouring states.

It is worth noting in this regard that the EU has a direct and vital strategic interest in the stability and security of Egypt. Europe's security is very closely tied to Egypt's. It is not just connectivity through the Suez Canal and the sub-sea data cables carrying 95% of our data on which our internet relies. With 80 million people, the Nile Delta is the largest demographic concentration on the Mediterranean, barely 550KM south of Cyprus. Egypt also offers a wealth of human resources, energy sources,

and economic partnership opportunities. The Strategic Partnership Agreement between the EU and Egypt in effect acknowledges Egypt's unique and critically important position in the EU's scale of geopolitical priorities. A seismic shift in the security architecture of the Middle East, in the shape of a shock to the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, will become a European problem as well, and not just in terms of mass youth migration. The EU must ensure that its interests are protected through supporting the status quo of the peace treaties.

There is no denying the attractions for Israel of proceeding with the military option. However, technological and military superiority without a political vision will not only be very expensive and demographically taxing on Israeli society but may also lead to less security for Israel itself over time. All indications, however, point in the direction that, for the time being, the military option is most likely to continue unabated.

The fourth dimension, the global, leads to a similar conclusion: that an armed confrontation between Israel and the US on one side, and Iran on the other, whilst not inevitable, is likely. All the protagonists drove themselves into a geopolitical cul de sac over the past two decades or so.

The Global geopolitical dimension of the conflict came about because Iran's behaviour was more often than not supported by Russia for the latter's own cynical reasons, and to preserve its privileges in Syria. Hezbollah, aka the strong arm of Iran in the Levant, was key to defeating the revolutionary militias aiming to unseat President Bashar Al Assad's government. Iran's relentless, successful and single-minded pursuit of its strategic aims through terrorist, violent, and cognitive interference and influence in the Middle East meant that it succeeded in making its case in the region. It didn't seem to be bothered about making the case in the global arena. It exercised its influence at a regional level with unrelenting focus on delivery, and with effective Hybrid campaigns.

Israel's focus, on the other hand, remained diffused between its domestic politics, its focus on Iran in a narrow sense, and on its global engagement centred around

the US. This fundamental difference in how focus was directed at different dimensions of the conflict between Iran and Israel inevitably created a basic strategic gap between the two protagonists as they defined their level of engagement differently. The gap was simply this: Whereas Iran's focus was firmly anchored in geography in all its varieties (political, human, economic, topographic and demographic), Israel's focus on geography became tinged, through the long 50-year peace, with the illusions of freedom from geographic constraints that technology and prosperity created. The gap also centred around their differing definitions of what constitutes defeat and victory in any confrontation (e.g. technological superiority vs attachment to territory, and to traditional social and religious norms, prosperity vs poverty etc). It also centred around which dimension of the four dimensions was to be targeted for either the conduct of conflict, or for resolution. The process of each protagonist trying to close the gap in their favour (by military, political, economic or diplomatic means) has now run its course resulting in military measures. Politics has clearly reached a dead end. Military action in this dimension, too, seems very likely.

In all four dimensions, the continuation of armed conflict, and the conflagration of a regional war of attrition, therefore, seem the most likely scenario.

THE EU MUST URGENTLY BRING ITS INSTRUMENTS OF POWER TO BEAR ON ALL FOUR DIMENSIONS, TOGETHER WITH THE US AND REGIONAL PARTNERS

As the EU's and the international community's engagement with the Middle East shifted from Conflict Resolution to Conflict Management over the past two decades, so did the conflicts multiply and deepen in all four dimensions.

After the Arab Spring did not deliver the values-based governance and changes for which the EU was hoping, a disappointed EU turned its back on Conflict Resolution in favour of Conflict Management. It largely left the management function to Israel, the Palestinians and Egypt. It was the equivalent of pretending that geography had untethered the Levant from its European hinges to drift away to its fate. Then the focus shifted, yet again,

with the arrival of the Obama Administration, towards the global dimension. The JCPOA, a “blueprint” for tackling the Iran-related challenges in their global dimension, was born. But critically, it left out the regional and local dimensions: there was no resolution on Iran’s regional interference through proxies, or its support for terrorism. Israel continued to argue the case for a military strike, ignoring the JCPOA as a global dimension instrument. Its approach, in other words, was largely based on domestic, local and regional grounds. It was inevitable that the JCPOA wouldn’t have survived such disregard for the multi-dimensional nature of the conflict, the latter being defined differently by different actors.

Moreover, The Obama Administration did not do US and European interests in the Middle East any favours by starting a process of disengagement from the region in its famous “Pivot” to Asia. The EU seemed to have simply accepted the Obama Administration’s global logic for the JCPOA, that left out the local and regional dimensions, despite the fact that the EU, and member states, had, still have and will continue to have a built-in fundamental security interest in the regional dimension, principally because of geography and interest. Whereas this might’ve made sense to the US being a faraway global power, the lack of geographic focus for the EU meant that it accepted the solution to the global dimension but ignored its need for resolving the local and regional dimensions.

CONCLUSION

Geography dictates that the Regional Dimension is also a key EU interest, however much one might like to pretend that it is a “faraway problem of faraway people of whom we know little “in the infamous words of Neville Chamberlin in 1939. If the Middle East would erupt in a “regional” war, it will take place barely 300 KM from Cyprus, a non-NATO ally, and the EU’s member state in the Eastern Mediterranean. The EU in this regard urgently needs to understand how art 42.7 of the Treaty on the EU will operate should the need arise as a result of hostile military or terrorist activity against a member state in the Mediterranean.

Developing an effective strategy to deal with the conflicts in the Levant, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, and to defend and promote the EU’s manifest and many vital interests in its regional context, will also require cooperating and partnering closely with Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf States, not only on policy, but also on delivery.

Developing a realistic, workable and deliverable political vision for the conflicts, away from “pie in the sky” blueprints, will be essential. To develop this vision, a new, practically-focused, geographically-minded and anchored, and concrete framework is needed for this cooperation, particularly as questions regarding the “day-after” remain dangerously open. There will be global and local consequences to this regional war over and above the humanitarian crises it will further create.

The future geopolitical settlement in the Middle East will have a direct and very significant bearing on the EU beyond the narrow political confines of humanitarian, terrorism and immigration issues, and into broader long-term vital strategic interests and challenges. That future cannot become secure with military solutions alone. A political vision for the future structure of the region that sits on the EU’s doorsteps will be needed to anchor a long-term political settlement that will directly affect Europe’s security and prosperity.

It is not just the East that the EU borders. The Mediterranean (and the Black Sea) are equally vital to the EU’s future security interests. The EU can and should drive the political and security process with the US and regional partners aided by a creative, non-ideological and practical approach. It must get involved in shaping that future NOW.

Bernard Siman, O.B.E., is a Senior Associate Fellow in the Europe in the World Programme at Egmont Institute.





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