

2021 – a year of dramatic developments

2021 was a momentous year with extraordinary developments that will continue to challenge us in 2022. From a European perspective, several events stand out in particular.



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The year 2021 began with a dramatic start, namely, the storming of the United States Capitol. An angry mob tried to use violence to prevent Joe Biden from taking office. A tragic day not just for the United States, but for all other democracies as well. For the images went around the world in a flash and played right into the hands of those who prophesize the decline of the US and exalt the superiority of authoritarian systems. In that way, what had initially begun as a mere domestic issue, quickly turned into a geopolitical one. For the US and China are increasingly dividing the world's countries into democratic and authoritarian spheres of influence. The classification of democracy vs. autocracy is increasingly becoming a central selection criterion when it comes to forming new alliances. By inviting 110 countries to the Summit for Democracy, President Biden attracted both attention as well as disgruntlement. This trend had already begun to manifest itself in 2020 at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic when it came to either dishing out blame or presenting oneself as an effective partner in times of need.

The drama in the United States and the resulting political bipolarity have also had serious geopolitical implications, overshadowing developments in the South China Sea. In Hong Kong, repressions of the protests movement, an amendment to election law as well as economic pressures brought an abrupt halt to the vision of “one country, two systems”. Beijing's de facto seizure of power over the defiant special administrative region no longer provokes significant resistance. For attention has already shifted to Taiwan, which mainland China has classified as a “renegade province”, and which it wants to incorporate as quickly as possible. Many observers view the events in Hong Kong as a prelude and dress rehearsal for Taiwan. Clear signs of this have already begun to manifest themselves. China is exerting political as well as economic pressure on Taiwan and its partners and is increasingly sending military jets into Taiwanese airspace. It appears that China's intention is to wear down the government in Taipei while scaring off potential supporters.

The hasty US withdrawal from Afghanistan in the

summer of 2021 was another event that led to geopolitical confusion. Even though the withdrawal had already been negotiated between former US President Trump and the Taliban as early as February 2020, the departure unfolded chaotically. The rapid advance of the Taliban and the surrender of the Afghan government and the security forces resulted in an image disaster and a loss of a key geostrategic base for Joe Biden. For the time being, China and Russia, as well as Iran and Pakistan, regard themselves as the winners of the situation, now that their archrival, the United States, has had to retreat. Future developments, as well as the security of the whole region, will depend on whether the Taliban regime can provide stability and prevent the emergence of safe havens for terrorists and extremists.

The negotiations on the resumption of nuclear talks with Iran, which began in April, are of similar importance. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – as it is officially called – is ultimately about whether or not Iran may produce nuclear-weapon-grade uranium. A horror scenario not only for Israel and Saudi Arabia, but for the entire Middle East. The mere suspicion that Iran may be in possession of nuclear weapons would lead to a nuclear arms race in the region. Despite the change of government in Tehran, there should still be interest in reaching such an agreement. The US likely views the situation similarly, as it is now once again participating in the talks after its initial withdrawal under President Trump in 2018. This increases the talk's chances of success, even if the biggest disagreements remain between Iran and the US – a “grand bargain” appears unlikely, but continued talks could offer a way out.

However, the Russian deployment of troops on the Ukrainian border is what has attracted the most attention. Over several months, the Kremlin moved military troops and combat equipment to its western border. By the end of 2021, the number of soldiers is said to have reached 100,000. But it was only around the turn of the new year that President Putin got upfront and presented his demands to the US. He made it clear once again that Russia feels threatened, demanding a de facto restoration of the geopolitical order of 1997

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(no eastward NATO expansion!). Apart from the fact that this approach was more akin to political blackmail than a real effort at negotiation, most of the demands themselves are completely over the top and do not comply with international standards and international law. Moscow knows this – so why this “spectacle”?

In any case, Putin has succeeded in shaking up the US, Europe and Ukraine, and putting himself in the international limelight once again. His stakes are very high, for, in the case of a real military intervention, he would drive even the most reluctant sceptics into NATO. In Finland and Sweden, this debate has already been started. It is probably time to enter into a serious political and above all security policy dialogue with Russia. However, Russia's aggressive tactics – see the invasion of South Ossetia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Russia's support for the separatists in the Donbas – remain absolutely unacceptable. An offer of continued talks must therefore not be a pardoning or endorsement of this new militarily led foreign policy. Talks should be held privately instead of sending one-sided messages via conferences and interviews.

Less impressive, but infused with considerable political volatility, are the Serbian secession efforts in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It is well known that the representative of the Republika Srpska (RS) entity rejects the Dayton Agreement and wants to dissolve the entire state and add RS to Serbia. At the end of 2021, RS went even further and decided to withdraw from state institutions. The constituent republic intends to exit the army, the justice system and the tax system within six months.

Without sounding alarmist – this would cross a red line. Not only could such a move lead to the collapse of the entire state of Bosnia-Herzegovina, but it would also greatly endanger peace efforts pertaining to Kosovo. The European integration process has already proved to be very difficult and long-winded. Critical developments such as these should therefore not be overlooked or ignored because they could result in serious setbacks.

What does all of this mean for 2022?

The key trends of 2021 are likely to continue. The



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rivalry between the US and China will probably not change in the foreseeable future. This should become especially apparent in the Indo-Pacific and in the two countries' bilateral economic relations. But for now, all eyes are on Russia. Recent developments indicate that Putin is less interested in negotiations but in creating facts on the ground. It's not unlikely that he will send Russian troops to conquer the whole Donbass exerting pressure on Ukraine and the western world. The situation is similar when it comes to the nuclear talks with Iran; the Russian representative sees a solution within reach within the year's first quarter. A positive result here could lead to a significant easing of tensions in the Middle East. The cold winter has already put the Afghan people and the Taliban regime to a hard test. The result will show whether those in power will be able to guarantee the survival of their people, security and stability, or whether the country's neighbours will feel compelled to intervene. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the international community appears to have finally understood the serious nature of recent developments – but that is not a guarantee for real solutions.

In summary, it can be said that while global warming is increasing, the political climate has become frostier. In that sense, it would be important for the warming in the spring to be followed by a political thaw, too. ●