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APRIL
2024

WAR AND PEACE IN THE 21ST CENTURY The EU ahead of a new political cycle and a new geopolitical era

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"The EU ahead of a new political cycle and a new geopolitical era" was the subject of the 22nd edition of the "War and Peace in the 21st Century" conference, held in Barcelona on March 16th, 2024. Organised by CIDOB in collaboration with EsadeGeo - Center for Global Economy and Geopolitics, and supported by "La Caixa" Foundation, Barcelona City Council and the rest of the CIDOB board, the conference provided expert insights on the internal and external challenges facing the EU in view of the elections to the European Parliament in June 2024, the wars raging in the EU's neighbourhood, and the potential outcomes of the US elections in November 2024.



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The European Union (EU) is facing a new political cycle marked by the European Parliament elections to be held in June 2024 and a shifting geopolitical landscape shaped by the war in Ukraine and in Gaza. Issues such as enlargement, institutional reform, the green transition, technological transformations, migration and asylum policy and European defence are taking centre stage on the European agenda. CIDOB's Annual Conference aimed to identify the challenges that lie ahead, both internally and in terms of external action, and discuss opportunities for a more inclusive and cohesive EU.

In his opening address, **Antoni Segura** (Chairman of CIDOB) noted the importance of analysing the EU's internal dynamics, considering the negative consequences of the rise of the extreme right ahead of the European Parliament elections. Segura reflected on the contributions of CIDOB's Annual Conference to the study of global politics from Barcelona since its first edition, held in 2002.

Speaking on behalf of the Mayor of Barcelona, **Pau Solanilla** (Commissioner for International Relations and City Promotion of Barcelona City Council) welcomed all the participants and highlighted the importance of reflecting on the global agenda from Barcelona, a global city and a non-state capital that benefits from the work of CIDOB, founded 50 years ago by civil society

representatives. Cities can bring a human dimension and help build bridges for peace through city diplomacy, responding to today's global calls for a new way of conceiving international relations, he said. Reminding us to "never cut ties between humans in conflicts", Barcelona should once again provide a platform for dialogue for peace in Europe and the Mediterranean.

Javier Solana (President of EsadeGeo and Honorary Chairman of CIDOB) began by underlining that "the project of Europe is a project of peace", requiring it to go beyond mere geopolitics. Regarding relations with the United States, he said the upcoming US elections in November made it imperative for the EU to foster its own technological sector and to construct its defence in a way which is not like America's. He addressed the EU's own upcoming elections and the need to take decisive steps to prevent populism from gaining control of European institutions. Finally, Solana underlined the geopolitical importance of China for the EU.

Reforming and enlarging the European Union for a new era

The first panel, moderated by **Cristina Gallach** (Member of Global Women Leaders' Voices), followed CIDOB's report "The World in 2024: ten issues that will shape the

international agenda”, which defines the geopolitical situation in two words: ballots and bullets. Ms. Gallach proposed instead to discuss *ballots* and *policies* and underlined that, with expectations of a shift from the centre to the right in the upcoming elections, the EU has never faced a set of ballots which will have such a direct influence on its green, digital, reform and enlargement policies. This set the stage for an exchange of ideas on how democratic processes intersect with policy debates.

Daniela Schwarzer (Member of the Bertelsmann Stiftung Executive Board) highlighted that in the present geopolitical context, enlargement policy could be a tool to bring regional stability and security, as it was in the past, but a larger union of 35 member states, and voting based on unanimity, also carries the risk of weakening the EU’s decision-making capacity. The EU will only emerge stronger from enlargement if it is paired with internal reforms addressing the question of qualified majority voting and the responsibilities of the European Commission. At the same time, differentiated integration and specific policies with rule of law conditionality – as was the case with the successful Next Generation EU funds – could provide ways to protect the fundamental principles of the EU. However, if it is to be credible in expecting candidate countries to fight corruption, the EU also needs to address its own internal challenges.

the EU has matured as a political system through crises, especially since 2009, becoming more resilient, adaptable and flexible. Laffan also pointed to four challenges for the EU if it is to be ready for the next stage. First, she focused on heterogeneity among European countries in terms of democratic capacities, with Hungary constantly blackmailing the EU and threatening unity over EU support for Ukraine. Second, she outlined the risks related to the geopolitics of war, with the resurgence of conflict in the continent and in Gaza, making relations with the US and China more problematic. Third, the EU’s enlargement towards weak, aid-dependent, democratically challenged states risks undermining EU policy-making capacity. Fourth, ahead of the next European elections Laffan observed the centre-right’s fatal tendency to move further right. She concluded that it remains to be seen whether the EU has the capacity to rise to these challenges and noted that a more fitting motto for the EU today is not “unity in diversity” but Mario Draghi’s “whatever it takes” to continue to be a zone of peace and prosperity.

The contributions from the three panellists were followed by a round of debate centring on the contradictions and challenges for the European integration and enlargement project, the need for a more consolidated budget, and the question of immigration. On the subject of European

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Loukas Tsoukalis (President of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, ELIAMEP) remarked that while enlargement may be called “the most successful foreign policy of the EU” because it helps new members to become more stable and prosperous (as it did in the case of Spain and Greece), it is not a panacea that cures all ills (referring to the problems with the rule of law in countries such as Hungary and Poland). He noted that enlargement comes at a cost: more members in a system that works through consensus and unanimity risks becoming a model for dysfunctionality. Tsoukalis said that the current challenge for the EU is reform on two levels, namely institutional reform and funding, without which it will be impossible to address any enlargement successfully. How could the EU consider exporting *pax europea* when neither it itself is ready to introduce the required internal reforms and budget increases, nor are the proposed countries for enlargement ready to fulfil the criteria?

Brigid Laffan (President of the European Policy Centre) highlighted how the EU has moved from a technocratic to an increasingly politicised union. She reflected on how

integration, some participants suggested the creation of subgroups within the EU where honest discussion among geopolitically aligned countries could take place, in addition to acknowledging the need for coalitions “of willing and able” within the EU, and the need for the EU to invest in relationships between member states and those with waiting-room status to smooth the candidates’ transition processes. As far as funding was concerned, the need for greater financial resources was noted, and it was argued that the EU should avoid relying solely on national contributions (and therefore taxation) and instead explore alternative methods of funding (i.e. carbon taxes). Lastly, the issue of immigration triggered a huge discussion as a divisive topic within the European community that goes to the heart of European identity. There was a consensus that Europe will need migration and that more attention and resources should be allocated to integration. The issue of controlling immigration and borders was also raised during the discussion, as well as the conflation of immigration and diversity, pointing to the ethnic and religious diversity within European societies and warnings about political exploitation of migration by far-right parties.

The EU in a new geopolitical context

The second panel was moderated by **Xavier Mas de Xaxàs** (Diplomatic Correspondent of *La Vanguardia*). It aimed to elaborate on the needs and efficiency of EU external action when it comes to tackling the challenges of an increasingly complex geopolitical reality, with open conflicts in European territory and its neighbourhood, including in Ukraine and Gaza; competition between the US and China; rivalry with Russia; and necessary engagement with the so-called Global South.

Jean-Marie Guéhenno (Director of the Kent Global Leadership Program on Conflict Resolution, Columbia University) warned of the consequences of the return of war in Europe. He reflected on how double standards in the EU's responses to the war in Ukraine and Gaza have undermined its soft power and global respect for the universality of European values. He emphasised the importance of legitimacy for the future of European integration, hence the need to preserve the identity and core values of the EU such as the rule of law, human dignity and solidarity. In his concluding remarks, he highlighted the urgency of reinforcing the EU's industrial

the face of the uncertainty that comes with the prospect of a victory for Trump, he emphasised the importance of more strategic autonomy, noting that, as one of the world's great powers, China can act as a stabilising force in peace-making, global governance and the economy. He called for a trust-building process between major powers in global politics and a real and efficient multilateral system that reflects the current multipolar world. Given we all live on the same planet and face common threats, and therefore cannot afford to be rivals, Huiyao proposed working together on projects like climate change, the economy, green development, the Belt and Road Initiative and the Global Gateway to tackle huge infrastructure deficits, while noting the need to rebuild Ukraine and Gaza. He also said that as China can mediate between Ukraine and Russia, the EU can do the same in US-China relations, making the EU, the United States and China work well as a trilateral relationship and making the world more stable.

Maha Yahya (Director, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center) referred to the Gaza war as a game changer with direct implications for Europe. For too long, the conflict has been swept under the carpet, with an idea of peace and security in the region based on a

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capacity in defence and artificial intelligence to address the existing security challenges in Europe. Drawing on some of the points raised during the first panel, he also stressed the need for multi-speed integration, especially in security and defence, and increasing financial resources for AI, research and development and technology.

Natalie Nougayrède (Member of the Council, European Council on Foreign Relations) focused her contribution on the importance of putting people at the centre of geopolitics, and the objective of democratisation for a peaceful Europe. Through the examples of the 2004 Orange Revolution, the 2014 Maidan revolution, and the ongoing popular resistance to Russia's invasion, she reflected on how Ukrainians have shaped geopolitics, arguing that geopolitics can also be made by people. Similarly, Nougayrède saw the empowerment of Russia's civil society and the reinforcement of democratic institutions in Russia as a necessary step towards the end of the Ukraine war. The latter, she argued, is indeed a direct result of the autocratic power system that Putin has built in Russia, for which the EU needs to think of a different Russia if peace is to be restored in the continent.

Wang Huiyao (Founder and President of the Center for China and Globalization, CCG), began by saying that it is vital for the EU (and the rest of the world) to play a bigger role to prevent the scenario of "lose-lose" geopolitics. In

process of normalisation. The blame game over who was responsible for the failure of the Oslo peace process and the negotiations for a ceasefire made the debate on a two-state solution unviable, while new settlements continued to be established. She also underlined the absence of leadership, not just in Israel (with its most far-right government for a long time) and the region as a whole, but also in the US and the EU, where leaderships are fragmented. While the European Commission takes a pragmatic approach, there is a lack of brainpower and political solutions in the European debate, noting that Borrell's appeals for peace will go unheeded for as long as the EU fails to send a clear, united message. Given the horrific humanitarian situation, Yahya criticised the EU's double standards in response to Ukraine and Gaza. She said that the recognition of Palestinian statehood is one leverage that European countries should use, either collectively or individually. Lastly, she noted that the perception in the region and the Global South is that the Gaza war is an incomplete decolonisation process.

During the discussion with the audience, the following issues were raised: the possibility of a change of government in Israel; the necessity of reform for EU enlargement; Europe's dark colonial past and how it could engage differently with the Global South; whether it is in the interest of Europe to open negotiations with Russia; and how the green transition is impacted by war.

In response, **Jean-Marie Guéhenno** stressed that, for a better relationship with the Global South, Europe will need a stronger stance on the Middle East, including recognising the Palestinian state. **Wang Huiyao** reaffirmed the importance of ending both wars, calling for a high-level peace summit. He then noted that although China was pushed towards Russia by the US, Henry Kissinger brokered US-China relations in the 1970s. Unfortunately, he added, there is “no Kissinger of the EU” now. Finally, **Maha Yahya** mentioned that there is no hope of an Israeli leadership change, therefore there is no significant window for peace talks. She mentioned some urgent necessities for the short term: a ceasefire, a firmer position from the EU; averting an invasion of Lebanon owing to the high risk of regional escalation; and the need to link the reconstruction of Gaza to a political track of the conflict.

In his concluding remarks, **Pol Morillas** (Director of CIDOB) summarised the conference themes by highlighting the intersection between politics and geopolitics in both panel discussions. He concluded by stating that, while the EU has matured enough to hold discussions on critical issues such as migration, the far right or the environment, it is still in the process of defining how the challenge of enlargement and reform will be addressed to strengthen the EU in the future. By asking whether the EU is ready to do “whatever it takes” on issues like security and defence and the green and the technological transitions, he argued that the main challenge for the EU will be approaching these issues through political discussions rather than policies alone. Reflecting on the second panel, Morillas referred to the idea of geopolitics defining our identity, and the impact of people and private actors on the shaping of geopolitics, too. He noted the imperative to rebuild trust among citizens and within the global community and argued that “at a moment when politics is most needed for the challenges we are facing, geopolitics is preventing global politics from solving our shared global problems”.