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**WORLD AFTER AFGHANISTAN,
AUKUS, EVERGRANDE**



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INSTITUTULUI DE ȘTIINȚE POLITICE
ȘI RELAȚII INTERNAȚIONALE
„ION I. C. BRĂȚIANU“**

București, 2022

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

CHIFU, IULIAN

World after Afghanistan, Aukus, Evergrande / Iulian Chifu, Kiran Bhatti. - București : Editura Institutului de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale "Ion I.C. Brătianu", 2022

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-630-6523-00-9

1. Bhatti, Kiran

32

Tehnoredactare computerizată:

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LILIANA DINCĂ

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ȘI RELAȚII INTERNAȚIONALE
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Chapter 1

Complex interdependencies: AUKUS, Afghanistan, Evergrande in times of Russian invasion of Ukraine

Iulian Chifu

Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has shaken the world. The prospect of a Russian invasion has been talked about since spring 2021, when new President Joe Biden was tested for the first time and the result was the Geneva meeting being granted to Vladimir Putin. But **change in the world** as we know it precedes it, and the main tectonic shifts that have premised the big changes date back to the **Bermuda Triangle** moment that includes three major events: **the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the making of the AUKUS agreements, and the collapse of China's real estate industry marked by the Evergrande bankruptcy**. In fact, all three are influencing not only the world developments, but also the **Russian military aggression in Ukraine**: the withdrawal from Afghanistan was seen by Vladimir Putin as a moment of **weakness of the West, the US and NATO first and foremost**, amplified by the debacle of the imploding Afghan regime in August 2021, before the Taliban's power-sharing/takeover, creating anger and rifts within the Western NATO coalition and *like-minded* partners; **AUKUS** was a moment of **Western reorientation towards the Indo-Pacific**, but also the great upset of France, excluded from previous submarines agreements with Australia, and **Evergrande** marked **the Chinese Communist Party's takeover** of big investors and multi-billionaires who wanted access to decision-making, also breaking a number of Western levers to influence, not to say constrain, leaders in Beijing. On top of all came **Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine** that erased all traces of the three major trends, in the public

space, even if it only obscured them from the layman's view and **amplified them**, but did not blur or change their course: the world is still moving towards **polarization between democracies and autocracies**, the US has abandoned its exceptionalist tendency and accepted that it can only succeed by **coagulating all the world's democracies in a multilateral format** to rein on the autocracies and keep the rule-based order, the **pivot to the Indo-Pacific has only been delayed** and postponed while building the resources of the democratic West for the **two major concurrent wars with Russia and China**, while the collapse of Evergrande and China's zero COVID policy has pushed the world towards **global economic crisis**.

With drawal from Afghanistan: wrong signals to Putin about America's weakness and the West's division

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has had many interpretations and costs. The US exit from the **long war in Afghanistan** was a mandatory move, but the untimely way it happened didn't help. There were two major problems: **a limited consultation with NATO allies** and *like-minded* states that were present on the ground – this time strictly to advise and train Afghan Army and Service forces – and the **chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan** before the August 31, 2021 deadline, prompted by the implosion of the Afghan regime and the violation of Kabul agreements by the Taliban, especially the Haqqani group, considered a terrorist organization, albeit with close ties to the ISI, the powerful Pakistani military intelligence service.

This led to the **August 15 moment** of regime implosion and the anticipated takeover of Kabul virtually overnight, followed by the **assault at Hamid Karzai airport** of numerous Afghans and foreigners willing to flee and the forcing of states to extract their nationals and Afghan workers in embassies and international organizations, many of them **wanted by the Taliban** to be executed for previous actions against the terrorist movement. **The implosion of the regime** and the **forcible takeover and partial control by the Taliban** has also led to internal rivalries within the movement, as well as the outbreak of rivalries with Daesh, the self-proclaimed Islamic State, this time the Khorasan faction, which began **terrorist actions at the airport itself**.

The result of **impact footage**, with **Afghans falling from the planes taking off** – even though they should never have been allowed on the runway –, **the August 26, 2021 terrorist attack** that killed at least 183 people, has resulted in major image costs for the United States and newly installed President Joe Biden. Moreover, the interpretation was one of **American weakness** – which could have led to the encouragement of Putin's decision to attack Ukraine, because America is preoccupied with its own problems and **China** – but also the existence of a **rift among the West**, through the upset of Emmanuel Macron, who tried a variant of supplanting the American withdrawal from the field, a perception that could also have **encouraged the invasion of Ukraine**.

On the other hand, **the outbreak of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine** demonstrated that the United States was right to reorient itself from a **no-win**, war of attrition, long war in Afghanistan to redirect its resources to the **future war in Ukraine**. Especially since the US military Afghanistan budget of about \$40bn a year was easily allocated to the newly emerging war in Ukraine. But **the complex interdependencies** did not stop there, and Putin's eventual Russian calculations about Afghanistan seem to have been wrong, because they **did not validate a split in the West**, on the contrary: the aggression on Ukraine had the effect of clarifying the common enemy and **unifying democratic states** in the face of the horror of a **full-scale, all-out war in the 21st century**.

AUKUS: France's anger and the EU's entrapment in the transatlantic rift

The AUKUS agreement was a **major technological leap forward** for Australia that doubled **the signals of multilateralism** launched by the United States in the world of democracies. On September 15, 2021, the US, UK and Australia signed an agreement that was much broader and, according to US President Joe Biden's statement, also targeted France. It was a **complex transfer of technology from the US and UK to Australia** (and other like-minded recipients, including France), the main – and most visible – point of which was **the construction of eight nuclear-powered submarines with all related technology**.

The agreement was much broader and covered many areas, the **cyber and new technologies** – artificial intelligence and machine learning – being the major ones. But the much quieter **nuclear engine technology, with** much greater capabilities, attracted attention because it overturned an earlier Australian agreement with France. Hence the **big upset in Paris**. In fact, France knew that it had not moved forward with the construction except in terms of price increases, and closing the dispute was costly for Australia because it involved **significant sums spent by France** and a compensation amount for breaking the contract. In addition, Australia traded earlier claims about the **quality of the material to be supplied by France** for a public statement that Australia alone was responsible for the **change in procurement strategy that led to the cancellation of the contract**.

The fact is that **France's dissatisfaction** was on the verge of a transatlantic rift, as France wanted to export the problem of a trade agreement to the EU level. However, **the dispute was closed**, especially as France was also targeted by the US and UK technology transfer. However, **the signal to Russia** and third parties (including China, as France is itself a player in the Indo-Pacific) was likely to **give further confidence to Putin's Russia**. Certainly, the episode had some lessons learned and messages that Russia got wrong: the **reorientation/pivoting towards the Pacific** of democratic countries attention, hence the diminishing concern for Europe and especially the **rift between NATO allies, US and France at least**.

In fact, the gesture was a **reaffirmation of Biden's American policy** of increasingly involving democratic and like-minded states in all efforts to **fight autocracies and maintain a rules-based world**. Thus, **AUKUS** was Australia's involvement by equipping itself with major, state-of-the-art military capabilities to be able to contribute to the **joint effort to contain China in the Indo-Pacific**. Of course, the package also included **Australia's direct defence** against direct pressure from China, but also equipping it with capabilities to be able to **re-establish its presence in the Pacific island states**, which have proved extremely important in security developments in the region and in stopping China's offensive after the conclusion of the **Solomon Islands security agreement**. The multilateralism professed by the US was most clearly represented on this occasion, over and above France's discontent.

The Evergrande epic and pushing the world into global economic crisis

The Evergrande deal is relevant to China for several reasons: first, it is not **the singular elimination of the influence of multi-billionaire Jack Ma**, the most visible figure in the dispute, representing Chinese private business, whose marginalization for **ambitions of control and influence** over Chinese Communist Party policies could be seen as **an exception**; it is, on the contrary, the symbol of an **entire industry**, representing **over 30% of China's gross domestic product** and combining private ownership, wealth, major credentials in various forms, and ambitions of control, again, of private individuals and private industry over politics.

In fact, the Evergrande situation is a **validation of the theories of Giovanni Sartori** who stressed that democracy and the free market economy are interdependent and mutually supportive. Specifically, **China's opening up** to the one-state-two-regime option has led to a fantastic growth based on the **private market economy** that has doubled the planned and centralised state economy, but has also led to the emergence of several **million millionaires in dollars** whose ambition has gone towards the need to play a role in their own state's policies. And since the multi-party option is unacceptable in communist China, the only formula for involvement, influence and control is simply **interference in the communist decision-making system**.

This prospect has been viewed with distrust and hostility by the current Chinese state leader, Xi Jinping, who has opted to **punish the conspirators**, to put them in their place, to confiscate businesses or wealth in various forms and to **discipline the entire industry**, partly taken over by the state, rescued in areas of social impact, but left to collapse and go bankrupt in the rest. The result has been **the strengthening of Xi Jinping's "power vertical"** but the undermining of China's investment and vibrant growth engines. In addition, as the situation has been compounded by the problems of the **"zero COVID" policy** and China's container, transport (domestic and maritime), energy and goods production crises. The result has been a **perfect storm** that threatens to push China, and then the world, into a **global economic crisis**.

Evergrande, however, meant first and foremost a **full takeover** by the Communist Party and Xi Jinping's **control** over the Chinese state and economy. Basically, after overusing even technological developments to make the famous **individual records** and 'social points' rewards for regime-friendly political activities for each citizen – with the position of knowledge and data storage reflecting individuals' own choices being extended to the whole world – China went on to **take full control of the private market economy** and especially the most lucrative areas – IT, gaming, telecoms, internet sales, construction and real estate. These are also the **engines of growth for the Chinese economy**. As China's **demographic crisis** has also become more pronounced (as poverty has fallen massively and despite the one-child policy, it is the first year since the Cultural Revolution of 1963 that China's population will fall this year), **the prospects for China's global economic crisis** are growing, as multinationals and Western firms **relocate heavily** from China and manufacturing industries move to other countries and regions, closer to the beneficiaries – as a result of lessons learned from the pandemic.

The complex interdependencies of the three trends prior to the outbreak of Putin's neo-imperial war of Russia

We thus have **the full picture of the complex interdependencies** first between the three global trends preceding Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine – Afghanistan, AUKUS and Evergrande – then between them and the **Russian invasion**, and finally between the four trends, once the war emerged. And all these developments accentuate the **impact of these overlapping and interrelated phenomena**, each of which represents a **major trend break** and generates further influences.

Thus, the withdrawal from **Afghanistan** had a direct influence on the **US and NATO credibility** and intra-Western friction, with altered perceptions on the ability to keep the US policies and operations at a strategic distance. Second, it also meant **freeing up the US capabilities and budgetary resources** that could be directed towards the new war brewing in Ukraine (the signs of which had been clear since April-May 2021). The retreat gave signals that could have been interpreted by Putin as weakness, but this overlapped with **much clearer and stronger messages in the election campaign** and in the

new Biden administration's security and foreign policy documents that saw **China as the main problem** and marched on a formula for settling differences with Putin's Russia and eventually **enlisting Russia in China's hardening alliance**.

AUKUS marked the same inclination to pivot towards the Indo-Pacific, already made at a time when **a deal with China was unlikely**. The US was exporting its financial and capability effort to trusted allies, to whom it was transferring technology and giving them **access to capabilities** with which to contribute to the Indo-Pacific effort, already drawing the formula for **countering autocracies on at least two fronts** (if we don't add Iran and North Korea). **AUKUS** was merely **doubling the QUAD** into which Japan and India alike were stepping in, to which the alliance of democracies and *like-minded* states were adding new players. Australia's actions after the appointment of the new Albanese government after 23 May and **the Australian mini-multilaterals** validated the US project in the Pacific and the Chinese blockade of the security takeover of the island states in the region.

Evergrande announces more serious signs of an **economic crisis**, which will affect both Western and Asian countries, with China adding to the **energy crisis** launched and managed with Russia throughout 2021 and acutely prolonged into 2022. But the **costs taken on by a Russia at war** and subject to harsh sanctions may also entail costs across the board in autocratic states, equally in terms of **interdependencies** and the exponential rise in the cost of raw materials and especially **high-tech products**, where they are still accessible beyond sanctions to autocratic states.

The three phenomena have, as we have seen, influenced **Putin's interpretation of Russia's window of opportunity** to manage the Ukrainian problem until 9 May, then until 30 December 2022, when the centenary of the founding of the USSR – dismantled 30 years earlier – is celebrated. **The war will not end** because Russia's level of ambition is beyond what it can achieve in that timeframe, just as Ukraine cannot accept the consecration of territorial amputation.

Instead, the sum of these phenomena will test the resilience of the world in two dimensions: first that of **absorbing rising costs** and falling living standards in the West and Russia, which seems to give

the upper hand to Russia, with a population more inclined to endure these costs, and through the prism of subjection to repression and control in Russia by Putin's authoritarian regime; the second, that of **limiting access to technology, funding**, the impact of sanctions and luxury goods limitations in Russia and social costs, i.e. the real public confidence and cohesion of the Russian elite versus the **continued cohesion and coherence of the West in supporting Ukraine**, which in turn should continue its **determination to defend itself to the end**.

1. Afghanistan 2021: the nightmare of ending a long war

The long war – also called the forever war, the neverending war – is a nightmare for any democracy: leaders are inheriting a war with specific rational, need to drag it over the mandate, taking the costs and trying to maintain the public interest for this conflict that they pass to the next administration. The history is not particularly rewarding for leaders that end those long wars, specially when the decision come on a political bases. The errors are accumulating during this long war, from different decision makers, and the payrole passes to the last in line who is suppose to close down the combat operations and retreat the troops. In the case of Afghanistan, the end game is far from ending decades of civil war and terrorism in the region. On the contrary, the rush out and the chaos in evacuations after the departure of the American and allied soldiers leave a real infection in Central Asia, passed to the regional actors which forced America out – including by paying bounties to the Taliban in order to kill American soldiers.

The avatars and complications of a long war. The eternal war. The endless war

The concepts of **long war, eternal war – long war, forever war, endless war** – have become the most sought-after and used concepts in recent years, following the **abrupt end of the Taliban offensive on Kabul**, with the fall of the capital and the untimely departure of officials and diplomats from Hamid Karzai International Airport in total chaos. However, the concepts have depth and long-standing dates of service in the history of security studies and war studies: they

engage an entire debate about **the theory of victory** in a long war and contradict, not to say publicly end, **the utopia of peace** and the aspirations for ending all conflict and installing eternal peace. **The case of Afghanistan** is a good referential for this whole debate.

The concept of **a long war**¹ is the most present and theoretically developed. It is based not so much on the idea, or rather the feeling, of the inability to end a conflict without enormous costs, which no one wants to bear, but on the duration of a war that spans many mandates and administrations, passed from one government to another, inherited, managed and passed on to the next administration.

The definition appears in the Qadrenial Defense Review, 2006², in which **Long War** refers to the duration of the war waged by the US (in Afghanistan already) and the **enemy identified**: 'violent extremists' and 'terrorists'. The document also includes **the definition of victory in a long war**, which contains conditions directly related to the conflict but also to other threats to US security:

- defeating terrorist networks;
- defence in depth of territory;
- drawing the options and choices of states that are at a turning point – historically depicting China and Russia;
- preventing hostile states and non-state actors from acquiring and using weapons of mass destruction (predominantly nuclear).

From here we quickly come to the relatively equivalent concepts of **perpetual war, endless war, or forever war**. Here it is not so much the duration that matters as the lack of prospect of ending the war, the state of continuous war without clear conditions that could lead to its conclusion.³ Of course, the absence of a convenient – and politically

¹ Christopher G. Pernin, Brian Nichiporuk, Dale Stahl, Justin Beck, Ricky Radaelli-Sanchez, *Chapter 2. "What is a long war?" in *Unfolding the Future of the Long War: Motivations, Prospects, and Implications for the U.S. Army*, RAND Co, 2008, at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg738a>.*

² Qadrenial Defense Review, 2006, (DoD, 2006).

³ Andrew J. Bacevich, *Ending Endless War: A Pragmatic Military Strategy*, Foreign Affairs, September/October 2016, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ united-states/2016-08-03/ending-endless-war>.

acceptable – **definition of victory in a long war** also comes into play. In the absence of such a formula for ending a long war, the definition migrates to endless war.⁴

This does not refer strictly to the **state of war**, but to continuous confrontations and especially to the possibility to erupt at any time, at unspecified intervals, depending on conditions that are difficult to predict and that are related to the combatants and to **the space of emotions** and image opportunities rather than to those related to the concrete situation on the ground and to obtaining concrete advantages in the conflict. Not infrequently, this category includes **unconventional and asymmetric wars**, such as the war on terrorism, the war on drugs or even the fight against poverty.

The difficulties of a newly installed government having to **continue a long⁵, possibly unpopular war** by the sheer weight of understanding the financial effort, the cost in casualties and especially **the action itself**, of fighting third parties from a strategic distance. Obviously, the handiest experiences come from the US, with **the Vietnam War**, and the Afghanistan War, but there are various experiences in what we call today frozen conflicts (although only Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh remain, with the emergence of the war in Eastern Ukraine, the others being reheated and temporarily resolved somehow, in Abkhazia and South Ossetia or Crimea, by occupation). But there are other cases of ongoing conflicts that are beginning to acquire **the characteristics of the long war**.⁶

The idea of a **long, protracted war**, began to be used in the American planning documents as early as the early 1990s, when the Cold War was the reference. Viewed as a whole, in the confrontation between the two ideological blocs, it was a long war that lasted 44 years,

⁴ David Sterman, “Why Ending Our Endless Wars Isn’t a ‘Vacuous’ Exercise,” *Responsible Statecraft*, August 27, 2020, at <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/08/27/why-ending-our-endless-wars-isnt-a-vacuous-exercise/>.

⁵ Tom Hayden, *Understanding the Long War*, in *The Nation*, 7 mai 2009, <https://www.thenation.com/article/understanding-long-war/>, accesat la 28 mai 2017.

⁶ Julian Chifu, *Comunicarea în război: cum menține un Guvern susținerea pentru un „război lung” sau Bătălia pentru „știrile bune”*, Revista Infosfera, Iunie 2017, ISSN 2065 – 3395, pp. 3-11.

from 1945 when the Second World War came to an end, and the Long Telegram, until the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. In the “**Defense Planning Guidance**” of 1991, when the signatory was the Pentagon’s Under Secretary for Defense Policy, Paul Wolfowitz, the document was referring to the victory in the first Gulf War and the Long Wars to be avoided by US military force and the avoidance of the rebirth of a superpower that could challenge the US and generate such a Long War.⁷

But the concept has much more historical depth: Mao Zedong called the **Protracted War** the second phase of the Sino-Japanese War, when the Japanese advance was halted, but the Chinese forces continued to prepare and did not immediately begin their counter-offensive against the Japanese.⁸ Here was a strategy, a deliberate choice by one side in **an inter-state war**, but recognizing that, at that point, no one could win the war. George Orwell, in the book “1984”, makes interesting observations in his scenario of **permanent war**, which he calls “**continuous war**”: while it was previously known that a war ended sooner or later with a victory or defeat, **Orwell’s superstates** – a figuration of **the two Cold War superpowers** – “cannot conquer or defeat each other”.⁹

The concept of **endless war** and the equivalents of “**permanent war**” and “**eternal war**” are, however, characteristic of the post-9/11 period.¹⁰ A whole body of theory and sharp academic criticism has pointed out that, unlike **the long war**, these concepts are pejorative slogans from politics, not concepts with academic weight. These are present conflicts that seem to be taking on a permanent character, with no prospect of ever being resolved. In fact, there is **a whole body of**

⁷ Paul Wolfowitz, *Defense Planning Guidance*, 1992, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/iraq/etc/wolf.html>.

⁸ Mao Zedong, *On Protracted War*, Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2001.

⁹ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008, 187-90.

¹⁰ New America, *Defining endless war*, at <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/defining-endless-wars/endless-war-a-term-with-a-history-and-a-definition/>.