Working Package

INFRASTRUCTURES AND POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA. THE CROSSROADS OF REGIONAL AND GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS

To be co-led by CIDOB – Barcelona Center for International Affairs and IAI – Istituto Affari Internazionali

Over the last decade, the Mediterranean and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has experienced profound and far-reaching social, political and economic transformations that have contributed to unprecedented levels of volatility and uncertainty across the region. Some of these shifts have reshaped many of the traditional features of the geopolitical order in place in the region for decades, while others might have the potential to do so in the near future. Increase competition among regional powers but also new stakes by emerging global powers are redefining the contours of regional geopolitics and the way in which this region relates to broader global trends.

One of those trends is the importance of connectivity and the control and property of physical or virtual infrastructures. This element is not new as evidenced by the centuries-old competition for control of some strategic passageways such as the Strait of Gibraltar, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, the Strait of Hormuz, the Straits of Tiran or the Suez Canal.

Yet, technological revolutions as well as changes in the balance and nature of power at the global and regional levels are modifying the way in which cooperation and competition dynamics take shape in this particular area. The importance of critical infrastructure has also been identified as a key dimension in the EU Global Strategy (EUGS), with policy tools being deployed to aid in the prevention and resilience of such infrastructure.

Analysing regional dynamics through the lenses of infrastructure and power will allow to discuss the shifting position of the region in world affairs but also to assess how global dynamics impact the MENA region itself. To frame it differently, we will be able to analyse whether the region (or parts of it) is embedded in global dynamics or, on the contrary, experiences or risks experiencing a process of peripheralisation due to the competition from other centres of power related to critical infrastructures or a deviation in global flows of goods, people and information.

Finally, it will allow us to refine our understanding of regional geopolitics by integrating into the analysis the role of private companies, some of which are of a transnational nature, and how they relate to 'conventional' centres of power, namely the state apparatuses, state-owned investment programmes and public companies.

The project will be composed of (1) a research dimension and (2) an outreach component. Research will lead to the production of a Joint Policy Study (JPS) that will offer an extended description and analysis (four chapters) of the proposed topics below. Each chapter will provide a broad overview of the MENA region as a whole while also zooming-in to focus on one or more case studies to be decided or confirmed when putting together the consortium. The dimensions that will be analysed include: the challenges for each type of infrastructure; the players involved (both from the regional and the global levels); the dynamics of power resulting from their interplay; instances of regional cooperation or conflict; and the implications for the EU

and its responses, policies and diplomacy around these infrastructures. Each chapter will be complemented by a map and/or a infographic as much as possible. It will also be interesting to draw a connectivity map of the MENA.

1. Ports and maritime choke points

The region includes five maritime straits that are crucial for global trade: Gibraltar, Bab-el-Mandeb, Tiran, Suez, Bosphorus and Hormuz. The latter is the world's most important oil chokepoint, with a flow of 17 million barrels per day amounting to about 30% of all seaborne-traded oil, while the Suez Canal carries around 8% of total seaborne trade. Regional instability and the appearance of alternative routes from Europe to Asia (mainly through the Artic) could affect geopolitical dynamics. Piracy also represents a major challenge. Somali piracy and a potential state collapse in Yemen are causing insecurity that is spilling over into the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. More recently, the Libyan coast has also become a safe haven for criminal networks operating in the Mediterranean and beyond. Finally, ports play a very important role in this new geopolitical dynamics and this chapter will study how the acquisition of critical infrastructures reflects larger geopolitical ambitions by regional or global players.

2. Pipelines and grids geopolitics

The MENA energy landscape is in constant flux due to the emergence of new players and infrastructures reflecting changing regional and global energy dynamics. For some years now the Eastern Mediterranean in particular has been a centre of attention as a potentially important natural gas province in the making. However, so far progress in that direction has in general been frustratingly slow. And this is for a number of reasons: the impact of energy price volatility and turbulent economic and financial conditions globally, uncertainties in the countries' energy, regulatory and fiscal policies, and, not least, the region's own geopolitical challenges which constitute a major source of difficulty. Studying regional geopolitics through the lenses of the security of key energy infrastructure and the players involved makes sense in light of the fact that the MENA is crisscrossed by several pipelines and grids that carry gas and electricity within the region itself and to its external destination markets, including the European countries. In this respect, improving the resilience of critical infrastructures has become a priority for the national authorities and private companies that have a stake in the regional energy market. Emerging threats, including unconventional and cyber attacks to critical infrastructures, as well as the aggressive posture by potential competitors globally have heightened the sense of insecurity and have often exacerbated or created old and new geopolitical tensions.

3. Airlines and airports as instruments of soft power

Soft power is traditionally defined as "the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes you want" (Nye 2004, 2). A country's cultural assets that are attractive to others such as literature, art, education and popular culture; commerce as a way of transmitting values and norms through contacts, visits and exchange, and the positive perception of its foreign policy are the main sources of soft power. Soft power needs the use of public diplomacy as a tool to win the hearts and minds of people. In this framework, it is possible to include national airlines. Over the last decade, Turkish Airlines, Ettihad Airways, Emirates and Qatar Airways have all emerged not only as among the most successful national airlines globally from a commercial point of view but also as powerful soft power instruments in the hands of national authorities. At a different scale, Royal Air Maroc has also made a continuous investment to open routes to African cities, a move which is consistent with the pivot to Africa of this country. Morocco is not an exception as in the MENA region those strategic plans are often part and parcel of broader national strategies and foreign policy

visions. For example, if a national airline can achieve making its city of origin an aviation hub, this has important repercussions commercially and politically with ramifications for regional and global geopolitics. Tracing the expanding air routes to and from key MENA countries serves to show some players' ability to project their commercial and political horizons often in competition with one another. Finally, their ability to connect globally is also perceived as part of the countries' public diplomacy strategies in which branding and connectivity are two sides of the same coin.

4. The geopolitics of virtual spaces

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are another battlefield for geopolitical competition and intra-regional breakdown. The penetration of these technologies into the MENA has increased dramatically in the past years, not only changing patterns of communication and information but also impacting heavily on state-society relations in the region. Stark differences exist across and within countries in terms of access to Internet-related technologies (for example Internet-based payment systems) and connectivity (for example 5G technology). Therefore, a mapping of the situation is important before being able to analyse a phenomenon that is multi-dimensional in nature and takes place in different forms and at different speeds. A particular chapter is represented by the penetration and use of social media by different categories of people for information and communication, leisure or control and propaganda. The ability to control these media and the messages that are circulated through them is highly valued by the elites (in different domains) and by the authorities that are increasingly making use themselves of these technologies and platforms to exercise their power. Finally, an important trans-regional and global phenomenon that affects the MENA too is represented by the cyber attacks on virtual and material infrastructures whose functioning is taken hostage by cyber pirates and criminals who do not know boundaries or nationalities. Cyber security is thus a crucial dimension of the geopolitics of virtual spaces.

The outreach component of the project will include a dialogue workshop with all the contributing researchers and other experts, and a final dissemination event.