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# THE PERSPECTIVE

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NEW LEADERSHIP. CHANGING TIMES



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Cover illustrated by Victoria Restrepo Giraldo



# EDITORIAL

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## Dear reader,

The theme of New Leadership, Changing Times is "Women, Peace, and Security." In our editorial meetings, we have had many spirited discussions and debates on what exactly this theme ought to entail. Questions about the role of women in issues of peace and security or which aspect to focus on have been at the forefront of the thinking for this issue. However the notion that ties all our articles together is one of new leaders and new times.

In many parts of the world and in many instances new models of leadership are emerging, adapted to the problems of the day. In many of these cases women are at the forefront of decision making in a way that was rare not so long ago. As the world moves further into the 21st century change is rife, both locally and globally.

In previous editorials, we've written about a world that's changing and in many ways, is becoming less secure and predictable. We've written about the need for new kinds of political thinking and the potential for a multipolar world order. The role of women in shaping our societies and the prospects for peace and security has also been subject to much change in recent years. The idea behind this issue of THE PERSPECTIVE was to highlight the various roles and types of impact that women have on issues both global and local, while also shining a light on certain issues of peace and security that were of particular interest, in light of ongoing geopolitical change.

It is somewhat of a paradox that one of the most important and consequential changes to the political order in Europe and abroad is one that is seemingly nondescript. However, from the Northern Triangle to Taiwan, more and more women govern nations and institutions of global importance. We've attempted to show this development from a variety of angles, such as media coverage, local and national politics, as well as security issues.

In this issue, we've also tried to highlight some issues of security that are often overlooked yet are of importance to larger security trends. From the Balkans to East Asia, countries big and small continue to grapple with and manage their relationships with great powers. How

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the world powers ,big and small, relate to each other is reflective of the kinds of societies they represent, the equality of the sexes being inseparable from the maintenance of decency and equality in a global setting.

In a world where great powers increasingly compete in cultural influence, military capability, and industrial prowess, the freedom and right of women to make the most of their potential as professionals, public servants, and citizens are indispensable for the current and future prosperity of free and open societies such as ours. Therefore the increased influence of women in decision-making and political life is welcome not just from the perspective of justice itself but also for the continued strength of just societies. A society that wants to thrive in a world of global competition and exchange must enable the entirety of its citizenry to participate in politics and enterprise on equal terms, without the hindrance of discrimination.

This is THE PERSPECTIVE and UPF's small contribution to the continued recognition of women in positions of political and social leadership, and we hope that you will find the texts interesting and worth reading!

In facing future challenges to a free and open way of life, the importance and advantage of having all citizens working together on equal footing for the betterment of society cannot be understated. We hope you enjoy the reading and hope to see you at other UPF events coming up this spring!

*Bahadır Sirin & Nicolas Jendi*  
*Editors-in-Chief*

# PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

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**Dear members,**

The spring semester has gone by very quickly and it is hard to believe that we are already more than half way through this semester! Many great things have been happening in UPF and we are very proud of everything that our active members have been producing.

Different committees have been busy working with their different tasks. The Career committee's mentorship programme and prep course kicked off successfully at the beginning of the year and the Lecture committee has been busy organizing interesting lectures on an almost weekly basis. The Webzine committee meanwhile, has produced two online articles per week, covering many different topics and geographical areas.

The Activity committee has brought back UPF pub quizzes which have been missed during the last two years and they have also been busy planning sittings and the UPF Spring Ball which finally took place in person for the first time in years. As of writing this, the Travel committee is on their trip to Istanbul where they have many interesting study visits planned, among them the embassy of Sweden. We hope that you will be able to read and hear about their travel from the webzine and magazine articles as well as from podcasts.

The Pod and Radio committee has also been actively producing new podcasts weekly and taking part in Radio AF's live shows. We encourage everyone to go and listen to their interesting production, there are topics of all kinds. The Magazine committee has also been busy with writing and editing articles. Their hard and detailed work was visible in the last magazine issue which was distributed to all of our members. Finally, the PR committee has been busy with marketing and promoting our events and their work is always very talented.

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Lastly, our annual Project of the Year group was selected just before Christmas and they have been actively planning the upcoming project, Spring Forward Conference, which is taking place on the 5th of May.

We are very happy about all the great things that the different committees in our association have been producing and we want to send out a big thank you and an appreciation to all of you who have contributed to the content that has been produced in UPF! Thank you, the association would not exist without all of you.

On another note, we have officially started our new collaboration with the European Student Think Thank (EST). They are an international organization that involves young people in the European policy-making process, organizes events across EU institutions, analyzes European affairs and works with a network of ambassadors to our organization. Moreover, we have renewed our contract with Sasnet (Swedish South Asian Studies Network). Finally, Lund Debate Society is now officially merged with UPF and the Debate Club within UPF has been up and running with weekly debate practices. Make sure to go and check it out if you are interested in developing your debating skills.

We would like to remind all of our members about our yearly Annual Meeting which will take place on the 14th of May. All members are welcome to join and we wish that as many as possible would be there. Our national organization UFS also has their own annual assembly on the 7th of May where UPF will send our representatives. With this being said, we look forward to seeing you and meeting you at our weekly operations, at the Spring Ball, at the Spring Forward Conference or at the Annual Meeting!

*Henrietta Kulleborn & Miljaemilia Wala*  
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## Centre for Advanced Middle Eastern Studies

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The Centre for Advanced Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) supports, creates, and coordinates multidisciplinary research on the Middle East at Lund University.

### *Upcoming events:*

**May 12** (13:15-14:30): CMES Research Seminar with Prof. Oliver Scharbrodt  
“Creating an Alternative Umma – Clerical Authority and Religio-Political Mobilisation in Transnational Shii Islam”

**May 18** (13:00-16:00): Open House – CMES scholars will be showcasing their ongoing Middle East research with posters on display.

**June 9** (13:15-14:30): CMES Research Seminar with Emma Sundkvist  
“Law, Language and Space Making – Three Dimensions of Human Rights in Egyptian Feminist Activism Post-2011”



## CMES

CENTRE FOR ADVANCED  
MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES





# New Politics Bring Hope to the Northern Triangle



Illustrated by Alina Madalina Dumnea



It is the 27th of January and Xiomara Castro is sworn in as Honduras' first female president. Castro won the election back in November with more than 51% of the vote, a landslide election for the left-wing politician. The highest ever vote share in the country's history. Her victory is historic, not only because it makes her the first female president of the country or that she is ending the 12-year rule of the right-wing National party, but because of all of the promise and hope that defines her ascent to the presidency.

Honduras's history is plagued with corruption, drugs, and criminality. Situated in the Northern Triangle of Central America, a geographic term used for the nations of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, these countries have experienced economic hardships and high rates of violence in the last decades. Since 2014, an estimated 2 million people have left the Northern Triangle and many continue to flee the region. Slow economic growth combined with high levels of crime and violence are the main reasons that people are leaving. Moreover, hurricanes and other environmental disasters have led to food security issues.

Situated just north of South America- where the majority of the world's cocaine is produced- and south of the United States- where most cocaine is consumed- Central America is the main drug trafficking route between the continents.



*Simon Liu-Office of the President/flickr*

The inauguration of Honduran President Xiomara Castro

Drugs are one of the biggest sources of criminal violence in Central America and the Northern Triangle countries have among the highest homicide rates in the world. Honduras has the highest rate, with 82 homicides per 100,000 people. Honduras has also the largest number of criminal gang activities in the region, with more than 100 different groups being active in the country.

In March 2021, the former Honduran congressman Juan Antonio Hernández was placed on trial for being involved in smuggling 185 thousand kilos of cocaine to the United States. According to the prosecutors, Hernández's corrupt political career has made Honduras a narco-state. His political campaign was funded with drug money and he had accepted a million-dollar bribe from one of the biggest cartels in Mexico, the Sinaloa cartel. Hernández also happens to be the former President's brother. Juan Orlando Hernández, the former president- also known under the abbreviation JOH- has called the life sentence that his brother Juan received "outrageous".

Many Hondurans have condemned JOH's presidency as a corrupt, drug-sponsored administration. His eight-year term ended with Castro taking power and the Guardian has reported on how Hondurans feel that he is leaving the country in shackles while "leaving as a millionaire" himself. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) even backed his presidency, as he put many drug lords in prison or extradited them to the United States. After his brother's arrest and sentence, the allegations against JOH's involvement in drug trafficking grew and the U.S. stopped supporting the administration.

The U.S. has played a role in the ongoing conflicts in the Northern Triangle for years. Already by the end of the George W. Bush administration, the U.S. started to interfere in Central America's security issues. The United States started many initiatives, including the establishment of task forces that combat drug trafficking in Central American countries. With the Obama administration, \$1.6 billion was sent as aid to Mexico and Central America as part of the Mérida Initiative, when the U.S. gave Mexico and Central America billions of

dollars to combat narcotics and organized crime. The aid money was also aimed at strengthening local law enforcement and the judicial system.

Xiomara Castro's husband Manuel Zelaya was once the former president of Honduras. He was overthrown in a military coup in 2009. Castro is thus a known political figure in Honduras. She has pledged that her government will "not continue the maelstrom of looting that has condemned generations of young people to pay the debt they incurred behind their back". The Biden administration has patiently waited until the end of JOH's administration to get a fresh start with Honduras. Kamala Harris attended her inauguration in Honduras and congratulated her on behalf of the Biden administration. The new government in Honduras is a symbol of hope for the Northern Triangle.

History has seen many changes with inaugurations of new presidents. Many of them have not delivered what they have promised and what the people had hoped for. Yet, the hopefulness and excitement of Xiomara Castro taking office are unquestionable. As the U.S. watches closely from the north, Castro has many hopes riding on her shoulders. However, delivering on her promises of combating corruption, violence, and poverty will not be easy. Castro herself has said that the situation of the Honduran economy is historically bad, referencing a national debt of \$15.5 billion or nearly 60% of the country's GDP.

Honduras has endured a lot and after a 12 year long dictatorship that ended with record-high violence, drugs, and debt, a change is long-awaited. Castro's previous experiences in politics and her determination to change the country is hopefully enough to deliver what she promises. For Honduras, this new presidency is a watershed moment.

# An Interview with InterviewHer

Illustrated by Victoria Restrepo Giraldo



***Five women Nobel Peace laureates—Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Jody Williams, Shirin Ebadi, Tawakkol Karman, and Leymah Gbowee - pooled efforts together aiming to increase the visibility of women in the media. InterviewHer is one of their initiatives aiming to promote women's voices and to amplify the voices of female experts with first-hand experience, in conflict, security and peacebuilding. The online platform was created to present female experts that are ready to answer media requests. The aim is to connect women experts with journalists redefining the image of an "expert".***

THE PERSPECTIVE interviewed Juliet O'Neill, a platform and social media account manager at InterviewHer. She is a Canadian journalist, and a former foreign correspondent with postings in Washington, Moscow, and London.

***How did InterviewHer get started?***

Some striking facts prompted the creation of interview-her.com. Most experts quoted in the news are men. Also, the concept of an expert is generally so narrow that women with valuable insight and first-hand experience in conflict zones are overlooked.

InterviewHer originated in a brainstorming session at the Nobel Women's Initiative (NWI), a global non-government organization based in Ottawa, Canada. Through NWI, five women peace laureates and their team magnify the power and visibility of women working for peace, justice, and equality around the world.

The brainstorming was prompted by media relations training for women from underfunded peace groups with little visibility to journalists, recalls Rachel Vincent, then

NWI director of advocacy and training.

"We wanted to provide a platform for helping media access women, particularly from conflict countries where they are experts from their own experience of conflict and have worked every day to bring about peace," she said.

"In many cases these are women with proven track records, using their skills to help mitigate or reduce conflict on the ground in their countries or in their communities."

Ketty Nivyabandi, then media associate at NWI and now secretary-general of Amnesty International Canada, took on the project. After a year or so of technical preparations and recruiting experts, the InterviewHer site was launched on Feb. 13, 2019.

InterviewHer includes traditional experts from think tanks and academia as well as advocacy groups for peace, transitional justice, women human rights defenders and humanitarian professionals working to end conflict in such countries as Yemen, Syria,

Sudan, Colombia, and Myanmar.

***How much has InterviewHer grown? Do you have stats on-site use?***

The database has grown by 50 new experts over the last year to more than 130. Many regions of the world are well represented either in-country or in the diaspora or both.

InterviewHer is steadily building interest in women experts. There were 6.6 times more InterviewHer website page views in 2021 than in 2019. Unique page visits doubled in 2020. Twitter followers nearly doubled in the last year and profile visits grew to a high of 18,400 in November 2021, compared to fewer than 100 (one hundred) a year earlier.

We are beginning to track interview and panel requests, many of which are arranged off the site after an expert has been found on InterviewHer.

***Who nominates experts?***

Experts are invited to submit their profiles and others ask if they may join. Many different sources recommend experts at our request or on their own initiative.

***How are women presented in the news? Do you observe improvements?***

In 2020 the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2020 found that 25 percent of people in the news were women, a small change from the previous survey in 2015.

However, there was a notable increase in the portion of experts quoted in the news who are women to 24 per cent from 19 per cent. Though rising, it is still low.

The GMMP survey is a one-day snapshot of news stories around the world. The 2020 survey included 116 countries and covered 30,172 stories in newspapers, on radio and TV, news websites and news media tweets.

A study of news in six countries published in 2020 by the International Women's Media Foundation drew similar conclusions. The six countries in the study commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation were India, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

"This alarming marginalization is clear in all areas of the news media: women are underrepresented in newsroom leadership, gender equality stories are going untold, and men remain the vast majority of quoted experts and sources," the report said.

Is it possible that women are, in general, less represented in the field of defence and security and thus less visible in the media?

Yes, according to data from European, G20 and NATO countries compiled for the 2020 "SHEcurity Index," for example, the proportion of women in the male-dominated foreign affairs and security policy fields has increased over the past 20 years, but at a rate which is considered far too slow to bridge the gender gap.

The index compiled for the 20th anniversary of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, calls for equal participation and full involvement of women in conflict prevention and resolution and maintaining and promoting peace and security.

Today, women remain underrepresented in the field of conflict, security and peacebuilding despite the fact that they constitute around half of all stakeholders in conflict situations. However organizations like InterviewHer are helping to increase the visibility of female experts in these fields, and continue to make positive changes in the industry.



# Burning Bridges in the State of Karen



Illustrated by Alina Madalina Dumca

*A year after the coup, families in the Karen state face continuing military violence.*

Myanmar, also known and referred to as Burma, is in South East Asia and neighbors Thailand, Laos, Bangladesh, China, and India. The military seized control of the country in a coup on 1 February 2021 following a general election which Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party won by a landslide - the military had backed the opposition, who were demanding a rerun of the vote claiming widespread fraud. However, the election commission said there was no evidence to support these claims.

Since the military coup, activists opposing the coupmakers have formed the Campaign for Civil Disobedience (CDM) and have helped organize strikes and mass protests against the coup. The military has put them down with live fire, water cannons, and rubber bullets. What started as civil disobedience has now turned into what amounts to civil war across Myanmar.

Myanmar's military government has recently filed an eleventh corruption accusation against deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi, 76, on February 3, 2022, the latest in a series of charges against the Nobel laureate, who faces more than 150 years in prison. According to a local monitoring group, she has been behind

bars since the coup, which sparked large protests and a brutal crackdown on dissent, killing over 1,500 civilians.

THE PERSPECTIVE had the opportunity to speak to Jane Best, the executive director of Refugee Empowerment International (REI), regarding the situation in Karen state. REI is an independent, not-for-profit organization dedicated to raising funds to assist people who have been displaced as a result of war and conflict. The NGO has been funding local projects such as the Baby Kits and Women's Health Awareness Project in the Karen state. Karen, also known as Kayin, is one of the states that has suffered most from the violence.

As clashes in Karen state escalated, some 40,000 Karen inhabitants were displaced by the campaign of the military, also known as the Tatmadaw, air raids in March and April. Additionally, air raids in March and April saw not only infrastructure and other assets destroyed, but also homes and public buildings. The attacks left 18 dead, according to figures from the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), and up to 49 injured, according to Karen National Union (KNU), a political organization with an armed wing.





The Map of Myanmar

The KNU claims it has clashed with junta-backed forces on 275 occasions throughout October despite the junta's announcement of a ceasefire from October 1. However, according to Best; "first of all, the ceasefire is nonsense". She also stated "The ongoing civil war between the junta troops and joint forces consisting of ethnic Karen groups and pro-democracy militias has forced thousands of civilians to seek refuge along the country's border with Thailand. After the incident in August last year, 6000 people ended up being displaced."

In August 2021, clashes between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed groups were especially intense, where dozens of security personnel have been killed in recent weeks. "Because this has been going on for so long, you rarely hear it anymore in the Western media," Best explains further. The population of Karen state have some distinctive ethnic traits, which have fueled a movement for self-determination, a central source of conflict with military authorities.

As Karen state borders Thailand, many fam-

ilies seek refuge in the neighboring country. According to official news statements by the Thai government, they are still allowing many refugees from Myanmar. However, according to Ms. Best, this is not as accurate: "In reality, the guards by the border don't let everyone in, and even if they do, most refugees cannot register. A lot of women are refugees and not registered."

Since 2015, Thailand hasn't allowed refugees to register as the government wants to send them back as soon as possible. Moreover, Thailand is still not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol as well as not having a domestic law on asylum. Thailand continues to operate under the 1979 Immigration Act, which considers asylum seekers and refugees as illegal immigrants and subjects them to arbitrary arrest, detention, and deportation.

### Women under crossfire

The ousting of State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi highlights a broader threat to women's security in Myanmar in general, and women in Karen state in particular.

The high incidence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) creates a climate of fear and insecurity.

***"In reality, the guards by the border don't let everyone in, and even if they do, most refugees cannot register. A lot of women are refugees and not registered."***



THAMMANIT PANOMSUK / Shutterstock.com

The Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA)

Karen women suffer not only from the aggression of the Myanmar military, but also across the border in Thailand which was documented by the Karen Women's Organization, which is an indigenous women's organization with 60,000 women members in Karen state and in refugee communities in Thailand.

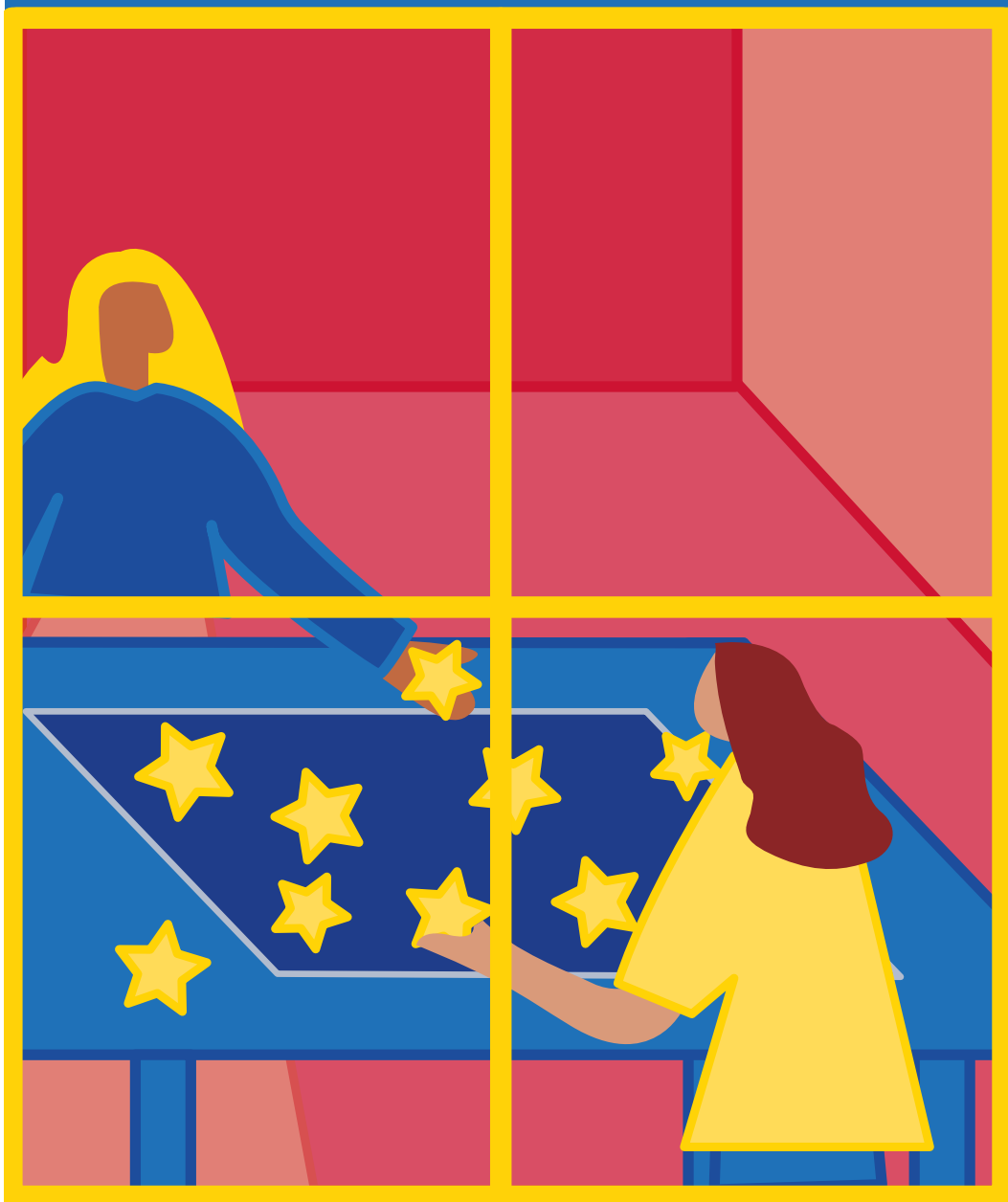
Women in particular face many risks in being used as human shields, being subjected to forced labor, to torture and sexual violence, and assaults in military custody", Best explains. "Women are always taking care of the family. They don't only try to protect themselves, but the whole family."

When Ms .Best was asked what she thought the future might look like, she said it is uncertain and it is all dependent on the current politics. "This type of cruel treatment by the military must end immediately and all soldiers responsible for subjecting its people to suffering need to be held accountable, to create a more

sustainable living for all people."

***“Women in particular face many risks in being used as human shields, being subjected to forced labor, to torture and sexual violence”***

Building peace after conflict is complex. Globally, about half of all negotiated peace agreements fail, with states relapsing into civil war within half a decade. Women's political participation is crucial to the global goals of achieving peace and sustainable development. It is a right of women to participate in decisions that affect their lives, from local governance to security issues.



# Building Europe at Home

Prospects for Moldova's Progressive Leadership

The Republic of Moldova has a long and complicated history that still weighs on its national development. Formerly part of “Greater Romania,” the territory was ceded to Russia following the Second World War and remained under Soviet influence until the collapse of communism. Arguably, not much has changed since then. Moldova’s economy has remained dysfunctional—a delicate situation worsened by corruption and weak rule of law.

Moldova’s development challenges are most acutely felt by the country’s socially marginalized groups, including women and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Inadequate public administration at various levels has prevented the government from properly working to serve the country’s citizens, while entrenched conservatism has meant that those most in need of services have often ended up last in line. The retrograde functioning of institutions has reinforced a cycle of poverty, affecting all major dimensions of human security, beginning with people’s physical integrity and their treatment in the family, but also basic civil liberties and labor rights.

The challenges of gender inequality and the corruption that the country is facing are mutually reinforcing. This kind of discrimination not only affects women and other disadvantaged groups. It permeates all spheres of society and has an indirect impact on the

country’s development. In 2019, Moldova had the lowest Human Development Index in Europe, comparable to some of the conflict-torn countries in Northern Africa and the Middle East.

A 2019 survey led by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) revealed that as many as 40% of women reported experiencing physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. Overall, the OSCE concluded that there is “a lack of trust in the institutions that should provide support,” as well as a deficiency in specialized services for disadvantaged groups.

These gender dynamics are also mirrored in the workplace. The World Bank estimates that less than 45 percent of women aged 15 to 64 are active in Moldova’s labor force, which demonstrates how norms associating women’s role in society with household responsibilities still prevail. Importantly, these norms have been given an institutional scope. In 2019, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showed that 51 percent of the Moldovan population believes that “men are better political leaders than women.” In the same year, 77 percent of the seats in parliament were occupied by men.

The election of Maia Sandu, the country’s first female and openly pro-European president, provides a glimmer of hope to many Moldovans and particularly to the disadvantaged.



Maia Sandu, the first woman president of Moldova

“By becoming the first woman president of Moldova, Maia Sandu breaks the rigid glass ceilings that only few women could achieve in the post-Soviet space so far,” according to researcher Cristina Gherasimov. Building Europe at home – this has been the slogan and driving force behind Sandu’s election campaign and is now the prime objective for her tenure in office.

Such a breakthrough signals progress for Moldova’s ongoing democratic transition, while also pointing towards a possible rapprochement with Western partners—a clear break from the pro-Russian tilt of Sandu’s predecessor, Igor Dodon. Sandu, a Harvard graduate and former World Bank economist, has not had a straightforward path to the presidency.

She first ran for president in 2016, campaigning on a similarly progressive agenda, but lost in an election illustrative of the difficulty in breaking the path dependency of Russian influence in the country.

Alexandru Damian, a researcher at the Romanian Center for European Policies, recalls that, “The entire institutional mechanism was rooting for Igor Dodon at the time.” During the 2016 presidential elections, Sandu had to face numerous personal attacks, most of which targeted the fact that she is an unmarried woman without any children. “Influential voices in society were saying loud and clear that a woman could not lead the Republic of Moldova. The institution of the church simply contributed to this propaganda, which was amplified even further by pro-Russian media,” said Damian.

In 2020, Sandu ran for office again. The attacks directed towards her were hardly different. In spite of this, Alexandru describes how “she shifted her campaign away from negative discourse and towards the reformist agenda that she was pursuing.” In doing so, she advocated for a stronger role of women and of the young generation in all societal spheres, including their presence in leadership positions.

Sandu managed to defeat Dodon with more than 57% of the vote. Part of this success was the result of Moldovan women receiving her message and becoming actively involved in electing her to office. During the second round of elections, more than 50% of voter turnout was attributable to women.

Referring to Sandu’s election, Damian emphasizes that, “Maia’s agenda was undoubtedly progressive for Moldovan society as a whole. She never tried to hide what she supported, including the LGBTQ+ community. In



her dealings with the press, her answers were always straightforward. Maia did not avoid anything, which is uncommon in Moldova..." Nonetheless, the election is only the beginning of a lengthy process of systemic transformation. Piotr Olesky, a historian specializing in the region, sees Moldova's new president as "walking through a mine-field." According to Olesky, Sandu is constrained by the old rules of the game, which are still being invoked by her political rivals.

Sandu's objectives go against the interests of many of Moldova's elites, who remain active and influential in domestic politics. On the prospects for realizing these objectives, Damian observes that, "for Maia's agenda to be put in practice, reform-oriented people need to support it at all levels and in all institutions, beginning with the justice system, which is quite an ambitious goal, too ambitious for only a four-year mandate."

Sandu has certainly acknowledged this and consolidated her gender strategy as a result. Empowering women as decision-makers involved in both local and national politics enables them to make policy and investment choices that are likely to bring a positive impact. Scholars increasingly agree with the fact that not only is including women in government able to reduce corruption, but it also represents one of the most cost-effective development strategies in Moldova and elsewhere.

Stimulating mobilization at the grassroots level is another key tool to the transformation that Sandu envisions. One of the first steps she undertook as president involved meeting with disadvantaged groups and their representatives in order to familiarize them with the policies that she planned to work on, along with a strategy encouraging civil society to

expose and uproot corruption in Moldova, deconstructing traditional norms over time. "Maia needs to support civil society and the few independent mass media outlets that exist in the country. Moldova will benefit from the combination between the watchdog power of investigative journalism and the non-governmental organizations that are able to support such aims by exerting additional pressure on conservative political elites," Alexandru states.

Complementary to this is an improved relationship with the West as part of the balanced foreign policy that Sandu promoted during her campaign. This realignment away from her predecessor's pro-Russian stance has recently paid dividends, with Moldova receiving the most generous EU Economic Recovery package among Eastern Partnership countries. Still, this does not put the president in a position to break ties with Russia completely.

The transformation that Moldova is undergoing and the process of building Europe at home has made the country a one-of-a-kind case in the wider region. "Looking from outside of the Balkans, Maia Sandu is the person in the spotlight not just in the Republic of Moldova but among all Eastern Partnership countries." On the dramatic approach to realigning Moldova's societal conventions and foreign policy under Sandu, Damian highlights that, "Moldova's singularity is beneficial, and Maia has proven her intentions of implementing the reforms that she campaigned for. However, the extent to which she will also get a hold of the means to make the reforms happen is a completely different story."





# A Steel Friendship?

*Serbia Veers Towards China*



***As the relations between Serbia and China deepen and expand into the security dimension, the EU is sounding the alarm. THE PERSPECTIVE spoke to experts on Sino-Serbian relations, according to whom it is not China who is to blame for democratic backsliding in Serbia – but the Serbian government itself.***

“History is being written,” said Serbian president Alexander Vucic back in 2019 during a foundation stone laying ceremony for a tire factory owned by the Chinese company Shandong Linglong Tire Co. Ltd. Two years later, in response to reports of alleged forced labour, human rights abuses, and human trafficking of workers in the factory, the European Parliament called on Serbian authorities to investigate the case and ensure that human rights are respected. The parliament also expressed concern over China’s growing influence in Serbia and across the Western Balkans, the declining rule of law, and the deterioration of media freedom, all of which might set back efforts to join the European Union.

A lack of food, water, heating and electricity, dirty and overcrowded dormitories, just two toilets for 500 people, and long working hours in violation of Serbian labour law—these are the conditions that the Vietnamese workers hired to build the giant tire factory lived in, according to several Serbian NGOs that visited the construction site last November.

The Serbian government has publicly praised the project and endorsed it by granting the company 95 hectares of free land, and pledging



BalkansCat/Shutterstock.com

President of Serbia, Alexander Vucic

€75 million in subsidies. For the sake of the investment, it has downplayed the human rights and environmental concerns – despite the European Parliament and the UN human rights experts’ criticism and requests from the



NGOs to launch a proper investigation into the situation. After sending in a labour inspector, the Serbian president Alexander Vucic commented: "What do they want? Do they want us to destroy a \$900 million investment?" Similarly, Prime Minister Ana Brnabic said that "institutions are doing their job" and that she would "not rule out that the attack against the Linglong factory" is organized "by those against Chinese investments" in Serbia.

In recent years, relations between Serbia and China have blossomed to an historically unprecedented extent, substantiated by the growth of trade from €1.18 billion in 2010 to €2.837 billion in 2019. "We have seen steady but continuous growth over the past decade in the field of economics, in the infrastructure projects, in the rise of foreign direct investment of Serbia, and also in the rise of the foreign trade exchange between both countries," says Stefan Vladislavljev, program coordinator at Belgrade Security Forum, a platform dedicated to foreign and security policy-related discussions. However, as things stand, the relationship is heavily tilted towards Chinese exports to Serbia. This disparity might be exasperated if the free trade agreement that is currently being discussed is signed.

The opacity of trade deals with China raises concerns over Serbia falling into a debt trap. Concerns in Brussels intensified as relations formerly confined to trade extended into the domain of national security. Surveillance cameras purchased from China were installed across Belgrade under the "Safe City" project and joint patrols of Chinese and Serbian police officers are strolling in the streets near tourist attractions. Last year, Serbia's army and air force displayed military combat drones bought from China for \$19.6 million. This made Serbia the first country to deploy Chinese military equipment in Europe since the EU arms

embargo following the Tiananmen Square massacre.

***"China is seen as an important partner who can help address some needs that are not met through the relationship with the EU or other partners"***

The experts Stefan Vladislavljev and Dragan Pavlicevic, agree that this does not necessarily pose a security threat: "The technology can boost security in the capital. Security cameras are not a novelty, many cities are fully covered by them. To prevent abuse is an important issue requiring domestic consideration, whoever provides the technology," explains Dragan Pavlicevic, a professor at the Department of China Studies at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. "The cooperation with China in the security sector really shows that Serbia will stay dedicated to its principle of military neutrality and it will use every opportunity to expand it," says Vladislavljev and adds that Serbia cooperates also with NATO, the EU, and Russia.

The promise of modern infrastructure and an economic boost from Chinese investments gives the populist-run Serbian government powerful leverage in domestic politics. "We cannot really pinpoint the direct Chinese influence in democratic backsliding, but the projects that have been done in cooperation with China have facilitated already existing trends," explains Vladislavljev. In his view, the promotion of the Chinese projects helped

the government to gain additional political legitimacy and power, rendering its position unchallenged.

The unwavering support from the Serbian government for Chinese investment projects ranges from loosened legal requirements to a number of high-level diplomatic visits and to an enthusiastic narrative in pro-government media. In many cases, contracts are awarded to Chinese companies without public tenders, a violation of EU competition rules.

The growing discord between Serbia and the EU is in line with the general sentiment of frustration of candidate countries in the Western Balkans. Serbia's alignment with the EU's foreign policy declarations has dropped from 99% in 2012 to 56% in 2020. "When the EU dealt with the consequences of the global financial crisis, there was an impression that it does not really facilitate the accession of Serbia to the EU, nor that its policies are contributing to the development of Serbia," shares Pavlicevic.

***"The promise of modern infrastructure and economic boost from Chinese investments gives the populist-run Serbian government powerful leverage in domestic politics"***

However, according to him, the country's key strategic orientation remains in line with EU ascension despite certain issues. "China is seen as an important partner who can help address some needs that are not met through the relationship with the EU or other partners. For Serbia, the EU and China do not have to be mutually exclusive, and that the EU is making it feel that way, while not understanding Serbia's preferences and at the same time maintaining deep economic links with China itself, also makes Serbia frustrated with the EU," he says.

During the pandemic, pro-government media glorified China as a saviour state, and marginalized the role of the EU. According to Vladislavljev, the EU's decision to close internal borders and a slow vaccine rollout is what boosted the already positive image of China among Serbians. According to a poll conducted by the Belgrade Center for Security Policy, 69.4% of participants felt that China has provided Serbia with the biggest financial and humanitarian help, whilst 9.6% considered it to be the EU. "The initial hesitancy gave the Serbian government the opportunity to present China as the only country that can help Serbia in times of crisis. The country has been named friendly and the Chinese leader was named brother of the Serbian people" says Vladislavljev. President Vucic even kissed the Chinese flag when an airplane with medical equipment arrived and touted the Sino-Serbian relations as a "friendship made of steel."

While the Sino-Serbian rapprochement might have made Serbia's path to becoming an EU member thornier, it is the steps taken by the Serbian, and not the Chinese government, that will determine the country's future. "If you take China completely out of the picture, would there be no democratic backsliding?" concludes Pavlicevic.



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# In the shadow of war

Portrait of Yemeni Human Rights Activist Kawkab Al-Thaibani



Illustration by Valentina Rapuano

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ALICE ABBAS / INTERVIEW

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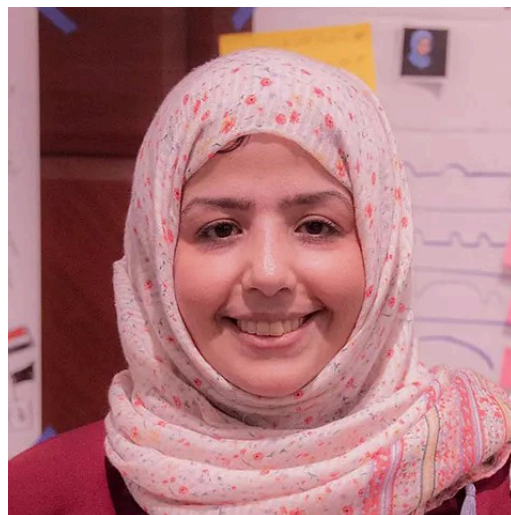
The Yemeni civil war broke out in 2014 following years of popular uprisings demanding an end to corruption and the formation of a new government. After failed negotiations, Houthi rebels backed by Iran seized power over Yemen's capital Sanaa. In turn, a coalition of states led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates began applying economic sanctions and launching air strikes against the Houthis. The coalition has been supported by the United States, who has continued counterterrorism operations in Yemen alongside the ongoing conflict.

In 2017, the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) established The Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen (GEE). The GEE has been the only international mechanism mandated to investigate violations of international law committed in the country. From 2017-2021, they documented war crimes and human rights abuses including arbitrary deprivation of life, recruitment of child soldiers, and torture. These crimes were committed by all parties. However, under pressure from the coalition partners, the HRC member states voted to end the GEE mandate in 2021.

Today, Yemen is classified as the country with the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. More than 100,000 people have been killed, close to 10 million children

are facing famine, and 25 million Yemenis remain in need of humanitarian aid. An end to the conflict is far from sight, but in the shadow of the war stand activists that are still fighting for a better tomorrow.

In February 2022, THE PERSPECTIVE spoke to the prominent Yemeni human right activist and journalist Kawkab Al-Thaibani. With a background in gender studies, she is one of the co-founders of Women for Yemen, a network of activists operating in the fields of media, human rights, and civil society. Eight years into the conflict, she shares her thoughts on her activism and the human rights situation in Yemen.



Kawkab Al-Thaibani, Yemeni Activist



**What's the moment when you decided to engage for the Yemeni cause and what is the motivation behind your activism?**

I have seen a lot of distress in my life, in our region. I used to think it is only in Yemen, but then I realized there is injustice in the entire world and recently, globalization and the events of the uprisings in the Arab world following 2011 showed the flaws of the “human system”. I was motivated by all the injustices. When I started to work as a journalist, I felt I could do something to change that. So, I have been working with victims of abuse and I have received threats because of this work on the controversial issue of abuse against women by the regime.

**Can you briefly describe the development of the situation in Yemen during the past seven years?**

The uprisings in 2011 were exacerbated by regional and international interference in the country. For instance, a lot of European countries were supporting arms trade and ill-political approaches inside Yemen, which created non-state actors such as the armed groups in the south, and fed the regional and long-standing conflicts inside the country. This allowed Yemen to become the worst ongoing global crisis and led to an increase in gender-based violence and the marginalization of women's movements and women's political participation in the country.

**From your personal experience, how is it harder for female activists and journalists in Yemen?**

It is much harder for women because they are not only facing the war, but also the ugly side of the patriarchal system of the country. The

gender norms were weaponized during the war by the conflict parties. Yemeni women are facing a lot of challenges because of the threats against their physical and personal safety. It is beyond what anybody could tolerate. Female journalists in Yemen are facing discrimination and marginalization. Despite this, they are working and pushing for change. Likewise, women-led peace movements and feminist movements are still pushing for change. They don't take no for an answer and continue to work on topics and issues that matter for the Yemeni society.

**Defending human rights in Yemen has led to the prosecution of many human right advocates. What have been the toughest challenges for you as an activist?**

Because of the threats I faced while in Sanaa, I had to flee the country. But the toughest challenges for me as an activist are not only the threats, but also the lack of a supportive environment. The environment for human rights organizations [in Yemen] has changed. We can see that there are just a few organizations working with human rights and they are struggling to get funding and access to information, as many have been shut down.

***“Yemeni women are facing a lot of challenges because of the threats against their physical and personal safety”***

I believe the failure to support human rights activists and prioritize their safety to be a deliberate systematic act to lower the support for human rights movements and strong human rights measures in Yemen. The involvement of different countries in the Yemen war makes it difficult to call for accountability and justice.

An example is the failure to extend the GEE's mandate, this was a big catastrophe because this group has been the voice for many organizations and people who can not otherwise reach authorities, decision-makers, and the international community.

**Do you think there are neglected aspects in how we report on the Yemeni war and Yemeni women?**

Unfortunately, we can say that there is a colonization-driven analysis of Yemen by western countries and analysts, and “lazy reporting” as we say in journalistic jargon. There are tendencies to analyze things without giving proper attention to the victims and there have been biases and polarization in the analysis of the Yemen war. There are a lot of people against Saudi Arabia, so they neglect the aspects of the involvement of Iran and its allies in Yemen and vice versa. The same applies to Yemeni women. There is, you know, this superficial aspect of looking at what women wear and they don't look at women's ability to make their life work and to make change. I think it is a patriarchal view of women that rules, and it's not only in Yemen. You can see this everywhere.

**The war in Yemen has now entered its eight year. What gives you strength or hope to carry on with your activism?**

***“I think it is a patriarchal view of women that rules, and it's not only in Yemen. You can see this everywhere”***

Yemen has historically gone through similar crises, with the involvement of external actors, but in the end Yemen was able to get through it. I feel like, despite the frustration that the 2011 uprisings have failed, people don't know that a lot of uprisings fail temporarily and then rise again.

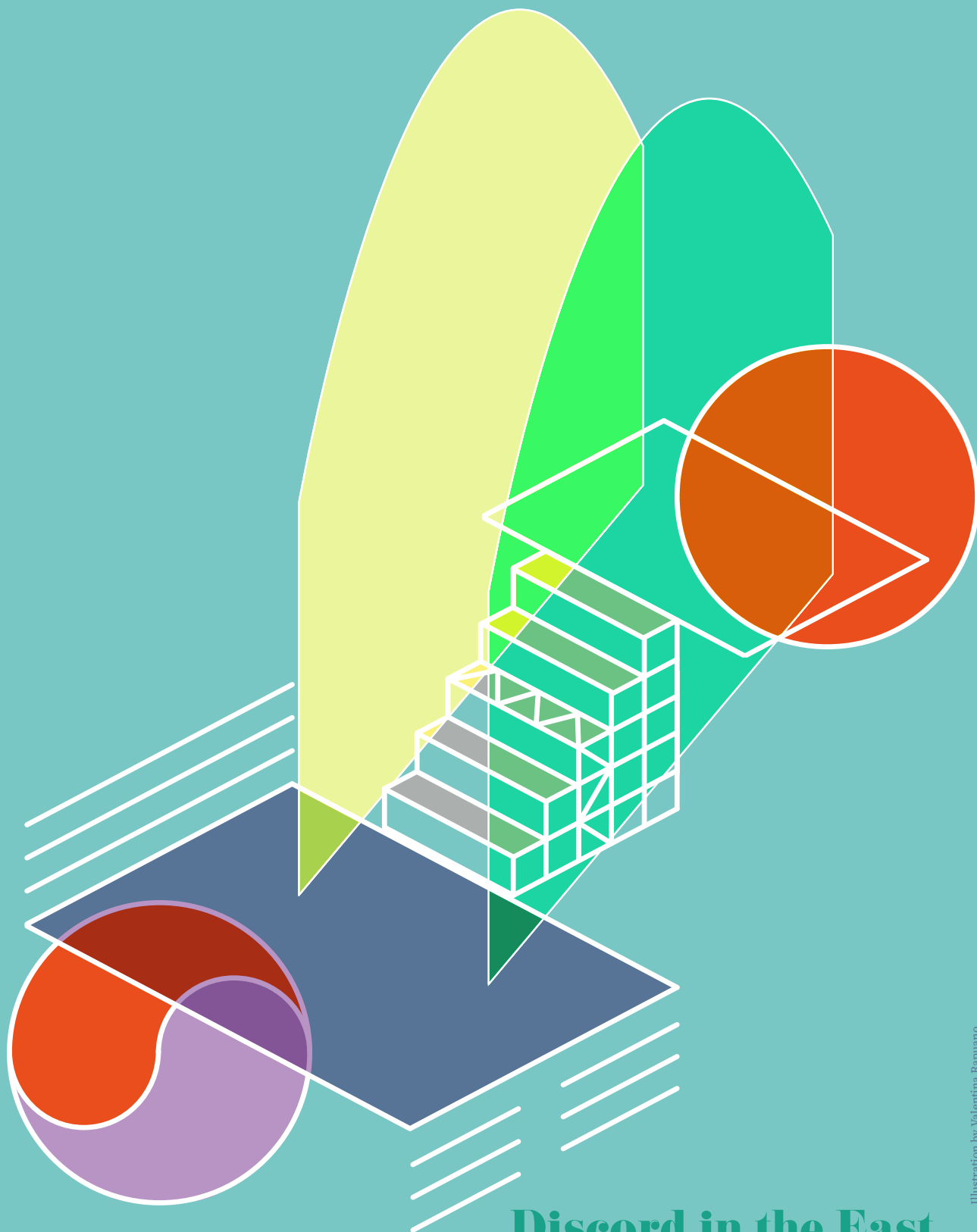
**How has your activism changed or developed during this period?**

My activism has of course changed and gone through phases of self reflection, phases of revisions, phases of, of course, depressions sometimes. It is among others, connected to the belief in change and one's own strength. Through supporting women and organizations, I also support myself and I feel like I grow. It is an extension of the change that we all want to see. I don't believe in the “one woman-show”. I believe that we need this kind of change where all people come together and each one contributes with his or her skills, so that change can continue to happen.

**Is there anything else you would like to add or any message you want to convey?**

Think local and trust women, this is my message!





## **Discord in the East**

*South Korea- Japan Relations  
under the New Presidency*

**D**omestic debates in South Korea have been intense both in the run up and in the aftermath of the recent presidential election. Yoon Suk-Yeol, the winner, will provide a substantial contrast in political values compared to the current administration. Especially important are discussions about South Korea's foreign policy with regards to allies and adversaries in East Asia.

The relationship between Japan and South Korea has historically been tarnished by overlapping territorial claims, Japanese colonialism, and unrectified atrocities during the second world war. The last decade especially has been a turbulent time for South Korean-Japanese relations, characterized by hostility exhibited through not only political conflicts, but also on cultural platforms like the 2020 Tokyo Olympics; issues like Japan's inclusion of the Liancourt Rocks on its Olympics map and the South Korean Olympic team's display of controversial banners conflated the cultural event with political disputes. This mutual resentment can be traced back to the extensive history between the two nations, from when South Korea was under Japanese occupation for 35 years until it gained independence from its colonizer in 1945.

The intense presidential elections for South Korea came to an end on March 9th 2022, when the presiding leader Moon Jae-in lost to Yoon Suk-Yeol from the opposition People

Power Party in May. Suk-Yeol won the election by a narrow margin over Lee Jae-myung from the ruling progressive Democratic Party, amidst a bitter race characterized by mutual lawsuits and criminal allegations. However, the return of a conservative government signifies a ray of hope for Korea's icy relations with Japan, raising anticipation for progress in long-standing political issues.

THE PERSPECTIVE spoke to Professor Paul O'Shea from the Center for East and South-East Asian Studies at Lund University on his prospects for the upcoming changes this election will entail for South Korea-Japan relations.

"On the Japanese side for years, leaders and indeed the population saw Korea as a 'little brother'. When there were anti-Japanese protests, these were explained away as a kind of 'immature nationalism,'" said Professor O'Shea. However, rapid industrialization and technological developments have unfolded to enable the emergence of South Korea as an economic powerhouse. "In the past twenty years, Korean popular culture and consumer goods (TVs, cars, etc.) have challenged long dominant Japanese versions. Korea is now a challenger to Japan, not a 'little brother'." The shift in power dynamics as a competitor in international society was reciprocated in Japan with stronger responses on historical disputes, threatened by Korea's sudden rise

in power – this led to a spiraling escalation in anti-Japanese sentiments in Korea.

In addition, “under the democratic system, nationalism is a vote-winner. Korean presidents often use nationalist issues to improve their popularity,” Professor O’Shea said. The longest serving prime minister of Japan, Abe Shinzo, also took position as a “beautiful Japan” nationalist, “If Korea raised an issue, Abe would escalate, whereas previous prime ministers usually sought to downplay and move on.”

***“Just as the invasion of Ukraine forced Europe to unite against Russia, in a regional crisis, Korea and Japan would be able to put their past behind them and cooperate. But without a crisis, history will continue to plague relations”***

The last decade has thus been marked by a widening rift between the two nations. Former South Korean president Moon’s cancellation of the 2015 ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement, which aided the surviving comfort women of WW2 through a foundation donating 1 billion yen from the Japanese government, prompted a series of other conflicts. Disputes have

unfolded particularly in trade agreements, with Japan taking South Korea off of its “white list” of trade partners and implementing restrictions on the export of a few chemicals essential to the production of semiconductors and smartphones, a substantial part of the South Korean economy.

Japan has also recently undergone a change of authority of its own, with former foreign minister Kishida Fumio from the Liberal Democratic Party appointed as the new Prime Minister in late 2021.

However, the election of Yoon, a right-wing conservative with closer values to Japanese prime minister Fumio Kishida than past presidents, could be a driving force for repairs in the shattered relations. Professor O’Shea added, “So far Yoon has criticized Moon for the damage to the Japan relationship, so I would expect him to seek to repair it, at least, as much as domestic public opinion will allow.”

“Kishida is not the nationalist that Abe was. So far, he has shown himself to be focused on economics and quality of life issues, not nationalist and historical issues. In that case, he may be better positioned to reciprocate if Yoon makes overtures” As the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kishida contributed to the signing of the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement, and has highlighted how “healthy Japan-Korea relations are indispensable” in light of Yoon’s victory.

Increasing threats coming from China and North Korea- especially in the midst of the Ukraine crisis- further emphasize an urgent need to restore relations and establish a united front of democracies against autocracies, but historical and geopolitical circumstances raise hurdles preventing real cooperation from materializing.

“While Japan and Korea share a democratic system, as well as the US as an ally, their



## South Korea and Japan

histories and geographic location make for complications. Japan is offshore. This increases its security. South Korea shares a border with the DPRK and faces China. It is smaller, and has historically aligned with China as the regional power. Historically it (South Korea) has been ‘a shrimp among whales’ (China, Russia, Japan, USA, etc.). Today it plays a balancing act between China and the US. It did not join the TPP or CPTPP,” Professor O’Shea points out. “Although they share many common interests, including threats from DPRK and China, so far the history issue has dominated and prevented close cooperation.”

Magnifying security threats imposed by the unpredictable powers, nevertheless may compel Japan and ROK to put their issues behind them. “Just as the invasion of Ukraine forced Europe to unite against Russia, in a regional crisis, Korea and Japan would be able to put their past behind them and cooperate. But without a crisis, history will continue to

plague relations.”

While these changing currents in a turbulent international landscape may promise a turning point for the future of the two nations’ relationship, transformative steps must be taken for a real change to occur. “I think the failure of Korea and Japan to forge closer ties is a tragedy,” noted Professor O’Shea. “These are two democracies, with close cultural ties. They share far more than what separates them. However, historical issues are intractable - Japanese elites want to break free from the war guilt and become a ‘normal nation’ while Korean identity is born out of the colonial experience and subjugation by Japan. We can hope that pragmatic, rather than nationalist, politicians gain and hold power in both countries, for a sufficiently long time to allow some normalization of bilateral relations, but also of public opinion in both states.”



# Democracy Through Global Dictatorship

*A Conversation with Professor Torbjörn Tånnsjö  
about Climate Change*



*Never has the world faced a challenge as intractable as climate change. Yet, the gap between actions promised by political leaders and implementation of solutions remains wide. As the world's ecosystems collapse before our eyes, it is worth questioning if the current global order is up to the task. THE PERSPECTIVE sat down with philosopher Dr. Torbjörn Tännsjö, who believes that a climate-dictatorship is the only way to solve the crisis—and, paradoxically, save global democracy.*

As most people, Professor Torbjörn Tännsjö from Stockholm University, explains climate change as an example of a “tragedy of the commons”. When acting in one’s own self-interest, individuals stand to gain even though this simultaneously exhausts common resources.

Acknowledging that the tragedy of the commons emanates from the egoistic interest of nation-states, an interest that seems “almost impossible” to give up, Tännsjö formulates an unconventional suggestion: that a world government is the only solution. Originally, he theorized that this would be reached through a gradual process of constituting global democracy in the form of a UN parliament and global disarmament. The transition would happen “peacefully and harmoniously.”

“I should have understood back then already, but now it is so heart wrenchingly clear – it will not happen,” Tännsjö laments.

Instead, he places his hope in climate despotism. When the ices in Antarctica

are about to collapse, the sea looms over civilization, and it has become clear that humanity stands before the abyss, a group of people, most likely from a central and already existing institution – perhaps the UN Security Council or the World Bank – establishes a government. Contrary to his earlier vision, Tännsjö posits that this will happen “in a violent way, of course – at least not in a democratic way.”

Dr. Tännsjö is articulate about the fact that one cannot have a plan for this development. But there are some features of climate despotism that have to be in place. First of all, the world government will need some active support from the people, presumably from the younger generation demanding change, as well as tacit support from a silent majority. Furthermore, great powers such as the U.S. and China would have to buy in, realizing that this might be the only way to solve the climate crisis.

In practice, Dr. Tännsjö hopes that the proposed government is able to limit itself





Torbjörn Tännsjö is a professor of philosophy at Stockholm University

according to some sort of principle of subsidiarity. Yet, he holds that this cannot be written into law as such a move would split the sovereignty, hence giving up the feature of coercing everyone into acting in accordance with the common good. One can imagine a loose federalist solution, where the world government is in charge of all states but that each state is treated according to what is best for them considering their preconditions.

Inclusion of the demos will still be beneficial, as some sort of compensation for making controversial decisions. He makes a parallel to the voting rights gained in connection with WWI, describing how people received voting rights in exchange for wartime sacrifices. Similarly, when discussing how to share the burdens of climate change, such as massive migration, it may be useful to incorporate the

people.

So what if there are severe differences between the world government and local leaders and their people? How repressive would the dictatorship be? For example, if the government forbids an oil-dependent state to extract oil with massive opposition as the result – how ought the government to respond?

Tännsjö has no doubts that everyone will have to make sacrifices. However he does not seem too worried about a scenario like this, believing that ordinary people can quite easily be compensated for their losses. The confrontation will be more direct with fossil fuel capitalists.

“There is a big opportunity for a global government to balance this, crowding out the ones that have to go and make way for others, as well as compensating the people,” Tännsjö concludes.

In many aspects, Tännsjö’s reasoning seems to make sense – at least if the existence of humanity is at stake. The bigger question, however, is if such a discussion even matters. Tännsjö is convinced that it does. He thinks there is a value in the continuation of the human species and is astonished by the philosophical effort that has been put in showing the opposite. After looking at the empirical evidence of climate change, he finds the choice between climate despotism, the end of humanity or possibly a few people surviving a climate catastrophe—what is called a “life-boat” situation—an easy one.

What could be difficult to process, however, is the hasty move from promoting global democracy, to arguing for its antithesis, global despotism. “This is not about despotism versus democracy as such – if we could realize my original dream of global democracy, that

would be fantastic. But now it is about global despotism instead of global anarchy, which is the case today,” Tännsjö clarifies.

Tännsjö is aware of the headwinds in which liberal democracies find themselves, and claims that there may be an unaccounted for majority in favor of some kind of despotism.

“We speak on our own behalf when we say that we want to live in a democracy rather than under despotism - most people already live under despotic conditions and the development of humanity has in long sequences happened under despotic conditions. Democracy is a small parenthesis,” he says.

Pointing towards his work with Folke Tersman about the threats towards democracy, Tännsjö finds that governments at the national level seem to be unable to handle issues on a global scale.

“This [deficiency] is partly what is behind the mistrust towards democracy in democratic states,” he says. These sentiments can be viewed as a resource for his idea of global despotism.

So, instead of getting stuck in our own privileged perspective, we ought to look at all the lives that could be saved in different parts of the world by switching from one kind of despotism to another.

“Suppose you live in Saudi Arabia and have to switch the Saudi despotism for a global despotism,” Tännsjö contemplates, “I am not that sure you would view it as a downgrade.”

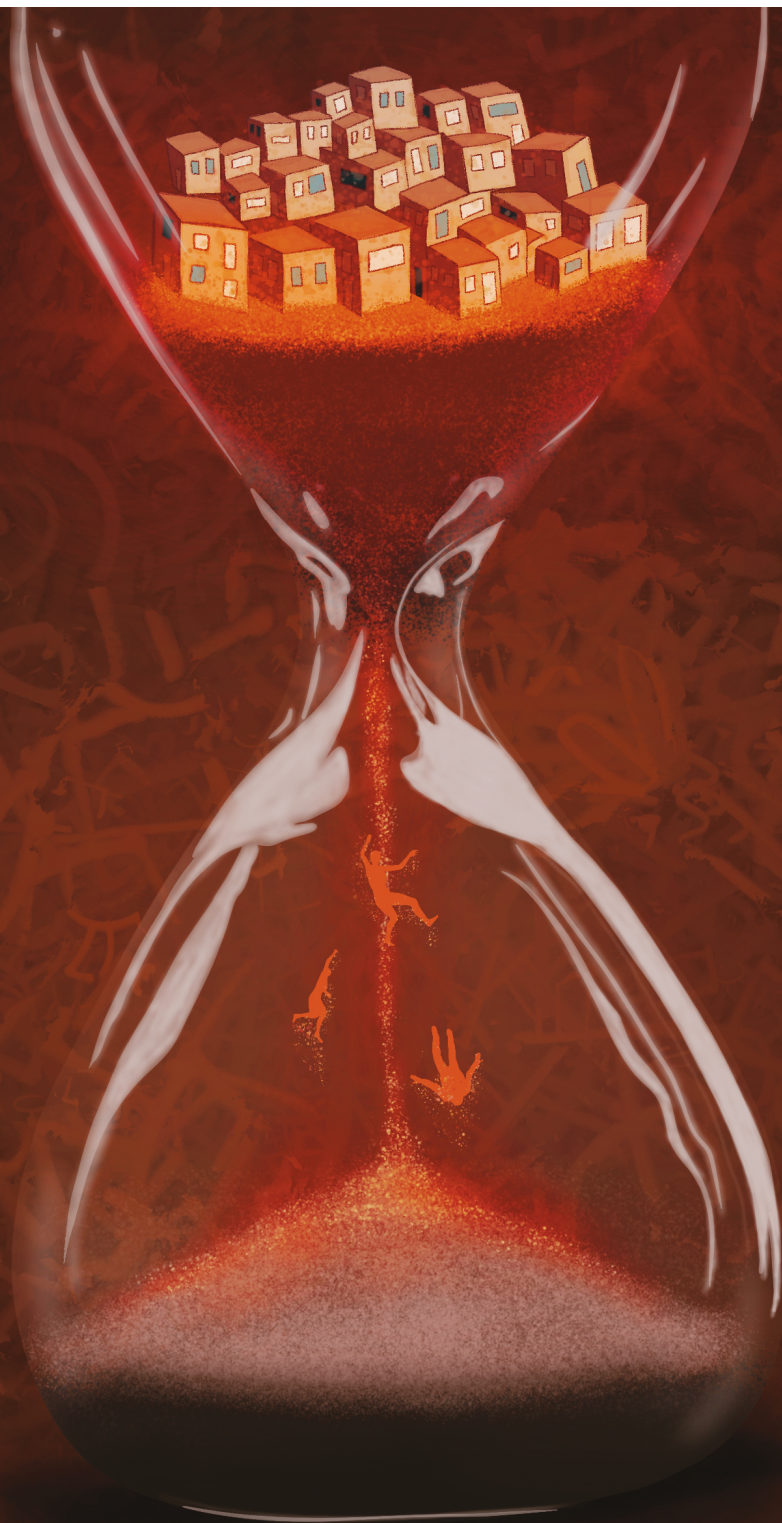
The reasoning is in line with Professor Tännsjö’s utilitarian stance – the view that the best action is the one that brings the most utility compared to the other possible actions. Hence, the goal should be to maximize the utility of the world. This would explain why an authoritarian world regime hypothetically could be better than “pockets of democracy”.

***“This is not about despotism versus democracy as such – if we could realize my original dream of global democracy, that would be fantastic. But now it is about global despotism instead of global anarchy, which is the case today”***

Tännsjö still thinks that global democracy ought to be pursued, though. In fact, he believes that global despotism is the only way to reach global democracy. He argues that democracy can only be saved if it is scaled to global proportions, even if that happens via an enlightened despot saving humanity from global warming as well as the nuclear threat, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine has lately demonstrated.

Professor Tännsjö’s ideas are controversial. However, it is hard to deny that his vision of an eventual global democracy (via despotism) sounds extremely intriguing. Despite its utopian character, it is worth contemplating on the implication of such a result. For Tännsjö himself, the implications are crystal clear, “When the world state looks similar to the Nordic democracies today, only scaled up at a global level, then the political project is over. Then, human history can have its beginning.”





Illustrated by Alina Madalina Dumea

# **Afghanistan Stands Alone before the Abyss**



Afghanistan, a country that has been a stage for geopolitical proxy conflict and manipulation for decades. On August 15, 2021, the Taliban insurgency entered Kabul and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani was forced to flee the country as the Afghan government collapsed. Later that day, the Taliban announced their victory and claimed total control of the country. After the violent takeover, the world abandoned Afghanistan, leaving Afghan people in the clutches of fanatics.

The subsequent cessation of international aid and the freezing of assets- including the foreign currency reserves of the Central Bank- has prompted a humanitarian crisis with Afghanistan facing widespread poverty and potential starvation. Famine, terror, and hopelessness are sweeping the country, and Afghan people's cries for help go unanswered.

### **Fifty years of war and nation building**

Afghanistan has been engulfed in unrelenting conflict for over five decades; beginning with a socialist revolution in 1978, followed by a Soviet occupation in 1979, a civil war in 1992, and most recently, the U.S. invasion following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The U.S. spent 20 years and hundreds of billions of dollars fighting the Taliban insurgency and supporting the Afghan government. According to SIGAR, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction report in 2021, thousands of U.S. and allied troops were injured or killed,

while tens of thousands of Afghan civilians suffered and perished.

The U.S. underestimated the scope of the challenge and continuously struggled to develop and implement a coherent strategy for rebuilding a country that had already experienced two decades of Soviet occupation, civil war, and Taliban brutality.

A result of the American misjudgement and struggles with the Afghan administration, the U.S. backed government in Kabul struggled for years with corruption and the maintenance of security for its citizens. In the final years of the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, security progressively worsened, and personal safety risks among Afghans remained high.

"The ultimate point of failure for our efforts wasn't an insurgency. It was the weight of endemic corruption." — former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker

Heavy and unsuccessful U.S. involvement in Afghanistan prevented the country from making its own decision regarding the process of nation-building. Instead, the continuing U.S. involvement resulted in instability, popular mistrust in American intentions, and the growing popularity of terrorist groups as a political alternative to the U.S. backed government in Kabul.

After the Taliban took charge of Afghanistan, the U.S. simply gave up on any help for locals and immediately left the country which it once promised protection and stability.



Ottawa, Canada. August 14th, 2021. End War in Afghanistan protest from local diaspora

Now, it is the Afghani men, women, and children who must carry the heavy burden of a war built on false premises.

#### **Crisis and economic collapse after the takeover**

When the Taliban took over, most of global aid was cut off and all of Afghanistan's assets were frozen, leaving the country with no money overnight. Billions of dollars frozen by the U.S. and the international community resulted in an economic collapse with rapidly rising prices of food and other commodities. While China and Russia have already called for the frozen assets to be released, the U.S. still holds a large proportion of them, with no plans to make the funds accessible for the Taliban government. The banks are unable to make transfers or distribute cash, therefore the Afghan people can not access their savings

in the banks nor can they make international money transfers. Salaries of teachers, doctors, state employees, and administrative civil servants have not been paid for months. Schools and hospitals can't work when the banking system is inoperable.

Afghanistan is now in a dangerous freefall with widespread hunger and a humanitarian crisis, culminating in mass starvation. Afghanistan has been hard hit by drought in the past two years, devastating agriculture. 90% of people in the country do not have enough to eat, with a million children facing severe malnutrition. The hunger is so severe that it is forcing Afghanis to resort to extreme actions. According to the Guardian, some families have even started to sell their children to survive. A child in Afghanistan can now cost between 200 - 500 hundred USD dollars.

Others are desperately fleeing. 4 million Afghan people have already managed to leave

the country and many more will follow. The drama does not end here.

### **The world turns its back on Afghanistan**

Are we looking at the beginning of the total collapse of the Afghanistan state with 40 million future displaced people? There is a need for the world, and especially the U.S., to swallow their pride and distinguish the Taliban government from the 40 million Afghan citizens who suffer every day in extreme conditions. The United Nations is urging the U.S. and international community for help in one of the biggest appeals ever for humanitarian aid for a single country, stating that €3.9 billion is needed for Afghans to prevent the “world’s most rapidly growing humanitarian crisis” from deteriorating any further. According to the UN, 97% of the Afghan population faces the risk of falling below the poverty line by mid-2022.

The Taliban has overestimated their capacity to try to govern a torn-up country that is primarily dependent on global aid. The communication between the members of the Taliban as well as communication with the outside world is very unclear. They do not have a clear crisis plan or an economic policy for addressing unemployment and poverty.

***“Now, it is the Afghani men, women and children who must carry the heavy burden of a war built on false premises”***



Steve Sanchez Photos/Shutterstock.com

Activists protest outside of the UN

Mohibullah Asad lamented to Al Jazeera “We were not prepared for this case because the previous government left us with no money so the only thing we can do is [to] have meetings with aid groups and explain the situation here: hunger and hard economic collapse.”

The crisis is so grave that the United Nations has received written promises from Taliban members that they will not interfere with humanitarian distribution and will safeguard aid workers.

International aid to Afghanistan has always been fraught with inefficiencies and accusations of corruption, but for decades they upheld a fragile sort of order. Today, Afghanistan is in desperate need of aid and support, as millions of Afghans suffer through a rapidly collapsing economy.





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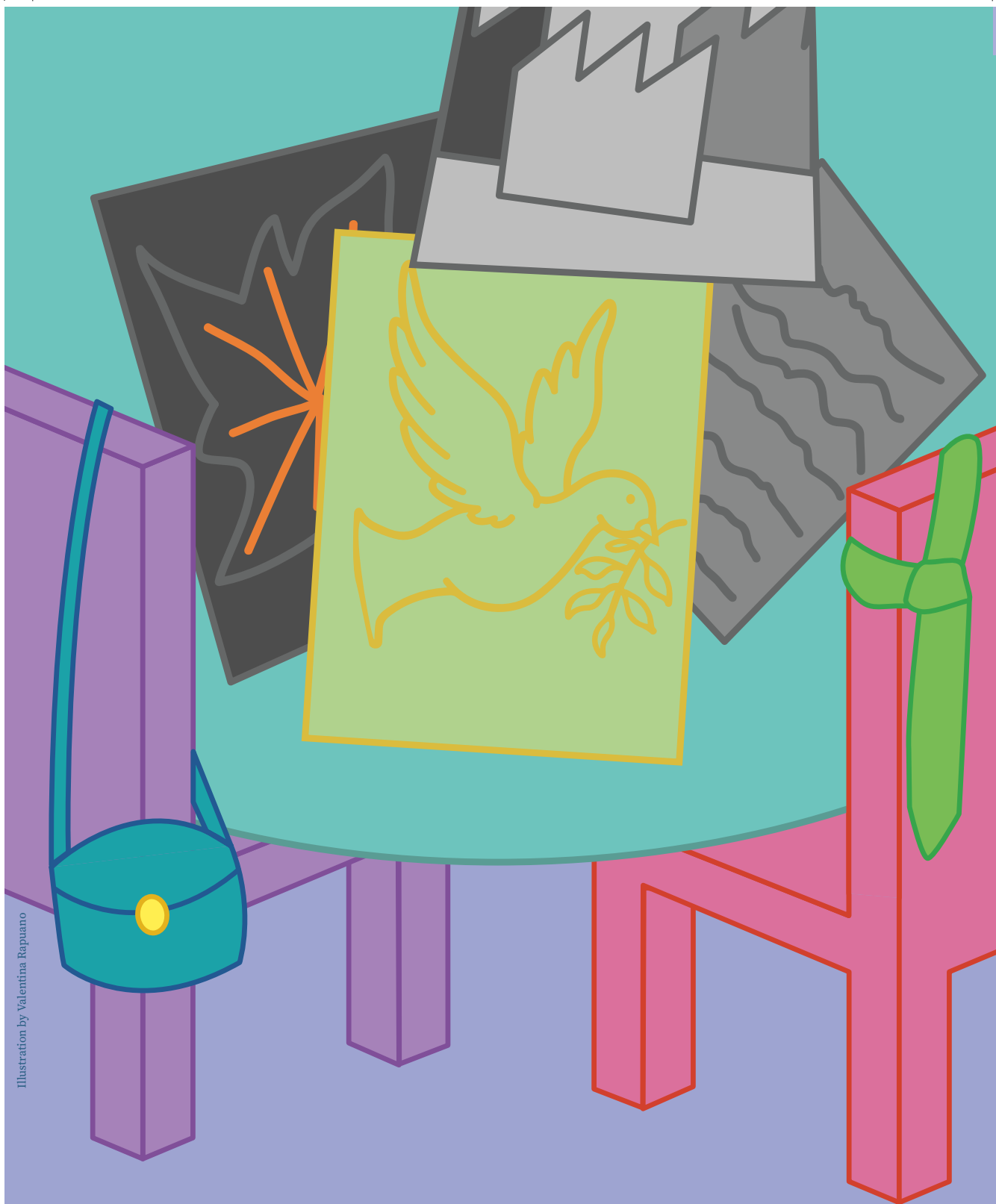


Illustration by Valentina Rapuano

Feminist Foreign Policy faces  
a harshening world



In 2014, Sweden became the first country in the world to introduce a “Feminist Foreign Policy.” This policy regime aims to systematically include gender perspectives in every political action, not only domestically but also on the international stage. Sweden applies the concept to many policy arenas, whereupon it has become particularly relevant to the country’s security politics. THE PERSPECTIVE spoke to Sofia Calltorp, the Swedish Foreign Ministry’s Ambassador for Gender Equality and Coordinator of the Feminist Foreign Policy, about the balancing act between the country’s domestic and international interests, which the approach entails.

“It says that [in] Sweden, we consider ourselves as quite, sort of forthcoming country when it comes to gender equality and that we have done achievements in our domestic work that we would like to also pursue internationally”, says Ms. Calltorp when asked what the implementation of Feminist Foreign Policy says about the country’s self-perception. The concept was introduced to consistently analyze the foreign policy context in which Sweden acts, including security and trade politics, through a gender perspective. This goal is structured using the so-called three Rs: rights, resources, and representation.

Feminist Foreign Policy tackles the continuous inequality and underrepresentation of women and girls, as well as their issues in

international affairs. It aims to ensure that their rights are respected, bearing in mind that around 80 percent of the countries in the world have discriminatory legislation against women, as Ms. Calltorp points out. She adds by highlighting Sweden’s overall point of view “that gender equality is a prerequisite to attain our [...] other foreign policy goals.”

Against the background of this policy perspective, the question arises as to what extent the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy can be considered as a concrete expression of the country’s national interests. Ms. Calltorp argues that it is rather a combination of Sweden’s goals on both a domestic and international level. “I think that the sort of basic assumption for us is that we need to pursue a global agenda of gender equality in order to pursue our foreign policy goals,” she says, adding that “that is very much at the heart of our interests in that sense.”

However, in international politics, Sweden is not necessarily known for taking leadership roles or actively getting involved in controversial issues. Rather, an approach of strict neutrality is pursued. This image does not seem to fit with Feminist Foreign Policy, as it is designed as a political action plan. Ms. Calltorp, however, disagrees. “I don’t see any contradiction between neutrality and the feminist foreign policy,” she says, “because all research shows that integrating

more women into peace negotiations as mediators, as stakeholders, makes peace more lasting and is a very important tool for peace and development. So [...] they are not contradictory, but rather sort of mutually reinforcing.”

## ***“We need to pursue a global agenda of gender equality in order to pursue our foreign policy goals”***

This shows that in security policy, the country appears to be staying true to its principles by using diplomatic rather than military means to intervene. For example, Sweden has created a global network of female mediators and peacebuilders. “And we’re working quite actively with other countries in their work in terms of developing national action plans, but also overall, to bring the women, peace and security agenda into the issue. I mean, into the multilateral work, but also bilaterally, when we work in countries like Somalia, [...] Syria, or [...] Ukraine. That’s very much an integrated part of our security policy, the women, peace, and security agenda,” adds Ms. Calltorp.

Despite few other countries following the Swedish example by introducing their own Feminist Foreign Policy, intergovernmental cooperation remains of great importance for the Swedish concept. “It has given us a very clear role [in] the global gender equality discussion”, explains Ms. Calltorp in this context. Even if there were disagreements, Sweden would put its own national interests first up to a certain point. “But it’s always, of course, we pursue our interests and our policy, to the extent possible, but I would not see any instance where we would abandon it as

a concept unless there is a very strong political decision that we will not pursue that sort of agenda”, highlights Ms. Calltorp.

Researchers within gender studies have suggested that Sweden’s current position in global politics is a cultivated image as a humanitarian superpower. However, Ms. Calltorp is skeptical about the term. “I used to work a lot on humanitarian issues. And to me, that’s a bit of a different concept,” she says. “But, of course, it’s linked to (...) neutrality being a core of our security policy, and I guess it links into the fact that we tried to look at the sort of bigger global picture somewhat, looking beyond our narrow national interest in foreign policy and looking at the broader picture of multilateral challenges. And there, of course, humanitarian assistance is part of that, as well as the Feminist Foreign Policy.”

Until recently, Sweden was the only country with such a concept. Today, seven other countries have followed Sweden’s example and, as Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde put it, are putting on their “gender glasses”. This increased interest in Feminist Foreign Policy is palpable, partly because Germany, one of the world’s major industrial nations, has put the concept on its political agenda.

When discussing future developments, Ms. Calltorp has a clear vision. “What I would wish for is, of course, for the feminist foreign policy to be an integrated concept, for all international relations in all matters [and] actually work in all countries’ foreign policy,” she says. “One important process now is looking at the new future report to the Secretary-General of the UN, our common agenda, where we are, together with others looking at sort of a feminist implementation of our common agenda. So, there are many, many issues that need to be tightened. I am definitely confident that this concept will gain more and more momentum”.

# Colombia's Wild West

While the state stands by, communities fend for themselves



Illustrated by Victoria Restrepo Giraldo



In Colombia, the end of a 50-year civil war has not meant the end of violence. In January 2022, the slaying of two indigenous community leaders—including a 14-year-old boy, Breiner David Cucuñame López—marked the continuation of a grim trend that plagues the country years after the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) suspended their guerilla war against the state and supposedly ended the country's internal conflict. Colombia remains one of the deadliest countries on Earth for indigenous and rural activists defending their lands from outside incursion. These community land defenders, with the active participation of women leaders, represent an alternative model of local security in rural areas all over the world— but the depredations of extractive industry and the COVID pandemic are placing them under increasing threat.

Latin America and the world looked to Colombia with hope when then-President Juan Manuel Santos reached a peace agreement with the FARC in 2016. More than 200,000 Colombians had been killed since the leftist rebels began their guerilla war against the state in 1964. Government forces and right-wing paramilitaries pursued a severe crackdown, leading to decades of instability and the displacement of at least 5 million people. It appeared that the war-weary country would finally move forward.

Among the citizenry, however, this agreement was controversial because of its conciliatory approach to FARC fighters; voters narrowly rejected it in a subsequent referendum and then elected a conservative President, Iván Duque, who pursued a harder line against the FARC. Despite these hiccups, the FARC (notwithstanding a few hardline splinter groups) disbanded five years ago. Sadly, this was not the end of civil strife in Colombia.

The FARC's demobilization created a power vacuum in much of rural Colombia. Jungles and mountain ranges once patrolled by guerillas were now open for economic exploitation, and the state is unable to assert its authority over the newly demilitarized frontier. A wave of land grabs and deforestation ensued across many parts of the country that had never before been open to agricultural incursions.

In 2020, the COVID crisis exacerbated this problem even further. Lockdowns made communities extremely vulnerable and sparked an increase in illegal incursions, making 2020 the deadliest year for environmental defenders—and one of the worst years for environmental destruction—in Colombia and around the world (Global Witness). The perpetrators represent all sides of the political spectrum, from remnants of the FARC to far-right paramilitary groups, profit-seeking agribusinesses, and drug cartels.



Even as threats from all sides multiply, rural communities are developing new ways to fight back. In the mountainous, hard-hit Cauca region, communities deploy “Indigenous Guards” to conduct unarmed patrols of the landscape. These guards, made up of men, women, and youth, survey their territory to report and counteract attempted land grabs under the constant threat of violence. Breiner David Cucuñame, a 14-year old member of the Cauca Indigenous Guard, was assassinated in January during a patrol of his homeland. Far from an isolated incident, this represents a pattern of attacks against local land defenders followed by impunity from consequences for the killers.

As more activists are killed, pleas for protection from Duque’s government have gone unanswered. Since protests against tax policy in 2019, Colombia’s military has come under fire for corruption and human rights abuses, leading to trust in the armed forces to plummet. As it becomes clear that the government is unable to confront the crises plaguing rural regions in particular, communities are becoming increasingly self-reliant.

Women play a critical role in these community security processes. In many indigenous communities, women are the guardians of traditional knowledge and livelihoods. The involvement of women ensures that territorial defense is about more than building physical strength to counter incursions; they defend both the physical landscape and their “lifeways,” the traditional livelihoods that enable their cultures to survive.

Women are central actors in indigenous communities, making them targets for violence. In 2019, an earlier massacre of Indigenous Guards in Cauca claimed the life of Cristina Bautista and four others. The perpetrators, a FARC splinter group that rejected the peace agreement, are just one of

many armed bands that attempt to harass, intimidate, and silence land defenders. At least 50 women land defenders have been assassinated since 2016 in Colombia alone.

The defense of territory is not only a matter of life and death to local communities, but also an overlooked trend with significant implications for global and regional politics. One major driver of regional insecurity is the illicit cultivation of coca, the base ingredient of cocaine, for narcotrafficking through Central America to the United States. The U.S. government has spent billions to support Colombia’s coca eradication program, which relies on a combination of brute force and chemical defoliants deployed in the reaches of Colombia’s jungles. However, this strategy has failed to stem the flow of illegal drugs out of the country.

Although local communities share the government’s interest in confronting the illegal drug trade, the government’s strategies are backfiring because they alienate local farmers. Coca, in its natural form, is a medicinal plant with sacred uses in indigenous communities across the Andean region. Stamping out all coca cultivation is not a viable option for these communities. Furthermore, the state’s harsh suppression tactics often lead to violence against rural people and the destruction of ecosystems that indigenous peoples depend on for sustenance.

The saga of communities defending their lands from agribusiness, narcotrafficking, and paramilitaries is of interest far beyond Colombia. Around the world, similar land defense movements have won important victories, but remain under siege. As the international community attempts to confront deforestation and human rights abuses in the world’s frontiers, indigenous peoples and local communities remain an overlooked and vital partner.

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