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Scenarios

Trump effect on future Middle East balance of power

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In recent weeks, the balance of international politics, between the Russian-Ukrainian front and the Middle East front, has undergone a rapid evolution. An evolution that represents the precipitation of various factors that have been at work in recent years, but on which one can already discern the impact of Donald Trump's full return to the world political scene, even before the start of his second term as President of the United States, during the inauguration of the restored Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. There, he clearly emerged as the main and most authoritative point of attraction for talks, contacts and expectations on the part of Western leaders.

With regard to the conflict between Moscow and Kiev, the US president-elect gave some very significant indications of the spirit with which he intends to engage in negotiations, as promised in his election campaign. The trilateral meeting he held in Paris with the Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, and Emmanuel Macron appeared to be a bilateral meeting, with the obviously politically weakened French president

playing only a supporting role, and resulted in Trump strongly pressurising the Ukrainian leader to accept as soon as possible a ceasefire and possible territorial losses as the outcome of negotiations with Moscow, on pain of the threat of drastic cuts in US arms supplies to Kiev.

In a politically 'heavy-handed' post on his social media account, Trump then pointed out that both sides in the war were exhausted and that it 'should never have started'. He confidentially mentioned Putin, whom he calls by his first name, 'Vladimir', as a potential serious interlocutor, and China as a potential facilitator of understanding. And he topped it off by reiterating, in an interview with ABC, his threat to withdraw from NATO if the allies did not pay their fair share of defence spending: a threat that could be read as a desire for relative disengagement from the Old Continent, which would not be unwelcome in Moscow.

In short, in the space of a day, the leader in pectore of the world's first superpower has already played a major role, placing himself at the centre of any possible positive development of the crisis and marking a profound difference with respect to the bellicose and weak line of the Biden administration.

Meanwhile, in the same hours, a decisive change took place on the Middle East chessboard, with repercussions that are also likely to prove fundamental for relations between the West and Russia. In Syria, the regime of Bashar al-Assad has collapsed under the blows of the Islamist rebel militias of the HTS. This collapse, which no one expected to happen so quickly until a few days ago, is leading to a significant redistribution of influence throughout the region.

First and foremost, it is a serious defeat for Russia, whose Syria under the Assads has been its main ally in the Middle East for decades. But also for the Iran of the ayatollahs, which, with the support of Russia and China, had formed a veritable axis of destabilisation based on common Shi'ite allegiance and the armed extremist organisations such as Hezbollah and Hamas. An axis that today seems to be in deep crisis after the massive response of the Israeli army and counter-espionage to the 7 October massacre, which led to the almost total destruction of these organisations and the military checkmate imposed on Tehran.

The conquest of Damascus by former Al-Qaeda members led by Abu Mohammed Al Jolani means, in short, an immediate strengthening of Israel, of the Turkish presence in the region and, more generally, of Sunni Islam in the face of Iranian power ambitions. In this sense, although it opens up a series of worrying unknowns about the fate of Syria

- in particular the Christian and Kurdish components of its population - its short-term effects could be, on the one hand, the consolidation of the path of the "Abraham Accords" promoted by Trump in his first term and the realisation, at last, of the convergence between the Israelis and the Saudis, with the approval of the other Sunni countries and the substantial neutrality of Turkey, which is satisfied with the greater influence it has acquired; on the other hand, a reduction in the profile of Putin's Russia as a great power, in order to favour its more reasonable and realistic attitude in possible negotiations to resolve the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

It is no coincidence that during his stay in Paris, the US president-elect also took the initiative on this issue, using it as a further boost to the inertia of international politics in the direction he wanted. In the aforementioned post on Truth, the tycoon mercilessly noted that Moscow's loss of control over Damascus was also the result of the huge resources Putin wasted in the conflict with Ukraine. And in a tweet published on Saturday 7, he was keen to point out that control of Syria was of no interest to Washington ("this is not our fight"), that Russia itself did not benefit from it and that it would do well to concentrate on resolving the Ukrainian crisis.

Trump's line therefore seems very clear: stabilise the Middle East by rebalancing in favour of Israel and the Sunnis on the one hand, trusting Moscow (and indirectly to Beijing) for a comprehensive security arrangement in Eastern Europe on the other. The latter is likely to be based not only on territorial concessions but also on more formal American commitments not to expand NATO beyond a certain limit and to recognise Russia as a sphere of influence. It would also take into account the dangerous 'fault lines' that could explode in areas on the borders of civilisations in countries such as Georgia, Moldova or Romania.

And what about Europe? How will the European members of NATO and the EU come to terms with these rapid, stormy changes?

At the moment, unfortunately, their position seems to be summed up by Macron's awkward pose in Paris in front of the imposing Trump: an awkward, embarrassed and impotent presence. For years they have been crushed by Biden's dead-end bellicose line in Ukraine, and have adopted an ambiguous stance in the Middle East, encouraging provocations by Tehran and its proxies. Now they seem totally unprepared to implement a coherent foreign policy in the sense of renewing their vocation for stabilisation and dialogue within the Western ranks.