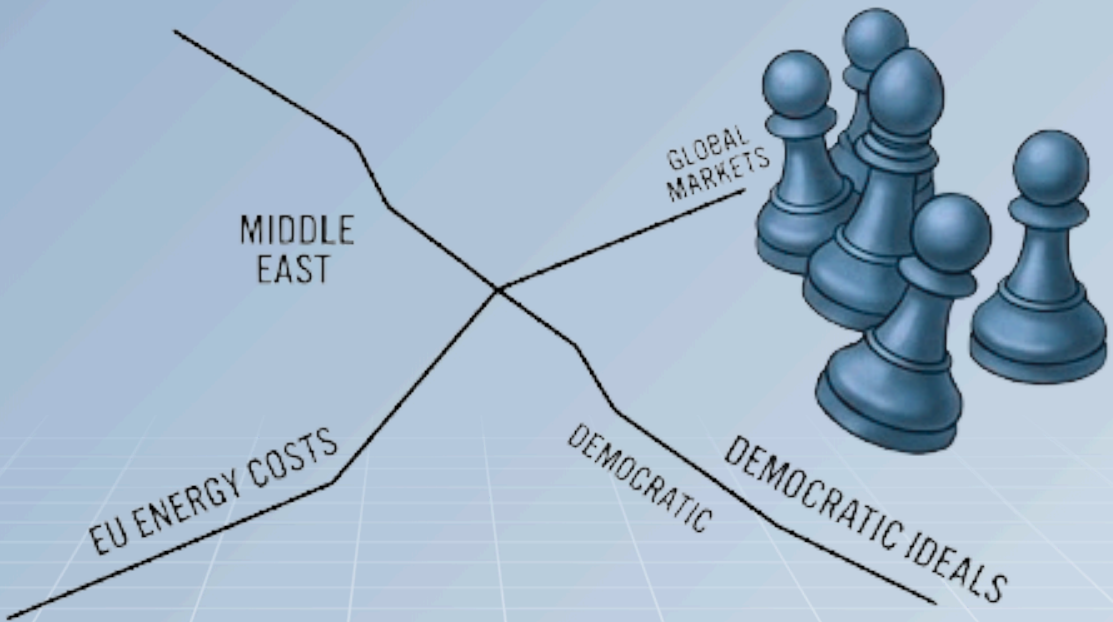
Students Diplomatic Association

the DIPLOMATIC DIGEST

Fifth issue



EDITOR'S NOTE

Six years ago, Andrija Mandić was an opposition figure in a country most Europeans could not place on a map. This month he opens our issue as the president of Montenegro's National Assembly, in what is now widely considered the next country in line to join the European Union. Six years is not a long time. Worth remembering how fast these things can move.

Most of the issue is about the same uncomfortable question, asked at different addresses: what governments actually do when their stated principles run into a price tag. The Strait of Hormuz is in three of the pieces below, directly or by reflection. The rest pull back to the bigger structural questions.

One small announcement. After our ongoing partnership with the Oxford Diplomatic Dispatch, we are happy to add a second one to the list. The article on EU ports and the war in Iran is co-written with Comité Diplomatique of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, and we hope it is the first of many. In this issue of the Diplomatic Digest, our contributors open with a conversation with Andrija Mandić on the six years since Montenegro's old regime fell and the path the country has taken toward Brussels since.

The next piece traces how a war thousands of kilometres away is rewiring trade routes, refineries, and security calculations across the Italy-Belgium axis. From there, the same crisis in New Delhi, where India is being asked to mediate between sides it cannot afford to lose, while presiding over a BRICS that cannot agree on what it wants. Then El Salvador, where the homicide rate has collapsed and so, depending on who you ask, has the rule of law. A column on whether states can defend their values while protecting their interests, and what it actually means when the answer is "all three." And in this month's Prove Me Wrong, a 1997 George Kennan essay turns out to read better in 2026 than it did when it was written, which is not necessarily good news for anyone training to be a diplomat.

Most people have decided not to think about it too hard, and honestly, who could blame them. This is for the ones still paying attention.

Gonzalo Rodao,
Editor-in-Chief

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IN THIS ISSUE

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Columns

Students Diplomatic Association

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THE COUNTRY THAT MOVED FAST

A conversation with Andrija Mandić on democracy, sovereignty, and what comes next for Montenegro

by Konstantin Zametica

Andrija Mandić, President of the National Assembly of Montenegro. Wikimedia Commons.

Andrija Mandić is the president of the National Assembly of Montenegro, as well as one of the leaders of the "Za budućnost Crne Gore / For the Future of Montenegro" coalition. For most of his political career, he has been a fierce opponent of Milo Đukanović and his Democratic Party of Socialists, which ruled Montenegro for 30 years until the elections of August 30, 2020, when the DPS lost its parliamentary majority. Since then, Montenegro has become a leading contender to become the next EU member state, among other achievements. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

1. This year marks six years since the change of government that ended the 30-year rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists.

Their time in power was characterized by corruption, partocracy, nepotism, a decline in the rule of law, and discrimination against those with differing views in Montenegro. As one of the most prominent Serbian politicians, and a former opposition figure, in Montenegro, how do you view the current position of the national community you represent, as well as the state of democracy in Montenegro?

I have to say that the rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists, the successor to the former League of Communists — the same party under a different name — brought to Montenegro something that had not existed before: organized crime at a systemic level. Organized crime exists in every country, but state institutions usually fight against it.

What made Montenegro different was that it was not just criminal groups acting independently for profit or power; rather, the state and the government themselves mobilized young people to engage in the smuggling of cocaine and tobacco in order to serve the interests of the ruling regime.

The consequences were severe: many young people lost their lives in the resulting conflicts, while the secret police operated behind the scenes, manipulating rival groups, setting some against others, and aligning with certain factions, all in pursuit of maximum profit from illegal activities.

The government also exerted strong pressure on the Serb population in Montenegro, particularly because they largely resisted the regime and voted for the opposition. As a result, many people from this community faced barriers to employment. Our young graduates from prestigious universities struggled to find work in the army, police, or public administration, while entrepreneurs encountered obstacles as their businesses were undermined by state interference.

With the change of government on August 30, 2020, a new era began. When that "iron curtain" fell in Montenegro and the regime was prevented from continuing what was seen as the country's decline, a large number of young, successful, and talented individuals emerged, bringing new energy into both political and economic life.

Within five years, salaries in Montenegro have doubled, from an average of around €500 before the change of government to over €1,000 today.

Pensions have increased from about €220 to over €500, and unemployment has dropped to a historic low, from around 18% to approximately 8.7%, although there are still cases of system abuse in which individuals register as unemployed despite having jobs.

Today, Montenegro is described as a country of freedom, where people no longer fear how they behave or what they say. During the rule of Milo Đukanović, there was a widespread sense among ordinary citizens that they were being watched or monitored, even when they were not, creating an atmosphere of intimidation and insecurity.

Now, according to both domestic assessments and those of international partners, Montenegro is the most advanced country in the process of European integration among its peers. It is moving decisively toward becoming the next member of the European Union, a goal supported by more than 80% of its citizens and unanimously backed in parliament as the country's key foreign policy priority and future direction.

2. Speaking of the EU, in your personal opinion, how much is EU membership the result of a candidate country's real progress, and how much is it influenced by the global geopolitical situation?

Typically, our opposition, and those who are not particularly well intentioned, claim that Montenegro's progress in EU integration has nothing to do with its own efforts, but rather with the need of the Brussels administration to admit a new member. However, that is not really the case.

When you look at how many new laws Montenegro has adopted and implemented, how much Montenegro has done in the fight against organized crime and corruption, and the impressive results achieved in every field, from the economy to security, you can see that Montenegro leads a dynamic political life.

What is particularly noteworthy is the emergence of an entirely new generation of politicians in both the economic and political spheres: young, talented individuals educated abroad who have taken on the responsibility of governing the country. The events of August 30 marked, in many ways, a generational shift in both political and economic developments in Montenegro.

So, Montenegro has accomplished a great deal. Is the geopolitical moment favorable? Yes, it is. But that moment alone has not set Montenegro apart from other Western Balkan countries, because the same geopolitical momentum is also favorable for Albania and others, yet they have not managed to reach the same level that Montenegro has.

3. How much sovereignty must a small country give up for EU membership, and how can it balance its own interests with the obligations of membership?

The key question is what we set as our goal. If the goal is for this country of 600,000 people to become a community of prosperous and happy citizens, then the EU is certainly a powerful tool for achieving such an aspiration.
Montenegro is not a large country, nor is it a military or economic power. It is a small state, which, in my opinion, and in the opinion of many who visit it, is the most beautiful country in Europe.

As for sovereignty, if large countries such as Germany, France, and Spain were willing to transfer part of their sovereignty to Brussels, then a small country like Montenegro can also take a similar risk.

4. Expanding further on the topic of sovereignty, would Montenegro have to give up its veto power and accept membership in a reduced capacity in order to become the next EU member state?

I believe that those admitting us into that prestigious club, the EU, are the ones who define the rules for accession. Montenegro is now joining under the old rules, which also include the right of veto. Therefore, the main model that remains at the core of EU enlargement is the one Montenegro seeks: full membership in the EU, with all the elements that such full membership entails.

5. When it comes to the future of Montenegro, what do you hope for and look forward to the most?

I most look forward to the success of a new, young generation. From what I see and feel, and from knowing people in my party who are involved in politics, as well as our young members of parliament, I do not think they lag behind any young European politician in any way. Our people are well educated, and our younger generation is ambitious. They can prove their abilities not only in Montenegro, but across the wider region. I believe in young people, I give them my full support, and I wish you all the best. Just keep going and stay persistent.

6. I know that in your free time you enjoy reading books on history, politics, and related subjects. Which books or authors would you recommend to young students aspiring to become politicians, diplomats, or enter similar professions?

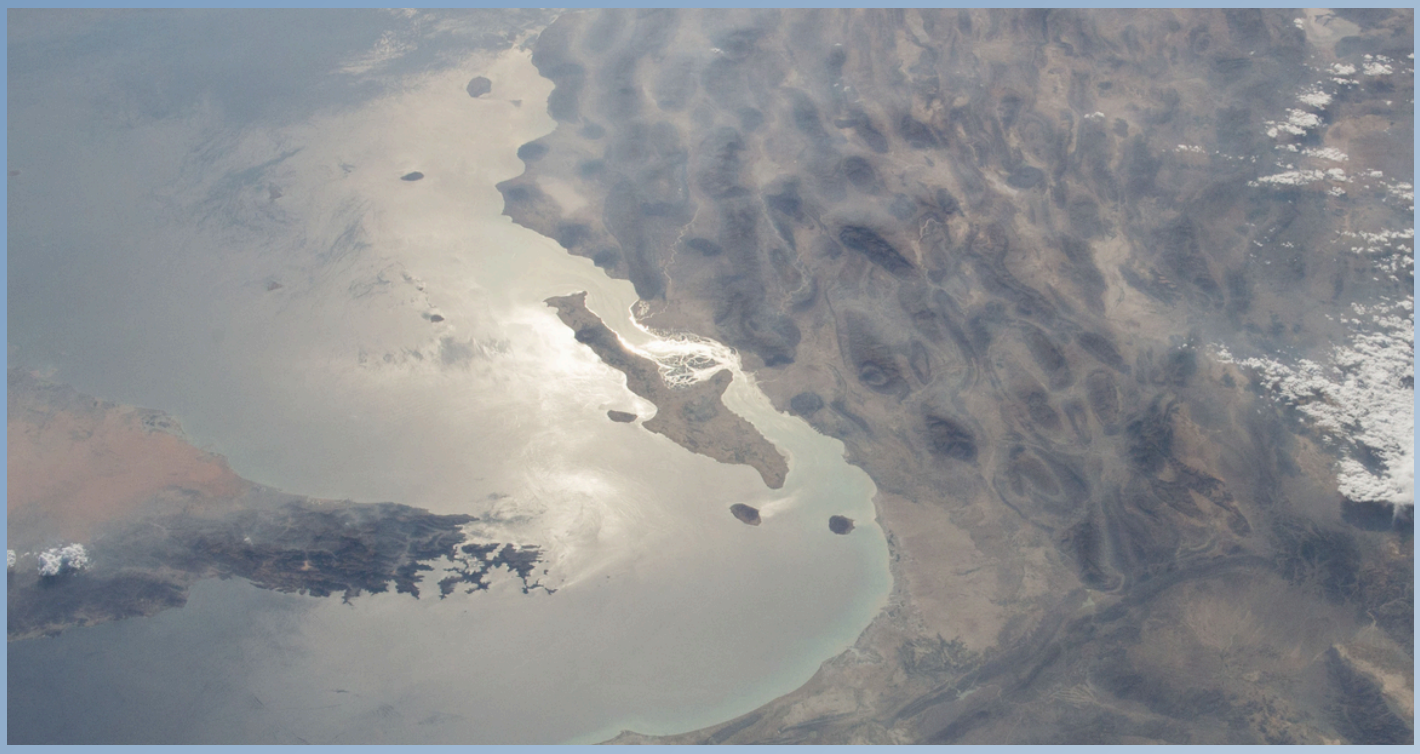
Our young people are becoming attached to ChatGPT very quickly, and they can easily access all the information they need for any activity they pursue. I would like to see a return, at least to some extent, to classical political education for those who want to engage in politics.

I would recommend that everyone carefully read one of our greatest intellectuals, Slobodan Jovanović, the former president of the Serbian Royal Academy, prime minister of the Yugoslav government-in-exile, and professor at the University of Belgrade. He left behind an extensive body of work covering history, politics, and literature, which, in my opinion, is essential reading for any young person.

WHEN THE STRAIT CLOSES

How the War in Iran Is Reshaping EU Port Economies and Trade Security

by Tristan Pascal & Yusuf Ertargin
(LUSDA x Comité Diplomatique)



The Strait of Hormuz and Musandam Peninsula, photographed from the International Space Station.
NASA / Wikimedia Commons

AOn 28 February 2026, the US-Israeli war with Iran prompted Tehran to block the Strait of Hormuz. A couple of days later, on 4 March 2026, the EU Commission unveiled a new Ports Strategy to strengthen competitiveness, security and sustainability of European ports. While the timing may appear as a direct response to the crisis, it rather signals that the EU had already anticipated the need to fortify and secure its maritime transport infrastructure. Written in collaboration between LUSDA and the Comité Diplomatique of ULB, this article examines the EU's efforts to secure its trade routes and energy supplies amid the war in Iran, tracing distinct levels of cooperation and tensions among member states.

Institutional Cooperation: Regulating Energy and Port Security

EU ports handle roughly 74% of the 27 member states' external trade, with 3.4 billion tonnes of goods and 395 million passengers per year. In the Commission's new EU Ports Strategy, the security dimension is now explicitly stated. Ports are framed as security assets, not just economic ones. The ambition is then to reinforce Europe's strategic autonomy and critical supply chains while achieving climate neutrality by 2050.

The Italy-Belgium axis offers a clear illustration of what this cooperation looks like in practice. Both countries are at the heart of EU trade, with

ports like Antwerp, Zeebrugge, Genoa, and Trieste, sitting at the interface of Atlantic and Mediterranean shipping corridors. Beyond geography, they share overlapping vulnerabilities and complementary assets, making European cooperation a real challenge in this context of energy and commercial crisis.

The U.S.-Iran conflict has had notable effects on European energy supplies, specifically liquefied natural gas, or LNG. Belgium and Italy's dependence on Qatari supplies has further exposed structural instability, leading to diverse policy approaches to long-term energy security. Alongside its new Ports Strategy, the Commission's AccelerateEU package aims to reduce Europe's LNG dependency through carbon pricing and the EU Emissions Trading System.

However, this long-term ambition has met with uneven reception among member states, particularly those most dependent on gas, like Italy and Belgium. As a country in which 47% of electricity is generated from gas, Italy fears that the Emissions Trading System might outpace the country's adaptation process, a concern common among countries that depend heavily on carbon-intensive systems.

Belgium's prime minister, Bart De Wever, has voiced similar criticisms regarding the ETS. Supporting more significant changes to the ETS, along with a possible taxation system on windfall profits, Belgium is trying to take measures in response to its LNG dependency.

These institutional tensions are not merely political disagreements. They reflect the structural exposure that the Iran crisis has brought into relief. Indeed, Belgium remains a critical actor in energy security through its infrastructure expansion, with four refineries in Antwerp and an LNG terminal in Zeebrugge.

After the EU decided to reduce Russian gas imports in 2022, Belgium reclaimed its role as an integral part of the transit route to Eastern Europe, reaching 70% in 2023. Additionally, with total energy consumption per capita 43% higher than the EU average, disruptions to oil imports resulting from the conflict raise major concerns for the country's energy security.

Furthermore, the unexpected bombardment by Iran of QatarEnergy's Ras Laffan facilities, belonging to the world's second-largest LNG exporter, amplified the importance of energy security precautions for Belgium and Italy. The attacks on the facilities on March 19 instantly reduced global LNG supplies by 3% and QatarEnergy declared *force majeure* on its contracts. Belgium and Italy began facing critical challenges in sustaining their imports within the EU.

One of the immediate consequences has been the diversion of ships that were bound for European ports. As Asian buyers outbid their European counterparts on the LNG market, the drone strikes on Ras Laffan accelerated a diversion already underway: several tankers bound for European ports began rerouting toward Asia. For example, the last Qatari supplies at the end of March that were bound for the UK and Italy diverted their course, and it was confirmed that 11 LNG cargoes turned mid-voyage toward Egypt, Turkey, and Asia. Belgium and Italy's central ports have reported volume drops and structural depletion, with a 3.2% decrease in total cargo throughput in the first months of 2026, as well as a decline in container volumes.

Operational Cooperation: Securing routes in real time

In this way, the EU institutional responses reveal a fundamental tension between long-term frameworks that set strategic direction

and the capacity to absorb the shock of a major crisis. Where member states disagree on the pace of the EU long-term reforms, the crisis has nonetheless highlighted the need for a coordinated operational response, capable of addressing immediate threats that institutional directives alone cannot solve.
In February 2024, in response to Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping, the EU launched Operation Aspides, a naval shield for trade routes. As a core contributor, Italy has conducted multiple close-protection missions for merchant vessels, providing the Italian frigates ITS Caio Duilio and ITS Federico Martinengo. Italy's active participation in this collective naval action offers a concrete answer to the Hormuz crisis.

At the port level, the operational dimension of cooperation is equally pressing. In 2023, Belgium seized a record 121 tonnes of cocaine through Antwerp. The port itself had already been hacked in 2011 by a drug trafficking network. In addition to the sabotage of Baltic Sea undersea cables in 2024, port authorities had no common framework to respond to that kind of hybrid threat. The Commission's directives are now calling for revised security guidance on emerging threats and for the establishment of a forum to exchange best practices. Such enhanced cooperation is particularly relevant for addressing vulnerabilities related to drug trafficking and cyberattacks.

The crisis has also triggered operational adaptations in trade routing. The EU has decided to rely on other routes to continue cargo shipments, with Italy's port of Trieste emerging as a pivotal hub. A roll-on/roll-off shipment route connecting Italy's port of Trieste and Egypt's port of Damietta is expected to become a popular route and is forecast to be used frequently.

The connection between the two ports will transfer shipments to Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates, proving the centrality of Italy's ports in presenting an alternative route to address energy market disruptions.

Industrial Cooperation: Building shared defence capabilities

The war in Iran has significantly transformed the planning of secure trade routes into an operational and industrial imperative. The PESCO project, led by Belgium, aims to deliver semi-autonomous systems for mine countermeasures. Launched in 2017, the project gained a significant importance after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, changing the ambition for EU defence cooperation. It explicitly aims to protect maritime vessels, harbours, offshore installations and freedom of navigation with technologies for mine detection and neutralisation. Those systems were tested in 2022 in an unmanned maritime systems exercise, in coordination with NATO's Mine Warfare Centre of Excellence. Belgium's leadership in EU mine warfare technology is no coincidence for a port-dependent economy with deep exposure to maritime chokepoints. The U.S.-Iran war has further elevated underwater mine countermeasures as a shared strategic priority.

In conclusion, Italy and Belgium share more than a dependence on LNG and a vulnerability to maritime disruptions. With ports at the heart of European trade and a joint commitment to securing them against hybrid threats, they share a common strategic logic. The war in Iran has simply made it impossible to ignore and has turned the Italian-Belgian axis into a concrete example of what coordinated European action can look like in practice.

FRIENDS TO ALL, ALLY TO NONE

How the Hormuz crisis is testing India's doctrine of permanent non-alignment
by Judith Wyplosz

Opening session of a BRICS summit. Wikimedia Commons.

For decades, India's foreign policy doctrine has been described as "friends of all, enemies of none." The country inherited Nehru's non-alignment, associated first with India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, in 1947. It defines New Delhi's capacity to maintain simultaneous relations with antagonistic blocs. In doing so, India refuses to align itself permanently with one side or the other. Today, this is precisely the strategy being tested in the Strait of Hormuz crisis.

The war in Iran is placing India in a paradoxical position. India is directly affected by the closure of the Strait, through which essential energy imports transit.

At the same time, it is being solicited as a mediator by Tehran while sitting in the Quad alongside Washington.

How can India reconcile these contradictory memberships? It is in this context that its role as BRICS chair makes sense, while also revealing its limits.

Initially, BRICS — Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa — was founded in 2009 to counter U.S. hegemony by providing alternative institutions and an investment framework. As it grew, it developed projects such as BRICS Pay, its own cross-border payment system. In 2024, the group welcomed six additional countries, including Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.

Since March 14, Iran has been seeking more help from regional countries. Iran has found in India a strategic partner that could help end the war. The Iranian ambassador to India, Mohammad Fathali, declared that high officials were having "good conversations" ahead of an upcoming BRICS meeting held in India. However, the war in Iran has provoked disagreements between member states.

Some countries, such as Brazil and India, are trying to implement new intergovernmental institutions to strengthen collective efforts, whereas Iran and Russia are firmly opposed to any U.S. action. China and India are also two rival giants, with China openly supporting Pakistan during episodes of military tension.

On April 11, Pakistani mediators met in Islamabad with J.D. Vance and the Iranian delegation to discuss peace talks concerning the Strait of Hormuz. Negotiations lasted 21 hours without an agreement because of two or three points of divergence. Immediately afterwards, Donald Trump announced a naval blockade in a designated zone and directly pressured the Iranian economy. The price of oil skyrocketed to $100 per barrel, causing a global shock. Two Indian ships were heading toward India carrying energy and resources. One was fired upon by Iranian authorities, while the other was hit by an unknown projectile. This gives India a stronger reason to pursue a path toward peace and demilitarisation.

At this complex diplomatic moment, India could emerge relatively unscathed thanks to its multiple relationships. The country has relations with Iran. But it also has relations with Israel, India's main arms supplier, with which it has maintained strong ties since the 1990s. It also cooperates within the Quad, a quadripartite alliance in the Indo-Pacific. This group comprises the United States, Japan, Australia, and India.

India appears to be the only major actor accepted by all sides, and therefore a potential mediator, credible at two distinct levels. At the first level, India could negotiate between Iran and the United States and use its "friends of all" doctrine. Economic and maritime interests would explain this. At the second level, India is presiding over BRICS this year. The technical meeting held on April 23 and 24 in New Delhi did not manage to reach a consensus. Disagreements between delegations from the United Arab Emirates and Iran blocked the negotiations.

The failure of this meeting does not lie in a lack of Indian diplomatic competence or skill. Rather, India is constrained by the internal contradictions within BRICS itself. New Delhi cannot impose consensus between member states with radically opposed interests. The next meeting in June will constitute a decisive test. At the same time, New Delhi succeeded in organising a Quad meeting that would coincide with the visit of the American secretary of state, Marco Rubio, a sign of the BRICS presidency's willingness to find solutions.

Ultimately, the crisis reveals the limits of both Indian diplomacy and the BRICS multilateral framework. Structurally, New Delhi is attempting to give meaning to its doctrine of being "friends of all."

HOW EL SALVADOR BECAME THE SAFEST COUNTRY IN CENTRAL AMERICA (WHILE LOSING ITS DEMOCRACY)

Bukele's mano dura worked. The question is what else it did.

by Sofia Giandomenico

President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador. Wikimedia Commons.

The people of El Salvador lived in fear for many years. Gang violence spiralled out of control and reached its peak in 2015, when the homicide rate was 103 per 100,000 people. Since the election of President Nayib Bukele in 2019, things have changed drastically: the rate is now 1.3 per 100,000, compared with Italy's 0.55 as of 2026. Unfortunately, this does not mean that Salvadorans have stopped living in fear. The country is now facing mass incarceration and authoritarian advances under President Bukele. Last year, El Salvador became the centre of attention when the country became a place for President Trump and ICE to send Venezuelan criminals — and others with disputed or absent criminal records — to prison.

Most Salvadoran gangs are a product of the civil war that took place in El Salvador from 1979 to 1992. During those years many Salvadorans emigrated to the U.S., specificaly in California, where gangs like MS-13 and Barrio 18 were created. When the civil war ended the U.S. government deported the Salvadoran criminals back to their country. The country lacked a reintegration policy, and many people were left to fend for themselves. This condition played into the hands of the gangs, allowing these groups to recruit and expand. Over time, El Salvador became one of the most dangerous countries in the world. People were constantly afraid for their lives, scared of entering other neighbourhoods, and afraid to let children play in their yards.

In 2019, the current president, Nayib Bukele, took office and promised to bring an end to gang violence. He began his presidency by declaring a state of emergency in prisons, putting almost 30 prisons under lockdown, and initiating arrests in areas believed to have the largest gang presence. These policies were successful and, within a few years, the quality of life of Salvadorans improved. The country, from being the most dangerous in the world, has become the safest in Latin America. After many years of hearing promises of change from various politicians, President Bukele did it, transforming for the better the lives of his people and showing neighbouring countries facing similar problems that it is possible. This has made him extremely popular in the whole Central America, with 90% of approval ratings, and he got elected for a second term.

But the other side of the coin shows a different reality: he has passed laws to centralise power and undermine the Constitution. His government has removed magistrates and attorneys who were investigating corruption and negotiations with gangs. Among other things, he declared a state of exception in 2022 and has kept extending it, which is an easy way to bypass the rule of law. The fact that he was elected for a second consecutive term is itself considered unconstitutional by critics. He has also made it possible for lawmakers to amend the Constitution in a single legislative session, and in recent days, a new law was passed allowing minors as young as 12 to receive life sentences. This got the media questioning if El Salvador is taking steps towards authoritarianism, to which President Bukele replied with a social media post saying that he is "the coolest dictator in the world". But these claims don't seem to concern the Salvadorans, who still show a lot of support for him.

What has attracted the most attention, however, is incarceration. As of March 2026, El Salvador had the highest incarceration rate in the world, with over 1,600 prisoners per 100,000 people, compared with Italy's 103. This is clearly a result of the policies used to end gang violence, often known as mano dura, or "iron fist." These policies have made it possible for people to be imprisoned without a court sentence, on the basis of arrest alone. This means that if a police officer decides someone looks like a criminal, they can arrest that person and put them in prison. And because prisons are in lockdown, prisoners are not allowed contact with the outside world, including their families or lawyers. This means that if someone is wrongly imprisoned — something that happens quite often — the chances of getting out are very slim. Relatives of prisoners cannot advocate for them and often do not know where they are being held, or even whether they are alive or dead. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have denounced the inhumane conditions inside prisons, including extreme overcrowding, deaths in custody that are not properly investigated, beatings, sexual humiliation, and many other abuses.

The most infamous prison in El Salvador is undoubtedly the Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo, also known by the acronym CECOT. It came into the spotlight because of the mass deportations carried out in the U.S. in March 2025 by ICE, when the Trump administration paid to send 288 Venezuelans and Salvadorans to CECOT. Later, in July, they were sent to Venezuela as part of a prisoner exchange. This case concerned the public because of the imprisonment of people with no criminal record, most famously the case of Abrego García, a Salvadoran man who was wrongly sent to CECOT by the U.S.

The dilemma here is clear: is it worth sacrificing democratic practices for security? For Salvadorans the answer seems yes. After too many years of not being able to live a normal life, they are now willing to turn an eye to the authoritarian steps their country is taking, even sometimes deeming it necessary to bring stability. But one cannot help but wonder if stability can be brought without bypassing the rule of law and if politicians abuse of their popularity to gain more power.

HAVE YOUR CAKE AND EAT IT TOO?

Values vs interests

by Flora Jannotti Testa

Every month, this column explores a new theme, usually framed as a dilemma. Think of it like the Trolley Problem, but for politics, economics, and diplomacy.
My goal each month? To see whether these "dilemmas" are actually dilemmas at all, or whether it is possible to get the best of both worlds.
In other words, must we really pick the red pill or the blue pill?

If you follow international politics for long enough, you start noticing a familiar pattern. Governments speak the language of values — democracy, human rights, the rule of law, international law — and yet they often act according to interests: security, trade, migration control, energy, and strategic influence.

The European Union is perhaps the clearest example of this tension. It presents itself as a normative power, promoting standards and principles abroad. Yet it also operates in a world where gas supplies, defence partnerships, and geopolitical competition do not politely wait for moral clarity.
So the question this month is a classic one: can states defend their values while protecting their interests?

There are good reasons why states insist that values matter. For democracies especially, foreign policy is not only about external relations but also about domestic legitimacy. Citizens expect their governments to defend the principles they claim to believe in. Criticising repression abroad, supporting international law, or sanctioning human rights abuses can strengthen political credibility at home.

For the EU, values are written into the treaties themselves. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union refers to respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights. In other words, values are not just branding; they are supposed to be part of the project.

Values can also create influence. States seen as principled often gain soft power, diplomatic trust, and long-term partnerships. The problem, of course, is that values become harder to defend when they carry a price tag.

Take the EU's relationship with China. Brussels has repeatedly criticised Beijing over human rights concerns in Xinjiang, the erosion of freedoms in Hong Kong, and broader issues of economic coercion. In 2021, the EU imposed sanctions on Chinese officials over Xinjiang abuses, prompting Chinese counter-sanctions on European politicians and institutions.

And yet, China remains one of the EU's largest trading partners. European industries rely on Chinese supply chains, and the EU still seeks cooperation with Beijing on issues such as climate policy and global economic stability.
So what is China to Europe: systemic rival, economic partner, or necessary collaborator? Officially, the answer has often been "all three." That may sound contradictory, but it reflects reality. Europe wants to defend its values without cutting itself off from the world's second-largest economy.

Another revealing case is the EU's cooperation with Tunisia and Egypt on migration. European leaders regularly emphasise human rights and democratic governance in the Southern Neighbourhood.

At the same time, the EU has signed major financial and migration agreements with governments accused by rights groups of authoritarian practices and abuses against migrants.

In 2023, the EU signed a memorandum of understanding with Tunisia involving economic support and cooperation on migration management. Similar strategic partnerships have developed with Egypt, especially around border control, regional stability, and energy.
Critics argue that Europe is sacrificing values for migration control. Supporters respond that governments have a duty to manage borders and maintain regional stability. Neither side is entirely wrong.

The tension is hardly unique to Europe. Western governments frequently criticise Saudi Arabia over civil liberties and the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Yet these same governments continue to engage Riyadh on oil markets, defence cooperation, investment, and regional security.

Even after strong public criticism in 2018, many Western states gradually resumed high-level engagement. Why? Because Saudi Arabia remains strategically important in energy markets and Middle Eastern diplomacy.
This is the uncomfortable reality of foreign policy: values may shape rhetoric, but interests often shape calendars, flights, and handshakes.
Is it hypocrisy? Sometimes, yes.

States can use values selectively, condemning rivals while ignoring partners. That inconsistency damages credibility and invites accusations of double standards. But the story is more complicated than simple hypocrisy.

Interests and values are not always opposites. In many cases, they overlap. Stable democracies make more predictable partners. Respect for international law can protect small and medium-sized powers. Human rights abuses can fuel migration, instability, and conflict. Supporting rules-based cooperation can therefore be both moral and strategic.

Likewise, values without power achieve little. A state that refuses all compromise may preserve its moral purity, but lose its influence entirely.

Disagree? Great! Like all our columns at the Diplomatic Digest, this one's meant to be a conversation. If you've got your own take on how to solve this dilemma, reach out for a chat!

PROVE ME WRONG

Diplomacy without diplomats

by Gonzalo Rodao

Prove Me Wrong is a column that dares to challenge conventional wisdom in international affairs, one "hot take" at a time.
Each piece begins with a claim that might sound controversial, but is backed by analysis and grounded in fact. The goal isn't to preach, but to provoke discussion and critical thinking among readers who care about diplomacy, politics, and global change.
Agree or disagree, please just don't stay indifferent.

A *Foreign Affairs* newsletter landed in my inbox a few weeks ago, resurfacing a 1997 piece by George Kennan. The title was "Diplomacy Without Diplomats?" I read it because Kennan was the mastermind behind containment, the man who, more than anyone, drew the intellectual map for how the West would fight and win the ideological battle of the Cold War. Whatever he had to say about the profession he had built his career inside, I wanted to hear it.
Kennan opens with a line from Jules Cambon, a French diplomat writing in 1925: democracy will always have ambassadors and ministers; the question is whether it will have diplomats. A hundred years later, the question hasn't gone away. It has just gotten harder, for reasons Cambon could not have anticipated and Kennan, in 1997, was only beginning to see.

There is something faintly ridiculous about a graduate student writing a column about whether his chosen profession will still exist by the time he gets to it. I am aware of this. I am writing it anyway, because I think the question is bigger than my discomfort with asking it, and because the answer, as far as I can tell, is not the one most people give when you ask them.

Kennan's article is not a lament. He entered the Foreign Service in 1926, in its second class, and by the time he wrote "Diplomacy Without Diplomats?" he had already concluded that the corps he joined had begun unraveling within his own career.

By 1950, he writes, the service "bore little resemblance to the corps its authors had intended." The professional, nonpolitical, self-administered diplomatic body the Rogers Act was supposed to create had been steadily eroded: by political appointees parachuted into ambassadorships, by other agencies setting up shop inside embassies, by the centralization of foreign policy in the White House. By the 1990s, only thirty percent of staff at major American embassies were actually State Department personnel. The other seventy percent answered to Washington bosses elsewhere.

Kennan's worry, in other words, was not that diplomats were being replaced. It was that the profession was being fragmented into something incoherent. The diplomat as a single, identifiable kind of professional was already dissolving thirty years ago. He was watching it happen. What Kennan could not see clearly in 1997, even as he gestured toward "the worldwide revolution in communication," is that the profession was about to be squeezed from two directions at once.

From below, artificial intelligence is eating the work that used to constitute the apprenticeship. The tasks AI handles best are precisely the ones a junior diplomat used to spend a decade doing before being trusted with anything serious: summarizing cables, drafting speeches, translating documents, writing the briefing memos nobody important reads. The U.S. State Department has rolled out its first Enterprise AI Strategy. The British Foreign Secretary has declared that "diplomacy needs machine speed." Every European foreign ministry is on the same trajectory. Goldman Sachs estimates that artificial intelligence is already erasing roughly sixteen thousand net jobs a month, with the heaviest losses concentrated among entry-level white-collar workers. The first decade of a diplomatic career, in other words, is being quietly hollowed out before anyone enters it.

TFrom above, the senior end of the profession is being eaten by something cruder. Heads of state communicate directly through their own social media accounts, bypassing diplomatic channels entirely. High-stakes negotiations increasingly run through personal envoys with no diplomatic background, accountable to no embassy and reporting to no foreign ministry.

he bilateral relationship Kennan defended as the foundation of diplomacy, carefully cultivated by ambassadors who actually understood the country they served in, is being replaced by a tweet and a phone call.

The standard reassurance is that AI will free diplomats from the tedious work and leave them more time for the things that actually matter: building relationships, reading a room, knowing when to say nothing. Probably some of that is true. The tasks being automated were never the point of the profession; they were the price of entry.

But there is a question nobody seems to want to sit with. Kennan became the analyst who understood the Soviet Union because he spent years inside the machinery of diplomacy, watching how governments actually behaved when they thought nobody serious was paying attention. That is not something you can shortcut. It is not something you can simulate. The judgment that makes a senior diplomat worth keeping is built, slowly, out of the work that is now being reassigned to a model that runs on a server somewhere.

Can you produce that judgment without the years that used to produce it? Maybe. But nobody designing the AI integration strategy for any foreign ministry in Europe is asking that question out loud, which is either reassuring or alarming, depending on your disposition. Kennan ended his 1997 article with something close to reluctant acceptance.

The foreign service, he wrote, was "just about the best that the American civilization of our day is capable of providing." Not a ringing endorsement. But not a eulogy either. He had made his peace with an institution that had failed to become what it was supposed to be, and he was asking it to keep going anyway.

I am not sure I have the same luxury of acceptance. Not because the profession is dying — professions do not die, they mutate — but because the mutation is happening fast enough that the people designing it and the people who will have to live inside it are not, for the most part, the same people. That gap is worth paying attention to. The diplomat will survive. I am just not sure I will recognize what I am walking into. Prove me wrong.

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