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Commentary

The Next European Century? Europe in Global Politics in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

This article addresses the key challenges facing Europe in the face of the fraying of the World Order that emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. It identifies four issues that may disrupt the multilateral world order – the rise of China, disruption to the trans-Atlantic relationship, the challenge of Russia and climate change. It concludes by highlighting EU efforts to respond to this challenge and questions whether these are a case of failing forward, failing better or the growing pains of a new strategic actor.

Keywords

EU; Transatlantic relationship; China; Russia; Climate change

Europe finds itself navigating the turbulent waters of an international system that is experiencing profound change and transformation. The world order established after the Second World War is fraying and it is far from clear what will replace it - a new order or more pronounced disorder. Faced with the traumatic experience of the last war, European leaders developed a two-pronged post-war strategy. First, confronted by an expansionist Soviet Union, Europe opted for the shelter of the United States to assure its security. The Transatlantic Alliance enabled the western half of the continent to concentrate on economic integration by embedding the future of its security in an US-led Alliance. Second, the European strategy was to proceed with a process of deep economic interdependence in the form of the European Union (EU) from the 1950s onwards. The latter was geographically contained in the Western half of the continent until the collapse of communism propelled the EU to a continental scale. The EU evolved within an international system characterised by the distinctive structural features outlined above. In analysing Europe in Global Politics in the 21st century, it is important to explore just what kind of Europe might evolve in tandem with what kind of global politics.

GLOBAL POLITICS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

As we approach the third decade of the 21st century, it is evident that the international system is in a transitory period and has experienced significant shifts and shocks. The post war trade and monetary order defined by Ruggie as 'embedded liberalism' is under severe strain and somewhat loose of its moorings (Ruggie, 1982). What follows is a synthesis of the main shifts that impinge on Europe in global politics. These are:

- *The Rise of China*: The most pronounced change in global politics over the last 40 years is the rise of China. It has transformed itself from a poor, peripheral, inward-looking rural society into a political and economic great power. Its rapid modernisation has not followed the US, European or Japanese models but was driven by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its state apparatus. In the early phase, its twin goals were growth and access to global markets. With

growing economic weight, China began to assert its vision of a plural world and started to project a Chinese way of doing things beyond its border. The arrival in power of Xi Jinping in 2012 heralded a shift in focus at home and abroad. Xi Jinping assumed far more personal power by diluting the collegiate leadership and collective decision-making that characterised governance in China. Under Xi, China is asserting its great power status and its vision is playing out across the world. A revitalised China pursuing the Chinese Dream is determined that the century of humiliation (1842-1949) that it suffered as a result of the actions of other great powers will never happen again. There are many perspectives of just what kind of power China is or will become. In addition to being a formidable trading state, its military capacity is growing at a rapid pace. What is more, it is strengthening its presence in Africa and Eurasia in its bid to secure raw materials and trading routes. It is the dominant state in Asia and given the asymmetry that this creates, smaller Asian powers and Japan have an interest in the presence of a balancing power. Moreover, as its economic power increases there is evidence of push-back from other powers given the weight of the state in the Chinese economy.

- *US Economic Nationalism:* Under President Obama, the US tried to act as balancer to China by its pivot to Asia and the launch of the 12 country Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). This was intended as a soft containment strategy as it did not exclude China but represented a group of Pacific Rim states willing to sign up to standardised rules on trade. It was superseded by the election of Donald Trump on a ticket of 'America First' underpinned by economic nationalism. One of the first things President Trump did when he assumed office was to refuse to sign the TPP. Instead of containing China with soft tools, Trump began to impose tariffs on Chinese trade at the beginning of 2018. What has come to be called a trade war, intensified during the year with further impositions of tariffs. There is no evidence that the US and China are close to a resolution of this conflict. Although there is disagreement about the imposition of tariffs as an effective weapon, there is agreement that China has not lived up to its commitments to open its markets while it has availed of the openness of the markets of others. President Trump did not sign away NAFTA but insisted on a re-negotiation and threatened to impose tariffs on the EU. The latter together with Trump's attitude to the Atlantic Alliance has damaged transatlantic relations and raised tensions between allies and partners at a time of wider geo-political change. President Trump's focus on economic nationalism undermines US leadership in the international system and may have lasting effects.
- *Russia-the disruptor state:* Russia is not a rising state but a declining one, still hurting from the loss of its sphere of interest in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992. Russia sees itself a victim of an expansionist NATO and EU, which has undermined its 'sphere of influence' in its neighbourhood. Vladimir Putin has sought to re-build Russian power and presence in the world by becoming a disruptive state. His model is very much that of a 19th century Great Power; having an influence on all big global issues and a seat at the table. It continues to fight a proxy war in Ukraine and has supported Iran and Syria in the battle over the future of the Assad regime. It has actively engaged in seeking to disrupt democratic politics by interfering in domestic elections and engaging in active cyber-attacks on many states and facilities. The Kremlin playbook is unlikely to shift in the absence of political liberalisation in Russia and a decision

to focus on the future of its economy. The exposure of Russian intelligence activity in a number of European states will not be challenged domestically but makes Russian disinformation less credible in Europe. For the EU, it poses particular challenges because of geographical proximity and Russian links to some member states.

- *Whither the multilateral system?* The US retreat combined with the rise of China and the disruptive power of Russia has undermined the global order that was created after the war. The US acting in the role of hegemon provided financial and institutional resources to maintain the system but is no longer committed to this system. The US has sought to disrupt the dispute settlement system of the WTO by refusing to appoint judges to the WTO Appellate Body. Although the dispute resolution system is still functioning, the loss of more judges when they come up for renewal will destroy the enforcement capacity of the WTO. The failure to conclude the Doha trade round has led to a proliferation of regional trade agreements across the world. Regionalism has become a substitute for global agreements. The international system has experienced significant power shifts, beyond just the rise of China, which are captured by the evolution of the G7 to the G20 although both those groupings are not functioning particularly effectively. The international system has morphed into a multipolar one but it is far from clear just how multilateral the future system will be.
- *Climate Change & Technological Transformation:* For the first time in human history, humanity has the capacity to destroy the planet and transform what it is to be human with the development of AI and bio-engineering. Moreover we are in the midst of a revolution in communications and every such revolution in the past has transformed politics. These changes go beyond what might be described as traditional geo-political challenges and are truly systemic and global in scope. Moreover, technology and communications are a resource in the battle for power and presence in the international system.

EUROPE IN 21ST CENTURY GLOBAL POLITICS

How should Europe respond to the changes outlined above and how will it operate in a multipolar world characterised by deep interdependence? The shifts and shocks outlined above underline the key dynamics that confront Europe as it seeks to respond to this changing world. The EU has agency and a capacity to shape and not just take what is emanating from the international system but it has distinct limits because it is a union of states with very different histories and foreign policy concerns. The depth of heterogeneity in Europe is a continuous constraint. There is a marked asymmetry within the EU between the larger and smaller states; the larger ones tend to pursue their own foreign policy goals while the smaller ones have a tendency to free ride. The EU has learnt that when it 'speaks with one voice' and acts together in a unified manner its power and influence is enhanced. Europe is one player among many searching for voice and influence and its power resources are stronger in some fields than in others and in some parts of the world than in others. For many years, the EU was portrayed both in the academic literature and in the EU's self-definition as a 'normative power' built on shared values. This portrayal was that of a Union that had moved beyond traditional geo-politics. The annexation of Crimea and the Russian engagement in Ukraine brought geo-politics crashing back into the consciousness of Europeans and disturbed their preference that the world beyond the EU should be more like the EU. The failure of the Arab Spring

and the destabilisation of Europe's neighbourhood triggered a flow of refugees that by summer 2015 was a major crisis. The election of President Trump to the Whitehouse and Brexit added to the uncertainty and contingency surrounding the Union and its future. The EU has not been passive but has responded in the following ways.

- *Deploying Trade Power:* One of the prevalent arguments during the UK referendum on Brexit was that exit would give it the freedom to sign trade deals across the world not hampered by the EU and the need for collective agreement. While the UK is negotiating Brexit, the EU has intensified its commitment to conclude multiple trade deals by agreeing the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with Canada in 2017 and the Strategic Partnership with Japan in 2018. Negotiations are continuing with Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, India and a host of ASEAN states. Given the blockages at the global level, an intensification of bilateral agreements is to be expected but Brexit adds an additional incentive. When President Trump threatened to impose tariffs on the EU, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker visited Washington in July and managed to reach an agreement that averted for now a trade war between the two sides of the Atlantic. Europe's trade clout continues to be its major power resource.
- *A Pivot to Africa:* The growing power of China in Africa and the increased movement of migrants and refugees from Africa to Europe prompted a review of Europe's approach toward Africa. The domestic salience of migration is a major driver of this policy as the 2015 crisis appeared to have a lag effect in European politics; the rise of the anti-migrant radical right in Europe has increased the volatility of European politics and made government formation more difficult in many EU states. Speaking in November 2017, the President of the EP, Tajani said "Before it's too late, we need a radical change that puts the African continent on top of the EU's political agenda," (Politico, November 2017). For long, the future of Africa was seen as an issue of development, now it is seen as Europe's self-interest as the future of Europe is bound up with the future of Africa. In September 2018, the Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker launched plans for a new Alliance with Africa that would involve a 'continent to continent' free trade agreement. This is partly to counter the growing Chinese power in Africa but more importantly to address migration from Africa to Europe.
- *Difficult Unity on Russia:* Russia is Europe's largest neighbour which underlines the salience of Russia-European relations. The legal basis for these relations is the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) which came into force in 1997. Since the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, EU-Russia relations have experienced considerable strain. In response to the Russian actions, the EU has imposed a series of restrictive measures and sanctions on Russia in 2014, and further expanded them in 2018. It was difficult for the 28 European states to agree on sanctions and to maintain them but that is what has happened. The tense situation between Russia and the EU was further exacerbated by the Salisbury chemical attack in the UK and the attempt by the Russian Intelligence Agency (GRU) to engage in a cyber-attack on Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in the Netherlands. Russia seeks to create maximum cleavages with the EU and weaken the supranational institutions. Russia cyber activity and support for right

wing groups in Europe adds to its disruptive role but also isolates it further with its neighbours. In the Balkans, Russia wants to disrupt the EU enlargement process. The EU marks its disapproval of Kremlin policy with sanctions but has not managed to influence Putin to change tack and to abide by the norms and rules of the international system.

GRAND STRATEGY OR MUDDLING UP?

The EU has always struggled to be an effective strategic actor in the international system and as already underlined, there are significant structural impediments to effective international action. The EU's strengths in soft power and a preference for multilateralism are ill-suited for a multipolar world dominated by power politics. Yet, in his State of the Union address in September 2018, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker argued that

The geopolitical situation makes this Europe's hour: the time for European sovereignty has come. It is time Europe took its destiny into its own hands. It is time Europe developed what I coined “Weltpolitikfähigkeit” – the capacity to play a role, as a Union, in shaping global affairs. Europe has to become a more sovereign actor in international relations (Juncker 2018).

The use of the phrase ‘European sovereignty’ is to emphasise the ambition of Europe to be a shaper not just a taker of developments in the international system.

Twice in less than 20 years, the EU has attempted to outline its strategic priorities: first with the 2003 *European Security Strategy* and later with the 2016 *Global Strategy*. Both documents were strong on aspiration but weak on how to translate strategy into policy because they were an amalgam of national foreign policy objectives and strategic cultures. The unfavourable external environment, however, is propelling Europe into further concerted action. This is more akin to ‘muddling up’ than grand strategy. It is characterised by the following features. First, there is an effort to strike a balance between normative and geopolitical goals and the EU is willing to use its trade power to protect itself in an increasingly unstable world. Second, the EU is working with like-minded states to defend a rule-based international order at a time when it is under extraordinary strain. Third, Africa has emerged as a central focus for the next decade. Whether this amounts to ‘failing forward’ (Jones et al, 2016), ‘failing better’ (Beckett, 1983) or the painful emergence of a more strategic actor, only time will tell.

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