

The EU and Multilateralism in an Age of Great Powers

Sven Biscop

Try to imagine a major issue in world politics today that could be settled (whether peacefully or forcefully) by a single power: one cannot. It's the interplay between at least four poles that determines the course of world politics: the United States (US), China, Russia, and, if it wants to, the European Union (EU). Thus we are living in a multipolar world. We might see other actors rising in the future, but these definitely are the great powers of the first half of the 21st century: one is the established power, one is emerging, one is declining, and one is in the making.

Multipolarity is a description of the reality of world politics today. It may not be something one would wish for, but it cannot be wished away, as many analysts and decision-makers still do. They should rather be thinking about how the great powers will position themselves in this multipolar context. Will the great powers share power and cooperate? Or will they try to grab more power and seek to dominate? In the first case, multilateralism can remain vibrant, though it will also have to be adapted to the new balance of power between the key actors. In the other case, multilateralism is perhaps even more important, as a way of stabilising relations and preventing conflicts among the great powers.

Between great powers, cooperation and competition have always co-existed. Great powers simultaneously compete on one issue and cooperate on another, in varying constellations. They compartmentalise their relations with each other: even a very serious dispute in one area need not block dialogue and cooperation in others. That is one way of preventing a deadlock in world politics and an escalation of crises that might lead to war. But even so, the question as to what will be the basic orientation of each of today's four great powers remains crucial.

RUSSIA: STUCK IN HISTORY

The main objective of current Russian grand strategy is the establishment of a sphere of influence in its near abroad. This excludes power sharing, for a sphere of influence implies exclusivity: Russia wants to be the only external power with the right to interfere. To achieve that objective, Russia doesn't hesitate to use military force, as witnessed in the invasion of the Crimea and the fomenting of armed rebellion in eastern Ukraine. This crude unilateral exercise of power is the classic way of the great powers.

It's also a decidedly old-fashioned way, which no longer necessarily achieves the same effect as before. Russia may have instilled fear in its neighbours and President Vladimir Putin acquired additional prestige in the eyes of domestic public opinion, but has Moscow really furthered its interests? Instead of restoring former greatness, Russia has lost influence in Ukraine, which thanks to the invasion is forging a much stronger sense of national identity than before. The Russian intervention in Syria has safeguarded its existing influence, but hardly increased it. The crassness of Russian military action has forced the western powers to partially abandon compartmentalisation and adopt economic sanctions. Though perhaps not mainly as a result of this, the fact is that Russia's economic prospects remain bleak. In short, strategically Russia is on the defensive.

One could have hoped that after the March 2018 presidential elections the Russian regime would feel suitably secure in power and might gradually switch back from confrontation to cooperation with the EU. Those hopes were immediately disappointed. Tensions rather escalated right before and after the elections with the attempted murder of former spy Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom (UK), new sanctions by the West and a further escalation in the Syria. A move towards normalisation of relations will in any case require a compromise on Ukraine, which means that Russia has to be willing to offer more than it has so far. Without any return, the EU will not be able to drop its sanctions. Lest we forget, the strongest sanctions were adopted after the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 above the Donetsk area in eastern Ukraine, on 17 July 2014, killing all 298 people on board.

THE UNITED STATES: TURNING ITS BACK ON ITS OWN HISTORY?

At the end of World War Two, the US created the current multilateral system that seeks to maintain peace and stability by involving the great powers in a cooperative effort. The United Nations Security Council epitomises this approach, though the US has been less willing to share power in the major financial and economic multilateral bodies. The US itself has resorted to force, at times clearly in support of the multilateral order (the 1991 Gulf War to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation), but at times in obvious breach of it (the 2003 invasion of Iraq without cause).

Now US grand strategy is in flux. Every American president has put America first—but all have considered the preservation of the multilateral system that their predecessors have created to be necessary to that end. Not anymore: as former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has brutally downsized the State Department, President Donald Trump is disinvesting in multilateralism. In his 2017 speech at the UN General Assembly, Trump called for “a great reawakening of nations”¹ instead. Like Russia, strategically the US has gone onto the defensive. Quoting from the same speech: “We can no longer be taken advantage of, or enter into a one-sided deal where the United States gets nothing in return.” In that spirit, the US has withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), is renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and is introducing tariffs on trade, leaving its allies and partners in the lurch.

Meanwhile one wonders whether the way the US tackles ongoing international crises contributes to their solution or to their escalation. The US did not create the North Korean crisis or the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran for dominance in the Gulf, but Trump’s fiery rhetoric against Pyongyang and his encouragement of Riyadh against Tehran might lead to war, not peace. The US is adding to instability just as it is weakening the multilateral structures that could help mitigate it, and without really consulting its allies. Rather than sharing power and cooperating, the US is reverting to unilateralism, trusting in the fact that its “military will soon be the strongest it has ever been,” as Trump said at the UN.

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly/>.

How will this US position itself in the world? The new *National Security Strategy* (NSS)² that the Trump administration published (in December 2017) certainly does not bode well for American relations with the world. The keyword is competition, notably with China and Russia. “An America that successfully competes is the best way to prevent conflict,” Trump’s NSS states. But does competition not create conflict, in reality?

Of course, grand strategy is a cost-benefit calculation—a transactional approach is actually nothing new. But Trump gets the calculation wrong. Unfortunately he’s not the only one. The idea that the US will get more by investing less is very powerful politically, and will thus not necessarily die with the end of the Trump presidency. It is certainly not impossible that Trump, another Trump, or a “Trumpist” will win the next presidential elections. It would be a strategic error, therefore, to consider Trump’s presidency to be a mere interlude.

CHINA: A NEW HISTORY?

At the 19th congress of the Communist Party in October 2017, China wrote one of the core projects of its grand strategy into the party constitution: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This is all about geopolitics: by a massive investment in a number of corridors of “connectivity” (over land to Europe and the Middle East, but also to Pakistan and the Indian Ocean, and to Southeast Asia, and across the seas) China is securing its lines of communication with the world and is acquiring substantial influence along the way. The BRI, accompanied by new institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), is essentially a cooperative project, though some on the receiving end may think the Chinese approach is rather too heavy-handed and might result in strong dependencies. Compared to Russia and how it exercises its power, however, China is a very smooth operator indeed. This is a very smart use of its economic power to increase its political power.

The one thing that disturbs the perception of China as a quickly rising but essentially peaceful power is its assertive policies in the East and South China Seas. Here China does use its military power, constructing artificial islands and building military bases. Because it is involved in a series of territo-

² <http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017.pdf>.

rial disputes, its neighbours are less sanguine about China's rise, and eye its accelerating military modernisation with suspicion.

At the same time, Beijing appears still to be feeling its way into the security dimension of its new great power status. Traditionally, China had a policy of non-intervention. That was easy to declare as long as China did not have many overseas interests anyway. But with Chinese investments and Chinese labour present across the world in ever greater numbers, their security has become a concern. The evacuation of 35,000 Chinese citizens from the Libyan war is a case in point, as is China's cooperation with the EU's anti-piracy operations off the Somali coast. The opening of a naval station in Djibouti in 2017 can be seen in this light: a power with global interests need the capabilities and the infrastructure to act globally, and to protect its investments and citizens.

A great power will also provoke counter-balancing however, and sometimes outright hostility. In 2016, a terrorist attack against the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan wounded three local employees. As it begins to address global security concerns, a China that still seems to be uncomfortable in this new role would appear to be looking for cooperation, and for multilateral cover for any action it may be compelled to take. That is an opportunity to be grasped. The other powers could work with China and the next time a crisis in Africa or the Middle East threatens the lives of foreign citizens, the EU and China, for example, could intervene together to protect them.

If, on the contrary, the fact in itself that China aims to develop a "world-class military" by 2050, as announced at the 19th party congress, were to be seen as a threat, and the other powers were to remain unwilling to make some space for China, we are set on a collision course. In the US especially, many observers are writing about the probability of war with China. This risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy: once one convinces oneself that war is inevitable, one will start preparing to win that war, and will lose sight of opportunities for cooperation that could preserve peace.

THE EUROPEAN UNION: HISTORY IN THE MAKING

In its 2016 *Global Strategy*,³ the EU has recognised the need for diplomatic initiatives to stabilise the geopolitically contested regions of the world, as

³ <https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/file/814/download?token=I-Kb0OrS>.

well as the importance of mobilising economic instruments to pursue its overall strategic interests. One of those vital EU interests identified in the *Global Strategy*, in addition to European security, prosperity, and democracy, is effective multilateral cooperation. The *Global Strategy* indeed puts global governance firmly back on the EU agenda, after “effective multilateralism” (as the previous EU strategy, the 2003 *European Security Strategy*, phrased it) had more or less disappeared from the radar screen.

The EU already has the diplomatic and economic instruments to pursue this strategy, but it should be a lot more proactive and creative in putting them to use. If optimal use is made of the newly activated mechanism of Permanent Structured Cooperation in defence (in December 2017), the EU will be able to complement its political and economic power with a certain capacity for autonomous military action. That would also allow the EU to step up its security cooperation with other actors.

The starting point of a reinvigorated EU grand strategy should be the recognition that the alliance with the US alone is no longer sufficient to achieve the EU’s objectives and safeguard its interests. The EU, obviously, needs to maintain the transatlantic alliance—and try to restrain the US at the same time. But it also needs to complement this alliance, because in this multipolar world, US and EU priorities and even interests coincide much less than before. On the one hand, the US does strongly support Europe, through NATO, prepositioning forces on the eastern borders in order to deter Russia. But at the same time the US is pursuing policies that are directly at odds with EU policy, such as supporting Saudi Arabia against Iran, whereas the EU, rather than taking sides, acknowledges that both have to be involved and feel ownership of a new regional balance in the Middle East and the Gulf. American economic protectionism and its undermining of multilateral structures, for example its blocking of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) dispute settlement mechanism, also go against EU interests.

Therefore, the EU must also invest in cooperation with the other powers, and forge ad hoc thematic coalitions whenever interests overlap. If, for example, the EU position on climate change is closer to that of China than that of the US, Brussels should not hesitate to work with Beijing on that issue. This way the EU can also try to pull the other great powers, and other actors, into multilateral cooperation, both by forming temporary coalitions within the existing multilateral institutions (from which the US is withdrawing) and by institutionalising new formats of cooperation. As the *Global Strategy* rightly

puts it, it will be necessary “to transform rather than simply preserve the existing system,” in order to prevent “the emerging of alternative groupings to the detriment of all.” Of course, other powers are already creating new institutions, but if they are open to broad participation, rather than creating closed clubs of a rather defensive nature, this should be welcomed as a strengthening of the web of multilateral relations. In this vein, most EU member states have joined the AIIB; through their participation, they can ensure that the bank plays a constructive role. The EU is also seeking to connect with the BRI, though for the moment it is doing so in a far too disjointed fashion, which weakens its leverage and plays into the hands of China.

The EU should proactively look for partners that share its interest in maintaining the fabric of the multilateral order. Regional powers such as India, Brazil and others would be primary partners. The *Global Strategy* mentions a range of issues on which more multilateral cooperation is necessary, and which the EU could try to put on the agenda, including notably the free use of the global commons: the seas, space, air space, and cyber space.

CREATIVE EU DIPLOMACY

An example of what a more creative EU diplomacy could achieve is linked to the BRI. The EU has to make China understand that if it wants the overland corridor of the BRI to Europe and the Middle East to succeed, Russia’s power-grab in precisely the areas that this “new silk road” has to traverse is China’s problem too. China will not be able to profit from its investment if Russia keeps fomenting war. Vice versa, the EU could signal to a Russia that does not now dare to voice its concerns about Chinese encroachment on its pretended sphere of influence, that Brussels remains willing to involve Moscow in a new eastern neighbourhood policy of its own. Could the EU then perhaps initiate a trilateral strategic dialogue between the three great powers along the “new silk road”: Russia, China, and the EU?

Another example is the fast development of the EU’s free trade agenda for Asia, as also announced in the *Global Strategy*. The US withdrawal from the TPP has undone the economic foundation of America’s Asia strategy. As a result, countries that were counting on the TPP to anchor themselves in the West, thus allowing them to keep a critical distance from China, now risk being sucked even deeper into China’s orbit. China will not hesitate to move into the vacuum that Trump has created. At a stroke, future free trade

agreements (FTAs) with the EU have gained real strategic importance, for there will be very few on offer with other western powers. Because the EU can pursue an inclusive trade agenda that encompasses rather than seeks to isolate China, and because it is not a military player in Asia, its strategy can be palatable for all parties as a workable alternative to ratcheting up military tensions.

In this context, the EU could deepen its partnership with countries like Canada, which is looking to Asia as its southern neighbour threatens to undo NAFTA, and Australia, which, torn between its defence alliance with the US and its economic dependence on China, has everything to gain from détente in Asia. So has Japan, but as yet Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is pursuing the opposite strategy, moving even closer to the US. In spite of this, the EU and Japan did announce a new FTA in the summer of 2017 and finalised it in December of the same year, a clear signal to the US that even Japan does not support its protectionist agenda.

A third, potential, example is security cooperation with China. If China were to behave consistently as a responsible great power in the future, cooperation with the EU could go a lot further. If the territorial claims in the South China Sea could be settled in a way that satisfies all parties and guarantees the freedom of navigation, then why could the EU not accept that in a certain region the Chinese navy carries the primary responsibility for maritime security in international waters? Until World War Two, it was the British Royal Navy that patrolled the seas. Today the US Navy plays that role. But the US hardly always took the right decisions when it intervened militarily, officially in order to safeguard international peace and security. In a multipolar system one should not a priori exclude the emergence of a division of labour.

Accepting a division of labour does not equate to recognising a sphere of influence. The idea is not that only the Chinese navy can sail in the international waters bordering on China, but that China would have the first-line responsibility, together with the participation of European and other navies. Vice versa, the EU could assume first-line responsibility for maritime security in the Mediterranean and the western half of the Indian Ocean, with the participation of China and others. This may seem a distant prospect, but it should also be realised that China has nothing to gain from escalating the maritime disputes and risking an armed conflict, for that would be as disastrous for its economy as for ours.

CONCLUSION

Comprehensiveness is the essence of grand strategy, which should integrate security, political and economic objectives and instruments. Current Russian and American strategies are doing the opposite. The Russian power grab and American disinvestment from multilateralism are directly affecting their economic interests, and will in turn undermine their political and security interests too. The smart power of the moment is China, which is increasing its reach very quickly without alienating its target countries. EU strategy would be a lot more effective if member states would put to use the instruments that they already have in a united and resolute way.

As of now nothing is set in stone. A skilful EU strategy of engagement, making use of Russian and Chinese sensibilities vis-à-vis each other, may yet succeed in returning Russia onto a path of cooperation while preventing an all too dominant China from emerging. The EU is well placed to lead such a strategy—if it gets its act together. Though the EU has to maintain a critical human rights dialogue, the aim is not to change the political system of either Russia or China, however authoritarian they may become. The aim is to make sure that from a world order in flux we move to a new system that is based on cooperation and not confrontation. The US, for its part, would be well-advised to think again and reinforce such a cooperative effort rather than undermine it. Trump should be careful what he wishes for: isolationists might just end up being isolated.

The absolute precondition that must be fulfilled before the EU explores the opportunity for more cooperation with non-democratic powers, however, is unity. A self-assured and resolute Europe can engage in a new relationship with China and Russia. If a hesitant and divided Europe embarks upon this course, Beijing and Russia will read it as weakness—which they will not hesitate to exploit.

Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop is the Director of the Europe in the World Programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels, and a Professor at Ghent University. He is an Honorary Fellow of the European Security and Defence College (ESDC) since 2015, and in 2017 was awarded the Grosses Ehrenzeichen für Verdienste um die Republik Österreich.