



The Power to Engage: Giving Punch to a new EU Global Strategy 2020

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I like being a policy-oriented academic: you meet lots of interesting people and you are invited to interesting meetings, so you can really contribute to the debate. Some actors may from time to time think you have an appealing idea, and they may even seek some academic legitimacy for their decisions. But you are of course not present when the actual decisions are being taken. It's my job and I love it – but this is not the role that the EU itself should play. Europe does not aspire to be the world's policeman, but it cannot just be the world's professor either. As the new EU leadership is coming in, we must give punch to our strategy, and make sure we have the power to make our ideas work in the real world. Power, not to confront, but to engage the world.

Let me start my argument by looking in from the outside, from the place that dominates all debates on international politics (when we aren't talking about Donald Trump, that is): Beijing. Teaching a summer course (on EU foreign policy) at the People's University in Beijing last July gave me the chance to renew my contacts with the Chinese strategic community and to get a feeling for how Europe is seen. Two main

takeaways: one, every year my Chinese students are getting better and better; and two, my Chinese colleagues are feeling very self-confident.

THE WORLD AS SEEN FROM BEIJING

If the trade war that Trump initiated made Beijing very nervous at first, it has now become clear that (so far) China has come out better than it feared. I certainly didn't sense any feeling of victory or complacency, but rather a grim satisfaction and a confident determination to see this through, for this is of course not the end of the story. Trump is an erratic leader, which seen from Beijing has both advantages and disadvantages, but in any case the US remains the most powerful of the great powers.

And what about us, the EU? The EU's statement, in March 2019, that it sees China as simultaneously a cooperation partner, a negotiating partner, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival came as a somewhat unpleasant surprise: my Chinese colleagues had not expected the EU to use what they see as the American language of rivalry. This has also earned the EU some grudging respect, though. One could say that the EU's message – we prefer to work with, not against China, but then you have to give us something to work with – delivered results: the April 2019 EU-China Summit resulted in a joint statement that

includes many concrete commitments on the part of China.

But is this not the exception? China also sees that even though the EU is adopting some more forceful positions, including positions that go against US policy – notably on Iran – the EU has difficulties putting these into action. Iran is a case in point: a strong EU stance has not convinced even Europe’s own firms to continue to trade with Iran, out of fear of American retaliation. The criticism is somewhat easy, coming from China, which in many crises happily lets the other powers take a front role while taking care of its business interests behind the scene – but it is not unjustified. And of course, the EU Member States often take very different positions, hence the Union does not come close to consistent strategic action.

For China, a game with three still offers more possibilities than if it were dealing with the US alone. When asked, my Chinese colleagues happily concede that a world in which the EU exists is better than one in which it doesn’t – but without taking the EU very seriously as a strategic actor. The EU does come up with interesting positions, which may or may not benefit China, but do not count on it too much for putting them into practice. (Only Russia seems to figure even less prominently in China’s calculations, presumably because its independent strategic action is mostly limited to its near abroad, and even there it dares not openly go against China).

EU STRATEGY AT A CROSSROADS

The reality of this perception (which is not just held in China) puts EU strategy at a crossroads. In spite of its internal divisions, the EU has taken several important strategic decisions during the term of the outgoing Commission. The strategy paper on China, which can be summarized as “cooperate when you can, push back when you

must”. The connectivity strategy for Asia, aimed at maintaining the sovereignty and open economy of key countries by putting a deep trade and investment relationship with the EU on the table. Free trade agreements with big Asian economies, which provides them with an anchor to avoid being sucked into the Chinese maelstrom. The investment screening mechanism that allows Member States to limit foreign investment in critical sectors. The INSTEX mechanism to allow European firms to continue to trade with Iran. Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund, to generate a degree of strategic autonomy in the field of defence.

The 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS) is the strategic framework for all these decisions. Informed by a pragmatic sense of *Realpolitik*, the EUGS defined the EU’s vital interests (our security, prosperity and democracy, and a rules-based international order) and set five clear priorities. As I interpret them (protecting Europe, stabilizing the neighbourhood, strategic autonomy in defence, stabilising geopolitically contested regions, and launching a new multilateral agenda), these remain the right priorities, but not all of them have been translated into action – they are still just good ideas. Moreover, a key priority, good relations between the great powers, is present at most implicitly, even though most of the important decisions listed above actually concern precisely the EU’s position in today’s multipolar world. And many of these decisions themselves have yet to generate real world effects.

The EUGS is a good strategy – that’s why the new leadership needs to review it: to make sure that the EU remains on this track and to take it *further*. The next edition of the EUGS must be even more operational, setting an agenda to translate all priorities into action and, eventually, results. The new High Representative can set a

crucial precedent for what henceforth should be a systematic five-yearly strategic review, after every European election. On four sets of issues the EU should definitely pack more of a punch, if it wants to achieve the priority objectives of the EUGS.

GOOD GREAT POWER RELATIONS

First, good or at least non-confrontational relations between the great powers must be added as a sixth priority to the EUGS, for without it the EU is unlikely to make much headway on the other five.

Whether relations can be good, naturally depends on the great powers' behaviour. The March 2019 paper on China puts forward exactly the right approach: the EU must be able to cooperate with every power when interests coincide, but also willing to push back when any power crosses its red lines. And yet many in the EU actually remain uncomfortable with this, because China is not a democracy and, moreover, a major human rights violator. But even a democratic China would still be a great power, and a rising one at that. It would still upset the balance between the great powers, which would inevitably create anxiety in the dominant power, the US. It is an illusion to think that the US would happily share power if only China were democratic – just look at how negatively it reacts to the EU's own modest proposition of strategic autonomy. And a democratic China would still pursue the same interests, probably even by largely similar methods.

In other words, the defining feature for international politics is not that China is not a democracy, but that it is a great power. What matters for the EU's *vital* interests is not how China treats its own citizens, but how it behaves in inter-state relations. Unfortunately, great powers often do what they do, because they can.

Even in democracies interests often trump values and rules when it comes to maintaining power. How India operates in its province of Kashmir has not reached the degree of repression of China's methods in its province of Xinjiang, but is it fundamentally not the same approach? Is China's disregard for international law in the South China Sea fundamentally different from US disregard for its own signature in its relations with Iran?

The EU, however, can position itself as a different kind of power, that in principle seeks to safeguard its interests without harming the interests of others, and in full respect of international law and its own values. A reviewed EUGS should clearly stake out the EU position: great power relations in the 21st century do not have to mean great power rivalry. By default, the EU will engage all the great powers and cooperate when it can, while reserving the right to push back when it must.

It is important that China does not misinterpret this as condoning its current posture. On the contrary, the EU should signal that 2019-2020 will be a crucial year for EU-China relations. It is China's chance to implement everything that it committed to at the EU-China Summit and prove that it can be worked with. If it doesn't, then Beijing should not be surprised if the more confrontational US approach will gain more and more headway in Europe. But if it does, the EU can showcase the success of its approach to the Americans, notably to the Democrats, who so far seem to be trying to outdo the Republicans in hawkishness instead of looking for a *modus vivendi* in world politics.

Meanwhile, the fact that the human rights situation within the other powers is not our vital interest does not mean that we should not care. Believing in human rights means believing in their universality – otherwise they would be but

European, or Belgian, or Hungarian rights. The EU must maintain a critical human rights dialogue with everybody, making it clear that respecting human rights is normal, not violating them, and that this is above all a moral duty of every state, regardless of its political system. Which also means that changing other states' political system is not in itself our objective: human rights promotion remains essential, but democratisation is something that a nation can only achieve for itself – it cannot be engineered from the outside by the EU.

If China has a very different political system, it is not set on exporting it. Outside China, ideology doesn't matter much to the government: it prioritises its economic interests in order to ensure its domestic political survival, and pragmatically works with whoever it needs to.

Russia, alas, has ended up being much more dogmatic than pragmatic, as its government has come to use confrontation with the West as an instrument of domestic legitimacy and regime survival. Moscow therefore will dogmatically seek confrontation and exploit every opportunity to upset American and European plans, even if the direct benefits are doubtful. Russia always claims that all it seeks is to be respected, but the problem is that it mostly operates in a single register: it expects respect because of its military power and its role in great power diplomacy. Moscow forgets that respect also results from economic power, the power of connectivity, and the power of attraction. Russia seems to ignore that what it seeks, a restored sphere of influence in the former Soviet republics, is not just in the gift of the US and the EU, but is a prospect that most people in those states do not welcome, not even those who feel very close to Russia.

The EU can nonetheless attempt to engage Russia in high-level diplomacy, e.g. on Iran. But

at the same time, it must consider how to answer Russia in its own favourite register of security and defence. In other words, cooperate when we can and push back when we must is the right approach towards Russia too. Pushback is necessary: how to deter, and if necessary, retaliate against Russian subversion? Should not every interference with EU sovereignty (in the cyber domain, through corruption, through espionage etc.) be met with a pointed but real retaliation (not necessarily in the same domain), in order to make Russia understand that the EU too wants to be respected? Or would that only produce more escalation?

CONNECTIVITY-BASED REGIONAL STRATEGIES

There is no need to fear China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As long as China does not force countries to join, and does not force those that have joined into limiting or ending their relations with us, BRI is but normal great power practice: using economic power to bind states politically. Indeed, has the EU not attempted the same, through the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean? The EU applied different principles and conditions than China, of course, but it too offered close bilateral relations and economic support, framed in a multilateral grouping, with the aim of creating a stable political climate favourable to our interests. In the Mediterranean the EU in practice ignored most of its own rhetoric on human rights and democracy and favoured any regime that worked with it on security, migration and energy. What is that but an interest-based association scheme?

In response to the BRI, the EU has adopted its own connectivity strategy for Asia. Again, the approach is exactly right: putting a deep trade and investment relationship on the table to convince countries that they have every interest in maintaining a truly open economy, and in not jeopardizing their sovereignty by putting all their eggs in the Chinese (or in some cases

Russian/Eurasian Economic Union) basket. Accepting the objective of an open economy is the precondition – not democratisation. Like China convenes its target countries at the annual BRI Forum, the EU is now also launching its EU-Asia Connectivity Forum, at the end of September 2019. If the approach is right, the question is: will the EU be able to mobilise sufficient resources to make the connectivity strategy work? It must not necessarily match Chinese resources – a lot also depends on how resources are used – but €60 billion for the 2021-2027 budgetary period from EU and other public and private sources combined seems rather meagre.

In addition, the EU should also reconsider the instruments that it uses to spend those resources. Rather than criticising China for its many state-owned operators, we could perhaps learn from its example. Instead of spending our often considerable resources mostly indirectly, through UN agencies or through local actors, which leads to a loss of visibility and a lack of coherence with foreign policy, could the EU not create new EU-owned agencies, and/or reinforce the external dimension of existing bodies (such as the European Investment Bank) in order to make sure that our trade and investment serve our overall strategy? It goes against the neo-liberal orthodoxy, but there are many areas (including domestically) in which state- or EU-owned operators are best placed to achieve strategic objectives.

Closer to home, perhaps the EU should revisit the Neighbourhood Policy in the light of connectivity. In reality, even though the EU pretends otherwise, there are two neighbourhood policies: one for the south and one for the east.

In the south, the operating principle has become resilience, which is an implicit way of admitting that democratisation didn't work. But resilience is a defensive concept – it basically amounts to the creation of buffer states to shield the EU from migration and terrorism. Is that sufficiently appealing to convince states to work with the EU, especially as

other powers are becoming increasingly active in our backyard? Resilience is also a bilateral approach, but our interests demand a regional settlement of ongoing wars. In the Sahel, the EU is fully engaged in the implementation of a regional strategy, but for the Middle East and the Gulf, which is isn't even covered by the Neighbourhood Policy, there is apparently no vision whatsoever. And yet the Iran crisis cannot be settled bilaterally with Tehran: it demands a regional approach that includes Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries – as the EUGS itself recognises. An idea of a regional order (or orders) that would satisfy our interests, backed up by a connectivity-inspired economic engagement is the priority for the southern neighbourhood.

The eastern neighbourhood is the exception, because it is in Europe: it's the only place where democratisation can be part of the sovereignty and connectivity agenda. But, *il faut laisser le temps au temps*, and let countries evolve at their own pace, without trying to artificially accelerate things and provoking another Ukraine-type crisis with Russia.

ACTIVE MULTILATERALISM

Multilateral cooperation probably is the EUGS priority that has seen the least implementation. Good relations between the great powers is both its precondition as well as the result if it is successful, which is why it remains so crucially important. France and Germany are envisaging an “alliance of multilateralists”, which might include such countries as Canada, India, Indonesia, Japan, and Mexico. This could be a promising avenue to operationalise this priority. Care must be taken, however, not to present this as an “alliance of democracies” – that was a proposal by circles around the Bush Jr. administration after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and all of Europe thought that was a very divisive scheme. Setting aside Europe's own choice for democracy, it must be understood that international politics is not about an ideological confrontation between the democracies and the non-democracies, but about the pursuit of

interests by all states. The EU has a strong interest in supporting democracy wherever it exists or is taking shape, but forcing international politics overall into an “us versus them” scheme can only lead to the EU’s isolation, sadly, given how few democracies there are, and how dependent many democracies are on economic and other cooperation with non-democracies.

If there must probably be a core group of states that settles on a priority agenda for multilateral initiatives, that group must actively engage all relevant states, according to the issue at hand, in changing constellations, regardless of their domestic political system. They must certainly reach out to both the US and China, as well as Russia. An “alliance of multilateralists” that refuses to pick sides in a Sino-American confrontation could play an important role in signalling that multipolarity does not have to mean great power rivalry.

The EUGS already mentions the key areas in which more multilateral cooperation is necessary. The freedom of access to the global commons (the seas, space, air space and cyber space), the climate crisis, non-proliferation, the global open economy, and artificial intelligence stand out as priorities.

A PACKAGE DEAL FOR 27/28

One cannot just assume, as academics (myself included) always do too easily, that there will be EU unity on the three sets of issues that I have addressed so far. Forging a compromise on an agenda that the new High Representative can then actively pursue is therefore a priority in its own right. Recently, divisions among the Member States about foreign policy have deepened, often preventing the EU from taking a position, let alone play an effective role. Member States divide differently on different issues, however: not all of those who take a more liberal attitude to China’s role in their countries adopt the same stance

towards Russia, for example. And some issues, such as the security of commercial shipping in the Gulf of Aden and the Persian Gulf, are obviously shared by all. An interest-based package deal seems possible, therefore – unless of course some leaders are out to sabotage the EU, because they oppose European integration and/or are in the pocket of a foreign power.

A proactive foreign policy agenda does not just demand unity, it also requires capabilities. The EU should accelerate the implementation of what is has already agreed upon: PESCO. More than thirty capability projects have been accepted as PESCO projects, but few concern the priority shortfalls in Europe’s arsenals, and even fewer have reached the implementation stage. A more ambitious view of PESCO is needed to make it relevant. In the notification document announcing its activation, the initiating Member States stated that “a long term vision of PESCO could be to arrive at a coherent full spectrum force package”. That goal requires a shift of focus, from adding dozens of projects every year to launching the key strategic projects that can only happen through PESCO, and from projects only to permanently integrating the capabilities that those projects will yield into multinational military units. The first priority is to create strategic autonomy in the expeditionary field: the EU needs a credible power projection capacity, to use as little as possible, but to generate a deterrent effect vis-à-vis those who might thwart our interests, and to earn more respect from those with whom we cooperate.

Finally, if we manage to achieve a workable degree of EU unity, we should also look to European unity and find a way of involving a post-Brexit UK in EU foreign policy. That would be in the interest of the EU, whose positions would carry more weight if the UK joins them, and even more of the UK, as an otherwise isolated Britain becomes vulnerable to economic blackmail by other powers. The answer cannot be some sort of

“European security council” outside the EU: why would anyone think that the weakening of the EU through the loss of an important Member State can be compensated by further diluting Union structures? Difficult though it may seem since Boris Johnson became Prime Minister, the EU and the UK will have to find a way to commit London to the Common Foreign and Security Policy *within* EU institutions.

CONCLUSION: THE POWER TO ENGAGE

Put all together, this is a tall order, and yet the EU cannot take too much time, for the world is moving fast. The 2020 edition of the Global Strategy should be ready no later than in the spring of next year. The new High Representative will thus have to propose a shortened and simplified but still inclusive procedure.

EU positions will count if the Union pronounces on issues in which it has a real interest at stake, can bring expertise to bear, and is willing to commit resources. That does require power: political, economic, and military power.

Not to confront the world, but to engage it. We are back in a world of great powers, and one cannot engage great powers from a position of weakness, or one will be swamped. Hence my bumper sticker for a 2020 Global Strategy: The Power to Engage

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