

Neither Trump nor Biden will restore American hegemony

Margarita Mathiopoulos

Why only a balance of power between Washington, Beijing and Moscow can ensure peace and stability

Growing commercial and military tensions in the South China Sea between the US and China have been tormenting and paralyzing the global community for months, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the conflicts between Washington and Beijing. The questions remain the same: Into what geopolitical waters will the world of the 21st century be drifting, now that the United States is gradually withdrawing as a global leader? Can the new fierce competition between the Great Powers proceed peacefully? What is the fate of the West after the forthcoming US elections? And will the next US President exert “a certain kind of American leadership – not just any kind of American leadership, but America at its best” as Mayor Pete Buttigieg put it at the #ACElections 2020 event? Finally: Can and does Europe even want to play a global role?

Until the day before yesterday, the wealthy democracies painted the post-Cold War global order according to their visions and declared it valid. Three pillars were to buttress the new order, as Philip Stephens observed in the *Financial Times* not long ago: as a benevolent hegemon the US would guarantee international peace and ensure the spread of liberal values; the EU would expand and deepen its model of integration; and a fallen and humiliated Russia, together with China and all the other emerging powers of the East and South, would recognize that it is in their national interest to become a *stakeholder* of a Western-dominated system. These basic assumptions were reinforced by the rather ahistorical thesis of the American historian, Francis Fukuyama, regarding the “End of History”: after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Soviet communism this thesis stimulated the Western elites and led them to believe that a liberal post-Cold War order would gradually be welcomed by all civilized countries.

This was more than naive, writes the Harvard political scientist Graham Allison in his latest *Foreign Affairs* article “The New Spheres of Influence.” Allison complains that since 1991, with the end of the Soviet Union, and

the retention of the United States as the only economically, militarily and geopolitically dominant world power, most American politicians’ acceptance of recognizing and respecting other countries’ spheres of influence has diminished. “The whole world *de facto* became an American sphere.” It was expected in Washington that the world would more or less abide by the American rules of the game; otherwise one would pay a price, from crippling sanctions to *regime change*. Today, this unipolarity is over, the *pax americana* has perished in the flames of Afghanistan and Iraq, and with it the illusion that other nations take their assigned place in an international order led by the United States. It is time, as Allison points out, for the United States of America to accept the reality that there are other spheres of influence in today’s world - and that these are not all American spheres.

WESTERN COMPLACENCY AND HUBRIS HAVE DAMAGED THE INTERNATIONAL LIBERAL WORLD ORDER

At the same time, it can’t be overlooked that 30 years ago we Europeans were wasting the turn of an era, under the sheltering umbrella of the Americans, and missing the opportunity for a *strategic break* - we Germans in particular, especially since we assumed that we were

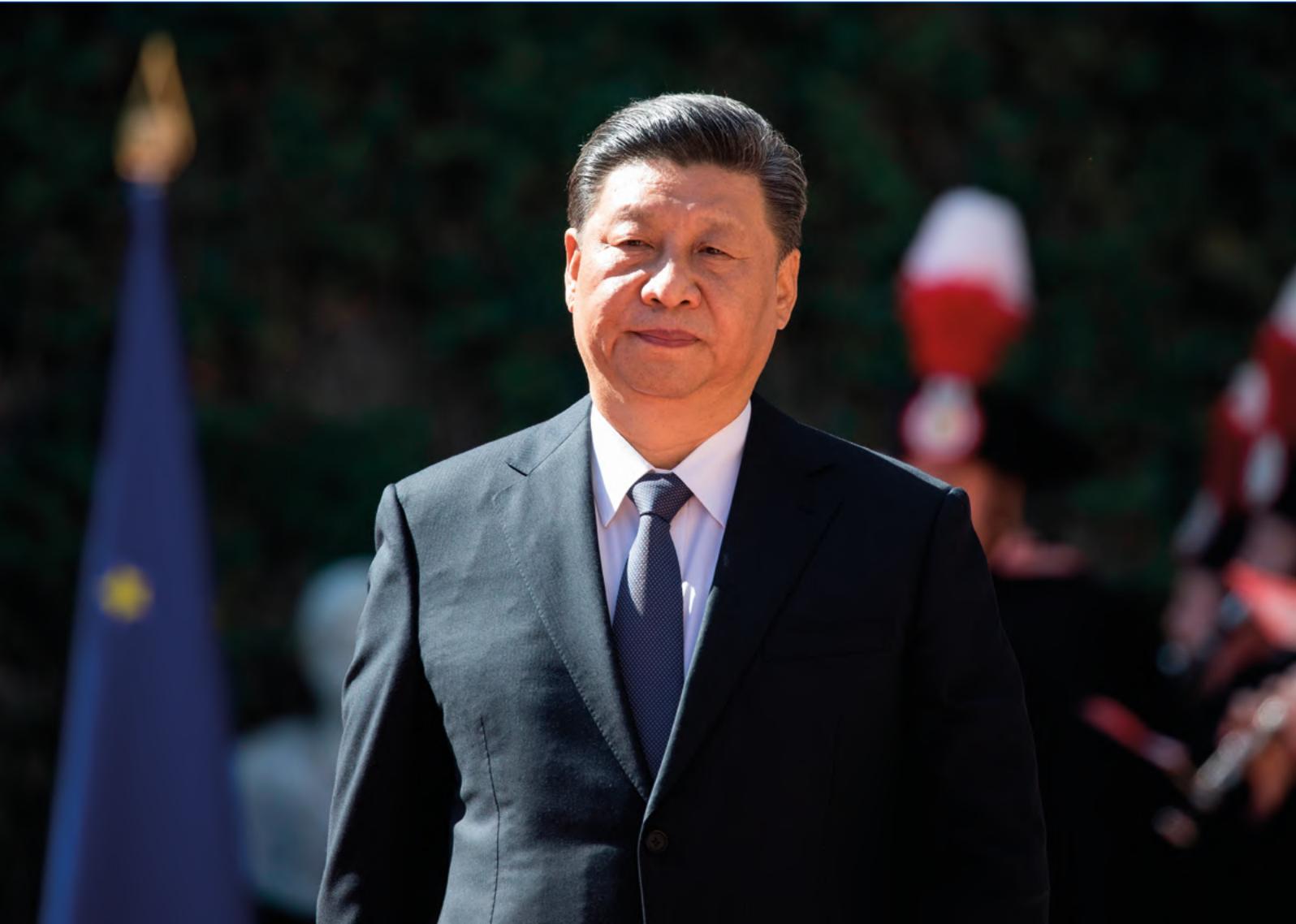


The pax americana has perished in the flames of Afghanistan and Iraq, and with it the illusion that other nations take their assigned place in an international order led by the United States. Depicted are several dignitaries during a military funeral in honor of US Army Maj. Gen. Harold J. Greene who was killed in Afghanistan on Aug. 14, 2014. He is the highest-ranking service member killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (photo: Flickr/U.S. Department of Defense)

surrounded only by friends. “The legacy of 1989 was western complacency,” wrote Tony Barber in the *Financial Times*. Have we perhaps not made sufficient efforts to live up to our own Western ideals and values, but instead paid lip service to them? For example, look at European responses to Srebrenica, Rwanda, Iraq, Syria/Palmyra, 20,000 drowned refugees in the Mediterranean Sea on their way to Europe from 2014-2020 or bestial refugee prisons in Libya partly financed with EU funds. The unfair rules of our capitalist economies and fictitious transactions of our banks came to the surface particularly blatantly in the global financial crisis of 2007/2008 with social consequences and upheavals, which have given rise to a reckless populism in Europe and the US, as on both sides of the Atlantic the particularly shaved middle classes felt abandoned, seeing themselves as victims of globalization. Since then, though, the credibility and the

ability of our elites to manage such crises in a globalized world in a transparent and fair manner have also suffered substantially.

From a Chinese perspective, the global financial crisis that China controlled and dealt with better and faster than did some Europeans and others was a sign of the weakness of the West and an opportunity to increase China’s power in the world. In Africa, Beijing has been very active since the early 1990s with major construction, bridge, port and rail projects from North to South and East to West. It is important to bear this in mind, especially in Europe, before quoting any complaints of African politicians about the Chinese: how many millions of Africans would have made their way to Europe without these large-scale investments from China?! But China’s ambition went further: 2012 is a key year. Beijing, very close-



From a Chinese perspective, the global financial crisis that China controlled and dealt with better and faster than did some Europeans and others was a sign of the weakness of the West and an opportunity to increase China's power in the world. Depicted is Chinese leader Xi Jinping during a visit to Italy in 2019 (photo: Alessia Pierdomenico/Shutterstock.com)

ly, monitored the euro crisis that followed the financial crisis, and how Brussels dealt with it. Here, Beijing saw an opportunity to present itself as a “helper in need,” especially for those countries that were most affected by Brussels’ austerity policy, and created with the 16+1 format (since April 2019: 17+1) a kind of “Side-EU.” Eleven Central European and five Balkan countries plus China are members of this club, which has since been dealing with Chinese investments in these respective countries. China managed to establish itself to some extent as a “European power” and the EU just stood by and watched.

With the *OneBelt&OneRoad* Initiative which followed in 2013, the Middle Kingdom set out to revive the Old Silk Road and connect China with Eurasia with a budget of over 1.3 trillion euros. It goes without saying: with all these infrastructure projects from Pakistan to Italy, and from Russia to Kenya, much can go wrong that cannot be hidden from us in the West. And also *imperial overre-*

ach could indeed become a real scenario. Nevertheless, despite all the justified criticism regarding the practice and implementation of the *B&R Initiative*, it reminds me of the parable of the fox and the grapes hanging high up in the tree: because they are so out of reach for the fox, he promptly proclaims that the grapes are sour and he therefore does not want to eat them. Where is a similar EU initiative? We are already having a hard time dealing in solidarity with each other within the EU – this was the case during the Euro Crisis of 2010 and during the Refugee Crisis of 2015, and this was fortunately prevented at the last minute by France and Germany during the COVID Crisis at the EU Summit in July, 2020, when Paris and Berlin pushed for a rescue-budget agreement, acknowledging that a “non-solidarity policy” between the rich North and the poorer South could risk irreparable damage to the *raison d’être* of the European Union. But also on the other side of the Atlantic the increase in US investment in the Indo-Pacific region to \$ 113 billion in

response to the *Belt and Road doctrine* of the Chinese cannot really be seen as a convincing and sufficient strategic American answer.

Henry Kissinger, who 50 years ago as US Secretary of State diplomatically prepared the opening of the United States to China for President Richard Nixon, and who is one of the most renowned experts on Chinese tradition, mentality and politics, wrote in his book "On China," about the importance of understanding that Washington and Beijing have very different approaches when it comes to promoting their fundamental political values internationally. While Washington had for decades been focused on spreading the cause of democracy and freedom worldwide - occasionally also imposing it on those who did not want to get involved on their own - the Chinese, by contrast, would believe that the others should look up to them and admire their virtues. Imperial China, according to Kissinger, "did not export its ideas, but let the others come to explore them." The liberal world order has come under pressure because we have not adhered to our values - our moral compass has sunk into the Sarin-contaminated sandy desert of Syria.

The liberal world order has also come under pressure from a new aggressive populism, nationalism and extremism in our European societies, as confidence in our political elites to deal with the problems of globalization, migration, and climate change is dwindling. The EU has been beset for years with financial crises, Brexit, transatlantic dissonances, and is struggling to achieve *strategic autonomy and sovereignty* between the fronts of the new great power competition. Norbert Röttgen, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the German Bundestag and one of the front-runners for the CDU Chairmanship sums it up when he demands in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ): "As Europeans, we must answer the question of who and what we want to be in a world in which order is increasingly dissolving, which is becoming more unpredictable and in which a US-Chinese major conflict is looming. We must make the historically unprecedentedly successful European internal project an external project. If we do not, we run the risk of becoming irrelevant." Jean-Claude Juncker coined during his time as president of the European Commission the elegant formula *Weltpolitikfähigkeit* to explain the way ahead for Europe, if irrelevance was to be avoided. But we can achieve this only if we become a *full-fledged global player*. Do we want this?

MISSED OPPORTUNITY

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain offered a unique opportunity to turn a reunited Europe into a *global player* - in economic, foreign and security terms as well

as politically and strategically. As Europeans, we had the long-awaited opportunity to re-think our relationship with Russia and to forge new paths with our American friends and partners - but we failed. Moscow was on the ground in 1991. Instead of building Europe into a *global player*, we have allowed Europe to *re-nationalize*. With Brexit, a new superpower China, the world power US departing from Europe and a newly strengthened and offended Russia, the EU is facing enormous challenges in the coming weeks and months. Clement Beaune, France's minister of State for European affairs and close advisor to President Emmanuel Macron on European affairs, outlines in his brilliant essay "Europe after COVID," published by the Atlantic Council's Future Europe Initiative on 21 September 2020, his vision of how to make Europe safe for becoming a *global player by transforming from an area into a power*.

But the liberal world order has also come under pressure since an *imperial overstretch* in the last two decades caused Americans to lose interest in continuing to play the world's *Globo-Cop*. They are no longer willing to deploy their resources "to get the chestnuts out of the fire for the free-riders in NATO" or to finance missions in regions that no longer serve their strategic interests, and the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq have exhausted them. Both, the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations had already called on their allies to do their homework on security and defense, but the tone was different from the somewhat harsh announcements which European or Asian partners have to listen to from current US President Donald Trump. Both Chinese and Russians have been able to make use of this power vacuum, Beijing with its *B&R doctrine*, its Africa and Europe policy, and Moscow with its dominant role in Syria in particular.

Finally, the liberal world order has come under pressure because the two great powers, China and Russia, have been complaining for years about the US-dominated world order and are demanding fundamental reform that is less imperial and more pluralistic. And they are demanding consideration of their different visions of what a *global governance mechanism in the 21st century* might look like. As long as Moscow and Beijing did not have the strategic relevance and power on the world stage, their complaints were neither heard or taken seriously. That was yesterday. Today, they articulate self-confidently and with ambition, especially Beijing, what they are not prepared to accept: rules imposed on them by the US or the EU.

While Russia's President Vladimir Putin in an interview with the *Financial Times* in the summer of 2019 declared unsurprisingly "liberalism has become obsolete," Chinese President Xi Jinping has been quoted as saying



The liberal world order has also come under pressure in European societies, as confidence in political elites to deal with the problems of globalization, migration, and climate change is dwindling. Depicted is French nationalist politician Marine Le Pen during a campaign rally in 2017 (photo: Frederic Legrand- COMEO/Shutterstock.com)

during the 70th anniversary celebrations of the Chinese Communist Party in October last year: China is claiming a leading role in the realignment of the international order. And, Xi added, strategic cooperation with Russia is at a historic high due to the good relations between him and Vladimir Putin. Have we driven the Russians into the arms of the Chinese by dismissing Moscow as a “regional power” - without need, without any strategic thought to the fact that the “register of sins” of both great powers do not take anything away from each other? And have we cultivated a more conciliatory approach to Beijing, and treated Putin like a “demon” (Henry Kissinger) only because the Chinese have made lucrative investments in our markets? In any case, we Germans, Europeans and Americans have made an unnecessary contribution to this new Russian-Chinese *rapprochement*.

FROM WESTERN DOMINANCE TO PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

In November 2019 Henry Kissinger was in Beijing on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the establishment of US-Chinese diplomatic relations. During each of his vi-

sits, he is treated by the Chinese leadership in the same way as the US President himself. His remarks on political, trade policy and military differences between the US and China at a Bloomberg Forum were drastic: He warned that both sides would have to settle their conflicts; otherwise, a catastrophe would ensue that would be far worse than the two world wars of the 20th century combined! One side could not dominate the other, and both sides should get used to it! We were sitting spellbound in the conference hall: it was a strong performance with clear words from a 96-year-old American diplomat who made history not only in China.

In order to secure peace and stability, Graham Allison in his much-noticed article demands that Washington must come to the realization about the need for: *Sharing the Globe with other Great Powers*. This is timely advice for the next elected American President. After the US presidential election in November, Donald Trump or Joe Biden, should invite his two colleagues Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin to a trilateral dialogue in the White House to talk

about a new world order and a new security architecture. As nuclear powers, all three major powers have a special responsibility to secure international peace and stability in a post-Cold War order. Such a trilateral dialogue will be possible if the following principles are observed by all three sides: mutual respect, parity and equal treatment. Washington, Beijing and Moscow must agree that they are indispensable powers of the 21st century, and, as global leaders, they must be prepared to accept and respect different political views in order to enable peaceful co-existence. This shared responsibility of the

three great powers for peace and stability could be sealed by a new *Trilateral Realpolitik Agenda of a New type of Relations in a New World Order*. In order for the trilateral dialogue to be fruitful, the Big Three should resort to a diplomatic format that was very successful during the Cold War: the CSCE (Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe)-Mechanism, now known as the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe).

All three major powers have a special responsibility to secure international peace and stability

At the same time, if the Big Three plan to discuss current sensitive issues such as human rights, the militarization of the South Chinese Sea, 5G network technology, the annexation of Crimea, the liberation of eastern Ukraine, Assad's regime, Erdogan's Russian arms procurement, the situation of the Uighurs, the new security law in Hong Kong, the future of Taiwan, NATO's eastward enlargement, tariffs on soya, Nord Stream 2, nuclear disarmament of China's medium-range missiles, the Paris Climate Agreement (2016), Iran's uranium-enrichment plans, and other concerns, and put these issues on each other's agenda, then the trilateral dialogue will end quickly. In order to avoid this, the use of the non-ideological baskets of the former CSCE dialogue is a good way of separating the topics: In the **First Basket (I)** the objectives of the UN Charter, in particular the prohibition of territorial aggression, conventional and nuclear disarmament, the ban on



Both the US-China rivalry and the Russian-Chinese partnership have also had an impact on transatlantic dialogue and cooperation in dealing with the challenges posed by Russia and China to a disjointed and fragmenting West (photo: Ekaterina Bykova/Shutterstock.com)

chemical and biological weapons, control of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, AI, cybercrime, joint combating of pandemics, the fight against terrorism, the fight against totalitarian Islamist structures and mass migration should be dealt with. **The Second Basket (II)** would include topics such as green technologies, climate change (Paris Agreement), fair and free trade agreements, art and cultural exchange. And in the **Third Basket (III)**, one would finally talk about human rights.

A new world order of peaceful co-existence would in no way mean that the Western community of destiny abandons its liberal values or that we would live in a *Westlessness* world. Our values are universal. But we will achieve a chance for peaceful co-existence only if we do not impose them on others. The universality of freedom, democracy, human rights and plurality of opinions has been in people's minds and hearts for the last 2000 years. That constitutes the sovereignty of the West.

Margarita Mathiopoulos is a German historian, political scientist and author. She is currently a Visiting Professor at the Dept. of Diplomacy of China Foreign Affairs Univ. and Professor em. of US Foreign Policy and International Security of Potsdam University. She published 7 books and numerous articles about the Transatlantic Relationship, NATO, US-Russian, and US-Chinese relations in German and US academic journals; from 2002 - 2011 she also served as foreign policy advisor to the Chairman of the Free Democratic Party, Guido Westerwelle.

Would you like to react?

Mail the editor: redactie@atlcom.nl.