

Geopolitical Shifts and the Post-COVID World: Europe and the Multipolar System

by Stefano Cont

The full extent of COVID-19's impact on global geopolitical balances cannot yet be assessed. Nevertheless, a number of trends are clearly emerging and these have already upset a number of balances which previously seemed unchangeable. COVID-19 is evidently not the cause of such changes, which had been well underway before the outbreak, but the pandemic has become a litmus test that has further thrust these developments under the political spotlight.

The first visible consequence is the establishment of a global system on a multipolar basis, where each "pole" pursues its policies by using traditional instruments of power in very different ways.¹ In this system, where Russia, China, the United States and, potentially, the European Union tend to emerge as key global players, other countries, such as India or Brazil, do

¹ Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic (DIME).

not yet seem to have reached the status of "global competitors". This proves that a booming economy is not enough to have a global role. Other material and immaterial factors, which these countries do not currently possess, are required.

In terms of areas of competition, the European region seems to have lost its historical centrality to the benefit of the Pacific area, where numerous new regional actors are now capable of exercising important roles.² The Pacific area could potentially evolve and develop a system similar to the European "Balance of Power" of the 18th and 19th century. Currently, however, only China and the United States are arguably willing and able to act as main players in this area, with Russia a more marginal actor.

² Such as, for instance, South Korea, Japan and Australia.

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The Middle East seems to have lost the centrality acquired in the 1970s following the oil shock. Many of the states which aspired to reach the status of “competitors” vis-à-vis the major powers have already or will soon face the reality that their geopolitical relevance is, at most, regional. Africa seems destined to remain an area of competition among major powers, thus having only limited possibilities of developing real centres of power which would eventually be able to take on such roles, even if only regional ones. South and Central America will continue to be peripheral regions, while remaining at the same time subject to competition from main actors on the global stage.

At a systemic level, the cultural and economic processes of integration will advance, but on the global scale these will presumably be much slower, albeit faster within those groups of nations which share similar values, rules and socio-political structures. The major international organizations, meanwhile, will likely lose credibility and capacity to take action, making room for new regional bodies, which will be more homogeneous, more responsive and probably “supervised” by a major power acting as the country of reference.

Within these general trends, what policies can be expected from the main actors on the global stage?

Sheltered behind a solid strategic deterrence posture, Russia, perhaps the weakest pole of the system, will continue to resort to an active and opportunistic use of its military power, backed by the efficient support of its

diplomatic and intelligence arms. By preserving a degree of strategic autonomy, Russia will seek to exploit today’s US–China competition to reap the greatest possible advantages on the economic level, Moscow’s Achilles heel. In the medium term, Russia will attempt to pursue its historical objectives of gaining access to the warm seas, by exerting influence on South-Eastern Europe and on the Middle East and by seeking to regain at least part of its lost relevance in Africa and South America.

Notwithstanding the significant political and social problems existing at the domestic level, China will continue to expand the use of the economic instruments as a form of a politico-strategic conditioning in order to subjugate the weakest countries and to divert the most robust ones from their traditional references. An assertive behaviour on the international stage,³ an aggressive intelligence effort (prioritising strategic and technological knowledge), strategic communication campaigns and, lastly, a strong and self-serving policy geared towards economic penetration and conditioning, will be the defining features of Chinese action in the years to come. At the same time, a progressive military-technological modernization will move ahead in order to compromise, first of all, freedom of action in certain strategic domains of traditional US superiority.⁴

In the United States, China is now considered by both Democrats and Republicans as the only and real

³ By also resorting to an aggressive diplomacy.

⁴ The Pacific Ocean, outer space and cyber space in particular.



strategic competitor. While Russia was also regarded as a “strategic threat” in the US’s last National Security Strategy, priority today is given to the more tangible Chinese threat, which is no longer framed within a medium or long-term perspective, since its economic and political influence are already unfolding prior to its military dimension.

The US’s progressively changing global role within a more competitive and complex multipolar system will lead to a rethinking of traditional principles of security and strategic action. Policies designed to protect the supply and availability of products which are fundamental for security and defence will first of all need to be redesigned, by rebuilding a minimum “potential industrial base” for a number of essential productions and by exercising broader control over academic exchanges, restricting access to sensitive scientific and technological research to students and experts of other nationalities.

Increased strategic tensions with China will strengthen Washington’s “with us or against us” dialectic towards allies and partners. “Taking sides” will be required to allow industrial and technological collaboration as well as for any exchange of information, with, on the one hand, a greater willingness to collaborate with those states adopting clear stances and, on the other, a more reluctant attitude towards those taking more ambiguous stances. Regarding relations with Russia, the search for a “strategic normalization of relations”, mainly in an anti-Chinese stance, is a plausible scenario.

Continuing a trend identifiably since the Obama presidency and which has been maintained under president Trump and is likely to continue independently from the results of the November elections, NATO will continue to lose its centrality, not because it is no longer considered a cornerstone of the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic area, but rather because the Pacific region will now be the major concern. Looking ahead, NATO members will be increasingly required to provide independently for their own defence and to take responsibility for their regional security issues. Only those countries becoming net contributors to security will be offered opportunities for information-sharing and technological and industrial collaboration.

In this new scenario, the key factor for assessing the “level of closeness” of a country will not be mere military utility, but rather the commonality of politico-strategic objectives, behavioural consistency and reliability over time.

US external action and interventionism will also change in nature: it will no longer be conceived as a long-term activity geared towards stabilization and crisis management (unless strictly necessary), but rather consist of (short-term) actions designed to prevent the rise of “regional powers” which are eventually able to deny the United States access to regions when needed.

As far the European Union is concerned, it can potentially be part of this new multipolar system. However, in order to become a fully-fledged member, economic power is not enough. The



EU also needs to develop diplomatic, intelligence and military power, which today are non-existent.

The consequences arising from the COVID-19 pandemic bring the risk of greater politico-economic fragmentation and further differentiation of the strategic objectives of individual states, with the result of transforming Europe into a land of conquest for other global actors.

Today there are different geopolitical realities in Europe which must be reconciled. The only solution seems to be that of applying Zymurgy's first law of evolving system dynamics, which says: "Once you open a can of worms, the only way to re-can them is to use a larger can."

Using a "larger can" means rediscovering the original objectives and focusing on existing elements of "elective affinities" and "strategic utility", rather than intensifying bureaucratic and regulatory structures. Elective affinities rest upon shared values, common cultural roots and similar historical and social trajectories.⁵ They do not lie in those existing factors that divide us, but in the ones that differentiate us from others, providing avenues for cooperation. Much as the Greek *poleis* rallied together to face external threats, Europeans' need to rediscover, redefine and reaffirm those distinctive elements that unite us in our diversity in order to create a stronger identity and *raison d'état*.

⁵ Ref. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, 1809.

In terms of utility, one should consider the strategic and long-term convenience of a European Union which is externally strong and respected, but also internally different and multi-faceted. As the need to achieve greater targets sometimes requires sacrificing less important objectives, and cooperating with other countries which are somehow different, likewise today, the multifaceted risks facing European nations require these to overcome their differences. These should instead focus on the actual danger, the risk of losing their own political, economic and social autonomy, thus gradually slipping into insignificance.

This, however, calls for a joint effort and willingness for compromises, putting relevant topics at the forefront of the agenda. Such effort requires leadership skills, a strategic thinking and a long-term vision, assets that, unfortunately, do not seem to belong to the present bureaucratic structure of the European Union.

A number of common objectives, clearly stated and shared by member states, could instead represent the cornerstones of a more concrete European foreign policy and, as a result, the basis for establishing real diplomatic and military instruments, thus giving a global perspective and future to the nations of the Old Continent.

Ultimately, the ongoing crisis situation caused by the COVID-19 emergency offers a possibility. Either Europe acts, and the EU is included among those "global actors" of the new looming multipolar system, or it bundles



through, potentially marking the beginnings of its end. This would bring Europe back to the situation of the end of the 19th century, but this time no longer being the centre of the world.

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