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The Great Powers Have Their Ways

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How will the great powers behave? That is what determines the future world order – or the absence of order. Could it be that China and the EU have found an alternative for the old-fashioned grand strategies that Russia and the US are again pursuing?

Try to imagine a major issue in world politics today that could be settled (whether peacefully or forcefully) by a single power: one can't. It's the interplay between at least four poles that determines the course of world politics: the United States, China, Russia, and, if it wants to, the European Union. Thus we are living in a multipolar world. These 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 field.

Will the great powers share power and cooperate? Or will they try to grab more power and seek to dominate?

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 what will be the basic orientation of each of the 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. That 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 economic prospects remain bleak. In short, strategically Russia is on the defensive.

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 did resort 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 Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is brutally downsizing the State Department, President Donald Trump is disinvesting in multilateralism. In his 2017 speech at the UN Trump has called for "a great reawakening of nations" 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) and is renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), 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 didn't 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 are leading 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 "Our military will soon be the strongest it has ever been", as Trump said at the UN. In that light, it becomes an issue of concern how the US will react to China's announcement, at the 19th congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2017, that by 2050 it too wants to have a "world-class military".

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 not die therefore with the end of the Trump presidency (which, moreover, might just last two terms, and then there's a daughter who can run…).

CHINA: A NEW HISTORY?

At the 19th congress, 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 South East Asia) 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 rather too heavy-handed. China reinforces this perception by its assertive policies in the East and South China Seas. Because it is involved in a series of territorial disputes, its neighbours are less sanguine about China's rise, and eye its accelerating military modernisation with suspicion.

Beijing is still feeling its way into the security dimension of its new great power status. A policy of non-intervention was easy to declare as long as China didn't 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 earlier this year can be seen in this light: a power with global interests needs the capabilities and the infrastructure to act globally.

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 is beginning to address global security concerns, a China that still appears to be uncomfortable in this new role, seems to be looking for cooperation, and for a multilateral cover for any action it may be compelled to take. That is an opportunity to be grasped. If on the contrary the fact in itself that China aims to develop a "world-class military" is seen as a threat, and the other powers are unwilling to make some space for China, we are set on a collision course.

The European Union: History in the Making

In its 2016 *Global Strategy* the EU recognized the need for diplomatic initiatives to stabilize the geopolitically contested regions of the world, as well as the importance of mobilizing economic instruments to pursue overall strategic interests. One of those interests is effective multilateral cooperation. The EU already has these diplomatic and economic instruments, 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, it will be able to complement them with a capacity for autonomous military action, and thus for security cooperation with others.

Starting point of a reinvigorated EU grand strategy should be the recognition that the alliance with the US is no longer sufficient to achieve the EU's objectives. The EU, obviously, needs to maintain it – and try to restrain the US. But it also needs to complement it, because in this multipolar world US and EU priorities and even interests coincide much less than before. Hence the EU must invest in cooperation with the other powers, whenever interests overlap, and try to pull them into multilateral cooperation (from which the US is withdrawing). In this vein, most EU Member States have joined the AIIB, and the EU is seeking to connect with the BRI (though for the moment in a far too disjointed fashion).

An example of what a creative diplomacy could achieve, is to make it clear to China that if it wants the corridor of the BRI that goes overland 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. Perhaps after the March 2018 presidential elections Russia could afford to offer the necessary compromise on Ukraine that would make it possible to gradually switch back from confrontation to cooperation with the EU.

Could the EU then initiate a trilateral strategic dialogue between the three great powers along the "new silk road": Russia, China, and the EU?

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 term 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 yet 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 would be well-advised to think again and reinforce such a cooperative effort rather than undermining it. Trump should be careful what he wishes for: isolationists might just end up being isolated.

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