



“Stand Firm and Hold the Handrail”: A Traveller’s Impressions of a Summer of Summitry

“Stand firm and hold the handrail”, a friendly female voice repeats over and over on the escalators in the Beijing subway. That is good advice in world politics too. Don’t be intimidated by capricious or aggressive world leaders; don’t overreact either; stand firm and calmly defend your position. But just as one would wish for a handrail in today’s volatile environment, there doesn’t seem to be one in sight.

China’s leaders like to project an image of cool-headed, long-term decision-making. That translates into a dislike of surprises, which is why they cannot but dislike the unpredictability of Donald Trump, who continuously reverses himself and often is at odds with his own administration. His antics seem to cause even more concern in Beijing, where like in previous summers I spent a couple of weeks teaching, then back home in Brussels. My Chinese colleagues were at least as surprised as I was by Trump’s bizarre meeting with Vladimir Putin in Helsinki on 16 July. That happened to be the first day of my summer course. The US president appearing to eat out of the hand of the Russian president: that certainly raised my students’ interest in my lecture on strategy.

WHAT IS THE ODD COUPLE UP TO?

In the run-up to Helsinki, China and the European Union (EU) feared the same thing, in fact: that Trump and Putin would combine against them. *Bien étonnés de se/les trouver ensemble...* The exact nature of Trump’s relation to Russia remains unknown – perhaps it will be revealed by the Mueller investigation into links between Trump’s presidential campaign and the Russian government. Trump’s business links to Russia are no secret, and he does seem beholden to the Russian president. Whatever the truth of it, the fact is that the US need not fear Russia: although still a great power, with a lot of nuisance capacity, Russia no longer is in a position to challenge American global predominance. Only China has that potential, and Trump certainly wants to reduce Beijing’s economic power.

This is why some in Beijing expressed their concern to me that Trump’s aim in seeking to normalize relations with Russia is to isolate China. In return for Moscow’s support against Beijing, Putin would be given more leeway in Europe – the other economic power that Trump has it in for. The Chinese know how this could work, because in the 1970s they did the exact same thing: Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger normalized Sino-US relations in order to balance against the Soviet Union. Today, however, it is China that is seen as the

main challenge, and not just by Trump. Trump may be focussing on the economic balance of power, but many American strategists think of China as an actual adversary that is to be contained, and with whom there even is a risk of war.

The Europeans had the doubtful pleasure of welcoming Trump just prior to the Helsinki meeting, for the NATO Summit in Brussels on 11 July. This summit seemed to mostly create risk, for there was nothing of substance on the agenda that had not already been decided at ministerial level, but Trump could have easily derailed it. Luckily, the Alliance survived relatively unscathed, mostly because Trump this time did not walk away (as he did from the G7 meeting in Canada on 9 June) but simply convinced himself that everybody had fallen in line behind him. The other heads of state and government did nothing to dispel these “alternative facts”, eager as they all were (except one, one presumes) to see Trump leave for his subsequent visit to the UK.

In any case, the Trump-Putin meeting potentially was the most important one and completely overshadowed the NATO Summit as soon as it was announced, because the EU, like China, feared that Trump and Putin could make a deal that would harm its interests. Europeans were already picturing themselves in the position of Japan and South Korea after Trump’s other prominent meeting, with North Korean president Kim Jong-un in Singapore on 12 June. There he made concessions to Pyongyang without consulting Tokyo and Seoul, but also without achieving much for the US, let alone for global stability.

Some of the immediate concerns that were raised just before the Helsinki meeting did not materialize: American recognition of the Russian annexation of the Crimea, for example. Actually, a de facto (though not de jure) acceptance could be possible, but not without Russian concessions in return, notably

ending Russian support for the separatist rebellion in Eastern Ukraine. A feared deal on Syria, that would leave president Assad in power without any guarantees for the security of Europe’s, and indeed America’s, partners, did not come to be either. As it happens, Europeans will have to come to terms with the fact that Assad will indeed remain – the Russian military intervention has ensured that – but again, not unconditionally so.

We don’t know what Trump sought to get out of his meeting with Putin, and probably never will (though there are reports now about what Putin proposed to Trump, on arms control). But the fact in itself that the president of the US sees no reason to debrief his European allies is a cause for concern.

GANGING UP ON THE EU

The biggest threat to the EU has already become a reality: a combination of several European governments backsliding towards authoritarianism, Russian interference, and American negligence – or worse.

Under the Trump administration the US has stepped up its contribution to NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence and has reinforced its troops in Europe. But deterrence is all about messaging. The message sent by an increased military presence will not have any effect if the president of the US himself sends a contradictory message at the same time. In spite of his heavy-handed rhetoric about Germany being a prisoner to Russia (on the morning of the NATO Summit), Trump is not actually helping the EU confront Russian interference in European societies. This means that in practice he is already leaving Putin a free hand, without obtaining anything in return. Worse, Trump and his acolytes are actively encouraging right-wing, Eurosceptic populism themselves.

This combined anti-EU stance by Trump and the European populists is a vital threat to the

cohesion of the Union, and therefore to the stability of the European continent. If the EU weakens, NATO weakens; tensions within and between European countries will rise, and foreign powers will see opportunities they just might want to grasp. Put differently, Trump is helping Putin achieve his aim of weakening western cohesion – and both will see what chances that may bring them. Trump seems willing to risk the stability of Europe for the sake of pursuing his simplistic economic agenda: buy American or suffer the consequences.

The core of the problem is, of course, the populist and authoritarian trend in Europe, which predates the election of Trump. But the risk has become all the greater with his election, as right-wing, nationalist populists on both sides of the Atlantic reinforce each other, and threaten to pull democracy down both in Europe and the US.

THE GEOPOLITICS BEHIND THE SUMMER'S SUMMITRY

Great power politics are not as simple as Trump seems to think, however. A few highly mediated one-on-one summit meetings cannot just wipe out the underlying geopolitical realities.

For a start, populism and nationalism go hand in hand – Eurosceptics may rave about escaping from the reach of Brussels, but not all of them are keen to trade it for the harsh power of Moscow. The current Polish government may feel strengthened in its opposition against EU rules and norms by Trump's anti-EU rhetoric. But it would be well-advised to reconsider its position in the light of the Helsinki meeting. Warsaw has antagonised the EU institutions and most Western European Member States in the belief that it can in any case always rely on the US. Where would that leave Poland if Trump would now move the US closer to Russia? This is the sort of geopolitical reality that a tweet cannot undo. Perhaps now is the time

for the EU to have a frank but magnanimous conversation with the Polish government, pointing out the geopolitical challenge, and emphasizing how Polish sovereignty would actually benefit from restoring cordial relations with the Brussels institutions and the other EU Member States.

Trump's acolytes are upping the ante, however. Steve Bannon, fired from the White House but still pursuing the same anti-EU agenda as the president, has announced that he will mount a campaign in support of Eurosceptical populism during next year's European elections. This interference into the electoral politics of the EU must not just be firmly condemned. The EU institutions, EU Member States, and all truly democratic parties (from the right, the centre, and the left) must actively counter it by highlighting that a vote for those whom Bannon supports, is a vote for Trump, for his domestic programme (tax cuts for the rich at the expense of everybody else), and for his foreign policy (letting Putin roam free). This is not a time to be faint-hearted: brutal disinformation can only be fought with brutal honesty.

Trump may think of Russia as a lever he can use against Europe, and against China. But on my last trip to Moscow (in November 2017) I also heard Russian voices pleading for a normalisation of relations with the EU. There is a feeling that Russian foreign policy is leaning too much on one leg, the partnership with China, and should be rebalanced by restoring links to the EU. There was a slight hope, before the Russian presidential elections (18 March 2018), that afterwards Putin might want to initiate a gradual move in this direction, but that was quickly undone by the Salisbury incident: the attempted murder of former Russian intelligence agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia.

At the same time, Russia will not easily abandon the strategic relationship with China, even though in economic terms it has proved

disappointing. Moscow may be disturbed by Beijing's growing influence in its southern periphery, and in the Russian far east itself, and many Russians certainly have difficulty accepting the fact that China has outpaced them (and many Chinese, in return, are irritated because the Russians tend to treat them as the inferior partner regardless). But precisely because China is now so powerful, it is indispensable to have it on its side in what Russia perceives as a western-dominated world order. Trump's unpredictability works against him here: it only strengthens Russia in its assessment of the necessity of the Chinese partnership, and it makes it more unlikely that Russia will give up on it in return for what can only be doubtful benefits, given Trump's capriciousness. It takes one to know one: how could Putin, who has broken more than one promise himself, ever trust an apparently equally cynical Trump?

Russo-American cooperation in the Middle East is far from evident as well. Trump's desire to escape the Syrian conundrum may incline him to look favourably upon a Russian-inspired solution for the country's political future. But that is bound to include a strong role for Iran, Assad's other ally, while Trump sees the regime in Tehran as the enemy, and is encouraging Saudi Arabia in its competition with Iran for dominance of the Gulf. Furthermore, by withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal, Trump has made the EU, China, and Russia, who all want to uphold the agreement, into objective allies on this issue. If an agreement might perhaps be found on Syria between the great powers, it is very unlikely that any one of them will sign up to the broader US strategy for the Middle East and the Gulf.

Finally, Trump's servile attitude to Putin in Helsinki provoked a strong reaction within the US, notably from the national security community, as did his childish attempt to reverse his position afterwards (he supposedly

meant to say "wouldn't" in "I don't see any reason why it would be Russia", when talking about interference in the US presidential elections). The forgotten double negative only served to double the outrage. American politics are extremely polarized these days, but national security is one of the last issues on which both sides of the political spectrum can meet. One wonders what will happen the day the leaders of the American security establishment come to the conclusion that the president himself is a threat to the national security of the US.

CONCLUSION: FROM SUMMER TO FALL

A summer of summitry has created neither spectacular results nor spectacular disasters. But a spectacle it has been, though not a very beneficial one for world politics. Trump has once again demonstrated his unpreparedness for diplomacy (to say the least). He has encouraged Putin by his servile stance, and created mistrust at the same time, in Russia by his quick u-turn after Helsinki, and in China and Europe by going to Helsinki without a clear agenda in the first place. Meanwhile, he has adopted additional sanctions and economic measures against Russia, China and the EU, thus antagonising everyone.

On my return to Brussels, having spent most of the summer in Asia, I somehow feel that Europe and the EU came out worst though. For one, we were the only ones to have a handrail to hold on to, our alliance with the US, but Trump has loosened the fittings. We probably feel even more uncomfortable than the others, therefore, also because of the political problems inside the EU. As stated above, the US obviously has domestic issues as well, and so have Russia and China. Putin has been predictably re-elected, but he can stay in power only at the cost of continuing to pay off his cronies; what happens the day he disappears, nobody knows. Xi Jinping is tightening the party's and his personal grip on China, but recently has increasingly come under criticism, for what public opinion sees as

a weak response to Trump's trade measures, and for his lavish spending on diplomatic projects (notably in Africa) while people feel many of China's urgent domestic challenges remain unanswered. But the EU is the only one of today's four global actors whose strategic decision-making is systemically flawed, because of the consensual nature of the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

If Brussels has certainly become aware of the challenges posed by great power politics in this multipolar world, it is not yet sufficiently acting as a great power itself. That leaves it an easy prey for the others. Russia will not hesitate to opportunistically exploit our internal divisions. Neither will China, though at the same time my Chinese colleagues, when I asked them whether they thought that China would be better off without the EU, mostly rather preferred not to have to deal with Trump and Putin by themselves.

This alone proves that the EU has a role to play in great power politics. And it only needs the same handrail as the other great powers: its own grand strategy.

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