



1919-2019: How to Make Peace Last? European Strategy and the Future of the World Order

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The commemorations of the Great War have come to an end. 2019 will see the centenary of the peace treaties that concluded the war, starting with Versailles, and of the founding of the League of Nations, the predecessor of the United Nations. These failed to establish a stable rules-based world order, but they deserve to be commemorated nonetheless, as well as analysed, for we might learn something from them. This policy brief offers four insights from the Interbellum to help us avoid a collapse of the world order today: (1) A world order that is created for the express purpose of keeping one of the great powers outside the system, is bound to fail. (2) If breaking the rules carries no consequences, the world order will be hollowed out and, eventually, collapse. (3) A great power who refuses to invest in the world order, cannot expect the others to do so. (4) No state voluntarily submits to another: a world order that is only imposed and not accepted, will not last long.

Like the Interbellum, this is an age of a shifting balance of power between a set of great powers. None of them is sufficiently powerful to impose its view on the world order on the others. Hence all the great powers are jostling for power. They do still cooperate, but they are competing with each other at the same time, for leadership, influence, and prestige. World War One had been triggered by the European great powers, but the power game in the interwar years was between global powers. The United Kingdom and France, both seemingly at the height of empire, a resurgent Germany, a powerful but hesitant United States, the new Soviet Union, and an expansionist Japan were looking for a new balance of power. Today it is the interaction between the US, China, Russia, and – if that is what we want – the European Union that will determine the future of the world order.

What can we learn from the failure of Versailles and the League, in the hope of doing better today?

INSIGHTS FROM THE INTERBELLUM

A first insight is that a world order that is created for the express purpose of keeping one of the great powers

outside the system, is bound to fail. Only an inclusive world order can be stable: an order that all of the great powers feel committed to, because they have more interest in its survival than in its collapse. If one of the great powers is pushed out by the others, that power will inevitably contest the world order, and attempt to undermine it.

After World War One, there was an understandable urge to take revenge on Germany, particularly in France. But after a while even Paris realised that this revanchism was counterproductive and that Europe would only be stable again if Germany were allowed to re-enter the club of European nations as a “normal” state. For the same reason, the other states gradually overcame their revulsion of the Bolshevik regime and forged relations with the Soviet Union. Today, the world order cannot be stable unless it includes China. It simply is too big and too powerful to keep out.

That does not mean that China has to be kept on board at any price. *A second historical insight is that if breaking the rules carries no consequences, the world order will be hollowed out and, eventually, collapse.* The strongest sanction that the League of Nations could impose, was expulsion. But if the offender in question did not care, or even resigned from the League itself, like Japan after its conquest of Manchuria, the League was powerless. Allowing China its rightful place in the world order does not amount to sheepishly accepting each and every Chinese policy therefore. One cannot possibly recognize China’s sovereignty claims over the South China Sea, for example, for that would be the end of international maritime law. Beijing must be made to see that the world order constitutes a single whole: it cannot just pick and choose those rules that happen to suit its interests. Far-reaching violations of the rules will have to have political and economic consequences.

This is a difficult balancing act. The EU and the US can take each other’s biggest

corporations to court and impose heavy fines, without that having an impact on the fundamentals of their relationship. Even the EU and Russia continue to trade in spite of the Ukraine crisis. In a similar vein, China must understand that a rejection of its policy in one area does not necessarily mean that we designate it as our enemy. Such “compartmentalisation”, the capacity to have a dispute in one domain and continue to cooperate in another, is part and parcel of great power relations. It is an important way of preventing escalation.

If one wants China to abide by the rules, one must follow them oneself. *That is a third historical insight: a great power who refuses to invest in the world order, cannot expect the others to do so.* US President Woodrow Wilson included the creation of the League of Nations in his Fourteen Points, which he considered the basis of the post-war order. But after the war, an isolationist US Senate refused to ratify America’s accession. From the start, the League was greatly handicapped by this American refusal to join.

The rules and the multilateral institutions of the current world order were largely American creations too, at the end of World War Two. But for the first time the US are disinvesting in the system, even though it very much is their own Pax Americana, because of the perception that it benefits other powers more than the US itself. How differently did the UK react when towards the end of the 19th century Germany and the US overtook it as an industrial power. Thanks to its early industrialisation, colonial expansion, and the power of the Royal Navy, which patrolled the seas, Britain had become the primus inter pares of the great powers. But even when this Pax Britannica began to facilitate the expansion of other powers, Britain continued to invest in it, because that was still much more in its interest than abandoning the world order. Today the US has reached a different conclusion. The consequence is that it is becoming increasingly

difficult to convince the other powers to follow the rules. How can the EU berate China for not faithfully implementing WTO rules when the US itself is blocking that organisation?

A final historical insight is that no state voluntarily submits to another: a world order that is only imposed and not accepted, will not last long. Japan aimed to incorporate other countries in its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, but failed because it was based on conquest and repression rather than on real cooperation. If certain Asian actors initially saw some merit in the project, that had a lot to do with the absence of any alternative as long as the western colonial powers had nothing more to offer than empty reforms and vague promises about independence in the distant future.

Today, Russia once again instils fear in many quarters, because of its brutal power politics and the invasion of Ukraine, but it has also antagonised many. Even states leaning closely towards Russia are not so enamoured of Moscow that they would volunteer to surrender a province. China in a much more clever manner uses its economic power to gain influence, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Nevertheless, most countries do not want to be sucked completely into China's orbit, because they have seen what little sovereignty remains when a country such as Sri Lanka becomes totally beholden to Beijing. Not everything that China touches turns into gold: countries such as Malaysia have already withdrawn from the BRI. And this is not the Cold War: a country that does participate in the BRI does not disappear behind an iron curtain. Most countries that are being targeted by China and/or Russia prefer to maintain good relations with the EU and the US at the same time. But Brussels and Washington have to put an attractive offer on the table, or Beijing and Moscow will end up dominating such countries nonetheless.

BISMARCK AND THE EU

In view of these historical insights, what is the right grand strategy for the EU? We can look back a bit further into history and draw some inspiration from Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. Not the Bismarck who consciously provoked a series of wars in order to unify Germany – we have the EU already, so we can skip that stage. But the Bismarck who, once he had founded the German Empire, constructed a web of alliances with Germany in the centre. His goal: to have better relations with each of the great powers than any of the others had with each other, and to prevent the emergence of any anti-German coalition among them. A goal that as long as Bismarck was in charge he achieved very well indeed.

This is exactly the strategy for the EU. In this age of great power rivalry, Europe should not choose sides. The EU should be the great power that maintains good relations with all of the other great powers. If the EU manages to play this crucial stabilising role, we can prevent getting stuck in another bipolar system: the EU and the US against China and Russia. Such bipolarity would only lead to a logic of confrontation without end. That is why the EU must continue to invest in the alliance with the US (especially now, when things are difficult), but seek partnership with China and Russia at the same time, in all areas in which interests coincide. Such a strategy of engagement aims to see all of the great powers enjoy the benefits of a rules-based world order, so that they would continue to invest in it – and would assume their rightful place in that order.

In parallel, the EU must engage strategically with other key states, especially those states who because of their geographic and economic position are important for Europe's "connectivity" with the rest of the world. The EU has no use for a sphere of influence, but it must prevent the other great powers from exclusively dominating other states against

their will, and from closing them off from interaction with us. The EU's objective therefore must be sovereignty: ensuring, by offering them an appealing package of relations with us, that other states continue to see an advantage in a genuinely open economy, based on global rules that apply to all. Instead of having Beijing or Moscow decide for them, the EU must motivate other states to continue to make their own decisions and to freely maintain relations with all of the great powers.

AUTONOMOUS STRATEGIC THINKING

Were the EU to adopt such a strategy, then it must abandon two basic tenets of European strategic thinking until now.

The first is the idea that what is good for the US is good for Europe and, by extension, that when push comes to shove the US will always come and solve Europe's problems. The EU should of course not adopt a strategy against the US, but it must set an autonomous course. Otherwise Europeans risk to simply copy the American view of the world, by sheer force of habit. The consensus in the American strategic community, across party lines, however is that China is an adversary and perhaps even an enemy – *the* enemy. But is that really true? China has become rich and powerful within the existing world order; for now at least it seems to have very little interest in overturning it, therefore. Designating China as a revisionist power could easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the US were to consciously opt for a confrontational course towards China, it will undoubtedly try to put pressure on Europe to follow suit and to reorient the Transatlantic alliance in that sense. But ours is a defensive alliance, and the Europeans should not follow any American attempt to turn it into a vehicle for US-China competition.

Of course, the US is a democracy and will remain Europe's closest ally. But the second idea that the EU must abandon is that it can

only have deep partnerships with democracies; that the objective of its foreign policy is indeed to democratise everybody else. If and when it happens, democratisation always is in Europe's interest, because well-functioning democracies create stability. But the EU does not have the leverage to democratise another great power, whereas if it makes democratisation a precondition of cooperation with other countries, it will exactly push them in the direction of China and Russia, at the expense of their sovereignty.

All too often, however, the EU falls for the temptation to picture world politics as a confrontation between the democracies and the non-democracies. But that is a distortion: world politics today is not about an ideological battle, but about the pursuit of interests. Each of the great powers has a strategy to safeguard its interests, which can of course have a negative impact on the interests of the other great powers – but that is not the same as having a strategy aimed directly against those other powers. China has a strategy for China, not against Europe. If we willingly make this into an ideological battle, once again, we will create a new long-term bipolar confrontation. The EU's aim is not to topple President Putin or President Xi or their regime. Our aim is that Russia and China, and the US, would more or less abide by the rules of the world order in their relations with other states. Which political system each country chooses for itself, is that state's own business, and that of its citizens.

Abandoning democratisation as an objective of foreign policy is not the same as abandoning human rights. Human rights are universal – otherwise they would not be human, but western or European or Belgian rights. The EU can and must continue a critical human rights dialogue with each and every country, even though its interests oblige it to cooperate with states that do not respect human rights. That is inevitable, but the red line must be that by cooperating with states that violate human

rights, the EU can never become party to those violations itself. Short of that, the EU can cooperate with every state; the only exception could be regimes that are guilty of the crimes that give rise to the Responsibility to Protect under the UN: war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and ethnic cleansing. Finally, the EU must of course defend its own democracy, both against internal anti-democratic forces and against foreign subversion.

CONCLUSION: NOT AN ADMISSION OF WEAKNESS

Playing this stabilising role in a way comes natural to the EU, but it should certainly not be seen as an admission of weakness. The EU can only play this role from a position of strength. In the first place, that means political

strength and unity. If today the EU, divided as it currently is, would signal to China that it is willing to accommodate it into the world order, Beijing will respond: well of course – you do not have any other options anyway. But a strong and united EU, that sticks to a single strategy towards China and the other powers, can live up to this crucial stabilising role. A great power does not have to engage in brutal power politics to safeguard its interests.

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