Europe in a Multipolar World

Benjamin Martill
Lisa ten Brinke

LSE !deas

**LSE IDEAS is LSE's foreign policy
think tank. Ranked #1 university affiliated
think tank in the world in the 2019
Global Go To Think Tank Index.**

We connect academic knowledge of diplomacy
and strategy with the people who use it.

> "
> Europe must get used to these new dynamics of world politics whilst making sure it has a stake in the game.
> "

Power is diffusing from West to East and non-democratic powers are among those rising fastest. These changes have been in the offing for decades, but their effects are now increasingly manifest. Where does Europe stand within this emerging multipolar order? Is there a European 'pole' in the international system, and—if so—what is its contribution to the emerging order? These are important questions at the forefront of policymakers' minds. This Strategic Update examines in more detail the position of Europe—and the EU—in a multipolar world. We argue that Europe's presence on the global stage is limited by a number of significant challenges, including institutional deficiencies, divergence in strategic cultures, values unconducive to power politics, and limitations in capabilities, not to mention Brexit. Finding ways to overcome each of these challenges, we argue, is imperative if Europe wishes to protect its interests and avoid being sidelined in the coming decades. And it is important for international order, too, since a strengthened Europe could contribute to a more stable multipolarity in a number of respects, not least by facilitating more fluid balancing dynamics, diluting perceptions of Western aggression, promoting regional cooperation, and strengthening institutions necessary for regulating international order.

Our argument proceeds as follows. We first consider the changing nature of international order and the rise of multipolarity, setting out the changes this involves, the implications for global stability, and the likely consequences for Europe. We then present the principal factors limiting the establishment of a European 'pole' within this system, focusing on institutions, strategic culture, capabilities, and values, before discussing the challenge of Brexit. Finally, we explore what contribution a European pole could make to the stability of the emerging multipolar system, suggesting a strong and unified Europe could hedge against American domination of the West, promote regionalisation and region-to-region cooperation, provide for a more fluid balance of power, and increase trust in the system through its perception as a more neutral actor without hegemonic interests.

A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

The world is becoming more multipolar as power diffuses gradually and as a host of formerly regional powers have begun to set out their designs on the international system. A number of countries, including China and India, have developed extraordinarily rapidly on the back of the American-led liberal international order. China has done so with the aid of a strong-state which has—contrary to Washington Consensus thinking—allowed the regime to bolster its productivity and thus its economic (if not political) development. Other countries, such as South Africa, Brazil and Turkey, have become regional power centres in their own right and have clamoured for greater global influence as a result, often representing their regions in

international forums. Russia, for its part, has not only moved a long way from its previous embrace of democratic norms in recent years, but it has also increasingly sought to articulate a more forceful philosophy of international affairs.

Whether multipolar dynamics make for a more or less stable international system remains an open question. Multipolar systems may seem unstable in some respects: Alliance patterns are more fluid and prone to swifter change, coordination is more difficult, institutions are correspondingly harder to maintain, and the presence of diverse worldviews allows for a near endless multiplicity of fault lines of conflict.[1] But corresponding stabilising features can also be identified: The greater diffusion of interests undermines the ability of states to achieve political or ideological hegemony, thereby increasing the need for genuinely multilateral institutional forums and diplomatic norms, and promoting balancing dynamics which may increase the leverage of smaller actors in the system. The increase in the number of potential conflicts also makes individual conflicts less salient, since divergence on fundamental issues becomes a fact of life rather than an existential challenge. As with other international orders, it will be a long-time until the dynamics of multipolarity become evident. But—stable or unstable—these dynamics are different from those that have gone before.

Multipolarity is a game-changer for Europe, which has enjoyed a comfortable position as junior partner to the United States (US) in the decades since the end of the Second

World War. Historically, Europe has been afforded the luxury of muddling through because it has been under the explicit protection of the American 'security umbrella' through NATO. And, of course, Europe was spared complex political and ethical choices by the dominance of liberal-democratic norms—especially after the end of the Cold War—since this allowed normative and strategic goals to go hand-in-hand. It must now confront a world in which power is becoming more important as a currency, in which disengagement is likely to increasingly characterise the US position on European security, and in which complex moral choices return to the forefront of strategic and diplomatic decisions. Europe must get used to these new dynamics of world politics whilst making sure it has a stake in the game. And it must confront new challenges and trade-offs which may sit poorly against past experience.

To achieve this, Europeans will need to overcome a number of long-standing challenges to the articulation of a strong—and coherent—European voice in world politics.

THE CHALLENGE FOR EUROPE

One challenge is the absence of pan-European institutional frameworks able to coordinate effective and coherent foreign, security and defence policies. Since the demise of proposals for a European Defence Community in 1954, the continent had relied upon NATO for its security. Proposals for indigenous European initiatives have been many, but have been comparatively modest. The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), for instance, has focused primarily on low-risk and politically acceptable missions in Europe's near abroad, not least because of concerns about burden sharing and effectiveness. Minilateral and bilateral formats and initiatives are the order of the day and, while more flexible, these lack

> " Even though Europeans are spending more on defence, they are not necessarily spending it together, in the right ways, and on the most appropriate projects. "

mechanisms for coordination, and frequently exclude key players. Recent initiatives, such as the launch of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and proposals for a 'European Intervention Initiative', show that Europe is taking the challenge seriously, but also that institutional duplication remains a major issue. In the absence of institutions facilitating (rapid) collective decisions on delicate matters of foreign and security policy, Europe will always lag behind.

Divergences in what is often termed 'strategic culture'—predispositions countries have towards security and defence issues—also afflict European countries and hamper close cooperation between them in foreign affairs. Some countries, such as Britain and France, seek to eke out a global role for themselves, while others, such as Germany, are less keen to do so. A number of countries seek to preserve the Atlantic security system, while others—chief among them France—have sought European alternatives. Countries in Central and Eastern Europe have an understandable preoccupation with territorial defence, while their Southern European neighbours are more concerned with maritime security. Britain and France, for their part, have focused on the ability to deploy expeditionary forces, not least in order to manage crises in parts of the world where they are the former colonising powers. The upshot of these differences is that Europe is an '*astrategic* actor' which is not predisposed—or perhaps even able—to agree upon common goals or to devise the means to achieve these.[2] European countries notably failed to agree a common line on the invasion of Iraq in 2003, on how to deal with the Libya crisis in 2011, and they differ at present on deterring Russia and dealing with the fallout from the collapse of the Iran nuclear deal.

Then there is the question of values, and whether the dominant value sets in Europe are suited to a potentially more dangerous world. The EU, for instance, regards itself as a champion of 'civilian' values—peace, diplomacy, multilateralism—and normative goals, including the promotion of democracy and human rights.[3] It is also a vanguardist project, aimed at the creation of an international order based on the rule of law, regional cooperation, and peaceful relations between states. Whether these values stem from Europe's violent history, or its relative weakness in military terms, is an open question. These values are laudable, but they may not be wholly suited to the realities of multipolar politics. For one thing, normative goals are more difficult to achieve in an international order marked by competing views of political order. Moreover, civilian values undergird the reluctance of both the EU and a number of member states to address shortfalls in defence capabilities. The 2016 *Global Strategy* recognises this problem and aims to inculcate changes in the Union's values which would facilitate greater strategic actorness, including attempts to break-down the taboo of 'hard power' and to introduce 'principled pragmatism' as a bridge between the EU's interests and its 'post-Westphalian' values.

There is also the question of capabilities. European states have only recently begun to arrest the decline in defence spending

which was the (inevitable) consequence of the end of the Cold War, and which was exacerbated in recent years by the financial crisis and the resulting implementation of austerity policies across the continent. To be fair, the countries of Europe—and the member states of the EU—together possess significant military capabilities. Moreover, as wealthy, industrialised countries they are also endowed with not insignificant 'latent capabilities', or the ability to translate resources into capabilities should the need arise. But shortfalls persist. European countries have notable deficiencies in strategic airlift, for instance, and this is one area where they rely significantly on the Americans. Meanwhile, defence procurement itself suffers from a lack of coordination, problems of duplication, issues with interoperability, and limitations which stem from the absence of an indigenous European defence-industrial base. Even though Europeans are spending more on defence, they are not necessarily spending it together, in the right ways, and on the most appropriate projects. While PESCO may help in this regard, it is no panacea.

AND THEN THERE'S BREXIT…

How Brexit factors into this picture is complex. In strategic terms, it is not clear the damage will be insurmountable, since European security is intergovernmental, since NATO is the prime security and defence actor, and since the commonality of interests on both sides is likely to remain intact. There are also some enabling factors, not least the removal of the 'British veto' over security and defence initiatives. Economically, the impact may well be more significant, since Brexit risks the UK undercutting EU standards as a spoiler from outside, and since Britain represents the loss of one-sixth of the EU's combined GDP. Brexit comes with challenges for the EU's legitimacy also, since it

> "
> Brexit is a wild card. But it does not herald the imminent break-up of the Union, nor does it obviate the pressures pushing the EU in a more 'strategic' direction.
> "

does not look good to have an important member state leave. The EU itself is well aware of this, which partly explains why it has driven such a hard bargain in the negotiations, seeking to see the UK demonstrably lose from its decision to withdraw. The existential nature of the Brexit challenge has also resulted in greater unity among the remaining EU27, as well as increased recognition among more recalcitrant member states as to the benefits of membership. Even populist parties have toned down their messages in the wake of Brexit.[4]

> "
> A strong European 'pole' can not only help the Europeans to realise their interests on the global stage but can also contribute to a more stable multipolar order.
> "

To be sure, the politics of Brexit will create problems for a few years. The negotiations have pitted both sides against each other in a manner which precludes easy compromises on a number of issues. And institutional quibbles may preclude UK participation in EU security initiatives in the short term, although in the long term the EU has an advantage keeping the Brits 'plugged in',[5] given what the UK can bring to the table in this regard. Both sides also have political incentives to demonstrate successful divergence from one another, which is one reason why politicians on both sides of the channel have cited such phrases as 'Global Britain' and 'strategic autonomy' with gusto in the past few years. But these political dynamics are unlikely to erode the underlying strategic (and economic) drivers for closer collaboration and will likely peter out as the divorce process nears completion. Ultimately, the commonality of interests and the fierceness of the strategic imperatives facing both Britain and the EU27 —Russian aggression, American disengagement, Chinese ascension etc.—will likely outweigh the shorter-term political and institutional conflicts which have characterised the Brexit process to-date.

Brexit is a wild card. But it does not herald the imminent break-up of the Union, nor does it obviate the pressures pushing the EU in a more 'strategic' direction. To some extent, Brexit has proven a driver in this regard. First, because British opposition to the EU becoming more of a security and defence actor has receded. Second,

because Brexit has provided a moment of necessary reflection on the future of the European project. Third, because Brexit has galvanised the EU27 into greater unity of purpose than previously imagined. Finally, because the EU has incentives to breathe fresh life into the integration project to show it remains viable, and nowhere is there more to be done than in security and defence. This is not to say that European policymakers can get ahead of themselves. Ambitions are still not matched by capabilities. And not all member states are on-board with further integration. But it is certainly not the case that Brexit wholly undermines the efforts of the European countries to become more coherent, and more powerful, on the world stage.

EUROPE AS A MULTIPOLAR STABILISER

Thus far we've listed the challenges Europe faces in articulating its diverse preferences in a coherent manner on the international stage. Put simply, Europe lacks the actorness, capabilities, common goals, and values conducive to the pursuit of interests. All this is changing, slowly. The *Global Strategy* and the host of recent institutional developments in the EU aim to overcome each of these problems. But progress needs to be more meaningful if the EU wishes to develop an effective response to a changing international order. What is at stake for Europeans is the ability to articulate their interests and values on the world stage, and to defend these when they come under attack. If Europe does not work on fostering institutions and a collective strategic culture capable of buttressing its preferences, it will lose out in the longer-term.

And an enfeebled Europe might not be a good thing for international order either, since there is much that a European 'pole' could bring to the table when it comes to promoting multipolar stability. The EU is a champion of both regional integration and region-to-region cooperation, which will become ever more crucial channels of interlocution in a world characterised by regional hegemons and their global interaction. The EU is also a key supporter of institutionalisation—of which it is itself one of the most successful global examples—and the defence of the existing framework of international order, the precarity of which is decried ever more frequently. A stronger Europe would also provide a useful counterweight to American dominance within the West, preventing more conflictual US preferences from defining the Western position, and undermining the view from the outside that the West is an indivisible (and threatening) bloc.[6] The EU may also be able to inspire greater trust in other actors, since it is perceptibly a more 'neutral' actor than the US, as well as being an avowedly regional actor with limited global designs (save for the nature of the institutions regulating international order). And the EU may well prove better adapted to the pluralism of the emerging multipolar world: Dealing with difference is in the EU's DNA, after all, and European countries have historically been more open to compromise and negotiation with non-democracies than has the US.

A strong European 'pole' can not only help the Europeans to realise their interests on the global stage but can also contribute to a more stable multipolar order. This requires not only the building-up of actorness and joint-capabilities, but also a number of careful balancing acts. It means tapping into a more 'realist'—but not aggressive—tradition of foreign policymaking and becoming more sensitive to the balance of global power and the limits of what is practically achievable, and less sensitive to the particular characteristics of would-be global allies. It also means balancing clashing normative commitments, such as the imperatives of global order and the promotion of liberal worldviews abroad.

This may be a lot for Europeans to stomach, although they might not have much of a choice in the matter. It is not so much about jettisoning the ideal of being a normative power, but rather qualifying what is possible, and recognising that normativity points in a multitude of potentially incompatible directions (order vs. justice, for instance). It requires a balance between the development of greater capabilities and 'actorness', and the eschewing of the trappings of power, so often associated with the jettisoning of normative commitments. In other words, Europe cannot lose sight of its multilateral commitments, but it needs to learn to play the power politics game too. And Europeans need to recognise that their own standards cannot simply be exported around the globe. In short, Europe must be humble when it comes to setting the scope of its desired influence.

CONCLUSION: A EUROPEAN POLE?

Europe finds itself ill-prepared to thrive in the more complex, plural and potentially dangerous multipolar world. Its institutions do not permit the necessary levels of coordination for us to speak of a strong, unified European pole, nor do its present capability levels or dominant values lend themselves to the emergence of Europe as a strategic actor.

The direction-of-travel at the EU level is progressing, but slowly. Recent institutional developments and discursive changes are to be welcomed but will need to be complemented by greater ambition and demonstrated usage by member states. And the thorny question of how these institutions can involve non-EU members is, especially since Brexit, of particular significance.

Making these changes is not only a way of safeguarding European values against threats, but also of contributing to a more stable multipolar world. Europeans can contribute to this by preventing the solidification of the 'Western' bloc, ensuring a more fluid balance of power, helping to ground institutional structures and practices, and bolstering region-to-region cooperation. In order to do this, however, they need to be realistic and jettison the aversion to power politics prevalent in many parts of the continent.

If Europe can get its act together, it is not just Europeans who will benefit. ∎

NOTES

1   Laïdi, Z. (2014) 'Towards a post-hegemonic world: The multipolar threat to the multilateral order'. *International Politics*, 51(3): 350-365.

2   Cottey, A. (2020) 'Astrategic Europe'. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 58(2): 276-291.

3   Manners, I. (2002) 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?'. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2): 235-258.

4   Van Kessel, S., Chelotti, N., Drake, H., Roch, J. & Rodi, P. (2020) 'Eager to leave? Populist radical right parties' responses to the UK's Brexit vote'. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 22(1): 65-84.

5   Besch, S., Bond, I. & Mortera-Martinez, C. (2018) 'Plugging in the British: Completing the Circuit'. Centre for European Reform Report, 22 June 2018. Available at: https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/report/2018/plugging-british-completing-circuit.

6   Biscop, S. (2019) '1919-2019: How to Make Peace Last? European Strategy and the Future of the World Order'. *Egmont Security Policy Brief*, No. 102, January 2019.

THE AUTHORS

Benjamin Martill is a Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Edinburgh and an Associate at LSE IDEAS. His research focuses on Brexit and the politics of European foreign and security policy.

Lisa ten Brinke is a Diplomat in training at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She previously worked as a Research Associate at LSE IDEAS and as a Research Analyst at Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of any other agency, organisation, or employer.

LSE
THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE

EXECUTIVE MASTERS PROGRAMME
INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY AND DIPLOMACY

LSE IDEAS, a Centre for the study of international affairs, brings together academics and policy-makers to think strategically about world events.

This one year **EXECUTIVE MASTERS PROGRAMME** is at the heart of that endeavour. While studying in a world-leading university you will be able to learn from top LSE academics and senior policy practitioners.

The programme will sharpen your ability to challenge conventional thinking, explore new techniques for addressing risk and threats, and coach you in devising effective strategies to address them.

The course has been especially tailored so that you can accelerate your career while holding a demanding position in the public or private sector.

"Right from the first week I was able to apply the lessons I had learnt to our operational and policy work and to coach my teams to look at issues differently."

– **Karen Pierce**
British Ambassador to the United Nations

CONTACT US

ideas.strategy@lse.ac.uk
+44 (0)20 7955 6526
lse.ac.uk/ideas/exec

LSE !deas]

Europe in a Multipolar World

Benjamin Martill
Lisa ten Brinke

Cover image:
Europe 24
NATS Press Office via
silicon angle / photopin cc

Multipolarity is a game-changer for Europe. Faced with a disengaged US, European policymakers are forced to shape their own response to new, multipolar dynamics.

Europe will need to overcome a host of internal challenges, including institutional deficiencies, divergence in strategic cultures, values unconducive to power politics, and limited capabilities.

While Brexit creates short-term political conflict, it is unlikely to undermine longer-term European efforts to become more powerful and coherent on the world stage.

A strong European 'pole' will not only help the Europeans to realise their interests on the global stage but can also contribute to a more stable multipolar order.

A strengthened Europe could support a stable multipolarity by facilitating fluid balancing, diluting perceptions of Western aggression, promoting regional cooperation, and strengthening international institutions.

This will require Europe to balance between a more 'realist' approach and clashing normative commitments, and between greater capabilities and its commitment to multilateralism.