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Europe – Still Between the Superpowers

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Research Article

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Abstract

In a famous study published in 1978, the American diplomat Anton DePorte argued – controversially – that a Europe held in frozen check between the superpowers was the only sound basis upon which the continent could find peace. The ending of the bloc system in Europe between 1989 and 1991 put paid to this dystopian vision. Indeed, within only a few years, many writers were even beginning to suggest that the new united Europe might one day become a superpower in its own right. As we now know, this early wave of unbridled optimism has given way to an altogether more downbeat mood. In this article, it shall be argued that the prevalent pessimism about Europe is not just a function of what has been occurring within Europe itself. It is also a reflection of the fact that the international order, which during the 1990s seemed to be so benign, has become much less so over the past fifteen years. A close examination of Europe's relationships with the three great powers the United States, China and Russia indeed suggests that the world is likely to become more, rather than less, difficult for Europe as it moves forward into the 21st century. Testing times lie ahead.

Policy Implications

- In a period of great transatlantic uncertainty Europe's priority should be to reinforce its economic, political and strategic links with the United States
- Russia's growing suspicion of, and opposition to the European Union as a project requires a strong and united response from all European leaders
- While the economic benefits of good economic relations with China should be recognized, it is important for Europeans to recognize the challenge which the PRC presents to Europe's vision of the world.

History as prologue

As one war drew to an end, and another longer Cold War began to announce itself, Winston Churchill took the very long view about a world that had been so unceremoniously smashed into fragments after 1914. What we had been through, he observed, was not a mere political revolution or a massive clash of arms, but rather something closer to a ‘Second Thirty Years War’ (Tooze, 2005, p. 4). Treating the period like a single unit, he focused unsurprisingly on what he saw as the long-running struggle by the British Empire to contain and finally defeat the German challenge. But as Britain had emerged victorious by 1945, the Empire, in his view, was now safe. The same could not be said, however, about mainland Europe itself. . Indeed, if one result of total war between 1939 and 1945 was in the short term to leave much of the continent in rubble, another much longer term consequence was to undermine Europe as the axis around which the world had for nearly three centuries revolved. Certainly, if we consider the international system in terms made popular by Paul Kennedy as an ever moving canvass of rising and falling great powers and regions, then by 1945 it was patently clear that the European age had finally come to an inglorious end (Kennedy, 1987).

The question remains whether or not Europe could have retained the mighty position it had held at the beginning of the century. The gradual economic rise of the United States constituted a challenge of the first order, to which Europe may never have found an adequate response. The British especially seemed to be concerned about what one British writer in 1901 termed ‘Americanization’ and the impact this was likely to have on the rest of the twentieth century (Stead, 1901). However, economics alone would not have turned the world upside down so fast nor so completely. As one of the more acute insider witnesses to both wars noted (Keynes, 1971). Europe’s position at the heart of the world system was not just undermined by the economic power of the US, but rather by two wars which left Europe dependent on American largesse. Continental Europeans may not have liked this altered state of affairs - and Britain as the once dominant power may have liked it least of all. But one thing was clear. The European ‘moment’, which had announced itself in the late 15th century had finally passed. As one of the more noted post-war historians pointed out not long after the end of World War II, the "collapse of the traditional European system” had become “an irrevocable fact” Historic Europe” was now “dead and beyond resurrection" (Holborn, 1951).

Naturally, not all Europeans felt especially comfortable with either their diminished role in world affairs or being dependent on the United States. Indeed, at least one West European leader in the form of de Gaulle went on to challenge the new American primacy in

the 1960s (Cohen, 2015). Nor did all Europeans – particularly those under Soviet tutelage - readily accept the subsequent division of the continent. However, what might have seemed temporary just after the war soon took on the appearance of permanence. Crises came and went, from the Hungarian revolution in 1956 through the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 to the Polish crisis of the 1970s, but nothing ever really changed. Moreover, as the years rolled by, several analysts began to assume that the ‘new’ status quo was here to stay. One American policymaker with a more acute sense of history even supposed that a Europe divided between the superpowers was the best guarantee for long-term stability: DePorte was insistent. Europe he opined was less likely to go to war now or even become seriously unstable. After all, in the new Europe, the age-old German problem had been solved; aggressive nationalism was now contained within the ‘two bloc’ system; and France and Germany had at last found a way to co-exist peacefully as neighbours. Nor of course was there much chance of the US retreating from Europe so long as the USSR remained where it was. Therefore, he cautioned on the dangers of challenging the new status quo, arguing that if the Cold War in Europe ever was to end – something which seemed deeply unlikely - then the old tensions and stresses could very easily return (DePorte, 1978).

Nonetheless, the system DePorte had so brilliantly rationalised back in the late 1970s did come to an end. What is more, with the exception of subsequent developments in former Yugoslavia, the dismantling of the two bloc system occurred without the disastrous consequences he had earlier forecast. Moreover, as time passed, and the European Community of old gave way to a new Union, the emerging entity slowly but surely moved from being a successful experiment in Europe to becoming something with real international potential. Indeed, by the turn of the century it very much looked as if Europe was not only not ‘missing’ the Cold War - as some realists had earlier predicted (Mearsheimer, 1990) - but was fast becoming a major global actor in its own right. Several writers in fact began talking about the new Europe in increasingly grandiloquent terms. Charlie Kupchan was one. America he argued in a much quoted study was facing an increasingly uncertain future. Europe on the other hand could look forward to the 21st century with confidence (Kupchan, 2002). Jeremy Rifkin agreed. The American Dream he claimed was dead or dying: Europe’s however was just beginning (Rifkin, 2004). Others concurred, including the irrepressible Mark Leonard. Europe (or more precisely the EU) he insisted was not simply doing well economically. There was every chance he believed that it would go on to ‘run the 21st century’ (Leonard, 2005). Nor was this his view alone. Indeed, yet another enthusiast boldly declared at around the same time that while the American Century was fast coming to an end

Europe's was only just beginning. (Reid, 2004). Nor was it just a question of capabilities. The new Europe – this enigmatic power as one writer called it (Laidi, 2008) - was much better designed to succeed in a globalized world where trade rather than weapons, and treaties rather than tanks, were fast becoming the truest measures of power. (Cooper, 2000). Normative power Europe it seemed could face the future with much greater confidence than martial America.

As we now know, things did not quite turn out that way. Indeed, the Europe which many believed might one day be the next superpower (albeit a quiet one according to Moravcsik (2009)) was fast turning into what George Soros later came to term a 'tragedy' (Soros, 2014). With unemployment on the rise, an increasing political gap opening up between the north and the south of Europe and a growing debt mountain it was hardly surprising that Europe started to look like a failed project. Perhaps Garton Ash captured this new mood best. As he wryly observed, had he been 'cryogenically frozen' in 2005, he would have gone to his 'provisional rest a happy European'. However, had he then been 'cryogenically reanimated' a dozen years later, he 'would have immediately died of shock' (Ash, 2017). Nor, of course were these his views alone. In fact, after 2010 at least, such pessimistic sentiment had become more or less mainstream. Thus according to Heisbourg by the Europe 'dream' was well and truly over (Heisbourg, 2013). A year later Offe was insisting that Europe had become 'trapped' (Offe, 2014). In 2015 Friedman was writing gloomily about an almost impossible to solve 'crisis' (Friedman, 2015) And a few months later the ever critical Varoufakis insisted that until Europe changed direction economically, then it had no future at all. As it was, it would, for the foreseeable future, simply have to suffer what the weak and the powerless always suffered (Varoufakis, 2016).

In the rest of this article my purpose is not so much to discuss either the contested causes and complex consequences of what is now regularly referred by pundits as Europe's 'existential crisis' but rather focus instead on the world outside the EU, and in particular on how important changes and shifts in the international system - quite independent of what is currently happening within Europe itself - have further contributed to the continent's problems. My thesis is a simple but important one: at the start of the new millennium, Europe was situated in a relatively benign international environment. Now, nearly two decades later, that environment has become much less benign. Most obviously, Europe now faces an America which is both less interested and less sympathetic to the needs of its Transatlantic partner. This trend was evident long before anyone considered the prospect of Donald Trump becoming the next US president. Now, however, following his successful election, the

situation has changed decidedly for the worst. Europe also faces a second challenge: namely a dynamic and increasingly competitive Asia, and within the Asian region an equally dynamic and competitive (not to mention authoritarian) China playing by a set of rules which present a serious problem to the way Europe would wish to see the world organized. Finally, Europe confronts something much closer to home: a more assertive Russia under a determined leader whose motives are no doubt mixed but one of whose objectives is to challenge the very idea of a democratic and united Europe. It would be difficult enough if Europe were only facing one of these ‘threats’. The fact that it is facing all three at the same time – and at a moment in time when Europe itself has massive problems of its own - - means that deeply difficult and potentially disturbing times lie ahead for a project which only a few years ago was being likened by one writer to an ‘empire’ (Zielonka, 2007) yet only a few years on – according to the same analyst – seemed to be ‘doomed’ (Zielonka, 2014)

Troubles in Transatlantia: the United States

In the literature, it has become almost axiomatic to argue that the relationship between Europe and the United States is a very special one – a ‘security community’ by any other name tightly held together by a number of overlapping interests, a similar set of values and membership of the same western clubs, which, of course, they also happen to run. Realist and sceptics have at times challenged this reading – none more controversially than Robert Kagan in the early years of the Bush administration. This so-called community he argued merely hid the fact that both looked at the world in entirely different ways (Kagan 2002). But all to no avail. Indeed, the more Kagan argued that the two were drifting apart fast, the more his critics emphasised the enormous economic ties linking the two continents and their shared goals in maintaining a liberal economic order. Peter Baldwin went even further in a powerful study comparing the two societies. The differences between the two, he opined, were minimal. But it was precisely because they were so ‘minor’ (to use his term) that many people on both sides of the Atlantic tended to claim that there was a vast gap indeed - not because there was in fact but rather as means of establishing their own respective identities (Baldwin, 2009).

Still, there was no hiding the fact that in a post Cold War environment, which lacked a single unifying threat to hold the alliance together, the bonds that once united the two were becoming weaker. In addition, significant generational and demographic changes in the United States also tended to accentuate the drift. Put simply, the generation of Americans that fought alongside European allies in World War II is no more. Moreover, in the past fifty

years, the US American population has diversified, with stronger Asian and Latino elements and less white and European influence: This change has inevitably frayed the ‘natural’ bonds that once held Europeans and Americans united. Indeed, if current trends continue, then by the middle of the 21st century the United States will have become a very different kind of country in terms of its population. Of course, such a transition could be read as a sign of multicultural success. Other analysts are more reserved. Among this group, the American political scientist Huntington has put the controversial question whether or not the US would remain as the country it had once been if this trend were to continue and fewer and fewer of its citizens came from the traditional European ‘stock’ (Huntington, 2004).

Other factors, too, have tended to compromise the quality of the transatlantic relationship. One, quite clearly, has been the ongoing problem of financing international security in general and European security in particular. Ironically, what was earlier known during the Cold War as ‘burden-sharing’ segued into something much more divisive once the USSR had disappeared – in part because military spending in Europe went into a nosedive and in part because NATO spending, which had been skewed from the beginning, became even more so once the Cold War had ended. This growing asymmetry might have caused political embarrassment in Europe. But more importantly, it caused (and continues to cause) even greater irritation across the Atlantic in Washington. And one can easily understand why. In 2016 the US contributed around USD 650 billion to the NATO budget of USD920. Meanwhile, the Europeans only contributed USD 250 billion. Nor is this all. Not only does the US account for more than two thirds of all spending on NATO, it also spends just under 4 per cent of its GDP on defence, while the average defence budget of most European countries is just about half that, with the richest European member Germany coming in at well below 2 per cent (Kottosova, 2016).

Beyond the question of spending, NATO itself has also become the source of transatlantic friction. President Trump may have expressed himself on this issue in his typically brutal way when he argued that the organisation was becoming ‘obsolete’. However, the unfortunate fact remains that Trump’s claim has only made public what other Americans have been saying privately for some time. Of course, NATO still has strong bipartisan support in the United States for the simple reason that NATO helps guarantee the US a foothold in Europe. Indeed, according to a former NATO commander, the organisation was not merely useful, it was also ‘the foundation’ upon which ‘U.S. foreign policy’ rested (Hobson, 2016). Still, questions continue to be asked about the utility of fighting war by ‘committee’. Significantly, neither the US-led war against the Taliban in Afghanistan nor the

invasion of Iraq were initiated as NATO operations; and when NATO finally did get involved in Afghanistan, the Americans tended to be highly critical of their allies' efforts. In addition, when in 2011 NATO took on the responsibility of intervening in Libya – albeit with a high degree of logistical support from the Americans – Obama attacked the British and the French later for failing to follow through after the war had been won on the ground. This was not only less than diplomatic. To many European observers it seemed downright disloyal (Goldberg, April 2016).

Yet perhaps one should not have been so surprised. Obama may have been personally popular in Europe, and certainly preferable to his republican predecessor. On the other hand, many in Europe did wonder whether he was really a true 'Atlanticist'. The son of a Kenyan father and an independently-minded liberal white mother Obama was hardly the typical American politician. Raised for some years in Hawaii and then Indonesia, where for some time he had attended a Moslem school, Obama was bound to bring a fresh new view of the world to the White House. And indeed he did. In fact, almost from day one, he seemed to recognize that the world he had inherited was not the world of the Cold War or even the unipolar world of the 1990s. Rather it was what Zakaria in a best-selling book had termed a 'post-American' world, one in which new emerging powers and dynamic new economies were beginning to redefine world politics (Zakaria, 2008). In of itself, this new focus should not have been a concern to Europe. However, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton began to talk in glowing terms of a rising Asia, to which the United States should be tilting, with barely a mention of Europe, the Europeans did start to worry – perhaps with good reason. After all, the Obama administration now showed an enthusiasm about Asia that it was no longer directing towards Europe. In a well-known speech, Secretary Clinton talked in almost world historical terms of America's next 'Century' being a 'Pacific Century', since that region, with its dynamic economies, was clearly where the future of the world was going to be decided (Clinton, 2007). This was by no means her view alone. The leading American official on Asian affairs, Kurt Campbell, also made it clear in an important interview that at a 'fundamental level' most of the history of the 21st Century was going to be written in the 'Asian Pacific region' and anyone who did not 'really understand' this basic fact would be missing the point. The Asia region, he concluded, was bound to become 'the dominant arena of strategic interaction' for the USA in the coming years (Campbell 2011).

While Asia appeared to be moving up the policy food chain, Europe increasingly began to be seen in Washington as a source of problems and woes. Of special concern among US policymakers was the Eurozone, whose problems even the Europeans themselves seemed

unable to solve. Moreover, as the crisis deepened, or at least failed to get resolved, American opinion became increasingly negative towards Europe with some on the right attacking the EU as a failed liberal project (Buchanan, 2016) while others of a more progressive outlook asked whether it could even survive. Stiglitz in particular was especially damning about the way in which the EU was being undermined by the Euro. Adopting a single European currency he argued had been a fatal error. The Euro he went on was not only causing a recession in those weaker economies where they needed monetary flexibility. If there was no reform to the system, the common currency could easily go on to destroy the European project in its entirety. (Stiglitz, 2016). Even the Obama administration did not remain neutral and urged European leaders to abandon what it saw as the dead end policy prescription of balanced budgets and deficit reduction (Nelson, 2012).

Europe, however, seemed to be in no mood to listen to advice coming from across the Atlantic. Germany especially saw no reason to change direction while its own economy continued to prosper. But as critics went on to point out, Germany's good fortunes was in part based on the economic misfortune of others. Indeed, while some countries in Europe – most notably in the 'South' - were experiencing misery, Germany was benefitting from an inflow of both investor cash and young immigrants, if only 'to escape the dire conditions that German Chancellor Angela Merkel and EU technocrats had helped create through their hard-line focus on austerity, structural reforms, and price stability' (Resinbichler and Morgan, 2016). No doubt on a personal level, Obama and Merkel enjoyed a decent relationship. However, there was no hiding the fact that US relations with its largest and most important partner were facing very testing times indeed. Nor, it seemed, was this just about economics. On a whole range of other issues from TTIP through to the use of electronic surveillance of German leaders, German views of America were turning decidedly negative (Kundani, 2015).

The transatlantic relationship therefore was already facing a series of important challenges some time before President Trump entered office. But his highly contested election turned a potentially problematic situation into a critical one, nowhere more dramatically than in Germany itself. A new German poll taken in early 2017 indicated as much, with only around 30 per cent of people expressing any degree of trust in the new American leader (The Local, 2017). Nor was this just a German reaction alone. Across Europe, Trump has provoked an almost unprecedented political storm. His open hostility towards the EU, his vocal support for Brexit, his positive views about Putin, not to mention his rejection of all things liberal, including globalisation, could not but have a disastrous impact on European public opinion. Even in Brexit-Britain where the government was

desperate to rebuild its ‘special relationship’ with the US after a period of perceived drift, Trump remained widely unpopular right across the political spectrum (Colville, 2016). Indeed, when it was mooted that he would soon be making a state visit to the UK some time in 2017, well over a million people objected, including many MPs and the Speaker of the House of Commons (BBC News, 2017). Others across Europe were equally concerned. Madame Le Pen may have welcomed his election as did others on the far right. But most European opinion formers seemed genuinely appalled. G W Bush they felt had been bad enough. But here was a newly elected leader of the free world with views closer to those of the National Front in France than the political mainstream. Little wonder that not long after his victory, *The New York Times* carried the bold headline ‘For Europe, Trump’s Election Is a Terrifying Disaster’. The article continued that hardly anybody in Europe had truly believed that Americans would ever elect someone so obviously unfit to lead the most powerful nation in the world. Tragically however they had. And now, across the Continent, it went on, ‘people were trying to figure out what this would mean’. Many feared the worst. Not only would he be bad for America. His election, the article concluded, might even mean the ‘end of the West’ itself. Clearly some very difficult and dangerous days lay ahead (Wergin, 2016).

Rich and rising China, Democratic Europe

If the election of Trump caused Europeans to worry in ways they had not worried for a very long time about their relationship with the United States – the EU’s President even talked in early 2017 of Trump being a ‘threat’ (Gaouette, 2017) – they could at least take refuge (and many did) in the fact that the two continents were so interconnected that even Trump could do no lasting damage. The relationship might be entering choppy waters. But according to some at least it was just ‘too big to fail’. The West might yet survive (Cox, 2012a). Dealing with China has posed a challenge of a quite different order, in part one suspects because so much has already been written about China by so many different kinds of people including economists (usually very positively), Sinologists (with great reverence), China lovers and China -haters and, of course, by scholars of International Relations. This latter group has in turn divided rather neatly into those who feel China as a rising power can gently ease itself into the welcoming arms of the liberal international order and others of a more realist persuasion who insist that the outcome is likely to be anything but peaceful (Buzan and Cox, 2013). China has in addition been the focus of much speculation about its long term future with some arguing that even if China does go global it will for ever remain a ‘partial power’

(Shambaugh, 2016), others insisting that its internal politics makes it a 'fragile superpower' (Shirk, 2007), and at least one author (who has now apparently changed his mind) making the bold claim that China will one day 'rule the world' (Jacques, 2009). Everybody seems to agree that China is in some sense 'rising'. But there is little consensus, or so it would seem, about whether it can continue to rise for ever and what all this might mean for the rest of the world. As one writer has put it, 'the growing number of books and articles on China's rise, whether it is sustainable, whether it is a model for other developing states, and most importantly whether it is likely to change the current international order' only 'highlights' the extraordinary level of interest there is in this particular question. (Jones, 2014)

In the wider debate about China in the West the American voice has clearly been dominant. Europeans meanwhile – with a few notable exceptions – have tended to focus less on the big strategic questions – presumably because Europe no longer does strategy – and concentrate instead on economics and how much Europe on the one side and China on the other can benefit materially from the relationship. Thus when the British or the Germans 'go' to China they talk about little else. Of course this does not mean the relationship is not without its economic stresses and strains. This while Europe insists that China is still not a full blown market economy and needs to push ahead with more reforms, China attacks Europe for not transferring more of its high technology or more sensitively, of not selling the PRC more weaponry. That said, the relationship seems to be functioning to most people's satisfaction with China over the past few years having become the EU's second largest trading partner – just behind the United States – and the EU in turn having become China's biggest. Moreover, both sides believe the relationship still has a long to go economically. As a recent report noted, though the relationship has brought benefits to both sides, investment flows continue to show vast untapped potential, especially when taking into account the size of the two economies. With China accounting for just 2-3 per cent of overall European investments abroad, and Chinese investments in Europe remaining relatively low, it is evident that enormous possibilities exist (European Commission, 2016).

The stress on both sides about the mutually beneficial character of the relationship with few of the strategic tensions apparent in say China's increasingly fractious relationship with the United States should not however obscure the very real challenge the new China poses for Europe. China is rarely described as a 'threat' in the European discourse as it most frequently is in the United States. On the other hand, there remain a number of outstanding issues.

First and foremost there is the challenge posed by China's almost inexhaustible capacity to export or 'dump' vast amounts of its low priced goods onto the European market – something no doubt welcome by millions of European consumers but not so welcome to those industries which have been driven out of business as a result. The numbers of jobs lost overall remains difficult to compute but according to one official source at least, anywhere between 100,000 and 10 million jobs have been lost to Chinese 'competition' since China joined the WTO. Nor it seems is the situation likely to improve any time soon given the enormous spare capacity in so many Chinese industries. As a European Commission report explained, the Chinese government basically has only one priority – and that is to keep as many people employed as possible, and one way of doing this of course was and remains dumping onto foreign markets – including European markets (European Commission, 2016). There is also the additional problem of what might happen in the future if China were to be granted full market status? If this were to happen then China, naturally enough, would be delighted. But for Europe the results could be economically very damaging indeed with the possible loss – according to one report – of somewhere between 1.7 to 3.5 European jobs as a result (Louch, 2015).

While job losses in Europe itself pose a very real challenge to European leaders, so too has China's highly successful drive to win market share – as well as hearts and minds – in both Africa and South America. The basic facts are by now clear. In 2000, the two continents were effectively within the Western economic sphere of influence. Fifteen years later and China had become a significant economic player both south of the Rio Grande and south of the Maghreb (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016) Take Latin America first. Here trade with China increased over a nine-year period by over a 1000 per cent, from around \$10bn in 2000 to \$130bn in 2009. Four years on (2013) and the total volume of trade between the two was now 24 times larger than it had been back in 2000! Over the same period China has also become the top destination of exports from Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay. China's banks have also gained a foothold, becoming in the process the largest annual public creditors to Latin American governments. In addition, China was fast developing into a major investor itself, especially in key extractive industries. Meanwhile, in Africa, the same pattern could be detected. Here, over a mere fifteen-year period, China had moved from being an economic irrelevance in 2000 to becoming a major economic player. With its large unconditional loans, its support for a number of well publicized infrastructural projects, and its apparently insatiable demand for African raw materials – not to mention the presence of close to a

million Chinese themselves in Africa – China was clearly becoming a force to be reckoned with (Tull, 2008).

In of itself, none of this when taken together constituted a major threat to Europe per se, though for both the US and Europe to see their share of trade with, say, Africa fall from 77 per cent to 60 per cent in a matter of a few years could hardly have been welcome. On the other hand, as a number of writers have observed, the China challenge did at least compel Europe to respond in a fairly positive way, and to use phrase ‘get its act together’, especially in Africa where many of its earlier policies had quite simply failed to deliver (Grimm and Hackenesch, 2016). Still, there was room for concern. If, after all, one of Europe’s purposes was not merely to do business in places like Africa but facilitate better governance, then everything China was doing was undermining that goal. Nor was China’s goal merely economic. Indeed, the more it drew both Latin America and Africa closer to it economically, then the more countries there felt moved to side with China on international issues – quite often against the Western powers. Here of course China had the added ideological advantage of being able to claim that like many of the countries in Africa and Latin America it too had suffered historically from ‘imperialism’; and that because it had, it was different in character to those Western and European powers who had previously treated the colonies, and latterly the Third World, with such contempt (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017). This in part would also explain the importance of the BRICs organization to China. Though an organization with limited ambitions, the BRICs did at least provide China with a real institutional connection to two of the most important countries on both continents: namely Brazil and South Africa. United together, as they claimed, in a desire to uphold the principle of non-interference against a West which had always stood in the way of their legitimate ambitions, the BRICs, if nothing else, provided a not insignificant platform for China, Brazil and South Africa to express solidarity while working together to make the international system a more balanced place, and certainly one more aligned with their interests rather than those of the established Western powers (Laidi, 2012).

Finally, China poses a problem for Europe in one other important respect: by providing an example of an apparently successful and dynamic economy constructed on a polity that is neither liberal in its values or democratic in its practices. China – as the Chinese recognize – is almost definitely not a model for export. Nonetheless, it has demonstrated to the wider world that however polluted its cities, however unequal its society, and however repressive its government – all features which do little to enhance China’s soft power abroad – it has delivered on growth and has also made huge strides forward in reducing poverty. It has also

spawned in the process one of the largest middle classes in the world whose children study in their hundreds of thousands in foreign universities. This does not always make the Chinese popular internationally. But it does point to a society facing the future with some degree of confidence. The global image of modern Europe could not be more different. Thus whereas China seems to be (and in many respects is) on ‘the up’, Europe looks to be ‘on the way down’. China is every day, and in every way, looking like a country that is on the rise economically. Europe on the other hand looks as if it is in long term decline. All this could change of course. However, for the time being, Europe very much looks like the ‘sick man’ of world politics, while China – and with it Asia more generally – is sending out the very clear and unambiguously clear message that it represents the wave of the future. Things may be much better than they look (Leonard and Kundani, 2013). Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the West - including Europe – retains major structural advantages over its various peer rivals (Cox, 2011, 2012b). But perceptions matter and for the time being as writers like Kishore Mahbubani have triumphantly proclaimed, the world is turning on its axis. The next millennium belongs to the ‘East’ (Mahbubani, 2008).

Russian resurgence and Europe

If contemporary China represents a long term economic challenge for Europe, then Putin’s Russia – with whom China has developed an increasingly close relationship (Cox, 2016) - poses a more immediate political and perhaps even strategic threat. Russia may well have become one of Europe’s biggest trading partners since the fall of the USSR; and the Russian market and Russian energy remains of considerable importance to many European countries. Nevertheless, what only twenty and twenty five years ago looked like becoming a ‘strategic partnership’, and at the turn of the new century a stable relationship based on what even Putin then termed core European values, has deteriorated to the point today where Europe and Russia look set to remain rivals - and serious ones at that – for a long time indeed (Omelicheva, November, 2016).

How this has come about remains a source of much debate both in Europe and in Russia itself. For the Russians the causes of the current crisis are self-evident. The West, it claims, has always been reluctant to accept Russia on its own terms. It has therefore interfered in Russian internal affairs with the declared purpose of undermining the Russian state. More generally, the West has also deployed its own institutions to either encircle Russia (in the case of NATO) or promote Western values (through the EU) all with the express objective of drawing countries within Russia’s sphere into the West’s orbit. Unsurprisingly,

this is not how many in the West appear to view the past few years. Russia under Putin – they argue – set out on a course to rebuild Russia after a period of precipitate decline in the 1990s. The obvious ways of achieving this was first to build a strong state, second to contest any Western interference in what he regarded as Russia’s ‘near abroad’ – including especially Ukraine - and finally by directly exploiting divisions and weaknesses in the West itself. Whether or not Putin had a plan from the outset, or simply developed one as events unfolded, is not entirely clear. What is clear that by 2004 relations with the West were already going sour, and that nothing which happened thereafter has prevented the situation from getting worse. So much worse in fact that by 2017 normally sober and fair-minded analysts were already talking of a ‘return’ to a new, and perhaps even more dangerous ‘cold war’ (Legvold, 2016).

This near collapse in the relationship has also been accompanied by a significant shift in Russian public opinion. In 1991 the very ‘idea of the West’ was a deeply attractive one to Russia and many Russians (English, 2000) . This is not how things look today. Indeed, by 2015, negative perceptions of the West in Russia had risen to the highest level ever recorded in the history of Russian public opinion, with over 80% of people surveyed now having a negative perception of the United States. Even the once popular European Union appeared to have lost its allure with just over 70% of Russians now viewing the EU negatively, with only 20% having a positive perception. This was an extraordinary turnaround. After all, in January 2013, before the crisis in Ukraine had unfolded, only one in a hundred Russians polled saw the EU in a negative light. Two years later, over 25% of Russians now accepted that relations with the EU had become hostile (Lipman, 2015). Many Russians also seem to hold the West responsible for their current economic woes. In fact, of the 73% who believed the economy was in bad shape, Pew found that one-third pointed to sanctions imposed by Western nations as the root cause of their difficulties (Speiser, 2015).

For many, if not all, Europeans this turn towards confrontation was little short of disastrous. After all, as far back as 1999 Javier Solana had spoken ‘longingly’ about the mutual economic and political benefits that would accrue to both sides of a new deal between the EU and Russia. A year later, the EU and Russia launched their first institutionalized framework in the form of the ‘EU-Russian Energy Dialogue’. The two also seemed to be united together in their combined desire to combat the growing threat of terrorism. And, of course, they shared common borders, a common heritage and a common history. Yet none of this prevented the slow and apparently inexorable decline in the relationship. More worrying

still from European leaders was how Russia's traditional suspicion of NATO reaching far back into the 1990s now began to be turned against the European Union itself (Maass, 2016).

But perhaps this hostility towards Europe should have come as no surprise. Putin had after all made plain his growing opposition to the kind of pluralistic kind of society which had come to flourish in Europe since the collapse of communism. Europe's celebration of cultural diversity, sexual tolerance and experimental life styles were hardly compatible with his vision of a society based on traditional practices. Indeed, not only was this idea of 'Europe' something which Putin appeared to find offensive personally, one sensed that this model of a modern, almost post-modern Europe, was itself a deeply subversive one for a state desperately seeking to establish its own identity in a world where the West and its ideas still remained extremely influential. Furthermore, in spite of its many problems, Europe itself remained a most attractive proposition for anybody in the former USSR seeking to distance themselves from a Russia being run in an increasingly authoritarian manner – as indeed became obvious when Ukraine looked like signing an association agreement with the EU in November 2013. Putin as we know was having none of it, fearing (with some justification) that if such an agreement were successfully implemented then there was the very real risk over the longer term potential of Ukraine gradually moving away from the Russian sphere and towards the West (Kalb, 2015)

As is now widely recognized, Putin's response to the situation in Ukraine marked a major turning point in Russia's relationship with the West generally and the EU particularly. It was one thing for Russia to interfere in the internal affairs of Ukraine. It had been doing that anyway since 1992. It was something else all together to annex the territory of another sovereign state. Nor of course did the crisis end with Crimea. Russia then went on to conduct its own proxy war in Ukraine itself while doing its level best to wage many others wars of 'disinformation' in the West. There is even credible evidence to suggest that Russia has even been involved in financing or supporting oppositional forces in Europe who are themselves either opposed to the European Union or who are deeply hostile to the brand of liberalism which has come to define Europe as a project. As one seasoned analyst has observed, it is not just that Russia under Putin has become 'increasingly nationalist and defensive'. Rather it would appear to reject the Western liberal order in its entirety. This may not prevent rich Russians living in their favourite European cities, sending their children to the best private schools, buying property in London, investing in European football teams, or using the London law courts to protect their very considerable assets. Russia to this degree remains very much part of the capitalist West. But as Ziegler has pointed out, it is not western

capitalism which Putin rejects - indeed one wonders how Russia today could survive without it - but rather western political ideas. (Ziegler, 2016).

Conclusion

In this brief overview I have attempted to do three things: firstly, provide some historical perspective when thinking about 'Europe'; second, point out how the debate about modern Europe has shifted rather dramatically from what was probably a premature optimism to what some (including the present author) might now view as overblown pessimism; and third argue that to understand this new downbeat mood we need to shift our gaze away from Europe and extend our perspective by looking at how the international environment has changed, and how this – as much as any architectural flaws - has reinforced the belief that Europe's position in the world is likely to become increasingly difficult in the years ahead. Some time back a British author wrote a powerful and controversial book suggesting that Europe was becoming globally 'irrelevant'. Unsurprisingly, this was not a message which many enthusiasts for the European project seemed prepared to accept at the time. Today one feels that they have no choice (Youngs, 2010).

Of course making predictions about the future is impossible; and those who have engaged in such speculation in the past have invariably got things wrong! Thus while the current relationship between the US and Europe in the age of Trump looks difficult at best and possibly disastrous at worst, it is not ruled out that the many interests which the two continents have in common will simply force the relationship back into what might be described as a normal, rather pedestrian, but stable, channel. Nor is it guaranteed that China will continue to rise or that Russia will for ever pursue its same aggressive policies towards the West. Nor moreover is the current situation within Europe bound to last for another ten years. Indeed, if the history of Europe has shown anything it is how innovative it has been in the past when faced with apparently insoluble problems; and there is no imminent reason why it should not also find ways out of its current travails.

However, as I have implied here, any long term answer to Europe's problems depends just as much on what happens outside Europe as happens within it. Europe may indeed find a way forward and a way out of its own crisis. Some even feel that the 'Trump challenge' is precisely what Europe needs right now to force it to take the painful but necessary decisions that will better guarantee its future. But even if this were to happen, Europe would still face a world composed of powerful states - states which together possess formidable assets which

can either work to Europe's advantage or disadvantage. Either way, none of these very different states are about to go away any time soon. Viewed from this all important global perspective, Europe's future is going to depend just as much if not more on the actions, policies and attitudes of the other major actors in the international system as it will on decisions taken in Brussels, Berlin or Paris. In this very specific sense the fate of Europe today – and here we need to draw at least one lesson from the Cold War – continues to depend on those all-important players we still refer to today (albeit with less and less intellectual confidence) as the superpowers.

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