

Geopolitics in Pandemic Times

Article by Roderick Kefferpütz

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The coronavirus was the first real challenge for the new self-proclaimed “geopolitical European Commission”. Alas, it failed the test. In a matter of weeks, the coronavirus exposed the fragility of the European Union to unanticipated shocks. As China uses the crisis to extend its influence, Roderick Kefferpütz argues that Europe needs ambitious policies for economic recovery if it wants to be a relevant global player.

The world is at war with a virus. This invisible killer is spreading at a rapid pace, throwing numerous countries into a state of emergency. Governments are fighting the collapse of their health systems and economy.

The coronavirus is dominating world politics. But it is not displacing the power politics of the world. Geopolitical competition does not take a break. On the contrary, the pandemic is an accelerator, reinforcing the fundamental dynamics already at play.

The global power vacuum in the world order is more evident than ever due to the coronavirus. It has demonstrated to a large extent the powerlessness of the United States, a global superpower yet the country most severely affected. A great power that gives the impression that it cannot protect its own society will likewise not be perceived as providing protection internationally. Many countries are desperately looking for orientation, global solidarity, security, and leadership in this crisis. They will have to look beyond the United States.

Under the Trump administration, the US has abdicated its position as a responsible stakeholder in the world. Compared to its leading role in the campaign to tackle the Ebola epidemic in 2014, it is glaringly absent today. The West is not leading the global effort against the virus. No one is assuming the burden of global responsibility. The sun is setting on the old geopolitical order: welcome to the age of world disorder.

Chaos as opportunity

The coronavirus causes chaos. But as the character Littlefinger puts it in *Game of Thrones*: “Chaos isn’t a pit. Chaos is a ladder.” China in particular has seen opportunity in this health crisis, a mindset exemplified in an old Mao dictum: “There is great chaos under heaven – the situation is excellent.”

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Beijing has portrayed itself as a knight in shining armour. With great fanfare it has offered support and protective equipment to hard-hit countries such as Italy and Spain. As part of its geo-economic infrastructure offensive – the “New Silk Road” – Beijing has tried to sell the idea of a “Health Silk Road”. The world is dependent on what China produces: masks, medicine, medical supplies. Now President Xi Jinping’s promotional concept of a “community of shared future for humankind” – a new outward-looking foreign policy direction announced in 2017

– has been brought to the fore again. In the context of the pandemic, the message is clear: the fate of humankind lies in China's hands. Though Beijing first covered up the outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan, it now boasts about saving the world.

Of course, that China is helping numerous states deal with the effects of the virus is positive. But one should not be naive; states are not charitable institutions. The People's Republic is establishing itself as a global "discourse power" capable of imposing its narrative on the world. As EU High Representative Josep Borrell aptly noted, there is a global battle of narratives. Beijing is formulating its claim to leadership in this leaderless world.

China has even stepped up its publicity campaign and could now be accused of deliberately fostering distrust in Western societies. Experts from the German Marshall Fund have noted that "China's more confrontational posture on COVID-19 represents a clear departure from its past behaviour and signals a move toward a style of information manipulation more like Russia's." The experts also note how Chinese officials are "dramatically increasing" their presence on Western social media platforms and "piggybacking off" Iranian and Russian propaganda networks.

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Europe was easy prey for these pandemic propaganda politics. When the coronavirus struck the continent, the European Union was clueless and marked by absolute inaction. European governments embarked on a course of political distancing. Hoarding, instead of helping, was their strategy. France confiscated masks intended for Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Italy. Germany imposed an export ban on crucial medical equipment. Italy's cry for help – the activation of the European Civil Protection Mechanism requesting material assistance – remained unanswered.

China and Russia took advantage of the situation. Their support served both humanitarian and hegemonic objectives. They sent medical supplies and simultaneously managed to deepen division between the European states. Pro-European sentiment in Italy has collapsed, with the latest polls showing 50 per cent would now opt to leave the European Union. Italy is becoming a swing state, looking towards China for international support. Countries in the middle of EU accession negotiations, such as Serbia, also felt abandoned. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić claimed that European solidarity was a "fairy tale" and that "only China can help us in this difficult situation." Europe's influence in its periphery is melting away. Such a vacuum only encourages other actors to step into the breach.

Luckily, China overplayed its hand in the end. Beijing's propaganda efforts were too blatant and aggressive. Aid material was defective, one Chinese diplomat accused the French government of letting French nursing home residents "die of hunger and disease", Beijing threatened the EU into softening a report critical of China, and, in the end, people have not forgotten where the virus originated. China's overreaction has backfired. Green MEP Reinhard Bütikofer, Chair of the European Parliament's China delegation, has in this context said that "over these months, China has lost Europe".

Europe slow off the mark

This pandemic has painfully demonstrated the immense geopolitical vulnerability and fragility of the European Union. It showed how quickly Europe can turn into a geopolitical chessboard upon which great powers play their hegemonic moves. It was a wake-up call that shook France, Germany, and the self-styled "geopolitical" European Commission. To a large extent, it revealed how many EU governments think and act in a way that is small-minded,

egocentric, and even apolitical. The EU, conceded Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, has looked deep “into the abyss”.

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In our geopolitical age, the systemic conflict between the liberal-democratic West and autocratic states dominates world politics. Diseases do not pause geopolitical competition but shape it. In the history of the Peloponnesian War, the outbreak of the plague in Athens was also a decisive moment. That is why the fight against the coronavirus is also a competition between liberal democracy and autocracy, about which societal system is more apt at fending off the virus.

The European Union has, belatedly, overcome its initial state of shock and inaction. But this crisis will leave Europe with social, economic, and political wounds. A period of severe economic weakness, financial duress, and political instability could possibly follow, with many EU countries facing high levels of debt and unemployment with politics susceptible to populism. Unemployment rates are already rapidly increasing.

This forces Europe to look inwards at a time when it needs to look outwards because the world order is in flux. In a post-pandemic world Europe cannot afford to be navel-gazing, a mere spectator of world politics. Traditionally, the European Union has emerged stronger from a crisis. This is all the more necessary this time around. The coronavirus crisis must bring the Union closer together, especially fiscally, because some states will most likely not be able to bear the burden of paying off their debt alone. If Europe does not step into the breach, countries like China will.

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Even Germany has now understood this. In May, President Emmanuel Macron and Chancellor Angela Merkel proposed a 500 billion euro European Recovery Package to stimulate the economy and support hard-hit member states in the South. This proposal preempted and opened the way for the European Commission’s proposal for a 750 billion euro package to be funded by unprecedented European Union debt. For Germany, it seems to be a radical break away from its austerity fixation. In June, Germany separately announced a domestic package worth 130 billion euros. This break is not simply about European solidarity; it is also in the German national interest. Germany has no interest in letting China profit geopolitically from the fallout of the crisis. In the Great Recession of 2007-2009, China used economic weakness in parts of Europe to buy up strategic infrastructure and deepen economic ties with struggling member states. Europe cannot become a blow-out sale for great powers. Germany has had its way on austerity against the South of Europe and on refugees against the East of Europe. Now it needs to muster all of its political capital to take on the North of Europe and the “Frugal Four” of Austria, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands to secure their agreement on the EU recovery package. The recovery package, after all, has a clear geopolitical dimension. Either EU member states stand together or Europe falls divided.

A resilient, geopolitical Europe

The European Union must stand on its own two feet and do so from its own strength and financial resources. The European Green Deal is ideally placed to act as a large-scale green and digital infrastructure offensive and reconstruction programme, putting Europe on a strong economic and technological footing and strengthening the resilience of society. Europe's economy must be future-proofed by making it more climate-friendly, digitalised, and competitive in the long term. However, the stimulus plan needs to have an economic effect right now, while the going is tough. Whilst building more windfarms, for example, might have an effect a couple of years down the line, it may not do much to ease the economic situation in this very moment. Three general policy proposals could have an immediate impact.

Europe must put its house in order quickly. This is a prerequisite if it wants to play any relevant role in shaping the future world order.

First, retrofitting. Europe's building stock should be systematically upgraded. Making buildings more energy efficient would boost the construction and efficiency industry as well as their supply chains, in addition to helping the climate and saving people money on energy bills. The same holds true for the car fleet. Upgrading the public car fleet to electric and hybrid cars could support Europe's car industry, as would an ecologically oriented cash-for-clunkers scheme where old emission-heavy cars are replaced by more environmentally friendly ones.

Second, a scrappage scheme for old, non-digital, and polluting machinery. Many European factories still work with outdated machinery. Providing financial support for their replacement with high-tech equipment with lower emissions would help digitalise European industry and make it more climate-friendly. It would simultaneously support the high-tech machinery sector.

Last but not least, Europe could consider a massive reshoring programme, providing companies with financial support if they wish to relocate to the EU. The coronavirus pandemic is redrawing global supply chains and a competition over the new shape of the economy is taking place. Japan has already earmarked 2.2 billion dollars of its stimulus package to support Japanese manufacturers shifting production out of China. The EU could do the same, offering financial incentives to bring manufacturers back to the Old Continent or help EU manufacturers to diversify their supply chains to increase resilience.

Europe must put its house in order quickly. This is a prerequisite if it wants to play any relevant role in shaping the future world order. In this context, Europe should particularly devote itself to countries in Africa and the Middle East – where health and economic systems will struggle to withstand a coronavirus shock – and not leave them open to the pandemic policies of China or Russia. This also means promoting what Chair of the German Greens Annalena Baerbock has called a “pandemic economy” that produces the necessary goods for a pandemic – medical protective gear, medicine – domestically. The European Union should establish common strategic stocks of important medicines and medical products and coordinate procurement policies. European manufacturers of crucial equipment and medical supplies could be offered long-term contracts as part of this effort, and these supplies could also be mobilised for foreign countries in case of need. The crisis has shown that Europe is ill prepared when it comes to coordinating its health systems. A task force, as suggested by the Franco-German initiative, should develop policy proposals to better integrate and coordinate the European health landscape in future.

A Europe that emerges stronger from the crisis will be able to assume a larger global role. In building resilience within the EU, it can show countries struggling against the virus around the world a real alternative to autocratic

government support.



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