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The European Union and the Russian federation coming to terms with a new geopolitical landscape: geostrategic and geo-economic ways out of the current deadlock

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Introduction

Both the European Union and the Russian federation are being confronted by a new geopolitical and geo-economic landscape. In this contribution we will try to identify some dimensions of this rapidly changing geopolitical theatre. In our previous paper in Brussels on 27 April 2018, we identified what went wrong in the East-West-relationship since the end of the 1990s. We also identified some areas in which Moscow and Brussels could work together pragmatically, using the analytical concept of the 'broad definition of security'. In this runner up contribution, we further develop and update some of these ideas. As a starting point we take the *current and rapid changes in the geopolitical landscape*. Some of these are strategic in origin, others are economic and technological, the last ones are environmental. Whether the EU and Russia will like it or not, both Brussels and Moscow will have to come to terms with each of them. The question remains; *is a win-win possible in such an exercise?* And if so, *could that restart the current deadlock in which the East-West relationship finds itself today?*

A changing geostrategic landscape: the need for a balance of power

Looking at today's global politics from a geostrategic point of view, there is a lot of turmoil. In its essence, there exists what I would like to call a "crisis in the measurement of power". The world has been in such phases before. Such a crisis appears during moments in which the tectonic plates of global power start shifting. The geo-economic and demographical trends that are underlying these seismic tremors can be located in Asia. The Chinese giant is awakening. The world's only hyperpower, the United States of America has been trying to deal with this new geopolitical situation as well. The geostrategic chess board is becoming more complex.

The 'American period' between 1991 and 2016, when the US was the sole great power in the world, may already be over. Former American president Obama tried to develop a geostrategic 'Pivot to Asia' so as to realign Washington's geostrategic priorities. The goal was to 'guide' China's inevitable re-entry as a major power on the global scene under such conditions that did not threaten American forward positions in the Pacific theatre. But Obama got distracted by several crises in, among others, North Africa and the Middle East. President Trump's *America First*-policies are much more drastic. This new America may already feel threatened by China, developing in fact a geostrategic containment-policy much like the former Soviet Union encountered during the Cold War.

Whereas the 'Atlantic' was the most important geopolitical theatre in the 20th century, the 21st century may all be about the *struggle for Eurasia*. This brings us to some of the major classical geopolitical thinkers of the 20th century such as the British geographer Halford John Mackinder (Heartland-theory) or the Dutch-American geopolitical scholar Nicholas John Spykman (Rimland-theory). Analysing world politics from the perspective of British interests, Mackinder warned several times that if all the Eurasian "landpowers" come together either through an alliance or conquest, the (Anglo-saxon) sea powers will be in trouble. Hence a divide and rule-policy should be pursued. Spykman on the other hand believed that the "belt" from Europe over the Middle East over India up until China constituted by far the most important regions in the world; two thirds of the world's population, GDP and riches are located here. Washington should ‘guide’ the political, military and economic fates of each of the components in the *Rimland* in such a way that they would not constitute a danger to US interests. A long term engagement by Washington would be needed. In 1941, during the Second World War, Spykman foresaw that the US’ enemies at the time, Japan and Germany, should become Washington’s closest allies in the *Rimland*.

So, what is new? Under president Trump, the US has forgotten the lessons of Mackinder and Spykman, or so it seems. *America First* is a strange mix in which policy incoherence constitutes the most coherent part of Washington’s foreign policy. Trump systematically disengages from multilateral treaties and frameworks. In trade a form of hard ball is played, to force the hand of the other side. In security matters there are questions with regard to the actual security guarantees from Washington. Although European leaders do not like to openly talk about it, in private many of them ask the question whether Europe should not take matters in its own hands, and develop its own European defence policy. In my opinion, the European Union should move towards a “balance politics” with each of the major poles in this new gradually shaping but skewed multipolar-world-in-the-making (Criekemans, 2018b). The US’ neglect of the lessons from Mackinder and Spykman and its retreat out of multilateral diplomacy constitutes what some such as the American Eurasia Group have called a “geopolitical recession”. Whether one is in agreement with that or not, what is in fact happening is that the old multilateral world order which was born out of the Second World War is gradually waning down.

On the other hand, China has learnt the lessons by both Mackinder and Spykman. Geostrategically, the current president Xi Jinping has clear and unequivocal ambitions. Geo-economically, Beijing is investing in a land-based and maritime ‘One Belt, One Road’. *Has the struggle over the fate of Eurasia already begun?* In the geostrategic realm, there are several signs this is already the case. Although Beijing officially keeps on using the rhetoric of a ‘peaceful rise’, there are concerns by many that a Eurasia which would be dominated (in)formally by China would not be a stable order.

We would dare to argue that the European Union and the Russian federation share a common geostrategic interest; in making sure that the coming world order would be one that would be balanced. Halford Mackinder wrote in 1904: *"The actual balance of power at any given time is […] the product, on the one hand, of geographical conditions, both economic and strategic, and, on the other hand, of relative number, virility, equipment and organization of the competing peoples."* (Mackinder 2004 [1904]: 31; Criekemans, 2007: 201). In 1943 he wrote in his famous Foreign Affairs article "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace" that the ideal state of the world system is *"a balanced globe of human beings […] And happy, because balanced and thus free."*.

A balanced world in which some of the major players themselves pursue a "balance politics" would be from a geostrategic point of view a goal to be pursued. The European countries realize today, although some of them would not admit openly, that an exclusive relationship with Washington is undesirable. Trump openly attacks some European countries such as Germany as "not spending enough on defence", "misusing the weaker Euro as a way to sell cars to the US" (January 2017) or "being at the mercy of Russian natural gas deliveries" (a comment made by Trump in the margins of a NATO summit in July 2018). Quite a statement from an "ally". I dare to state that it would, by analogy, not be in the interest of the Russian federation to be confronted by a Eurasia that, in the coming decades, would gradually become an informal or even a formal sphere of influence of China. There is a chance that Beijing's *'One Belt, One Road'* would constitute a win-win for all Eurasian actors today, including Europe, Russia and Asia. But there is an equal chance that will not be the case if Eurasia itself is not managed geostrategically in the coming decades in a balance of power mode. The western sanctions in 2014 following the Ukrainian and Crimean crises have somehow pushed Russia and China together. And Moscow and Beijing are now being confronted by American sanctions for different reasons, a new kind of containment. In fact, all Eurasian players may fear some kind of Anglo-American sanctions later down the road.

What is the central message to take away of this first brief analysis? That the future world order should best be one in which each of the major players develop a "balance politics" through which pragmatic solutions are found. To avoid a struggle for Eurasia, both Europe and Russia need to shape and mold the geo-economic and technological future of this region on an equal basis to China.

A deteriorating geostrategic landscape: steering clear of new impending dramas as a result of Trump's exit from the INF treaty

But even before we hope to arrive in such a more balanced world, the road in between promises to be bumpy. Do external actors want to avoid that a rapprochement between Brussels and Moscow cannot materialize? The current geostrategic picture is very fuzzy and chaotic today. On the one hand, the American president Donald Trump spoke extensively with the Russian president Vladimir Putin in Helsinki in July 2018. Both leaders clearly indicated they wanted to restart the East-West relationship. But on his way back to Washington the American president was criticized. Meanwhile the momentum seems to be slipping away. In October 2018, the American president indicated he wanted to exit the INF Treaty of 1987 on Intermediate Nuclear Forces. The direct reason was the alleged Russian surpassing of the treaty. The indirect reason are the Chinese, which are not a party to this central building block of the Cold War peace. Perhaps this move is all part of a Trumpian *'Art of the Deal'* move to shock and awe the world in a new treaty mechanism? Perhaps, but, does the US itself still adhere to treaties? We also do not know whether Trump perhaps wants to connect this dossier with the New Start-treaty, which lasts until December 2021.

Seen from Europe however, a dire action-reaction scenario between the great powers could unfold in the coming years. If the US effectively steps out of the INF treaty and starts developing the next generation of intermediate nuclear missiles, the Russian federation may well feel compelled to install upgraded versions of their respective technology in Kaliningrad. This would automatically compel the Baltic states or Poland to buy an American 'insurance policy' against that new perceived threat, etc. We all know to what this would lead. It could potentially lead to a new missile crisis in Europe. This is a scenario that must be avoided by Brussels and Moscow, just like both are trying to indirectly work together to try to save the Iranian nuclear deal. Perhaps European and Russian diplomacy should create a nucleus for *a broader multilateral initiative in Eurasia on limiting short and intermediate range missile technology on the continent*? Chances are Washington would then want to play ball later in this dossier. A European-Russian initiative in this regard has the potential of becoming a building block of a more global peace equilibrium in an upcoming multipolar world, much like the 1987 INF treaty was a building block for a bipolar peace.

Geo-economic complementarity: a match made in Eurasia

As discussed in our previous contribution in Brussels, the Russian federation and the European Union are geo-economically much more complementary as generally is accepted and realized (Criekemans, 2018a). Let us briefly explore this from a geo-economic point of view.

The study of Geopolitics has always also included the question how technological advances impact the geo-economic and geostrategic relations in the world. The concept of the 'geo-technical ensemble' captures this phenomenon. It is clear that there is also a correlation between the structural economic crisis we have been experiencing for many years and our ageing infrastructure. Many countries in the world also want to transition towards renewable energy. At the same time a third industrial revolution is impending upon us. Authors such as Jeremy Rifkin have identified the parameters of such a technological and infrastructural leap ahead; it envisions a transition towards 100% renewable energy, a digital revolution and a sharing economy (Rifkin, 2011). The current, very heated race between the United States and China in the domains of the future 5G-standards for an Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, and Deep Learning show how geopolitical this technological race will become in the years ahead.

Our petrochemical industries also need to be replaced with a *biobased chemical industry*, an opportunity for cooperation between the EU and Russia – a major future biomass player. Natural gas will in the coming decades be the *bridge fuel* towards such a renewable energy future, if and when the problem of methane evaporation in natural gas production is solved – this problem urgently needs more research and collaboration. European energy efficiency technologies combined with smart, peer-to-peer delivery systems could help both Russia and Europe immensely. Cradle-to-cradle concepts in developing our products could create a true 'circular economy' and will much improve the competitiveness of Eurasian companies. Europe & Russia are much more complementarity from a geo-economic point of view than is often thought. In making use of these, it will become possible to create the conditions under which a more stable and workable world order could gradually materialize; a *positive sum game* instead of a *zero sum game*. The precondition to realize such a goal lies with solving the problems of standards and in promoting genuine reciprocal market access.

Geo-environmental dangers looming ahead: the coming ecological catastrophe and the need to set differences aside

Another domain where the European Union and the Russian federation could work together is on environmental matters. Let us set aside the topic of 'climate change' for a moment, because Brussels and Moscow each have other appreciations of the respective impact of this phenomenon on their territories.

In my opinion we should here shift attention to a geo-environmental danger that is looming ahead and to which neither the EU nor Russia currently is devoting much attention, strangely enough; *the rapid deterioration in our planet's biodiversity*. There are many studies out there that signal planet Earth is currently experiencing its sixth, man-made mass extinction. And yet, none of the capitals is treating this as their highest priority. The very latest report comes from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the *Living Planet Report: Aiming Higher* (WWF, 2018). The latest *Living Planet Index* shows a 60% fall in just over 40 years…

Areas such as Brazil's Amazone region or Russia's wildlife constitute some of humanity's last buffers against a dramatic scenario, that – if left unchecked – will dawn upon us much sooner rather than later. The report states that the coming years leading up to 2020 might prove crucial. There is an unparalleled yet rapidly closing window of opportunity as we head into the year 2020, when the world will review its progress on sustainable development by means of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity. All economic activity ultimately depends on services provided by nature, making it an immensely valuable component of a nation's wealth. The period 2011-2020 has been declared the *United Nations Decade on Biodiversity* ("Living in Harmony with Nature") (https://www.cbd.int/2011-2020/), but the world's major powers do not seem to see the urgency, or perhaps they will later, when it is too late. This year's 25th anniversary of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) could be a good moment to place this topic of the highest political agenda (see: https://www.cbd.int/). We have to turn the tide (and we have to turn it quickly), not (only) for the sake of having a biologically diverse planet but for the sake of survival of humankind. In addition, without genuine biodiversity it will be impossible to fight climate change and to reach the objectives of the

UNFCCC / Climate Convention and its Paris Agreement. And even if this would be possible, we would still end up with a planet where basic ecosystem services such as food, drinkable water, and oxygen will become more and more scarce, until they complete cease to exist. Have our geostrategic agenda's clouded or distracted our judgement about what is really at stake in today's world? I fear this is indeed the case. The Russian Federation and the European Union could here jointly create a new momentum and place this topic of biodiversity where it belongs; centre stage in world politics. If not now, then future Russian and European generations will ask us if we had our priorities straight.

Conclusion: coming to terms to the new geopolitical landscape, together, or apart once again?

Looking back at the last phase before the end of the Cold War, things sometimes first have to get worse before they get better. As also mentioned in my Brussels paper in April 2018, East and West mistrust one another as a result of a mismanagement of the peace after 1991 and a lack of mutual empathy. Understanding what went wrong constitutes the first step in an analysis to draw lessons. But some things also went right, at least for a while. Some of the major treaties which formed the building blocks of the peace were born out of a mutually perceived necessity. Perhaps we are again entering such a period soon. In the redefinition of the East-West confrontation during the Cold War it were European countries that saw this necessity first. We can think here of the *Ostpolitik* pursued by the West-German chancellor Willy Brandt, and the subsequent Belgian Harmel-policy between 1967 and 1968. These diplomatic initiatives laid the ground work for the later Helsinki accords of 1975, as part of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Although the time may not be here just yet, it is diplomacy which is necessary to try to defuse some of the current tensions. The Russian President Putin seems to be ready for a *'Great Détente'* with the US, only if the American President Trump would create the conditions under which such a détente would be possible. If he is following the Mad Man-scenario of Ronald Reagan however, then we might still be finding ourselves somewhere in 1981, just before things got even worse before they got better. Reagan believed in a massive rearmament before he would be willing to talk again, to 'force' the hand of the other side. But the story is different this time; the playing field is no longer bilateral but multilateral. Reenacting Reagan's game once again will not necessarily 'work', it will complicate matters further. Why should European countries and the Russian federation wait for Washington to set the parameters?

Taking into account the current challenges of geo-economic renewal and geo-environmental catastrophes, why wait? A pragmatic cooperation to tackle at least some of these challenges could help both Europe and Russia to reaffirm their ambitions and capacities to become independent balancing players in the still to be materializing world order. Our actions or inactions will shape that upcoming world. Let us hope the opportunities are identified and seized upon.

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