Expert Comment

The crisis of the old West: Views from Germany

Peter W. Schulze (2019)
The crisis of the old West: Views from Germany

Peter W. Schulze

Introduction
The transience of the contemporary period, characterised by the evolution of the multipolar world order, differs fundamentally from both the now bygone yet long-lived bipolar era and the short interim of the unipolar world.

Back then, the Cuban crisis acted as a game changer, tackling the threat of nuclear confrontation and opening avenues for the building of a solid and acceptable basis of predictable policies. Mutually assured destruction/MAD neutralised aggressive policies on both sides, as John Herz and Kenneth Waltz had predicted. The nuclear stalemate created a balanced security equation throughout Europe and the northern hemisphere, respected by both the USSR and the US. In order to avoid deliberate or unintentional war, Cold War diplomacy led to agreements and treaties on the reduction of geostrategic and conventional arms, and respect for non-military intervention in opposing spheres of interest, at least in Europe. Regime change was not on the agenda, but the accumulated tension and massive military build-up in Europe found an outlet in proxy wars across the developing world.

Elements of the bipolar order are still with us, like the nuclear stalemate. But the transient period of a newly emerging global order is multi-layered and even more complicated than the preceding eras. This period is characterised by the confrontation between the outgoing and emerging world orders. The unipolar world under the hegemonic assertiveness of the United States is gradually giving way to a multipolar order. This process is being – whether knowingly or unintentionally – accelerated by the present administration in Washington.
Pointedly, Wolfgang Ischinger, the chairman of the highly renowned Munich Security Conference, states that Trump is “not a factor of stability” (2018, 92). He believes a withdrawal or weakening of US leadership will jeopardise the basis of international relations. The unpredictability of the new US president has serious consequences for the transatlantic community, for Europe, and for Germany. “Trust is lost” and crises could escalate faster and more forcefully (Ibid, 94).

This new order, still in its early formative stage, has neither a broad socio-political consensus nor universally accepted norms. What is even more problematic is that it is not based on established institutions and so lacks leadership, stability, and security.¹ In this context, the chances of reforming and democratising the United Nation are rather slim. Mutual trust and consensus regarding the essential challenges facing the world’s chief international actors are missing. The very foundations of world order are under attack. Consequently, expert communities in most countries throughout both the East and the West are concerned about a noticeable nationalist and protectionist backlash with global repercussions and presenting serious consequences for peace and security. Regions exposed to unresolved conflicts will be most affected.

Drivers and challenges of the multipolar order

Trends in the transient international order are no longer characterised by the search for democratic, law-based institutions enhancing universal human rights (Schulze (2018b, 17f). Persistent instability is due in part to a backlash that aims to re-establish the traditional social-political centrality of the nation-state. Instead of enhancing and projecting democratic and internationally agreed governance or strengthening multilateral agreements and

¹ For a more enhanced analysis of the transient order see Peter W. Schulze (Ed.), Multipolarity: The promise of disharmony (2018).
networks, the focus of national actors has now shifted. Stability and security have replaced the objective of enhancing democracy.

Multilateralism, the indispensable edifice of the old world order established at the end of World War Two by the West, is being challenged by a retreat to protectionism, national interests, and a weakening of the rule-based global order.

The central question is whether the emerging multipolar order can provide security and welfare for the international community and enhance rule-based multilateral relations? Uncertainty has given powerful impetus to the rise of populist, anti-democratic forces in both Western and Eastern societies. Such forces challenge the political establishment from within as political movements, NGOs, or newly formed parties. We must therefore assume that the newly emerging multipolar order will barely be able to guarantee territorial security and prospects for peaceful development.

Amid this process, the leading actors and drivers of global transformation are also themselves exposed to drastic changes and often unwilling to act as mediators to deescalate tensions or conflicts.
In this context, recent debate in Germany on the future of Western alliances, the transatlantic community, and Europe’s place in the international system’s new constellation of forces will be decisive for the survival of the EU, its potential for reform, and for its relations to another key international actor, Russia. Moscow, despite all its differences with the EU, probably shares the same fears, namely being side-lined by the major drivers of global change, the US and China. Russia’s nuclear status means it can exercise some constraint, but the EU does not have enough economic or political strength to shape the design of the future order.

Let us assume that the hegemonic position of the US – along with the attraction of its prevailing ideological scheme, *institutionalised international liberalism* – is steadily
evaporating. Given this fact, both actors, Russia and the EU, will eventually be forced to decide which power to cooperate with. The options are very limited, especially for the EU. As Ischinger argues, the EU needs to become an assertive actor in international politics but it can never renounce its alliance with Washington (2018, 98).

To complicate the issue even further, neither China nor Russia are currently – or likely to be so in the foreseeable future – able to act as an ally or substitute for declining US leadership in global affairs. Chinese experts deny “that China can step into the role of world leader in the near future” (Qinggua, 2018, 53ff). And if we follow the views of the Russian expert community, as aired at the Valdai conferences, or via the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) or in *Russia in Global Affairs*, the country is too weak economically to assume a dominant global leadership role (Karaganov and Suslov, 2018, 59-83).

However, the withering away of both the old bipolar order and the short and transitional unipolar order are creating opportunities for Russia. The political analyst Sergey Karaganov stresses that a “governance vacuum” will eventually be created and then filled with a new order in which Russia will play a key role.34

According to Karaganov, Russia “has re-established itself as a balancing influence within the global order”. Russia and China have been able to “build an increasingly robust partnership” that is challenging US hegemony. Or as Dmitri Trenin of the Moscow Carnegie Centre puts it, “The Russia-China relationship can be defined in strategic terms, based on clear common interests” (Trenin, 2018). The concept of Greater Eurasia and the pursuit of

---

2 This insight has successively prevailed in circles of the US expert world since 2009. Against this background, both the cautious and selective orientation of former President Obama’s foreign policies, his restraint in terms of military interventions, and the neo-isolationist approach under Trump are understandable.

3 Sergey Karaganov (2017) argues that a “big troika” of China, the US, and Russia should create the conditions for a peaceful transition to a more stable world order. Such an order should be expanded to other countries and based on “multilateral nuclear deterrence”.

4 Strangely enough, the former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (2018), of the Green Party, argues along similar lines, stating that the basis of the old order, dominated by Western powers, is staggering. The question considered absurd years ago, namely whether the West would survive, has been placed on the agenda.
a more balanced multipolar world order demonstrate unity in resisting US dominance in
world politics and opposing the export of the US institutionalised liberal democracy project.

Nevertheless, Russia and China operate in accordance with different geopolitical
models. “China’s geopolitical strategy to enhance its global position rests on its economic
and financial assets. The penetration of markets, giant infrastructural and industrial projects
like the One Belt One Road initiative, and the securing of energy supplies and resources for
its advancing economy are Beijing’s main tools” (Schulze, 2018, 156). In this respect Russia
has very little to offer. Or, as Ischinger (2018, 99) puts it, Russia has little to offer besides
energy and military strength; it is a “Scheinriese” (a phantom giant).

In a remarkable contribution to *Russia in Global Affairs*, Vladislav Surkov, the Russian
president’s special envoy to Ukraine, contradicts Karaganov’s optimism about the Eurasian
option. However, he does agree that after the “unavoidable events” of 2014 “Russia’s epic
westward quest is finally over. Repeated and invariably abortive attempts to become part
and parcel of the Western civilization, to get into the ‘good family’ of European nations have
ground to a final halt”. The cultural models simply did not match, because “Russia is a
Western-Eastern half-breed nation”. This implied that the Eurasian option had failed
historically too. In this context, Surkov predicted that 2014 was a game changer for Moscow.
The “era 14 plus” had started. In such an era, Russia would be destined “to a hundred years”
(or even more), “of geopolitical loneliness”. But such loneliness “does not spell isolation”.
Russia must look for and embark on a third way between isolationism and unlimited
openness.

Looking at the European Union, only daydreamers would argue the EU has a chance
to play a major role as an influential geopolitical player in the foreseeable future. Despite
several attempts, like Javier Solana’s security doctrine of 2003 and the *Shared Vision,
Common Action: A stronger Europe* reports of 2016, the EU is still characterised by its
inability to conduct an independent foreign policy due to the dominant position of the US and its transatlantic allies within NATO and the EU (Council of the European Union 2016, 135f).

The *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe* report is definitely a document of assertiveness, written to unify the EU against external challenges (Schulze, 2018, 135). Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security policy, even admits (Council of the European Union, 2016) that under the present international system’s instability, the “purpose, even existence, of our Union is being questioned” (Ibid, 3). She calls for collective “responsibility”, so that the EU will play a major role “as a global security provider”.

Mogherini does not define the global reach of the EU in hard power terms of military potential, but follows the traditional path of EU policies, pointing to the relevance of domestic social and political capabilities. However, in light of the international system’s lingering unpredictability, the EU must face reality. In concrete terms, the EU cannot exclusively remain a *civilian power*. Widespread investment in EU foreign policy is required, particularly in security and defence cooperation. Mogherini shows awareness of such challenges in the strategy’s introduction: “As Europeans we must take greater responsibility for our security. We must be ready and able to deter, respond to, and protect ourselves against external threats” (Ibid, 19).

However, Brussels’ lack of capacity as a geopolitical power presents a different image. The EU is challenged and immobilised by a multitude of combined internal and external factors including Brexit, the Trump Administration’s unpredictable foreign policy, rising anti-EU sentiment within Member States, the ongoing catastrophe of the refugee crisis, the unresolved Ukraine conflict, and the hopelessness of overcoming persistent financial crises since 2009.
The German debate: Loosening of Gulliver’s bonds?

Paradoxically enough, despite early warnings, a debate on the future world order and its impact on Europe’s role in the international system only recently came alive in Germany. For four years, the issue of the emerging global order has been overshadowed by domestic and external challenges like the refugee crisis, the divisions within the EU, the fight against terrorism, and the rise of a national-revisionist party which is deeply – and probably permanently – altering the spectrum of German political parties.

All these factors figured significantly in the German parliamentary elections of 2017 and have retained prominence since. The electoral results caused a political shock wave which rippled through the EU, complicating its already fragile cohesion. Unusually for stability-obsessed German politics, it took months of intense negotiations to form a coalition government composed of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, just as was previously the case. Germany’s position as a rock amid the storm, an island of reason in troubled times of international turmoil was shattered. As a result, neither is the coalition government solid nor is the political crisis yet over. Two factors have dominated political infighting since the elections. First, the rise of a nationalist and populist party, the AfD, which succeeded in entering not only all the German Länder parliaments but also the Bundestag, with an astonishingly 13% of the vote. Second, the unresolved refugee crisis has acted as a game changer in European politics since 2015, especially so in Germany. Nevertheless, the political struggles within the CDU and the SPD, the latter having failed miserably in most recent regional and national elections, has given rise to speculation that new elections are looming in 2019. The political establishment of both parties is under attack from within. The governing parties are confronted with an unquestionable erosion of voter loyalty, while the
opposition Greens are moving forward, claiming the former place of the Social Democrats in the political spectrum.\(^5\)

As a result, the confluence of factors seen in 2018, Berlin lost credibility as an anchor of European stability and engine of further integration. Immobilised by internal power struggles and suffering a loss of authority, Berlin is unable to play a leading role in European politics. As a consequence, the EU’s position as a mediator for conflict resolution in and beyond Europe is seriously troubled.

Surprisingly, and in contrast to the standstill in German politics, an open – and some would say divisive – debate has suddenly materialised in Germany’s political community to define the position of not only Germany itself, but also Europe, amid the accumulating challenges of the international arena. All at once, leading former decision-makers from the Green Party, Die Linke, the CDU, the CSU, and the Social Democrats joined the discussion. Those with previously divided assessments have concurred, bridging old left-right antagonisms.

In retrospect, 2018 may come to be seen by future historians as the watershed year in which the political and expert community of Germany realised that the free ride in security guaranteed by the United States during the bipolar era is over.

In the autumn of that year, Chancellor Merkel declared she would step down from the position as chair of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and would not seek re-election in 2021. Her announcement was a bombshell, although in a way it had been expected – even longed for – by large portions of society.

Within the CDU itself, the election of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, nicknamed AKK, to the helm of the party and as a potential successor for the chancellor’s office, calmed any

\(^5\) In follow up regional elections in Bavaria and Hessen, both coalition parties lost more than 10% each; the future looks even more disastrous for the Social Democrats. In a recent poll they figured at 14% in national polls.
potential internal unrest. But surprisingly, and in contrast to the past standstill in German politics, an open – and some would say divisive – debate then suddenly materialised in the wider political community to define the position of not only Germany itself, but also Europe, amid the accumulating challenges in the international arena.

All at once, leading former decision-makers from the Green Party, Die Linke, the CDU, the Christian Socialist Union of Bavaria (the sister party of the CDU), and the Social Democrats joined the discussion. Those with previously divided assessments have often concurred, which has bridged many of the old left-right antagonisms.

Germany’s long-standing high-moral reluctance to become involved in robust international obligations – even when demanded by Western allies or mandated by the international community – is seen as clashing with the present uncertainty and threatening realities of the transient global system.

The call that Germany must agree to shoulder more international responsibilities is shared across the political spectrum. However, a deep discrepancy remains over the use of hard power and interventionist practises as exemplified by the US. Sigmar Gabriel, a former leader of the SPD, the more left-leaning of the two major parties, wrote in Zeitenwende in der Weltpolitik (2018) that Germany must clearly profess its position to its diplomacy of peace which culminates in the “Primat des Politischen” (Primate of politics) and rejects military actions. This view is shared by the Bavarian Prime minister Markus Söder of the conservative CSU party, who in an interview with the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on 22 February 2019 strongly argued against the dangers of a new arms race, and opposes the stationing of missiles in Europe.

Gabriel, whose brief term as German Foreign Minister ended in March 2018 after nine brief months, expressively supports a rebirth of the European idea, for deepening integration, strengthening EU institutions, and moving the EU out of its present immobilised situation to become a global actor. European assertiveness is the catch word. He is aware
that reforms of EU institutions are behind schedule, and that the EU must develop its foreign and security policy to be recognised as a leading competitor to take part in the redesign of the new world order.

Gabriel demands structural and institutional reforms and stresses that “the European Union of today possesses only a reduced capacity to act”. In a way, he supports the idea of a multispeed European integration process that could lead to the creation of a Core Europe. To achieve a role as a global actor, the EU needs to overcome its internal division and face the reality of the international system, which is ruled by power politics. The pursuit of national power interests does not exclude the application of military means.

According to Gabriel his assertion should not be misunderstood as a call for the militarisation of the EU’s foreign and security policy. The EU, he concludes, still remains the “strongest globally acting civil power”. But efforts are needed to balance and counter military power with soft power for the EU to achieve its objectives.

The first steps toward a common European Defence Union point in the right direction, but this process must not replace the civil and diplomatic advantages of the EU as a leading civil soft power in the world. What is more required is a return to Realpolitik. The EU and Germany both must keep away from over dimensional moral and normative restrictions. In a transient world where different actors are clashing over values and the search for a new world order is on the agenda, Germany must renounce its historical constraints and opt actively for more global responsibility.

Such a policy approach would lead to the establishment of a strategic foreign policy culture, of course, deeply embedded in a European perspective. Such a strategic policy culture must focus on European and German interests and needs to clarify the relationships to the USA and Russia. Gabriel argues persuasively that Washington will remain the main strategic partner of the EU. However, this will not exclude clashes of interest, as evident today in the fields of Europe’s energy security, US protectionism and tax threats against the
German car industry, as well as the abandonment of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), and in differences in securing the multilateral global order or how to deal and solve conflicts in the Middle East, or on Iran. In other words, Gabriel warns that Germany or Europe should not rely on the illusion that Washington will provide security for Europe as it did in the past during the bipolar era. Washington has become a non-predictable actor.

As opposed to other voices in the German expert community, Gabriel also focuses on domestic political and socio-economic issues as determents of Europe’s and Germany’s security and position in global politics. The verdict in his book, Europe’s stability depends on Germany’s stability is well made. The backbone of Germany’s stability, that it can function as an anchor for Europe’s strength and welfare, depends socially on its economically thriving middle class who have been resilient to political extremism and polarisation. But times have changed.

The German middle class – as seen in the election results of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) – senses a loss of security caused by profound changes of power in the international system, as well as threats to domestic protection and the authority of the German state. Growing social and economic inequality, which has appeared despite favourable economic performance, has further eroded trust in the EU and in the transatlantic community.

The middle class is anxious that mass migration, first seen in 2015, would alter the societal composition of the country, that integration of refugees would not lead to expected results, but would rather deplete social protection systems. German Angst is becoming a crucial factor of politics again, damaging the hitherto common and prevailing consensus between all political classes. Gabriel piercingly states that the “struggle for Germany’s soul had started” (“Der Kampf um Deutschlands Seele hat längst begonnen”).
According to Gabriel the relationship of Germany to Russia is central for the security and welfare of Europe. He reveals that his political persuasion is profoundly influenced by subjective impressions and by the tradition of Willy Brandt’s and Egon Bahr’s former German Ostpolitik, based on Realpolitik, which ended Europe’s division and paved the way to Germany’s unification.

Gabriel describes the stages of Russia’s transition during the last two decades, emphasising the intense cooperation to build relationships between Germany and Russia and criticises those Western states which never “intended to live together with Russia in a common European house”. He warns that geopolitical right-wing forces in the United States plan to contain not only Russia but also Germany, referring to Brzezinski’s concept that the US intends to bring the Eurasian continent under its control.

Recognising that German-Russian relations are central for Europe’s security and welfare, he warns that within Europe there should be no Sonderbeziehungen (special relationships) between Russia and Germany. He rejects the ideas of some right- and left-wing politicians that Germany can never subscribe to an Äquidistanz (Equidistant) between the US and Russia. However, that does not include the search for new fields of cooperation. The dialogue with Moscow must continue.

In this respect there is no difference with some politicians from the CDU/CSU, like the Bavarian Prime Minister. Markus Söder (2019) defines himself as a convinced transatlantic minded person but refuses to push Russia into a neglectable role in global politics. To settle the thorny Ukrainian issue, Gabriel urges for more flexibility and openness of the US, the EU and Kiev towards Moscow.

Germany, he argues, should use its seat in the Security Council of the United Nations to mediate and push forward the peacekeeping mission in the Ukraine. In his book, he states he does not expect any support from Washington for solving the Ukrainian conflict. He opts, as did his predecessor Frank-Walter Steinmeier, for a more creative and flexible
implementation of the sanctions against Russia. This is based on his personal impression gained from several visits in the Kremlin that the Russian president is willing to accept a political, face saving solution of the conflict.

Jürgen Trittin, a leading member of the Green Party and spokesman in the Foreign Affairs committee, bluntly declared that the “old West” is dead (2018, 13). In theory, Trittin argued, the alliance between the US and Europe rested on common values, interests, and institutions. But those common values are eroding under the Trump Administration. Trittin identified Trump as the “grave digger of the political West” (Ibid). He argued that Europe must emancipate itself from the US project of a liberal institutionalised order. He shared Chancellor Merkel’s idea that Europe must look after its own security interests in its neighbourhood. The US is no longer a trustworthy partner. However, contrary to statements made by other Greens in the Bundestag, and those of the CDU, especially those of the German Minister of Defence Ursula von der Leyen, Trittin warned that Europe’s security would neither be guaranteed by military interventions nor a rise in defence spending: “The security of Europe is predominantly threatened by failing states and by new types of wars at Europe’s southern border, but not by Russia”.6 His stance is that higher defence spending and militarily deterrence will not help against these threats.

Instead, Europe must attain an independent position as a structural pillar in the emerging multipolar world order. This may even imply flexible alliances set up on the basis of multilateral interest. Europe’s strength lies in its economic potential and its use of soft power. Europe should take responsibility for pushing through civil, global governance. Military intervention is a fruitless means of assuming responsibility in the international arena, Trittin argued.

6 “Europas Sicherheit ist nämlich vor allem durch Staatszerfall und Kriegen neuen Typs an der südlichen Grenze bedroht, nicht durch Russland".
In contrast to Trittin, the former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (2018a) predicted a gloomy scenario for Europe and also for the stability and security of international relations more widely in a recent article in the German weekly, Die Zeit, if the trend towards isolationism under the Trump Administration continues. If the US gives up its global leadership role, he argued, and regresses to a narrow variant of national interests and particularism, or even launches a trade war with the EU and China, severe repercussions for international stability could follow. The West would suffer. In that event the very existence of the Western model would be at stake. Fischer warned that if US foreign policy under Trump became a security risk ("Risikofaktor") the “whole system would cease to function”.

Given the deplorable state of the European Union, Fischer insisted that the EU has reached a moment of truth. Either the integration process would deepen and attain a new political quality or there would be a backlash of national particularism similar to what was seen in the 19th century and the 20th century. Neither a solid consensus nor a political will to reform and democratise the EU is currently in sight, and any retreat into nationalism could provoke a collapse. Fischer therefore embraced the notion of a “vanguard” for Europe.

He supports the idea of creating a core Europe, i.e., assembling a “group of the willing”. The concept is based on French-German partnership (Fischer, 2018b, 123ff) as the traditional engine for integration. Its main objective – of keeping the EU together – is not exclusive. It would be open for countries to join if certain standards and conditions are met. Nevertheless, this would imply a Europe of “two speeds”. This is not the most favourable solution and Fischer is aware of the danger a ‘Core Europe’ concept could present but it could boost the political, social, and fiscal integration process. The division of the EU into core and peripheral states would open the door to external non-European forces, like China, to penetrate the European space with investments and large scale projects.

Fischer’s position also differs from Trittin in emphasising that the main security risks for Europe are the war in Ukraine and the still unresolved dormant conflicts in the Balkans.
For him, Russia remains the highest threat to Europe’s security. In this respect he is in accordance with his unrelenting transatlantic credentials. Fischer fears that the Russian elite still longs for superpower status, just as in the bipolar era. Despite its economic and technological weakness, Russia’s military strength means it could embark on a “risky foreign policy” (Fisher, 2018b, 134). Obviously this would be directed against Europe. Interestingly enough, Fischer’s view is moderated by the fact he sees Russia as exposed to the changing constellation of forces in the international system as well. Russia lacks a specific strategy as to how to deal with the challenge of what its place in the new world order could be. As a result, the Kremlin is torn between three options:

a) **Remain in self-isolation at a low level of socio-economic and technological development;**

b) **Strengthening and accelerating its Eurasian preference and becoming a subordinate collaborator to Beijing;**

c) **Returning to Europe.**

Because of its Eurasian heritage, Russia will remain an exceptional actor and the country will always play a special role in European politics. This needs to be recognised by Europeans (Fischer, 2018b, 137). In dealing with Russia, the European Union should be aware that Russian identity is deeply rooted, historically and geopolitically. Fischer therefore recommends that Western powers, especially the EU, conduct diplomacy ruled by strategic patience, endurance, and respect. This would eventually allow Russia to return into the European community.
Gernot Erler, a high ranking Social Democrat and formerly the German coordinator for relations between German and Russian civil society, has raised the question of whether the shock waves of transition that are currently rippling through the international system will eventually give rise to new power relations. A new world order is emerging, but without the West, he argues provocatively (2018).

Erler defines Russia, China, the US and the EU as global players which influence and drive processes of change (Erler, 2018, 191). Because of their different interests and objectives, they are unable to shape the emerging order according to their own views. Unquestionably, a multipolar global order is emerging, but what configuration of power relations will emerge at the end is far from obvious. Erler persuasively argues that experiences and decisions of the past still shape the political context of today and will continue to influence the new order that will be created.

Erler points to several past experiences which, in his opinion, have lasting effects for the present and the future:

(i) **Military intervention**

Interventions in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Libya, and Iraq have been the most telling, since they all produced catastrophic results and failed to succeed in their objectives. In some cases, the legal basis was questionable; in other cases, failing states were created or a whole region was artificially secured through external measures. Each of these cases directly influenced in world politics a negative manner and gave rise to interstate tension. As a result, relations between the West – i.e., the US and EU – and Russia deteriorated substantially.

(ii) **Regime change**

Military interventions have often been supported by soft power, which is a more flexible variant of hard power, consisting of infiltration, media usage, propaganda, and support for
opposition groups, parties, and NGOs. These instruments and methods belong to the classic repertoire of all political powers, but they have really come to prominence since the end of the bipolar era.

Since the ‘colour revolutions’ in the post-Soviet space, Moscow has reacted – or overreacted – to plans and initiatives to steer those countries out of the Russian sphere of influence. There is no doubt among the Russian expert community and power groups linked to the Kremlin that all those efforts were assisted financially and organisationally by the US and Western NGOs (Erler, 2018, 194). Regime change was openly declared as an objective by Russian opposition groups and in Western circles. As a disastrous side effect, as with the sanctions regime since 2014, opposition efforts and initiatives in Russia have come to be seen as externally designed have therefore been exposed to repressive measures.

(iii) Double standards and the battle against terror

Since 2001 and the proclamation of the War on Terrorism, the authority and established values of Western society have suffered tremendously. Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, water boarding, and other practices of torture and humiliation have undermined esteem for the West around the world. The moral high ground of the US and its Western allies is practically gone, having collided with a reality characterised by savage brutality in the use of force, disregarding human and civil rights. Such appalling truth now seems global knowledge, the West’s double standards, as Moscow claims.

Erler throws open an interesting question, one barely raised elsewhere in the debate. In the framework of his painful analytical description of the present international scenery, he asks what would happen if one of the driving forces of global change were to collapse or leave the field. In real terms, what would happen if Europe ceased to project its values, rules, and institutions and softened its reliance on controlling power through a pluralistic and democratic civil society?
Summing up, Erler is confident that a global order without Europe is not possible (Erler, 2018, 202). He enthusiastically embraces French President Macron’s 2017 Sorbonne speech, which advocated re-establishing a sovereign, democratic, and unified Europe (Ibid, 200). However, in light of the political backlash and social battles in France, as in other EU Member States, it seems highly doubtful that a ‘new start’ for Europe will begin in France.

Wolfgang Ischinger shares Erler’s reassuring optimism and demands an active European policy to successfully conclude Europe and Germany’s projects of reconciliation with all neighbouring states, including Russia (Ischinger, 2018, 281). To accomplish this, the EU needs to become a global player, adapt to the changing international environment, and begin its own transformation toward majority-based decision-making in foreign policy. The creation of a Defence Union and the effective protection of Europe’s external borders are mandatory. Ischinger echoes Mogherini’s call for more realism. But according to him, such realism can only be achieved through higher defence spending and by maintaining close ties with the US, regardless of the present Trump Administration. Ischinger refers to the familiar old idea of the Common European Home and concludes that the danger of a new division of Europe can only be met if a balanced relationship can be established with Russia. However, this goal cannot be achieved from a position of weakness. Building trust and a readiness to counter aggression should become the backbone of Europe’s global objective to guarantee a peaceful future.

The German debate is indicative of the fact that the EU and Germany are at the crossroads of change: Europe cannot escape the challenges resulting from the international system’s process of transition and must assert its position as a global actor, at least on the continent itself and throughout the European neighbourhood. Germany is exposed to those challenges more than other member states of the EU.

In the present German debate on the future of the EU, the state of the transatlantic community, the country’s position within the networks of multilateralism, its global trade and
investment objectives, especially in the US, China, and Russia, are all at stake. Leadership and sovereignty at the European level are in demand, but they are in demand in Germany too.

It seems to be clear that a special path for Germany to meander through the traps of the transitory global order is as unrealistic as a special relationship with Russia. But the brilliantly formulated common wishes as – rhetorically at least – uttered currently by Berlin’s Foreign Office, that Germany’s foreign policy must be embedded in Europe’s foreign objectives, are neither realistic nor practical. Even a convoy needs leadership and an orientation of where to go; both are currently missing in Brussels and Berlin.

**Peter W. Schulze**

*Professor, Georg-August University of Göttingen*
References


