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Dear High Representative,

As you enter into your role as High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, you will undoubtedly be inundated with unsolicited advice, especially as the impetus for the *Conference on the Future of Europe* gains traction and because of the importance it will give to civic space and the ideas of citizens. So, it is with apologies, but in the spirit of supporting your endeavours that we offer some remarks for your consideration, which we hope can bolster them, and by extension the EU, in its external relations during your period as High Representative.

You, along with others, are surely correct to argue that the EU should adopt a more strategically independent approach towards a troubled and increasingly competitive world order. But we caution against a full-bore commitment to *geopolitical* strategic thinking. In terms of both intellectual tradition and practice, the geopolitical disposition is at odds with the path the EU has taken over the last several decades, especially in its commitment to collective problem solving in multilateral institutional settings. For all the challenges, we strongly believe that multilateral collaboration is still the best approach for the EU to articulate and propagate.

In an era when populist leaders try to normalise nationalist postures, it falls to the EU to provide the intellectual and practical leadership necessary to halt this trend. It will best do so by reasserting the core values that underpin the European project. We offer seven propositions (elaborated upon in the supporting paper we offer in the attached annex) as to how this might be done in a way that resists both the populist-nationalist discourse and the geopolitical discourse with which the Commission appears to be dabbling.

The EU—while embracing the US security relationship—should do more to defend itself as the US is looking a less reliable actor and partner. There are damaging long-term splits in the EU's relationship with the US that need to be repaired: the future of NATO, strategy towards Iran, trade and protectionism, the importance of international institutions (especially the UN and WTO) and global environmental policy. A strategy of European Defence can coexist with NATO, especially with the EU buying 80+% of its military hardware from the US. Russia should also be engaged, but in a European way. On an issue such as Russian readmittance to the G7, we need to adhere to President Macron's view of re-engagement with "necessary prerequisites," rather than President Trump's condition-free approach.

Europe must lead on the reform and (re)-strengthening of multilateralism in the absence of either US or Chinese leadership. This is especially so as we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the creation of the UN. As both you and President Von der Leyen have noted, multilateralism for the EU is obvious. As she says: “Cooperating and working with others is what our Union is all about.” But multilateralism must change. It needs to adapt to the growing hybridity in international relations, become less bureaucratic and be more open to non-state actors.

A new multi-centred (as distinct from multipolar) system will require new rules, or at least the reform of the old rules. Sensitively espoused and properly contextualised, a “rules-based order”—or perhaps more precisely a “norms-based order” incorporating the core liberal democratic practices—may have considerable purchase and Europe will remain the laboratory of multilateralism and multi-level governance. The EU must act as a defender of these norms at the same time as it supports the reform of institutional practice where necessary.

The venues of diplomacy and dialogue need reinvigoration or, as with the WTO, they will continue to atrophy. The challenge is to get the balance right between a tired-looking international institutional technocracy and the need for a multilateral diplomacy to provide public goods in a nuanced and moderated fashion. This should be a diplomacy that exhibits an appropriate compromise, reflecting the demands of *all* major players in the modern order and taking advantage of modern communicative technologies. The EU must support multilateralism with all the vigour it can muster. It must put real support, not just rhetoric, behind the Franco-German led [*Alliance for Multilateralism*](#). But while the EU must tread firmly in the pursuit of modern-day multilateralism, it must also tread softly and deftly.

The EU should strengthen its inter-regional relations, especially in its neighbourhood. In a world drifting away from multilateralism, inter-regional relations will become increasingly important. This is especially so regarding Eurasia, East Asia, the MENA and sub-Saharan Africa regions. EU-Asia relations will grow as trans-Atlantic relations become more strained. The EU understands the global “China issue.” But in contrast to US policy towards China, the EU should work towards accommodation not confrontation. This does not mean accepting everything that China does that may be questionable. Cautiously nurturing the relationship is not the same as passive acceptance.

The EU should treat the concept and practice of Eurasia seriously. It is gaining momentum as both an economic and a geopolitical fact of life. The relationship between Russia and China might be fitful, but it would be imprudent to assume that it will not consolidate in the security or the economic domain in the near term, especially since the relationship is now developing more on the basis of strategic pragmatism rather than, as in the past, ideology.

The EU should recognise that events across the Mediterranean will have an adverse impact in the longer run if sustainable governance and growth and development strategies cannot be put in place to contain the pressures of economic and political migration. Less talk of Europe as a “cultural superpower” and more talk of pragmatic partnership and business potential that takes the relationship beyond a residual colonial legacy will change the atmospherics of the relationship. The two continents are going to be more integrated across a range of economic and political issue areas in the years to come. Now is the time to think comprehensively about a systemic strategy that balances both optimism and pessimism about the future of the continent. The development of a “continent to continent”

relationship, with North and Sub Saharan Africa treated as a single entity, should be an important development. We commend your comments made during your recent trip to Addis Ababa.

As the President has affirmed, the EU needs to take the lead in combating climate change. The European Green Deal is premised on the assumption identified in the 2019-24 *New Strategic Agenda for the EU* that climate change is “an existential threat.” The EU cannot solve this challenge on its own. It is a foreign policy issue as much as an EU organisational issue. The new Commission has the formidable ambition to combine growth with sustainable development. In theory, the proposed deal will cut emissions while also creating jobs and improving quality of life. But to do so it will require massive investment in infrastructure, research, innovation and green technologies, as well as a commitment to stimulate the economy. Moreover, it will also need policies to decouple economic growth from resource depletion and environmental degradation. This implies levying carbon taxes on imports, becoming carbon neutral by 2050 and developing the various technologies needed to get there as the EU becomes the partner of countries also wishing to address the climate change challenge. This task is not simply an internal affair, but also one that will change the EU’s external policy and relations with external partners. Its ambition here will, for example, affect EU trade policy and its policy of scientific and technological cooperation.

Dealing with digitalisation and digital disruption must be another EU priority. These issues are foreign policy and international relations questions as much as questions for EU internal resolution. The need and desire of states to preserve their “information sovereignty” is a major policy issue, as issues of sovereignty and jurisdiction continue to compete more fiercely with freedom and openness. The EU will need to respond to both the *hierarchical* behaviour of the digital “superpowers” (the US and China) and the aspiring great powers (notably Russia and India) and the *hybridity* of the principal non-state digital players that have driven digitalisation in the 21st century: notably GAFAM companies in the US and Tencent, Huawei, Baidu, Alibaba and Weibo in China.

The major states are now harnessing privately developed technological platforms of power to enhance their rhetoric and practice of nationalism in the battle to safeguard (and control) national digital economies. Current tensions over design, governance and jurisdiction reflect broader global fissures. In the contemporary era the US and China are creating two sharply defined technological and online systems—or separate *digital ecologies*. The American system is still primarily private sector-driven, while China’s is state-driven. But both systems envelop the development of AI, big data, 5G and instruments of cyber warfare. The European President appears to understand the implications of this for the EU, especially the digitalisation of finance. Importantly here, it is time for the EU to get over its inferiority complex vis-à-vis the US dollar, especially as the US now uses it as an economic weapon. As Russia and China look to trade in roubles and renminbi, the EU should ensure that European financial instruments are used strategically to enhance Europe’s leadership and influence in the world of digital practice and governance. More generally, a diplomatic but strong competition policy will be a crucial instrument of external relations over the next five years

The EU must not follow the US in seeking a major decoupling in the manufacturing and industrial sectors. Decoupling in the name of national security is a US response to China as a strategic competitor. China is also showing signs of a decoupling strategy. This trend can only be exacerbated by the current coronavirus epidemic. But let us not lose sight of the fact that supply chain integration is much greater than vocal “de-couplers” appreciate and support for this trend is still alarming.

Integrated supply chains are still one of our best hopes for avoiding a new Cold War. Europe lacks the clout to contest US, Chinese or Sino-Russian politico-strategic power. The EU should be a major player *but* has to-date “muddled through,” so it must now make the best of the economic and trade assets to remain the champion of global commerce.

As a top three global trader, and whatever the pain it might cause, the EU must face down US protectionist recklessness and a preference for transactional/bilateral negotiation if an open trading regime is to survive. It will not be alone. Others will support the EU position, especially states along the East Asian seaboard from China to Japan, South Korea and into the major Southeast Asian trading states. Support will also be found in outward facing Latin America, Oceania, and Africa, especially as the Free Trade area develops. The EU should show resolve towards excessive Chinese intrusion into its affairs, especially regarding AI and digital information technologies. But it should equally avoid decoupling from China simply to conform to American wishes and pressure.

The EU needs to acknowledge that for many people in Europe migration is *the* major policy challenge. Therefore, coherent, humane and fair policy is needed. But to do this Brussels must now deal with the principal opponents to a sensible migration policy—populists and nationalists. Not only have they grown more politically powerful, they *are becoming internationalist in outlook*. While still strongly Eurosceptical, the new populist-nationalists are learning to harness a pan-European identity to further their goal of a racially pure, white Christian continent. Nationalists have done this by adopting a broader “civilisational” outlook on international relations which, ironically focuses on European, not nationalist, culture. Conflict is moving in a nationalist cross-cultural civilisational direction, although nationalist views of European values focus less on issues of freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights than racial and ethnic identity politics and a privileged status for Judaism and Christianity.

The Europeanisation of anti-immigrant positions by nationalists has evolved into a deliberate strategy to make their radical demands appear moderate and palatable. In this context, Brussels will need to confront pan-European, anti-Muslim “occidental” policies that nationalists, if successful, would mobilise in the pursuit of its particular view of EU external relations. To counter this, the EU should enhance its strategic approach to international cultural relations and diplomacy, begun under your predecessor, as a vehicle to help combat European populism and nationalism and send a strong signal of collective European identity that nevertheless embraces diversity. **International cultural relations and cultural diplomacy remain a core EU strength.**

But simply adjusting old narratives to new environments will not be enough to restore the liberal order. New mindsets will need to take account of the impact of modern communicative technologies on international relations as we strive to maintain an open (and increasingly digitally networked) new order. Digital communication changes the nature of state bargaining and cooperative strategies. The governance dilemma is no longer simply democracy *versus* autocracy, although that division remains; it is also *open* governance *versus* *closed* governance. This applies in particular to the role of those self-empowered international civil society networks outside the scope of governments and for whom many traditional liberal values remain salient. There will (must) still be a place for democracy (of many variants), freedom of thought, rule of law and indeed human rights. Europe must be their advocate. But these values will have to exist within a context of greater respect for national values and civilisational identity. In an open order we should expect power to be distributed more horizontally—

both publicly and privately and with flatter, reciprocal structures—than in the past. So-called soft power will become increasingly, not less, important and increasingly digital in its application.

In sum: The Commission must decide what is going to be its strategic message. To outside observers two competing views currently appear to emanate from its senior leadership: (i) The idea that the new Commission will be an increasingly muscular “geopolitical commission” for an increasingly geopolitical world yet (ii) continuing a similarly robust commitment to the values of multilateralism and cooperative collective action problem solving. While not theoretically not contradictory of one another, these are messages that do not normally sit easily together; especially when it comes to practical matters of policy implementation. Sometime choices will need to be made soon. The EU should not become a purely *Realpolitik*-driven player—implicit in the first view—if it really believes in and intends to stick to its internationalist values, expressed in the second view. We believe that “the EU as a Geopolitical Commission” should not become a new slogan. A geopolitical road needs to be resisted for a geo-sustainable strategic agenda that offers innovative ways to deal with climate change, digital disruption and migration and that strengthens multilateralism, interregional and intercultural relations and open, non-protectionist trade against the contemporary nationalist transactional tide.

Yours sincerely*,

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The need to avoid “mixed messages”: Towards a consistent EU position on world order

Abstract

This paper highlights what it sees as a risk of ambiguity—and possibly even contradiction—in the new Commission’s strategy for its external relations. Put simply, two competing views can be identified: on the one hand the senior leaders of the Commission make it clear in their declarations that collective action problem solving through multilateral institutionalism is the *modus operandi* running through the DNA of the EU and should be preserved. On the other hand, in a new move, it is also argued that we live in geopolitical world requiring a “geopolitical commission” to confront the US, China and Russia on their own geopolitical terms.

Sadly, we cannot have it both ways. The EU should not make the mistake of thinking that the only way it can be a player in the contemporary order is by becoming a *Realpolitik*-driven geopolitical player itself. Rather it should stick to the approach recently identified in its *New Strategic Agenda: 2019-24* (European Council, 2019) of supporting multilateral organisations, implementing the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and preserving an open global economy. If the EU really believes in its internationalist values, it should stick to them. The goal should be geo-sustainability not geopolitics. This paper outlines seven key propositions directed towards that end.

Introduction: Where are we with the World Order?

For a range of now well-understood reasons, the post-World War II rules-based era—for want of an alternative explanation, an American Liberal-Led World Order, noting that it was only ever a partial order—is unravelling rapidly in front of our eyes. Explanations of this unravelling are multifaceted and often interconnected. They include *inter alia*:

- The rising challenges from China.
- An era of post-Soviet collapse and Russian re-assertiveness following a radical decline in trust between Moscow and Brussels in the wake of the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine.
- The impact of digital information, communication technologies and social media on politics as a facilitator of the growth of nationalism, populism and fundamentalism in Europe and elsewhere (especially since 2008).
- The destabilising political impact of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa on migration flows to Europe as part of a wider global refugee problem of unprecedented and growing proportions (in excess of 70 million displaced people worldwide).
- The impact of uneven distributional consequences of globalisation on rising inequality within developed countries to a level that undermines economic solidarity and the “social bond” in the relationship between citizens and the state.
- The structural, but necessary, disruptive impact needed to address climate change.
- Last and perhaps most importantly, the progressive withdrawal of the United States from international citizenship, both reflected in and exacerbated by the growing socio-political divisions in the US and the destabilising populist, nationalist and transactionalist behaviour of its current president, which effectively places the international institutional architecture in suspended animation.

Less tangibly, but no less significantly, we are caught in a “narcissistic turn” in international political discourse. A culture of narcissism afflicts the international politics of the world’s major states. We live in an era of “strongman leadership” (emphasis on “man”), vis-à-vis Putin, Xi Jinping, Modi, Bolsonaro, Duterte, Orban, Mohammed bin Salman and “wannabe” strong leaders such as Trump, Johnson and others. We are at a stage where rampant personal, invariably male, narcissism distorts the manner in which states practice international relations and conduct diplomacy (see Burkle, 2017). For these leaders, international leadership has to be both *public* and *personal* (think Trump and Kim Jong Un)—not the best way to conduct international relations and diplomacy.

Fortunately, the collective leadership of the EU does not exhibit such tendencies. The structure of the EU, the dual roles of the President and the HR, the importance that the new President wants to place on College decision-making supported by other, increasingly gender diverse, commissioners with international dimensions to their portfolios, mitigates this kind of behaviour—the illiberal behaviour of some EU leaders notwithstanding. Any desire to establish unique personal roles is contained by this collective structure of leadership in the EU. Europe does not need to exhibit the leadership style of Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. As we will suggest, the EU needs simply to show consistency and resolve—a quiet but persuasive strength if you like—in its external relations. This is, of course, no small task.

For sure, the incoming Commission has indicated that it needs to toughen up for a more brutal age in which geopolitics and realist power politics are back in fashion after 20 years of growing soft power ascendancy between the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Global Financial Crisis, built on assumptions of EU normative power (see Manners 2006). Indeed, as indicated in her *Mission Letter* (September 2019), the incoming President identified her Commission as a “geopolitical commission.” At one level this makes sense. Given both the sometimes-nationalist rhetoric and practice of international relations of the 21st century, especially by the Great Powers, the EU must be attuned to this trend and its attendant implications. But a knee jerk U-turn from its traditional positions is not without danger for the EU. The EU’s international strengths are economic (especially as the world’s third largest trading community) and cultural (as the home of the Enlightenment). But neither economics nor culture are easily applied to a modern-day geopolitical strategy.

The EU remains one of the few serious international actors that believes in, and still mostly practices, a liberal view of world order as articulated in its *Grand Strategic Vision Statement* (European Union, 2016) and echoed in its *New 2019-2024 Strategy* (European Council, 2019). Moreover, none of the challenges identified by the Commission can be successfully confronted by hard power and *Realpolitik*, nor indeed traditional diplomacy, alone. “Toughening up” is one thing. Jettisoning the EU’s traditional collective institutional strengths and ethics is another. The EU’s external relations cannot only be about geopolitics.

Conversely, cultural and soft power diplomacy, while yet to fully punch their weight, do at least have the potential to enhance EU international standing in both the near neighbourhood and far abroad if implemented strategically (see Carta and Higgott, 2019). Geopolitics and geo-economics ignore the dramatic rise of *geo-civilisational* politics and culture wars at the international level and the need to mitigate their worst excesses. States are appropriating the concept of “civilisational status” to resist the ubiquity of universal liberal values in the discussion of the structure of global order. This is not just the trend in countries such as China, Russia, Turkey and other (semi) authoritarian states. Western articulations of civilisational identity are also built on “narratives of irreconcilability.” This is a battle of ideas and culture (see [DOC Research Institute, 2019](#)).

So, let's do international relations the European way

There is an unspoken issue that is often presented as an assumption. Let us put it as a question rather than an assertion: To what degree is Europe a global actor? And if it is to be one, what kind of actor will it be? How should it practice international relations? Should it have global economic and political strategies comparable to the United States in the 20th century and now also China in the 21st century? The EU is not the US nor is it China but it has to be a player in a multipolar world if it is to share in the economic and technological developments that are changing the nature of world order and reshaping the power structures of the early 21st century (especially online digital platforms, AI, data monopolies, etc). Europe is vulnerable to the technological and political bifurcation—“de-coupling” to use the *mot du jour*—of the global superstructure between the US and China.

Europe is mainly a “user” rather than producer in the domains of modern technology. If, on the back of the changing nature of great power economic competition, de-coupling takes root in the international order, then the longer-term effects on the EU will be profound. Occupying a secondary role will be an inevitable loss of influence and more importantly, diminished economic autonomy. The resolution of this conundrum for Europe is not easy. To flourish, the EU needs to become more assertive, while at the same time maintaining its wider commitment to collective action problem solving. This strategy, rather than a geopolitical strategy, is indeed the road to which the EU should adhere over the next five years. To do so, the EU must get over its self-identified “existential crisis” (EU, 2016:9) and develop its currently under-developed *global* voice. Establishing a global voice is a task for the Commission as a whole, recognising that the boundaries between internal affairs and foreign affairs are always blurred and operating through the collective decision-making processes identified by the President in her *Mission Letter* (Von der Leyden, 2019) will be crucial.

Put bluntly, the EU should avoid getting tied up in the games of geopolitics. The EU’s long-standing instinct to resist the more egregious forms of *Realpolitik* and geopolitical imperatives in favour of a commitment to global, collective action problem solving in multilateral institutional contexts is not wrong. Contrary to her remarks on geopolitics, the President appears to understand this. As she says: “We want multilateralism, we want fair trade, we defend the rules-based order because we know it is better for all of us. We have to do it the European way. This European way isn’t marked on black and white geopolitical maps.” (European Commission, 2019).

Used deftly, the principles that underpinned European normative power in the closing decades of the 20th century, can remain relevant as a guide to action. The EU cannot match, and nor does it have the intellectual will or stomach for, the transactionalism of the other major states. It needs to lead by example and carve out a wider collective position with other “like-minded” democratic nations (of which there are still more than we often imagine) resistant to simply being squeezed between the global powers (Japan, Canada, South Korea, Australia, etc).

The EU has the ability to lead hybrid “coalitions of the willing” or “like-minded” actors that can constitute a critical mass and “force multipliers” in specific policy areas, adopting strategies redesigned around the new communicative technologies. Of course, this is no easy task. But if “finding voice” is to be successful, it is crucial to demonstrate the added value of an EU foreign policy both to member states, their citizens and international partners. Mitigating the challenges that emanate from the unravelling of world order is both an internal and an external task. To the extent possible, its external policy goals and priorities need to create a Community-wide consensual foreign policy discourse. The EU should thus engage in dialogue both within and beyond its borders.

To do this, EU policy approaches over the next five years need to incorporate and enhance the instruments and practices of soft power and cultural diplomacy, the scientific and academic diplomacy begun under HE Mogherini, as well as the instruments of traditional security and economic diplomacy. To punch its weight, Europe needs to be a proactive, rather than reactive, innovative multilateral actor. It must also believe in itself at a time when major allies, notably, but not only the US president, see European values as increasingly alien. It is no longer sufficient for the EU to consider itself as the United States' junior partner, waiting to take its lead from their major ally. Waiting for this leadership, on all current evidence, would be like "waiting for Godot." The relationship between Europe and the US is changing. Notwithstanding the size and depth of the economic and politico-security partnership (Hamilton and Quinlan, 2019) and people-to-people links between the US and Europe, the negative impact of Trump's rhetoric and practice on US-EU relations, on both sides of the Atlantic, is unlikely to abate while he remains in office. This is especially so as the US, with increasing frequency, threatens judicial responses in areas such as an EU preference for the Russian Northstream2 gas rather than US gas.

But for Europe's potential as a smart international innovator for other international actors to develop, it must be presented in a sensitive and practical manner. It should avoid references, *as per* HE Federica Mogherini, to Europe as a "cultural superpower." This approach will no longer wash with partners in an era when international cultural relations are becoming increasingly salient. Rather, the approach must be to stress the *practical utility, not cultural superiority* of European norms and values—especially the rule of law; human rights; a commitment to an open liberal, anti-protectionist international trade regime; the need for the continuing enhancement of equality (both economic and gendered); and the importance of multilateralism and collective action problem solving via international institutions. Europe must recognise the need to bring international institutions into alignment with the modern era.

Europe and the reform of world order: The challenges

We are in what Ian Bremmer calls "geopolitical recession," which—unlike economic recessions—are not short lived. To the extent that the geopolitical nature of that order can be mitigated, the better things will be. A mitigation strategy, while it seems out of step with the hard realist nature of geopolitics, must remain at the core of EU strategy. It has to be a goal of the EU to develop a *hybrid*, post-institutional international order in which existing institutions are both buttressed and reformed in a manner that opens the way for less institutionalised players to take on a greater role in what we identify as an "open, networked world."

In the past, Europe has seen its diversity as a handicap, and has attempted to become uniform with world players like China, Russia and the US. Today, Europe needs to grasp the advantages of diversity. In an age where regionalism, transnationalism, and the massive contribution of civil society to public discourse and the public good have become major components of political strategy and the quest for a new political order, Europe's long experience with multiple identities and loyalties, transnationalism, and the value of communities of choice may be seen as an asset, and should indeed be incorporated into a European strategy.

Europe is something of an outlier in the current debate over world order when contrasted with the US, China and to a lesser extent Russia. There is a sharp divergence of EU thinking with that of the US regarding global order. The EU explicitly rejects a Trumpian view of world order, especially his bilateral-cum-transactional hostility to multilateralism. But it currently lacks a coherent strategy to

secure what it does like. The EU, while cognisant of the downsides of Chinese international policy, is more pragmatic than the US and strives for a strong relationship with East Asia and a realistic accommodation with China, especially if the trans-Atlantic relationship continues to deteriorate.

The EU does not think like the other geopolitical powers and currently has what some may argue is an underdeveloped voice in the debate over world order. Some analysts say that it should strive for “geopolitical equidistance” between the US and China; a situation in which it develops a strategic autonomy and attempts to reform and secure an international order absent the participation of the two major protagonists (see Biscop, 2019). Others argue that equidistance is not an option. Notwithstanding its economic strength, the EU lacks the joined-up clout to contest US, Chinese and even Russian political and strategic power or pursue a *via media* strategy. In this view, the paucity of the current trans-Atlantic relationship notwithstanding, the ties across the ocean, both political and economic, are still determinant factors in European political security thinking and practice (Simon, 2019). Absent a European deterrent force and its own champions in the domains of technology and AI, Europe is not in position comparable to the US and China.

The EU (and Japan) have effectively been given a series of “take it or leave it” propositions by the US vis-à-vis China, rather than the opportunity to develop a collective strategy. For example, the putative EU-Japan-US initiative developed by Japan in 2017 to coordinate legal action against China at the WTO on technology transfer was dismissively relegated to second place behind US direct unilateral action against China. Both the EU and Japan remain concerned about getting caught in the crossfire of an exacerbating, long, wide and deep US-China conflict. But both equally appear as concerned not to alienate China as the US has. If the EU follows the logic of geopolitics, the luxury of avoiding choosing sides in the US-China conflict will not easily present itself. The pressure to align with the US may prove immense, indeed overwhelming, unless Europe can engage the wider international community in the conversation on this issue. Other states in similarly difficult positions will be watching Europe and looking for a lead from it.

Perhaps the final factor in an understanding of EU policy towards a wider global cooperative endeavour is its relationship with Russia and the degree to which the development of a Eurasian geopolitical sphere will affect the relationship with Eurasia and East Asia in the future. The key issue is whether Russia will act as a barrier or a conduit between Europe and Asia. While it is easy to suggest that the infrastructural development of the Belt and Road Initiative across Central Asia is clearly facilitative, the politics of the process may be less so. Russia is not an easy issue for Europe. Russia has been less a beneficiary of economic globalisation and, as a consequence, appears less economically and politically invested in international economic and political reform in the way that the EU is.

While clearly a *revisionist* power in its attitude to the current world order, Russia understandably first and foremost wants a restoration of prestige following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the intrusion of NATO into what it considered its legitimate orbit. Can, in this context, Russia make a more positive contribution to world order reform? Does it (read President Putin) have the ability and strategic vision to contribute to world order reform? Its recent international track record is problematic. The answer will depend on: (i) how its rapprochement with China proceeds in the geo-economic and geopolitical space that we now think of as Eurasia and (ii) how the relationship with the US continues as both states exhibit “spoiler characteristics” in the international domain.

Clearly Russia is becoming more strategic in the international space (see Palacio, 2019). And the US by default is making it easier for Russia to play a greater international role and greater China-Russia closeness is clearly developing. Indeed, the integration of Eurasian and European economies more

generally seems inevitable. With the rapid economic expansion of China and India, but also some Eurasian nations, there is a growing demand to improve connections between Europe and Asia, offering an opportunity for Eurasian countries to emerge as hubs for finance, goods and services, which makes them valuable trading partners for Europe. Practically, this cooperation could take place through enhanced cooperation between the Chinese BRI and Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership.

The unraveling of the liberal order and the as yet scratchy geopolitical contours of any future order pose a range of generic policy questions. The EU needs to offer a commonsense bout of reformism. Ambiguity, of a non-strategic kind, must be minimised in EU external policy by focusing on topics and regions that matter to citizens directly, such as security, migration, climate but also those other actions that facilitate EU policy, such as the defense of multilateralism. Also, given that the civic space has become a determining component of any political development (viz Hongkong, Teheran, Cairo, Paris, Istanbul, Beirut, Barcelona, Kiev), EU external policy must take this into account and should act as champion of civil liberties wherever these are endangered.

Set out below are seven points of substance for consideration. They are not formal recommendations. Rather what is offered is a series of propositions in need of recognition by those driving EU international relations during the life of the next Commission.

Seven Propositions in need of attention:

1. The US is looking like a less reliable actor and partner in international relations.

Waiting for Donald Trump to go is not the solution. He is a symptom not a cause. Even post-Trump, key elements of this new reality will need to be lived with. What we do not know is the degree to which his successor may move to restore America's reputation and role as a global leader and whether they will try to do this unilaterally and transactionally or—in a manner more suited to the EU's preferences for collective action problem solving—multilaterally.

There are damaging long-term splits in the EU's relationship with the US that need to be repaired post-Trump, especially over the future of NATO, strategy towards Iran, trade and protectionism (including health and food standards), the importance of international institutions (especially the United Nations and WTO) and global environmental policy. The EU—without turning its back on the US security relationship—should do more to defend itself. This has to be a core component of the EU's longer-term strategic focus.

The 70th anniversary meeting of NATO was more about damage limitation than developing a strategy for the future. The US is unlikely to abandon NATO and Europe. US-China competition is not restricted to the Pacific. The 2019 NATO communiqué noted that the US and Europe needed to respond to China “together as an alliance.” While the jury is still out on the EU response to the US on say Huawei and gas supplies, the time has not yet come when Europe will choose China over the US in the wider security domain (see Rachman, 2019a). This is not to be complacent about NATO. A strategy of European Defence will obviously pose questions about the future of NATO. But they can coexist, especially as long as the EU continues to buy 80+% of its military hardware from the US.

Something must also be done to break the logjam of Macron's “frozen conflicts,” but avoid a Trumpian style reset that sees Europe give way to it on core issues. Specifically, Russia should be engaged. But Russian engagement needs to be in a European, not a Trumpian manner. On an

issue such as Russian readmittance to the G7, we need to distinguish President Macron’s views of re-engagement to what he calls “necessary prerequisites,” rather than Donald Trump’s supine “condition free” approach. Deadlock and stalemate on issues such as Ukraine, and other shared neighbourhoods, can only undermine both Ukraine’s and Europe’s position—which must see the EU as one of the principal interlocutors if we are to avoid throwing Eastern Europe into chaos.

2. In the absence of either US or Chinese leadership, Europe must lead on the reform and (re)-strengthening of multilateralism.

This is particularly so at a time when the world is celebrating in 2020 the 75th anniversary of the creation of the UN. The importance of multilateralism for the Europe Union is obvious. Indeed, as the new President notes: “Cooperating and working with others is what our Union is all about. This is why Europe will always lead the way when it comes to upholding and, where necessary, updating the rules-based global order” (*Mission Letter*, 2019).

But multilateralism needs to change dramatically. It needs to recognise the growing hybridity in international relations and become less bureaucratic and more open to non-state actors and to a networked approach. A new multipolar system will require new rules, or at least reform of the old rules. Sensitively espoused and properly contextualised, the “rules-based order” preferences emanating from long standing liberal democratic norms still have considerable purchase. They are worth defending. Europe has been and remains, in and of itself, a laboratory of multilateralism and multi-level governance. Europe has always been a pillar of the international institutional architecture. Therefore, it is necessary for it to act as a defender of these principles and support the reform of institutional practice where necessary.

The institutional venues of diplomacy and dialogue need to be reinvigorated or they will continue to atrophy. Nowhere is this clearer than with the WTO. The challenge is to get the balance right between a tired looking international technocracy in contemporary institutions and the need for a multilateral diplomacy charged with providing global public goods. But this means doing so in a nuanced and moderated fashion, exhibiting appropriate compromise reflective of the demands of *all* major players in the modern order while taking advantage of the modern communicative technologies.

The US prerogative of being the only one to shape the global agenda is no longer tenable or present. The EU must support multilateralism with all the vigour it can muster. It must, for example, put real financial support, not just rhetoric, behind the new Franco-German led *Alliance for Multilateralism*. While the EU must tread firmly in the pursuit of modern-day multilateralism, it must also tread softly and deftly. EU soft power diplomacy requires a commitment that its Cartesian legal formalism is not labelled as such.

3. In a world drifting away from multilateralism, inter-regional relations will become increasingly important.

This is especially so regarding Eurasia, East Asia and the MENA and sub-Saharan Africa regions. EU-Asia relations will grow as trans-Atlantic relations become more strained by the vagaries of Trumpian logic. The EU understands the global “China issue” but in contrast to US policy towards China, the EU should work towards accommodation not confrontation. This does not mean accepting everything that China—or any other country for that matter—does that may be questionable. Nurturing the relationship is not the same as passive acceptance. While trade with

China, currently at \$400 billion a year, is strengthening, favourable European opinion of China is (according the *South China Morning Post*) declining.

In a new world order, Europe should remember its close and historically very long-term intercultural ties to regions east of Europe and build on them to establish a closer relationship with these regions. As a consequence, the EU should treat the concept and practice of Eurasia seriously. It is gaining momentum as both an economic and a geopolitical fact of life. The relationship between Russia and China might be fitful, but it would be imprudent to assume that it will not consolidate in the security or the economic domain in the near term, especially since the relationship is developing more on the basis of strategic pragmatism not, as in the past, on ideology. Both the concept and practice of Eurasia will have a role in the international relations of the middle and later 21st century in a way not imagined in decades earlier. If China's forward-leaning diplomacy is to be successfully countered by the EU, then it first needs to come to a political solution to the current hostility between itself and Russia. Only mitigation of the major tensions with Russia is likely to allow the EU to play a stronger role in the relationship between these two Great Powers.

Closer to home, the EU should recognise that events across the Mediterranean are likely to have an immediately greater impact in the longer run if sustainable governance, growth and development strategies cannot be put in place to contain the pressures of economic and political migration. The President making her visit to the African Union her first official visit was a promising start. Less talk of Europe, à la the previous High Representative, as a cultural superpower and more talk, à la façon Chinois, of pragmatic partnership and business potential that takes the relationship beyond a residual colonial legacy will change the atmospherics of the relationship at this important time in Africa's outward development.

The development of a "continent to continent" relationship, with North and Sub Saharan Africa treated as a single entity should be an important development. It will boost the prospects of the long overdue all-African Continental Free Trade Area. The two continents are going to be more closely integrated across a range of crucial economic and political issue areas in the years to come. Now is the time to think comprehensively about a systemic strategy and to get the balance between optimism and pessimism about the future of the continent in balance.

4. Climate change is not only a major concern of the European Community, but also a major international policy challenge.

While a key global player in this area for a number of reasons, the EU cannot solve this challenge on its own. It becomes central to its external relations and is linked, to give but one example, to policy towards the Middle East where the consequences of climate change will be felt first. Recognising the relationship between development and environmental health as per the UN SDGs is also important. The new Commission has the formidable ambition to combine growth with sustainable development. The European Green Deal is premised on the assumption identified in the 2019-24 *New Strategic Agenda for the EU* that climate change is "an existential threat" (European Council, 2019).

In theory, the proposed 100 billion EUR European Green Deal will cut emissions while also creating jobs and improving the quality of life. The new strategy also suggests that it is possible to "embrace technological evolution *and* globalisation." Perhaps it is. But it will require massive investment in infrastructure, research, innovation and green technologies. Moreover, it will also

need policies to decouple economic growth from resource depletion and environmental degradation. This implies levying carbon taxes on imports, becoming carbon neutral by 2050 and developing the various technologies needed to get there as the EU becomes the global partner of countries also wishing to address the climate change challenge. This task is not simply an internal affair, but also one that will change the EU's external policy as the ambition affects its trade policy and its policy of scientific and technological cooperation. As the failure of the Madrid COP 25 meeting attests, climate agreement will be one of the most intractable and vexatious international problems to be faced in the coming years.

5. Dealing with digitalisation and digital disruption must be a priority.

Particularly note that these factors are rapidly becoming a foreign policy and international relations question as much as a question for internal EU resolution. The need and desire of states to preserve their “information sovereignty” is now a major policy issue as tensions over sovereignty and jurisdiction compete with freedom and openness. We need to recognise both the *hierarchical* behaviour of the digital “superpowers” (the US and China) and the aspiring great powers (notably Russia, India and Brazil) and the *hybridity* of the principal non-state digital players that have driven digitalisation in the 21st century to-date: notably Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft in the US and Tencent, Huawei, Baidu, Alibaba and Weibo in China.

The battle to secure ascendancy is no longer simply one of sovereign states butting heads with each other across a spectrum, from diplomacy to war—the traditional stuff of international relations. Rather, the major states are now harnessing privately developed technological platforms of power to enhance the rhetoric and practice of nationalism in the battle to safeguard their national digital economies. While the internet may have emerged as a decentralised platform, there have nevertheless always been competing models of what the digital terrain should look like. Current tensions over design, governance and jurisdiction reflect broader global fissures. In the contemporary era the US and China are creating two sharply defined technological and online systems—what we might call separate *digital ecologies*. The American system is still primarily private sector-driven while China's is state-driven. But both systems envelope the development of AI, big data, 5G and instruments of cyber warfare.

The European President appears to understand the implications of this for the EU, especially the digitalisation of finance. It is time for the EU to get over its inferiority complex vis-à-vis the US dollar. As Russia and China are looking to trade in roubles and renminbi, the President says the EU should be ensuring that European financial instruments are used strategically “...[to] contribute to our wider political aims and enhance Europe's leadership and influence in the world” (*Financial Times*, 2019). This is not to understate the challenge to the Euro gaining a greater role, which has its own limitations, notably the absence of large reserves of Euro denominated assets. Rather, it is to assert that it be used more as an economic foreign policy instrument than it has in the past.

6. Major decoupling in the manufacturing and industrial sectors will not take place to the extent that the US would like.

While the promotion of decoupling in the name of national security is a US response to China as a strategic competitor, the state of supply chain integration is much greater than those vocal “de-couplers” in the Trump administration appreciate. But support for this trend is still alarming.

Supply chains are at the core of the modern global manufacturing and industrial economy and China too has now joined the US in the decoupling strategy. Yet integrated supply chains are still one of our best hopes for avoiding a new Cold War.

As Kant said, “the spirit of commerce...is incompatible with war.” Notwithstanding that Europe lacks clout to contest US, Chinese or Russian politico-strategic power, it must make the best of the economic and trade assets that it has to remain the champion of global commerce. It is time to put its money where its mouth is. It needs to do three things:

- (i) Whatever the pain, it must face down US protectionist recklessness if an open liberal trading regime is to survive. It will not be alone. Others will support the EU position, especially along the East Asian seaboard from China down through Japan, South Korea and into the major Southeast Asian trading states. Support will also be found in outward facing Africa, Latin America and Oceania.
- (ii) The EU should resist US calls for a “reset” on international trade that reflects the US preference for bilateral and transactionalist approaches to negotiation. In this context, the electoral success of Boris Johnson means that the major bilateral transactional trade activity of the next few years will almost certainly be between the US and the UK. In theory, the UK should prioritise Europe given the size of the trade relationship. In practice it will be surprising if it does. But, the UK’s ability to conduct two major trade deals at the same time (let alone all the smaller renegotiations that will need to be conducted) is limited. This will complicate the post Brexit UK-EU trade negotiations, especially if deals are cut with the US that run counter to positions acceptable to the EU. But, at the least, it will strengthen Europe’s understanding of what needs to be done to mitigate the opportunity the US will almost certainly try to take to drive a wedge between the EU and the UK.
- (iii) The EU should engage with China but show resolve to resist excessive Chinese involvement, especially into the digital industries. It is proper that “technological sovereignty” should be a contemporary EU slogan. The new Commission has etched the concept of digital sovereignty into its political guidelines. But excessive decoupling from China in the AI and digital information domain to conform to American wishes should be resisted.

7. For many people in Europe, migration is *the* key concern and a major policy challenge.

Therefore, a coherent, humane and fair migration policy is needed in order to help refugees and control economic migration. Specifically, the dangers of a further refugee crisis in the wake of recent events in Syria must be foreshadowed. Brussels needs to develop a sensible asylum policy that thinks longer term about the issue of migrants and refugees. Doing this is more complicated than simply stating it.

One major complication is that Brussels must now deal with the principal opponents to a sensible migration policy—populists and nationalists. Not only have they grown more politically powerful, they *are becoming internationalist in outlook*. While still strongly Eurosceptical, the new populist-nationalists are, as the journal *Foreign Policy* notes, learning to harness “a pan-European identity to further their goal of a racially pure, white Christian continent”. (Foreign Policy, 2019). Nationalists have done this by adopting a broader “civilisational” outlook on international relations (see DOC, 2019) which, ironically and not a little contradictorily, focuses

on European, not nationalist, culture. Conflict still falls along national lines, but is moving increasingly in the direction of a cross-cultural civilisational one. Nationalist views of European values focus less on issues of freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights but rather the accentuation of racial and ethnic identity, identitarian politics and a privileged status for Judaism and Christianity. This is now an issue to be factored into thinking in Brussels on external relations.

The Europeanisation of anti-immigrant positions by nationalists has evolved into a deliberate strategy to make their radical demands appear more moderate and palatable. In this context, Brussels will need a strategy to minimise the pan-European, anti-Muslim “occidentalisation” of migration policies that nationalists, if successful, would mobilise in the pursuit of its particular view of the EU and its external relations. To counter this, the EU should enhance its strategic approach to international cultural relations and cultural diplomacy as a vehicle to help combat European populism and nationalism.

This is not to say that efforts to shape a European identity *within* the EU does not also remain important. To give but one example, the success of the Erasmus exchanges shows that the EU can and should be active in fostering an open dialogue within its boundaries to combat nationalist thinking. Similarly, the recent call to set up pan European university consortia (the Macron initiative, [The Pie News, 2019](#)) is a strong signal of a sense of collective European identity that nevertheless embraces diversity.

Conclusion: Some thoughts on an “open world order” for EU policy makers to consider

As it fully understands, the new Commission must come to terms with a changing global order that is drifting inexorably, or so it would seem, away from its liberal underpinnings in the direction of a progressively more realist power politics-driven order. An order underwritten by the new geopolitics and complicated by both geo-economic and geo-cultural/civilisational dynamics. In this context, progress is not guaranteed nor is it linear. The “end of history” has come and gone. The liberal order is unlikely to be restored. As Pascal Lamy (2018) noted “Adjusting old narratives to new environments will not be enough.” Outdated mindsets will need to be superseded in order to take account of the impact of modern communicative technologies on international relations as we strive to maintain an open (and increasingly digitally networked) new order.

Digital communication changes the nature of state bargaining and cooperative strategies from the pre-digital age. This applies in particular to the role of self-empowered networks outside the normal scope of governments and/or the state in general, i.e. the arena of international civil society. Thus, we need more precisely defined *minimal conditions* for multilateral cooperation that recognise: (i) networks and digitalisation change the nature of connections in global governance; (ii) networks do not require government sanction, indeed networks—unlike institutional hierarchies—encourage self-organisation; (iii) the governance dilemma is no longer simply democracy *versus* autocracy; in addition it is also *open* governance versus *closed* governance (see Slaughter, 2017).

What would the principles of an open world order look like? Some traditional liberal values will remain salient. There will (must) still be a place for democracy (of many variants), freedom of thought, rule of law and human rights. Europe must be their advocate. But these values will have to learn to exist within a context of greater respect for regional and national values and expect less compliance with those Western, international norms of the second half of the 20th century. In an open order we should

expect power to be distributed more horizontally—both publicly and privately with flatter, reciprocal structures—than in the past. An open order will stress more loosely defined terms such as community—to include communities of choice—and civilisation—in which we will inevitably see digital spheres of influence consolidated. Indeed, they are already developing. The EU should resist this trend in digitalisation. But while resisting it, the EU should recognise that soft power and cultural diplomacy will become increasingly important and increasingly digital.

We are moving into a new era and the EU must be a voice in the discussion over what this newness shall look like. To make its contribution, the EU must decide what is going to be the prominent message it wishes to put forward. Confusingly, two competing views are presently found emanating from the Commission’s senior leadership: (i) The idea that this Commission will be a “geopolitical commission” for an increasingly geopolitical world and (ii) a continuing commitment on the part of the EU, if rhetoric is to be taken seriously, to the values of multilateralism and cooperative collective action problem solving.

These competing views have never sat, and do not currently sit, easily together. The EU needs to resolve what is looking increasingly like a “Mixed Message Strategy.” Sometime soon choices will need to be made. The EU should not make the mistake of thinking that the only way it can be a “player” in the contemporary order is by mimicking the behaviour of the other major players; that is by becoming a *Realpolitik*-driven geopolitical player itself. Rather it should stick to the approach recently identified in its *New Strategic Agenda: 2019-24* (European Council, 2019) of supporting multilateral organisation, implementing the 2030 sustainable development agenda and preserving an open global economy. If the EU really believes in its internationalist values, it should stick to them. Geo-politics must not become the international relations slogan of the new Commission.

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