



# POLICY BRIEF

HOW THE PANDEMIC  
HAS RESHAPED  
THE GLOBAL ORDER -  
CHINA AND THE  
UNITED STATES

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Sandis Šrāders

**THE RĪGA CONFERENCE**  
**POLICY BRIEF**

2020

*2020 began on a hopeful note, as all new years do. However, it soon changed to a year that brought us “the new normal” and a completely different understanding of “unusual times”.*

*Much has happened this year, beginning with the global pandemic, which affects all spheres of life – from healthcare, economy and politics to individual psychological aspects, not to mention the hectic U.S. presidential election campaign, unprecedented wildfires in Australia, the escalating conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, the brutal and relentless suppression of peaceful protesters in Belarus in the wake of falsified presidential election, and all this against a backdrop where the international community also celebrated the 75th anniversary of the United Nations.*

*It has been estimated that a human brain processes about 70,000 thoughts daily, and 95% of them are the same as the day before. Small wonder that so many events are being framed in the context of Covid-19 this year, and thoughts are focused on it. However, this collection of Riga Conference Policy Briefs clearly demonstrates the complexity of international affairs and the fact that focusing on one of their facets is neither productive nor rational.*

*The influence of Covid-19 on international processes is quite considerable – starting from the questioning of World Health Organization’s operability and reputation, confusion in the European Union and the absence of resilience and solidarity, to an Infodemic, triggered by psychological factors and enabled by technology.*

*Meanwhile, the pandemic has not brought substantial changes to the Euro-Atlantic security policy in its classical sense. Russia has been pursuing large scale military exercises, developing its military capabilities and maintaining an active presence abroad. Strategic rivalry between the United States and China has spilled over from issues centering on the economy and international trade into an all-embracing ideological confrontation concerning values and technological dominance. The European Union has adopted its multiannual financial framework for 2021–2027 and approved a European Union Recovery Instrument; an intensive debate is underway on the goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050, on digital issues, development of the Single Market, solutions to migration, as well as values and the rule of law.*

*I urge the reader to remain open and curious about a wide range of topics in international politics and pursue their broader interests. The desire to think critically about even the simplest of issues and tasks fosters the path towards both constructive and creative solutions. Let’s work for better times together!*

**Edgars Rinkēvičs**  
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia

*The modern world is globally interconnected, and citizens, goods, and services are constantly moving. Therefore it is obvious to observers that Europe and the World at large are exceptionally vulnerable to the consequences of the world-wide pandemic which cuts contacts, affects business, halts economic activity and endangers the world security and peace.*

*Frequently, people and governments underestimate the probability of negative scenarios. Almost nobody was ready to face the sudden challenge of Covid-19. Many of us hoped for the best and totally ignored good old Murphy's Law, which says "if it can go wrong, it will go wrong". The same applies to international security issues.*

*Of course, there are well-known excuses why security and defence issues were not a top priority for state institutions and the public. There are numerous other issues like employment, infrastructure, education which seems more important than investments in defence or military. Younger European generations, particularly in the Western European societies, are overconfident that security is eternal and granted them for free. No wonder that under such conditions and dominating public opinion many countries across Europe are still acting naively when it comes to decision making about security and defence matters.*

*In the meantime, international organizations, which in many ways have been upholding the peace and post-World War II order, are increasingly dismantling or dismantled. Under such circumstances, in international relations, the role of the nation-states increases, and they are ready to rely on their economic power or even military might to reach their political goals.*

*Post-Cold War multilateralism is slowly shifting from institutionalism to realpolitik. COVID-19 crisis is only speeding up these changes. As an example, The World Health Organisation and the European Union, both of whom should have been at the forefront of a comprehensive international response to this pandemic, have largely taken a backseat while individual nations have responded unilaterally.*

*What are the ways to deal with increasing threats to global security posed by the nationalization of international politics? How to evade the principle that "Might is Right"? How to re-establish the working world order based on mutual agreement, justice, and humanity reflecting the realities and necessities of 21st. Century? These are only a few questions I hope we can tackle in Riga Conference, taking into account the number of prestige thinkers taking part in this event.*

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Minister of Defence of the Republic of Latvia

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## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

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1. The United States must consolidate Europe to ensure dual containment of Russia and China.
2. The West must enhance their shared alliances and build closer partnerships in Asia.
3. To bring Beijing back to respect human rights and the rule of law, the West must apply their simultaneous technological, commercial and political influence.
4. As reciprocal interests suggest, liberal and democratic values must be at the forefront of United States and Europe cooperation.

There has never been any explicit world order that has been natural, autarkic, and self-sustained. The only exception might a world order with ‘rule of the jungle’ wherein the powerful subdue the weak. Despite the seemingly beneficial and all-inclusive liberal world order supported by the Western alliance and led by the United States, there is an ongoing trend for the jungle to grow back – with its inherent rules in tow. <sup>1</sup>

Authoritarian regimes such as the People’s Republic of China or the former communist and authoritarian Russia are undermining the premises of the Western liberal world order to expand their influence, both politically and geo-economically. These trends have led to a weakening of Western institutions with their roots in liberal and democratic principles. In addition, this rivalry now is facing additional pressures imposed by COVID-19. Thus,

**“most of the major powers seem to be equally situated to gain or lose from this ongoing geopolitical and ideological bout between the authoritarian realist jungle versus democratic rules-based liberal world order.”**

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (Knopf, First Edition, September 18, 2018).

In theory, the liberal world order allows all states to operate in an international environment on equal terms. Such attempts were evident in the past but failed. For example, the First World War ended with multiple treaties and agreements like the Kellogg-Briand Pact that forbade the war. Just in a one decade from this moment in Europe and elsewhere, the analogy of the return of the jungle as an alternative is clear. From the initially appalling post-war economic conditions in the 1930s, in Europe and the United States, this 'law of the jungle' rapidly displaced international rules.

There was no great power that could either enforce or nurture international laws because the United States had chosen a position of isolation, comfortably between Atlantic and Pacific Oceans from a world that it thought was not its own. These conditions and the distribution of power allowed the state centrism, the surge of nationalism in Europe, the Second World War, and the five-decade ideological confrontation between the liberal and democratic West against the oppressive and authoritarian communist bloc. Only shortly before the end of this exhausting Cold War confrontation did some pundits from Gorbachev's foreign affairs team acknowledge the need for Russia to leave its isolationism and join the general flow of civilization.<sup>2</sup> Such a desire yet remains contested, with even fewer suggesting any success and different interpretations of a better civilization in different parts of the world.

In China, such ideological oppression becomes increasing evident in such areas as the South China Sea, Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, or Taiwan, in respect to its own population or more distant neighbors and global democracies and that liberal world order that profoundly experiences authoritarian methods as the main source of global oppression. The Chinese Communist Party finally seems to have abandoned Deng Xiaoping's advice to "hide their capabilities and bide its time" in exchange for more assertive civilian-economic-military fusion of power to enhance "the community of common destiny" against "hostile foreign forces."<sup>3</sup> The recent pandemic seems to provide favorable terms for such assertiveness.

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2 William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (W. W. Norton and Company, 2017), 266.

3 Aaron L. Friedberg, "An Answer to Aggression: How to Push Back Against Beijing" (*Foreign Affairs*, September/October, 2020), 153-155.

With growing assertiveness and nationalism inside of China, an alternative might be the same as the one that Western Europe has enjoyed since the end of the Second World War. The redemption of Europe from the rule of the jungle came concurrently with US foreign policy adjustments and the surge of the liberal world order among the democratic regimes. Instead of leaving Europe as the United States did after the First World War with the Paris Peace Conference agreements, the end of the Second World War offered the possibility to avoid a repetition of past predicaments. Instead of leaving the United States alone, Europe should actively enhance the transatlantic cooperation.

This cooperation with the United States and an embrace of the democratic liberal world order upheld the European renaissance in the past. Such a European euphoria lasted, including the double enlargements of the EU and NATO by 2004 that brought stability and affluence to Europe, now whole and free at last.<sup>4</sup> The preponderant power, the United States, enjoyed this unipolar moment and fantasy for multiple decades, especially since the end of the Cold War until brought back to the reality of material and ideational constraints by the two wars of choice in Iraq and Afghanistan. The relieving of the hegemonic compulsions by the United States then in the oil rich, but rather underdeveloped Middle East, enhanced a global trend of anti-American sentiment.

In Europe, both the German public and political leaders shared the private advice by the French leadership to avoid invasions thereafter. If there emerged such a compulsion, however, then the United States was advised not to look for even formal partners in Europe.<sup>5</sup> The stance of France and Germany were bolstered by the two principal Eurasian powers in the Security Council – Russia and China. Only the United Kingdom held to alliance with the United States, but the return of centrifugal geopolitics squeezed Britain out from Europe until Brexit dragged it eventually back to the forefront. Despite few old partnerships with the United Kingdom or the part of Europe that has acted as a source of support (Central and Eastern Europe), the United States has suffered an incremental loss of overall power – its appeal has dropped, institutional influence

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4 Stanley Hoffman, "The European Community and 1992" (Foreign Affairs, Fall 1989), 2.

5 David P Calleo, *Follies of Power: America's Unipolar Fantasy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 22, 40.

waned, and Euro-Atlantic alliances have fractured. Across the Atlantic, Europe was not capable and decisive enough to immediately support the endurance of the liberal world order when the international standing of the United States suffered a setback.

The result of this doubt resulted in a dwindling liberal world order and is visible not long thereafter. Russia invades Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 – all in addition to the self-declared right to intervene in domestic affairs of foreign countries. The United States and Europe responded with a comprehensive package of sanctions to contain the reminiscent forceful historical willingness to reign over the pan-Slavic, former Soviet, or Imperial territories by any means to eventually re-impose Russian ethnic, linguistic, Orthodox, and political tradition and standards. To underwrite this challenge, influential Russian pundits describe the Russian civilization as a center now; for them, Russia is a great and sovereign country with its own interests, specific, and peculiar values that would coexist as a mix of Russian-Soviet-Imperial traditions turning into Soviet ‘Large Space’ or a Russian ‘Reich.’<sup>6</sup> To achieve these objectives at home, blame is specifically placed on the West and a Western global order that denies Russia “any serious influence beyond its borders” or the possibility to alter NATO as “a neo-Weimar policy vis-à-vis Russia with its primary manifestation being NATO expansion” driven against Russia.

When it comes to the preferential partnerships, however, Russia boasts about a historical and ideological relationship with China close to the status of an alliance that grows closer yearly.<sup>7</sup> Here, the only profound binding aspect is the serious disparities in all types of power, except in terms of the military, where Russia enjoys a (yet) parity for the time being.<sup>8</sup> As a result, a junior partner, Russia becomes a useful tool for Beijing against US allies in Europe, which is another of Beijing’s partners against the United States.

Already in the past, the result of US observation of the Soviet Union or China

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6 Alexander Dugin, *The Rise of the Fourth Political Theory* (Arktos Media, 2017), 57-83, 114-146.

7 See Sergey Karaganov and Dmitry V. Suslov, “A New World Order: A View from Russia,” (*Russia in International Affairs*, October 4, 2018, accessed on 12.10.2020, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/a-new-world-order-a-view-from-russia/>).

8 Ibid,

has been the containment of both which then – and even more now – seems to be applicable. The lasting policies of containment contained revisionist threats against the United States and its allies. Even those American pundits who blame the United States' policies for spoiling relations with major powers over small international entities in the post-Cold War (like the admission of the Baltic States to NATO) now admit the necessity to enhance the United States' led alliances for multilateral containment – specifically the containment of Russia and China.<sup>9</sup>

The success of such policies to sustain the liberal world order will depend not only on the United States. Its unilateral engagement can trigger the opposite. The role of allies and traditional alliances can enhance or undermine US power to sustain the global liberal order. Moreover, the United States and its democratic allies and alliances seem to be more vulnerable.

**“ Even if China and the United States met COVID-19 pandemic equally unprepared, now the authoritarian rule seems to be more efficient – in both containing the virus but also undermining democracies. ”**

Thus, China can abuse all options to divide, discredit, and weaken democracies to undermine their appeal, co-opt possible defectors, and to isolate those who would resist leaving the United States alone either with diminished and enfeebled coalition.<sup>10</sup> That would be the interest for Beijing and Moscow, but would be detrimental in turn to Europe, transatlantic cooperation, and to all those who benefit from the existence of the liberal world order.

We should not forget historical lessons, but the current policy brief will argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a 'return of history, the jungle, and a decline of the United States led Western alliance or the surge of the rest. When future historians will think of the moment that marked the end of the

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9 See Michael Mandelbaum, *Mission Failure: American and the World in the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford University Press; 1st Edition, April 5, 2016); Michael Mandelbaum, "The New Containment: Handling Russia, China, and Iran" (Foreign Affairs, March/April, 2019).

10 Aaron L. Friedberg, "An Answer to Aggression: How to Push Back Against Beijing" (Foreign Affairs, September/October, 2020), 151.

liberal world order, they may point to the spring of 2020. This is the moment when the United States and its allies, facing the gravest public health threat and economic catastrophe of the postwar era, could not even agree on a simple communique of common cause.<sup>11</sup>

To answer this question, the policy brief will focus on two areas. First are the adjustments that the pandemic has made to global affairs and globalization, which is the primary result of the liberal world order. In this instance, different aspects of globalization and its effects toward the advantages of major powers will be the point of reference. The second focus of the analysis will appraise possible adjustments for old or novel alliances. The capacity of the United States to uphold the liberal world order (and democratic regimes) will depend on institutional arrangements to offset and contain the surge of China (and Russia as its junior partner).

## **FROM THE LIBERAL-GLOBAL, BACK TO THE REALIST JUNGLE**

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The World Trade Organization estimates that the global trade and commerce in the first year of COVID-19 will be the worst for the globalization since the great recession of early 1930s.<sup>12</sup> Thus, this trend of globalization will assume a geopolitical face. Some in China have suggested as the world settles into a post-COVID-19 framework, it will divide in two parts. First, there will be a group of East Asian Countries led by China that are relatively successful in surpassing the pandemic and staging an economic recovery. Second, the West will be mired in repeated waves of the disease and will have trouble regaining its political and economic momentum.<sup>13</sup> The last group suffers such especially political consequences because of China's deliberate frustration of democracies as well as the liberal world order.

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11 G. John Ikenberry, "The Next Liberal Order: The Age of Contagion Demands More Internationalism, Not Less" (Foreign Affairs, July/August, 2020), 133.

12 Carmen Reinhart and Vincent Reinhart, "The Pandemic Depression: The Global Economy Will Never Be the Same" (Foreign Affairs, September/October 2020), 87.

13 Shivashankar Menon, "League of Nationalists: How Trump and Modi Refashioned the U.S.-Indian Relationship," (Foreign Affairs, September/October 2020), 139.

These two trends bring the world to the tantamount ancient colonization patterns when guns, germs, and steel defined the fortune for any civilized society.<sup>14</sup> At this point, guns and military power was used to colonize and assert power.

**“Germs, traveling alongside advanced civilizations, forced colonies to accept treatment from superior colonizers together with the status of a colony. This condition reflects the present COVID-19 challenges and advantages since the inventor of a COVID-19 treatment will capitalize financially and in terms of international status. Steel, a symbol of economic and technological superiority, served to enhance and sustain dominance. In this respect, especially China’s technological dominance is a menace for the Western democratic and social cohesion.”**

Now, China is boosting its military might, benefits from the pandemic repercussions (with the possibility of becoming a source of a cure), and is increasingly advancing its technology to uphold the interests of the regime.

The pandemic has contested the limits of globalized liberal order – a surging trend since the beginning of 1990s that was bringing people closer apart and places further together.<sup>15</sup> Despite the simultaneous request from local, regional, or global businesses to remain together, there was the strain on societies and individuals to quarantine, inside of states, cities, and homes, and away from others. This lockdown of domestic movement and inter-state cooperation adjusted cooperation on the international level as well as policies of national states. Formerly fictional borders erected especially across Europe, but also elsewhere, were aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19 by limiting the movement of people. First, these arose across borders but later also within national states to a larger or smaller extent. The easiest way to cope with the pandemic turned out to rapidly impose stringent controls over internal and external movement. Furthermore, such control enhanced the effect of tech-

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14 Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997), 427.

15 John Rennie Short, *Global Dimensions: Space, Place, and the Contemporary World* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 19.

nological and informational frustration by China or Russia affecting trust in shared truths, democratic structures and social cohesion.

Here, autocracies have been the most efficient as the rights and customs of individuals and slower decision-making mechanisms have been harder to override for democratic governments. For democracies like the United States, the task for overcoming the pandemic has turned out to be inherently complicated. In comparison with China, the consequences have resulted from bad policy choices, partisan deadlock, and an increasing insularity of domestic politics.<sup>16</sup> As the least prepared, the result is that the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases have been in the United States with only Brazil suffering more.<sup>17</sup> All of these consequences unveil the case-by-case fragility and ostensible fecklessness of democratic regimes to efficiently contain the pandemic. Authoritarian China as well as its like-minded partners only enhances such effects through deliberate information campaigns. As a result, the economic and political situation suffers turbulence in countries like the United States or in Europe.

Despite the first wave of COVID-19 originating from China, their autocratic methods of social control allowed for the rapid domestic elimination of the virus. Moreover, the effort to develop a vaccine will prove competitiveness as well as medical research capacity for global players where Beijing looks like the ostensible winner, according to the World Health Organization reports. As of mid-August, more than half of the COVID-19 vaccines that have showed the most promising testing results had been developed in China.<sup>18</sup> Better control over domestic affairs and possible inventions to cope with the pandemic with medial means have already exemplified China's strengths against the United States.

This position is the result of early access to the sample of the virus, but also

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16 James Dobbins and Gabrielle Tarini, "The Lost Generation in American Foreign Policy" (Rand Cooperation, September 15, 2020, accessed on 12.10.2020, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/09/the-lost-generation-in-american-foreign-policy.html?fbclid=IwAR34B-9nzMNnHuJV8GiCZcEakCYz0ahfbxlAlaqRI1j4wuq07tHmEr70VwwE>).

17 See WHO Covid-19 report, "By Country, Territory or Area" (Accessed on 30.09.2020, [https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=EAlalQobCh-MlwY6QvbKQ7AlVh94YCh03xQyyEAAAYASAAEgJHgvd\\_BwE](https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=EAlalQobCh-MlwY6QvbKQ7AlVh94YCh03xQyyEAAAYASAAEgJHgvd_BwE)). From this report, the United States is leading in terms of diagnosed 7,044mio Covid-19 cases (the population 328mio), Brazil has diagnosed 4,732mio cases (the population size is 209mio).

18 Fareed Zakaria, "Russia's dubious vaccine breakthrough" (See GPS, 16.08.2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=326990185347774&extid=iynzA06fy3rwJ6Fl>)

China's vast aggregate resources for research and development (second only to that of the United States). In front of the leadership's push to rapidly develop an antidote, the challenge for China is its present lack of exposure to the virus. The stringent lockdown at home and efficient control over its society have allowed China to eliminate the virus to near invisible levels.

Moreover, Beijing has managed to consolidate its communist regime to a level where the principle of 'one state, two systems' is severely overridden in favor of strong political consolidation. Inside of China and with its more autonomous regions, technological advancements have allowed for controlled oppression of, for example, Uighur population to a disturbing degree in the western region of Xinjiang. Furthermore, multiple methods and technological inventions for strict control over society have been exported to China's authoritarian allies.

One vivid example is Russia, which can utilize this novel technology for the enhancement of neo-imperial, neo-communist ideological strains to build the alternative to liberal and democratic world order - one that would be different and dwell on the Eurasianist Empire plans.<sup>19</sup> This siege against democracies increasingly allows Europe to look at Russia ideologically more as an Asian (a partner to China) but not a European power (sharing the same values and cooperation principles). This model of technology-driven totalitarianism has also become a growing Chinese export, enabling other autocrats to follow the Chinese example and join the loose alliance.

For China, this is the systematic effort to undermine liberal democracies or human rights or its international adversaries, which are rooted in specific rules and institutions.<sup>20</sup> As a counterweight to Western critics against China, Beijing has been increasingly vociferous about the multiple initiatives of the United States (in particular, by the present administration) used to undermine media, trust in public institutions, or democratic governance resulting in the lack of coherent leadership and communication with the society as profound and less than democratic initiatives. These public announcements are aiming at shift

19 Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry V Suslov, "A New World Order: A View from Russia," (Russia in Global Affairs (April 18, 2018), accessed on March 26, 2020, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/a-new-world-order-a-view-from-russia/>).

20 See Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (Doubleday, July 21, 2020); See also Fareed Zakaria, "How Authoritarianism Creeps In" (See GPS, 02.08.2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=291714238915434>)

ing attention from China to democratic deficits in the United States during the times of crises. Furthermore, Beijing is becoming more interested in destabilizing democratic processes, institutions, values, social trust, and leadership in the United States from within.<sup>21</sup>

**Present China, with its expanding economic, military, and diplomatic might, is at the forefront of this authoritarian challenge to the United States.<sup>22</sup>**

Beijing seeks to build a world in which its ambitions are unchallenged and individual freedoms give way to the needs of the state. Such a geopolitical and ideological rivalry might force even India to pick sides in the environment where structural anarchy begins to overshadow a liberal and democratic world order.<sup>23</sup> In spite of the favorable strategic order provided by the Pax Americana even for China, this confrontation is forcing not only East Asian powers to pick sides as Beijing builds its geo-economic sphere of influence.

While attributed mainly to the field of commerce, globalization is a set of processes involving increasing liquidity and the growing multidirectional flows of services, goods, and information as well as structures they encounter and create that are barriers to or expedite those flows.<sup>24</sup> This system has been created, nourished, and been beneficial to the United States economy as well as to that of China. It has been the key in the economic affluence and rehabilitation from the past revisionisms for countries such as Germany or Japan. Even China or India owes its economic success to liberal trade, despite commercial rules inside of China being altered to adjust to communist principles and elite political interests.<sup>25</sup> Despite diverse interpretations, trends of global-

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21 See Report by Reuters in Washington D.C., "US security adviser claims China has taken 'most active role' in election meddling" (The Guardian, Accessed on 21.10.2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/04/us-security-adviser-china-elections-meddling>)

22 See Adam Schiff, "The U.S. Intelligence Community Is Not Prepared for the China Threat: A Fundamental Realignment Is Needed to Counter Beijing" (Foreign Affairs, September 30, 2020).

23 Lee Hsien Loong, "The Endangered Asian Century: America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation" (Foreign Affairs, July/August, 2020),

24 George Ritzer, *Globalization: A Basic Text* (Blackwell publishing, 2010), 2, 44.

25 Minxin Pei, "China's Coming Upheaval: Competition, Coronavirus, and the Weakness of Xi Jinping" (Foreign Affairs, May/June 2020), 3.

ization with a domineering China hint at a geopolitical reconfiguration. This reconfiguration of economic and social geography transcends the geography between people and states that might lead to insecurity, inequality, and further democratic deficits.<sup>26</sup>

It is increasingly evident that China uses all means to enhance its power – both utilizing the democratic liberal world order and harming it at the same time. If trade offers all states equally mutual benefits from cooperation, then for Beijing this trade and cooperation provides an opportunity for political exploitation. As a communist state, all its enterprises are under the control of a state. In China, with its expanding infrastructural and investments projects, there is a direct correlation between the investment and political control from China. Multiple states can fall into ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ with possible political concessions or simply become victims of domestic political-economic pressures by Chinese interests.<sup>27</sup>

Such economic and political mixing of powers allows Beijing to offer different rules (or lack thereof) and cooperation principles as an alternative, which due to the choice and constraints of influence might not be offered by the United States. The already expanding influence of authoritarian countries allows them to propose sets of different rights (the absence of rules and rights) and cooperation principles.

**For example, China, Russia, Cuba, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia are expected to be elected to the board of the UN Human Rights Council, leaving human rights campaigners in the countries aghast and pleading with EU states to commit to withholding their support.<sup>28</sup> Such a trend would indeed mean the return to the ‘jungle’ where the most notorious regimes in the past or present with the least respect against human rights and values would command the global humanitarian values and order.**

26 Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2nd Edition, 2005), 8-9.

27 Aardon L. Friedberg, “An Answer to Aggression: How to Push Back Against Beijing” (*Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2020), 161

28 Patrick Wintour, “China, Russia and Saudi Arabia set to join UN human rights council” (*The Guardian*, October 12, 2020, accessed on 12.10.2020, [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/12/china-russia-saudi-arabia-set-join-un-human-rights-council?utm\\_term=Autofeed&CMP=tw\\_t\\_gu&utm\\_medium&utm\\_source=Twitter&fbclid=IwAR27j1xcHa00Zz\\_KipAh-hz03Rh2cb0lgnr\\_HkDPQa-ZZfmbpVMHU0c14594#Echobox=1602505626](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/12/china-russia-saudi-arabia-set-join-un-human-rights-council?utm_term=Autofeed&CMP=tw_t_gu&utm_medium&utm_source=Twitter&fbclid=IwAR27j1xcHa00Zz_KipAh-hz03Rh2cb0lgnr_HkDPQa-ZZfmbpVMHU0c14594#Echobox=1602505626)).

# REVERTING THE LOCAL JUNGLE GEOPOLITICS

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In the immediate post-Cold War world where military and political power seemed to have lost its prominence, the United States and Europe were the most advanced the most industrialized entities that controlled the global economic affairs by moving capital around the world.<sup>29</sup> Despite political divergence, trade yet bound the United States and the European Union into the largest and wealthiest market in the world that accounts for half of total global personal consumption and close to one-third of the world's GDP in terms of purchasing power (with only a fraction of global population).<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the present political fracturing over the terms of global trade has led to the possibility of new "economic iron curtain" where China and the United States is competing, especially in the field of technologies and information, for Europe. Chinese curse suggests, "may you live in interesting times," haunts the robustness and solidarity of the transatlantic economy. The United States and the European Union remains each other's most important partner, but this partnership now bears significant geopolitical and security importance.

Russia has never shied away from neo-communist and neo-imperial ambitions (while veiling them within a different lexicon), especially after lost hopes and illusions for closer ties with the West. Since Putin's Munich speech in 2007 onward, its primary adversary has been the United States.<sup>31</sup> In his remarks, in addition to a criticism of the neglect of Russia as a part of the European security architecture, he mentioned the economic superiority of China and India over the United States and BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), which was becoming larger than the European Union. Such statements are tantamount to the times when Gorbachev was steering the Soviet Union to build a "common European home" where there was no place for the United States.<sup>32</sup> In such

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29 Fareed Zakaria, *Post-American, Post-Western World: and the Rise of the Rest* (Penguin Books, 2008), 20.

30 See Daniel S. Hamilton and Joseph Quinlan, "Transatlantic Economy 2020," (Amcham-EU, accessed on 15.10.2020, <https://transatlanticrelations.org/publications/transatlantic-economy-2020/>)

31 Sandis Sraders, *Small Baltic State and the Euro-Atlantic Community* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 181.

32 Rebecca R. Moore, *NATO's New Mission* (London: Praeger Security International, 2007), 16–17.

an environment, a liberal and democratic order would depend on dwindling American influence in Europe.

Until now, China has been quietly and slowly biding its time, but recently, Beijing's response against democracies and toward United States' allies in the shadow of the pandemic has marked – especially with the crackdown on Hong Kong, its military maneuvers around Taiwan, and attempts to quell any public gatherings aimed at commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown.

In terms of technological advancement, such profound players like China can perfect artificial intelligence to enhance control over local populations and to spread such innovations to the closest allies with shared interests. In its partnership with Russia, Beijing is leading an anti-satellite weapons system and anti-access/area denial weapons system to undermine Washington's ability to project power in space, East Asia, or Europe.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the United States' international power suffers from an expanding and bolder Russia and China. As a result, the American-led liberal and democratic world order is damaged in kind together with its international means for influence.

China has invested in multiple efforts to replace the United States as the major commercial superpower where more than military power is required.<sup>34</sup> With Xi Jinping's announcement of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, International Monetary Fund blessed the Chinese Renminbi with the status of one of the world's elite currencies, alongside the Dollar, Euro, Pound, and Yen. Multiple United States allies from Europe then hastily joined Beijing's duplication of the United States-led World Bank.<sup>35</sup> Not only covertly in the informational and technological domain, but also with the United States dollar, a symbol of its global strength and appeal, China is overtly challenging Western financial influence.

On top of commerce, China is set to challenge global dominance of the

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33 Nadia Schadlow, "The End of American Illusions" (Foreign Affairs, September/October, 2020), 38-40.

34 Barry Eichengreen, "Hegemonic Stability Theories and the International Monetary System" (National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 2193, 1987), 57-58.

35 Jane Perlez, "China Creates a World Bank of Its Own, and the U.S. Balks" (New York Times, December 4, 2015, accessed on 10.01.2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/05/business/international/china-creates-an-asian-bank-as-the-us-stands-alooof.html>)

United States by undermining its sea power capabilities. At the beginning of the 2000s, Zbigniew Brzezinski questioned the nature of the strategy that the United States should adapt in order to maintain its superpower status in Eurasia, calling it the 'grand chessboard'. Even then, China was explicitly mentioned as a menace within the context of hypothetical future developments.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, United States international standing depends on American foreign policy in four parts of Eurasia – toward its old ally, Europe, the old rival, Russia, and toward Central and East Asia. Now United States presence is challenged by Beijing in all these regions. China's seemingly benign Belt and Road project to connect Asia with Europe bears within itself prospects for domination and the United States decline in Eurasia.

Far from being solely an economic initiative, One Road One Belt implementation allows China to build a military base in Djibouti. In multiple countries where there is substantial interest in these transportation-infrastructure projects, there is insufficient media scrutiny (over economic-political deals between local governments and Beijing). Investment initiatives come with corruption by accepting payments in cash or offering to resolve debt issues for a control over strategic assets. All these offers bear political costs, as China does not operate as a philanthropic enterprise. Thus, these projects are interplay between security, political, and economic factors.

Some recipient countries themselves are concerned about Chinese intent, as the investments are looking tantamount to "a race-to-the-top dynamic vis-à-vis China."<sup>37</sup> In the end, the United States international influence will have to face a land power challenge.<sup>38</sup> It will make China bolder and the United States less capable to exercise multilateral cooperation with allies in Eurasia even if reciprocal interests would suggest closer cooperation.

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36 See Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (Basic Books, 1997).

37 See report by Amar Bhattacharya, David Dollar, Rush Doshi, Ryan Hass, Bruce Jones, Homi Kharas, Jennifer Mason, Mireya Solís, and Jonathan Stromseth, "China's Belt and Road: The new geopolitics of global infrastructure development" (Brookings, April 2019, accessed on 06.10.2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chinas-belt-and-road-the-new-geopolitics-of-global-infrastructure-development/>).

38 See arguments about the vulnerability of land powers, such as China, in front of sources for global dominance naval powers can project, A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (Dover Publications; Revised ed. Edition, November 1, 1987).

At the core of the Western liberal order, even the United States and Europe are facing a daunting set of challenges in the short-, medium-, and long-term. First, such global challenges as the pandemic, economic recessions, and climate change will be harder to resolve in the face of China's disruptive technologies and security threats.<sup>39</sup> At present, neither the United States nor Europe holds the capacity to address these challenges on their own, notwithstanding any common interests.

To consolidate transatlantic and European structures, there is an urgent need to remedy multiple fault lines in the transatlantic alliance as well as in regards to domestic democratic fracturing. The coming presidential election results in the United States can empower the present rather isolationist posture of the United States but also toughen the United States stance against China which deserves credit and enjoys bipartisan support. The United States will have to change its isolationist posture and might be forced to cope with China with fewer allies and capabilities. Such a trend would further the decline of United States international influence with less allies, especially from Europe, where talks about strategic autonomy are gaining traction. To restore United States international standing, there is an urgent need to end the domestic polarization and to move the United States forward – to address tense relations with China, loss of the international trust, restore multilateral structures, and enhance binding rules (the basis of the liberal world order).<sup>40</sup> The United States will also have to cope with pandemic-caused economic repercussions.

In Europe, the United Kingdom is about to leave the European single market, complicating transatlantic relations even more. In terms of a United States-friendly voice in Europe, Britain is becoming like Norway in relations with Europe (without political influence in the EU), but Mexico in relations with the United States (it is not an equal partner despite strategic interests in Lon-

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39 See the German Marshall Fund of the United States Report, "Together or Alone? Choices and Strategies for Transatlantic Relations for 2021 and Beyond" (GMF, October 6, 2020, accessed on 08.10.2020, [https://www.gmfus.org/publications/together-or-alone-choices-and-strategies-transatlantic-relations-2021-and-beyond?utm\\_source=email&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=ww%202020-10-07](https://www.gmfus.org/publications/together-or-alone-choices-and-strategies-transatlantic-relations-2021-and-beyond?utm_source=email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ww%202020-10-07)).

40 Volker Perthes, "What Trump will be leaving behind if he leaves," (German Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (SWP), September 15, 2020, accessed on 08.10.2020, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/what-trump-will-be-leaving-behind-if-he-leaves/>).

don to build closer ties). The economic leader of Europe, Germany, is inching closer to a national election – a factor that could adjust the future of Europe.

**“The so-called new architecture of security that France wants to develop with Russia is sensitive for the United States part of Europe and for transatlantic security cooperation prospects. Such efforts invoke bad memories in the Central and Eastern Europe and especially in the small Baltic States.**

Then the French President Jacques Chirac mentioned that these American allies “missed an opportunity to keep quiet” when they supported the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 against the major European powers such as the French and German opposition.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of common defense, German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer during the Riga Conference in 2019, mentioned the Federal Republic's effort to reach the two percent for defense in 15 years (the same amount of time the Baltic States have been members of NATO). Furthermore, according to her, the pandemic has rendered “the share from GDP spent on defense increasingly insufficient measure of commitment to the NATO military alliance.”<sup>42</sup> Regarding transatlantic cooperation, the always-ambivalent France is planning to reach the same objective by 2025.<sup>43</sup> When it comes to strategic approaches, Germany (and probably alone) can contribute to the solidarity of Europe and solidarity with transatlantic cooperation if its approach to cooperation in Europe would favor alignment with United States' interests (such as matching burden sharing within NATO). This transatlantic security cooperation is yet seen as the cornerstone of the national security strategy and important for addressing challenges for Europe and with China.

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41 Rym Momtaz, “Macron's Russia dialogue to be tested on Baltic trip” (Politico, September 2020, accessed on 08.10.2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-baltics-trip-france-russia-strategy/>)

42 See article “NATO spending rules need revising due to coronavirus, German defense chief says” (Deutsche Welle, accessed on 08.10.2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/nato-spending-rules-need-revising-due-to-coronavirus-german-defense-chief-says/a-54214272>)

43 Pierre Tran, “France to bolster defense spending by \$2 billion,” (Defense News, September 26, 2018, accessed on 08.10.2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2018/09/26/france-to-bolster-defense-spending-by-2-billion-heres-the-military-equipment-already-on-order/>)

## THE COMPLICATED CONTEXT - THE WAY AHEAD

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COVID-19 has complicated the international environment by making competition between major powers as the United States and China, the roles of their partners such as the European Union and Russia, and their championed principles such as democracy and autocracy more vivid. The result of such an expedited competition is the return of geopolitics as an ordering concept. As a result,

“**the global liberal order based on democratic cooperation and alliances is competing with a ‘rules of a jungle’ paradigm where in each state must first consider its alliances and security interests against surging powers in an overall situation of anarchy.**”

**First**, in order to uphold its international influence, **the United States must bridge extant gaps and consolidate cooperation inside of Europe and with Europe to ensure containment of China and Russia.**<sup>44</sup> Even though there is the lack of confidence in transatlantic frameworks, security interests against a surging China or a revisionist Russia nonetheless affect all the old allies. Thus, there is a profound interest on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean to contain the neo-imperial and neo-communist ambitions by Russia, and to uphold democratic liberal principles and human rights across the globe. China leads this revision of the liberal democratic order despite the benefits such order has delivered to it is over the last many decades.

**Second, the United States and Europe must enhance cooperation with like-minded states in Asia.** Few examples are India and Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, Australia and Indonesia. Most see a surging China as a challenge to themselves (irreversibly becoming more nationalistic) and others (in its consolidation of domestic and regional power, China would become inclined to

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44 Michael Mandelbaum, “The New Containment: Handling Russia, China, and Iran,” (Foreign Affairs, March/April, 2019).

expand its influence further). Enhanced security and commercial cooperation, based on liberal democratic principles, would uphold a cooperative world order in Asia for those who find a merit in it. With such allies in Asia, there would be a dual extension of the US-European influence across Eurasia.

**Third, both the United States and European states must uphold present alliances as well as values.** To tame China's reign and dominance in such regions as Hong Kong or against Taiwan, the United States and Europe might face short-term limitations. Nevertheless, in long- and short-term perspectives, the core of the West must apply their commercial and political influence to bring Beijing back to a respect of human rights and rule of law. As a member of the WTO and a major commercial power, the means of its political influence by economic means can be best addressed through an economic and then political containment of China. Here, the United States and the European Union must find a common ground to uphold international trading rules and approach to China's technological expansion (bearing challenges to democracies worldwide). This would be possible only after the internal solidarity challenges inside of Europe or within the transatlantic cooperation frameworks and in the past.

**Fourth, the intrinsic influence of the United States and the European Union dwells on the liberal and democratic principles worldwide.** To address the effects of COVID-19, both share a common interest in restoring and enhancing these principles. From the past, this would avoid the fragmentation of the transatlantic alliance (as the United States would become more isolated), European institutions (with Europe becoming more state centered and nationalistic), and a situation in which European nation states become more assertive and nationalistic. The support and success of liberal and democratic values would reverse such regressive conditions like the experiences at the end of the Great Depression and the beginning of the surge of the authoritarian rule in Europe in the middle of the 1930s. These are kindred historical experiences Europe would like to avoid repeating, but that COVID-19 has nonetheless expedited. Furthermore, the United States would like to see these historical alliances strong for furthering the beneficial liberal democratic order where all compete equally (a condition for stability and security worldwide).

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