

Multipolarity and Multilateralism

Document Type: Commentary

Heinz Gärtner*

Received: 2022/05/30

Accepted: 2022/08/31

Introduction

New actors are emerging in the World after Cold War-bipolarity and US-unipolarity. The world is becoming more multipolar. More competing poles may lead to more polarization and (nuclear) arms race unless it will be accompanied by a strong multilateralism. However, in spite of the new administration in the White House multilateralism is in decline. Europe and Asia have to find their roles in this new world. The US-debate tends to ignore Europe's importance in the world while China's threat is often exaggerated. Asia itself is heterogeneous and consists of multiple political, economic and cultural centers. China is the most powerful state but Asia is not China led. Multipolarity with no or little multilateralism is a dangerous mix for the world. Europe's history offers some analogies for possible scenarios for the future. Just as in the second half of the nineteenth century, the world saw breakdown of an order base on the Great Power Cooperation of the Concert of Vienna of 1815. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 can be model for global cooperation. The world has now the choice: 1914 or 1975.

1. Theoretical Background

On the one hand, the realist school sees a world with is anarchic with no or little regulatory mechanisms above the state. The only effective regulatory mechanism would be the balance of power system, and in the age of nuclear

* Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Vienna, Austria
heinz.gaertner@univie.ac.at

weapons it is nuclear deterrence. There can be war any time like it can rain if this systems fail. Realist do not care much about international institutions and international law, because they think that it is ineffective.

On the other hand, the political scientist Karl Deutsch developed the idea of “security communities” that can be built on common values. They will be enhanced through permanent communication. Hedley Bull, a representative of the English school, argues that an “international society” can be achieved through enhanced cooperation. The “international society” can be “pluralist” based on the philosophy of Hugo Grotius or “solidarist” referring to Kant’s thinking. International cooperation and multilateralism can be placed within this frameworks.

The presidency of Donald Trump made visible that the world is becoming more polarized and anarchic. The Biden-Presidency promised to introduce a more cooperative approach. In fact, it found same anarchic free areas like climate change, where multilateral cooperation seems possible. Great Power competition continues with the increasing danger of polarization, however.

2. Trump’s foreign policy left the world more anarchic

President Trump’s presidency left the world in disarray. The world moved towards a Great Power Conflict. The conflictual relations between the US and China are not new but US President Donald Trump increased tensions with China. He abandoned multilateralism and polarized the international system. President Trump left most of the international and multilateral agreements, like the nuclear deal with Iran (“Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” - JCPOA) and the Treaty on Intermediate Missiles (INF) and he attacked multilateral Institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Paris Climate agreement. The Great Power Competition with China and Russia became priority and he imposed heavy sanctions on Iran. He threatened European companies with secondary sanctions if they do business with Iran.

3. Great Power Conflict

The historian Graham Allison found that in 75 percent of Great Power Conflict when a declining power is challenged by a rising power war occurred. He calls this “Thucydides trap”. Most countries in the world do not want to be entrapped in a future great power conflict (Allison, 2018). Fareed Zakaria argues that the existence of two great power does not necessarily lead to war, however. “You can have bipolarity without war.” He is referring to the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. Counter

examples would be the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta or the Carthaginian War between Rome and Carthage (Zakaria, 2020).

A worst case scenario would be the second half of the nineteenth century, when the world witnessed a breakdown of multilateralism, the emergence of nationalistic and ethnic xenophobia, the demonization of adversaries, the depreciation of international institutions, withdrawals from international agreements and treaties, and an expanding arms race. This scenario would be a breakdown of values in slow motion of what Europe holds dear: effective multilateralism, working international institutions, interdependence and interconnectedness, military restraint but peace support, engagement of adversaries, common and cooperative security.

China is not only a geopolitical power but engages in various institutional, political, economic and financial multilateral levels. It goes without saying that it tries to influence and shape the process according to its own political and economic interests - but so do other countries. Abandoning multilateralism means abandoning common values. Values can change environments.

4. Europe's role

What about Europe? Many Europeans felt betrayed by the big ally United States during the Trump period. Over decades they have built up a very positive image of the US. The US intervened in both World Wars, was the leading Western power against the Soviet bloc and provided the Marshall Plan for some European states. They remained mostly silent in the face of the brutality of the Vietnam War. This was not possible anymore when George W. Bush intervened in Iraq 2003 under false pretenses. As former Secretary of Defense Ronald Rumsfeld observed that there was a division between "old and new Europe". Under the Trump administration again most parts of Europe felt that the US has ceased to be the beloved leading world power.

This Great Power Conflict between the US, China and nuclear Russia implies that Europe will have to engage more in world affairs. The debate so far has been focused on enhancing European military capabilities. Higher defense spending, as many European officials are requesting, is not the solution for Europe to get a bigger leverage in the world but political engagement. The EU has not been very successful in getting engaged in international conflicts, however. Also, a European army would not be able to address these issues. It is becoming an excuse for European political deficiencies.

More importantly is Europe's political role. During the Trump administration it left the Middle East to the Kushner-Plan which abandoned the Two-State-Solution. On Syria, Europe is not even at the negotiating table. On the Korean Peninsula, Europeans watched first the Kim-Trump war of

words and then their love affair. US-Russia relations were dominated by US internal affairs which had an impact on European-Russian relations. There is strong US-pressure to cancel the pipeline-project “Northstream 2”. Although the EU should develop its own China policy independent from the US-China Great Power Conflict, it - probably under US-pressure - suspended the implementation of its comprehensive investment agreement of the EU with China. Europeans must learn to manage international crises themselves – not without the US, but also not by waiting for the US to do so. If Europe is not in the position to take on its role, the world will become more dangerous and polarized.

What will be Europe’s options? In such a military Great-Power-Conflict Europe will not side with China but to be drawn into a Great Power Conflict with the US, which is not in its interest, would be disastrous neither. A rational choice would be to stay neutral. Some NATO members, however, will observe the security commitments (Article V) of the Washington Treaty. If the EU stays neutral, NATO will likely become divided. Austria will be obliged to remain neutral according to its neutrality law.

5. The JCPOA and the wider Middle East

Europe was also not able to keep the JCPOA functional because it was afraid of Trump’s secondary sanctions. After all, the JCPOA was for the EU a “masterpiece of effective multilateralism”. Europe eventually took on its responsibility. Under the chairmanship of the European Union, talks about Iran’s nuclear program began in Vienna on April 7, 2021. These talks focused on the technical details on how to re-implement the JCPOA within the framework of JCPOA “Joint Commission”. The talks in Vienna offered a window of opportunity, similar to the one in 2015 when the JCPOA was first adopted. At that time, both Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and U.S. President Barack Obama understood that after more than a decade of failed attempts, it was a unique moment to come to an agreement. Weeks passed as negotiations were extended time and again. There was a similar situation of urgency this time, of what the EU, Rouhani and Biden are all aware of.

On the wider Middle East, President Trump wanted to prevent the next president to restore normal relations with Iran. He made Iran responsible for all the tensions in the region. The killing of General Soleimani and the alliance of Arab states with Israel should isolate Iran politically and diplomatically. If President Biden thinks within a larger context, he could ignore Trump’s policies and offer new diplomatic relations with Iran in order to save the nuclear deal. Such an initiative would go beyond Obama’s rapprochement with Iran.

A comprehensive regional solution must be based on the recognition of the borders of 1967 when Israel occupied Palestinian territories. This would not alienate the Palestinians and would keep the door open to a Two-State-Solution which Joseph Biden supports. Trump's peace plan for the Middle East, which is still in place, confirms Israel's occupation of the West Bank and ignores the rights of the Palestinians.

Under Biden's presidency same multilateralism will return, great power conflict is here to stay

Will President Joseph Biden change course? Biden will not bring the US back to an exceptional status. Many developments are structural. Trump was not only an aberration. Richard Haass speaks of a "disruptive superpower" (Haass, 2020), Michael Beckley of the "illiberal superpower" (Beckley, 2020).

Biden will certainly cooperate within some multilateral organizations like the WHO, the WTO and return to the Paris Climate Agreement. He will act more diplomatically. What Biden did was to return to the pre-Trump era. However, the US can be hardly a model for multilateralism. The US did not join various multilateral agreements, like the law of the sea, the conventions on landmines and cluster bombs, the conventions on children's and women's rights, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Biden could make a big move by signing and ratifying some of these agreements.

Joseph Biden will be more committed to NATO and work with US-allies in Europe and Asia. He also announced to create an "alliance of democracies". Let alone the definition of democracy (what about the US-allies Saudi Arabia or Egypt?), this alliance or association would exclude powers like China and Russia. This concept undermines per definitionem multilateralism which is comprehensive and not exclusive. Tensions with China and Russia will remain. Polarity is structural. Biden could, however, wage a big step like US-President Nixon took when he visited Mao's China 1972. This was one of the most successful summits in post Second World War history.

6. 1914 or 1975?

How can a "security community" be achieved? A historical analogy could be the CSCE -Helsinki "Final Act" of 1975. The Helsinki summit took place at the height of the Cold War. The principle of mutual recognition of systems stood the test of heightened tensions. It is the Helsinki-document which expresses best European values. It does not identify enemies or threats, not even opponents or adversaries. It requests "cooperative security" and analyses that security is indivisible. The "Final Act" is not only a guideline to reduce the tensions in the whole of Europe but can be model for other conflict areas

in the world, for example the relations between the two Koreas. The EU itself has to be realigned to the principles of the Helsinki “Final Act”. The world has now the choice: 1914 or 1975.



References

- Allison Graham (2018), *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* New York: Mariner Books.
- Zakaria Fareed (2020), *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Haass Richard (2020), "Present at the Disruption: How Trump Unmade U.S. Foreign Policy", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October.
- Beckley Michael (2020), "Rogue Superpower: Why This Could Be an Illiberal American Century", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December.

