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BUILDING FORWARD BETTER AFTER THE RAIN

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THREE RIVALRIES

POWER, IDEOLOGY, MULTILATERALISM

Thierry de Montbrial

GLOBALIZATION is a recurring phenomenon in Universal History. Our modern era traces its origins to two successive periods of globalization: the Age of Discovery, which was in turn followed by the nineteenth century's Age of Imperialism—led mostly by the European powers as well as by the United States. In both cases, it is a relatively straightforward procedure to link both of these to economic revolutions.

The third period of globalization stems from the revolution in communication and information technologies. It began in the 1970s in the military domain, expanded in the 1980s into the realm of finance, before then spreading into the rest of the economy and throughout society.

The rise in competition that resulted from this third period culminated in the downfall of the Soviet Union and the apparent ideological victory of liberal democracy and the American empire.

POWER

But this is hardly sufficient. We must immediately bring some contrasts to the surface. In the first period of globalization, the exclusive beneficiaries were the Europeans and their descendants (the founding colonists of the United States). In the second, it was Europe again, but also a booming post-Civil War America; yet both only managed to effloresce the large countries belonging to the civilizational area that was called the Far East and is now referred to as East Asia: Japan and China. In other words, both Americans and Europeans only touched the surface of these two nations. And, as a result, these two nations went about setting themselves the task of endeavoring to catch up with those that had failed to conquer them.

Japan took off a century ahead of China. The Meiji Restoration benefited from the fruits of a fully-formed political unity led by a strong and well-disciplined party of reform. The history of Japan between 1868 and 1945 forms a coher-

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Illustration: CIRSD

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ent whole, notwithstanding its deviations and excesses. In China, the reformers failed to establish themselves under the declining Qing dynasty. They had to wait more than one century, coming together coherently only after the national reunification achieved by Mao's regime.

But East Asia is not a community. Although Japan did manage to catch up with the West during the Meiji period, its dream of domination was shattered by its own hubris and, ultimately, by Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As a result, it entered into

the American order that arose from the ashes of World War II. In the Deng Xiaoping period, China at first tread softly with the West on which it was dependent—as too did Japan at the onset of the Meiji period. But today, the regime that emanates from the New Forbidden City increasingly displays its aspiration for power whilst refraining from excesses. As a result, unlike Japan, China's independence is today only hampered by certain technological shortcomings or by a dearth of natural resources, all of which Beijing is keen to overcome at any cost in the coming years.

China's goal is to be recognized as the world's leading power on the centenary of Mao's victory in 2049. The Chinese plan on taking revenge on the West, and they are not hiding it. One cannot help but ask the question whether by then their power will have become hegemonic; and whether by then China will be recognized by the United States, India, the Europeans, and others as being responsible for the maintenance of world order in the twenty-first century—as was the case, more or less, for England during the Pax Britannica of the nineteenth century and the United States during the Pax Americana of the twentieth.

In the short term—that is to say, within the horizon of the mandate of the Biden-Harris couple—the common interest of the United States and China is to try to play the card of “cooperative rivalry,” to use the euphemism of the great inventor of expressions, Joseph Nye. Instead of hegemony, could such a rivalry lead to a new, structurally stable bipolar equilibrium?

In the medium term, we cannot exclude the risk of an accidental misstep—a risk the probability of which will increase over time. Over this time

horizon, the major issue is Taiwan. Hong Kong is already lost to the West. Of course, one also cannot exclude the possibility that China will experience serious internal difficulties in the time to come. Its rivals are tempted to hope

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IDEOLOGY

On the back of the question of power relations, we see the issue of ideology being increasingly made manifest. Since 1945, the West has tried to impose

a model of liberal democracy on the rest of the world. After the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, this became the full meaning of the push of what the Americans like to call the “Euro-Atlantic” institutions towards the east—a push that abruptly came to an end point with Russia's refusal to submit to American-style capitalism. Because that was the underlying material issue.

Unfortunately for Russia, Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin were unable to implement reforms that would have enabled their country to enter modernity while remaining independent, as China has been able to do. However, over the long term, legitimacy and efficiency go hand in hand. With the Navalny affair,

we see that the legitimacy of the Putin regime is beginning to erode; this trend will intensify, to the benefit of China.

But the legitimacy of liberal democracy is equally tarnished, due to its apparent

ineffectiveness in being able to solve its plethora of societal problems, as in the current context of the pandemic. Conversely, we can expect that the regime that is the home of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” will continue to enjoy the support of the vast majority of its population for as long as it continues to meet

their aspirations, which are not primarily ideological but rather practical in nature. These can be summed up as follows: a better life for the greatest number.

For a long time, the ideologues of Westernism believed in the myth of what I have called for thirty years Fukuyama's equation, or better yet, Fukuyama's postulate:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{democracy} + \text{market economy} \\ \longleftrightarrow \\ \text{peace} + \text{prosperity} \end{array}$$

A chemical equation more than one of logic, the double arrow symbol is understood as indicating that the implications are supposed to work in both directions.

Even if we were to admit that the meaning of each of the terms used is deprived of ambiguity, which is not the case, we can observe the following: since neither liberal democracy and the market economy, on the one hand, nor

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peace and prosperity, on the other, have ever reigned supreme over the totality of our Earth, it is therefore difficult to affirm or indeed to invalidate one or the other of these implications. They are merely pseudo-Hegelian postulates—nothing more. In addition, the emergence of China contradicts the

idea that peace and the march towards prosperity precipitates the advent of liberal democracy. We could obviously come back, in this regard, to the comparative history of China and Japan.

To conclude the first part of this essay, we can say that in the time ahead the world will be dominated by a competition between not only two imperial powers but also two ideologies, neither of which ought to be allowed to claim credibly that it (in opposition to the other) will prevail over the entirety of the Earth anytime soon. To this we must add that the other major powers—such as India, the EU and its constituent countries, and the ASEAN member states—do not wish to be forced to

choose between the two camps. This of course further complicates any medium-term forecast.

For the European Union, the priority is to develop technological autonomy, a prerequisite for any sort of successful realization of the ambiguous concept of “strategic autonomy.” The EU will have to resist American attempts to transform the Atlantic Alliance into a Holy Alliance of more or less liberal democracies banding together to take on a collective of authoritarian or autocratic states. The EU will thus have to increase its room for maneuver vis-à-vis the United States, but obviously without falling into a dependence on China.

MULTILATERALISM

This is the context in which the question of the future of multilateralism arises. First of all, we can say that it consists of the system arising from the Charter of the United Nations. It is sometimes said that its superiority over the League of Nations is mainly due to the institution of the Security Council with its five permanent members (P5), endowed with the right veto. The intrinsic weakness of the UN,

however, is that—despite the end of the Cold War 30 years ago—the P5 remains as divided as ever between the three liberal democracies (the United States, France, and the United Kingdom) and the two authoritarian powers (Russia and China, the latter having taken precedence over the former).

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With respect to the most important conflicts, the great powers, starting with the United States, pay only episodic attention to international law, depending exclusively on their national interest of the moment, more or less narrowly conceived. The United Nations nevertheless retains a certain legitimacy on the international level, for it increases the influence of middle powers and constitutes a sounding board available to small states. In the General Assembly, the majority of UN member states plead for a reform in which the Security Council would become more representative of the hierarchy of power as it has evolved over time—whether directly or, more realistically, through the strengthening of regional organizations. This last point is essential, because in the realities of the balance of power, no reform would currently have a chance of succeeding.

The problem is hence transferred to regional organizations—some of which, like the African Union, have consolidated themselves over time—at a historic moment when the image of multilateralism blurs with that of a very geopolitical multipolarity. The major powers tend, according to their rank, to constitute zones of influence, as in the style of the nineteenth century. The OSCE remains paralyzed by the lingering shadow of the Cold War-era East-West conflict. Showing on another screen, as it were, has been the image of Erdogan’s Turkey. Has not this middle power NATO member been attempting to take advantage of America’s distraction—under the Trump presidency—to impose itself not only in the Middle East but also in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Caucasus?

The idea, excellent on paper, of a democratic international organization of nesting doll multilateralism strikes me as unlikely to prosper in the foreseeable future. In the short to medium term, I think it is more realistic to expect the United Nations to continue playing its role as a brake on the destabilizing shocks that are sure to arise here and there. And even that would be something to write home about.

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For the high stakes issues, however, bilateralism or unilateralism will continue to prevail. Unilateralism is obviously in the interests of the Europeans, particularly for France, which has never given up on elaborating and defending its own vision of the international system as a whole. Still on the subject of high stakes issues, one can regret the retreat of the arms control regime—one of the great diplomatic achievements of the Cold War. Its rise in the wake of the resolution of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis made it possible to reduce the risk of World War III.

A return to the principles and methods of arms control, both nuclear and conventional, seems to me to be a more promising prospect for peace than the formal transposition of democratic principles to the UN General Assembly, which is in no way whatsoever a parliament of supposedly equal states.

But security is not just a politico-military issue. Good economic governance will remain in the interest of the international system as a whole as long as states do not reorganize themselves into blocks loosely coupled amongst themselves. Such a configuration could arise if everyone’s desire to reduce the strategic vulnerability of their respective supply chains takes an

extreme turn, but this is not an immediate risk.

Such a common interest is critical, for the experience of the 1930s suggests that the shortest route to the explosion of an international system and the onset of war is through the instauration of a great economic crisis.

We have known since at least 2008 that if international cooperation is insufficient, then the contemporary world is not immune from the return of such a calamity. Such cooperation (even if sufficient) necessarily goes through the intermediacy of institutions that must constantly adapt. This is not just an intellectual or doctrinal matter; it is also a question of balance of power, because if the forecasts outlined above materialize, the weight of China in these institutions will gradually become preponderant.

Added to this is another, essential consideration: as in arms control agreements, good governance requires reciprocal rights of scrutiny into each other's affairs—a discipline that the Americans and the Soviets did not easily resolve. The great slippages of international relations have their origin in acts that we want to hide.

However, culturally, the Chinese open their vaults even less easily than do the Americans. I see no simple solution to

this type of problem other than a shared desire to establish confidence-building measures. This can only happen if the parties concerned feel it is absolutely necessary. And we are just not there yet. The Europeans can and must act vigorously to push the Americans, the Russians, and now the Chinese in this

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direction, which presupposes ideological restraint on the part of the Europeans.

These remarks lead me to evoke the COVID-19 pandemic, an additional signal of the return to historical normality since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This tragedy is a warning. Other pandemics could arise as a result of globalization. This is an area where the need for a strong international organization should be evident.

The WHO has been criticized. But today its problem is not its strength, but its weakness. Access to health services is spoken of as a “global public good.” Yes indeed, for example, immunizing an individual anywhere is in the interest of the world's population as a whole. But, having said that, who will decide on how to gather and then distribute the resources needed for the development of vaccines, for their production, for their distribution, and so on? Where will these resources come from? Too often, in this particular case

as in so many others concerning international relations, the debt is paid with words because there no world government exists. While waiting to make access to health services a truly global public good, the EU can and must give it consistency as a public good on its own scale.

When it comes to global warming, we are barely starting to develop effective responses, less thanks to treaties or direct political pressure

than because of technological progress and the conviction among manufacturers that demand will inevitably go in the direction of the green economy. Logical connections exist between the different approaches, but they are subtle.

A MODEL FOR CENTURIES HENCE

Finally, I will add a few words on the ongoing construction of Europe, omnipresent in the background of what has been said in this essay to date. I see the EU as a reduced and still fledgling model of what global political organization could become in the coming centuries.

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True multilateralism is built in the image of the neural system, in the face of the necessities imposed by action, in the broad sense. International relations theorists speak of “institutional gears.”

This is how the organization that allows for survival is gradually developed.

For Europe, survival is first and foremost about a civilization that has not yet spoken its last word. Little inclined to abstraction, the founding

fathers of the Community that became a Union instinctively grasped that the nations of Europe had to interconnect with each other in order for unity in diversity to emerge. In this sense, despite all its difficulties, Europe continues to present itself as an example to the world: Europe aspires to show the world a third way, somewhere between a naive legal order and the law of the strongest.

One can hope that France will come to understand ever more than it does at present that the construction of Europe must remain *the* center of gravity of its foreign policy in the even more turbulent times that lie ahead. ●