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**EUROPE'S ROLE IN THE
CORONA AND POST-
CORONA WORLD**

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I. INTRODUCTION

In order to understand how global political conflicts and social peace will look after the corona era, it is necessary to analyze how they are developing during the crisis itself. This article makes the argument that the existing tendencies will accelerate and endure after the crisis. The following four factors will be discussed here: competition between the US and China, which has been accelerated by the election campaign in the US and the mutual blame game over the origin of the coronavirus; the changing priorities and threat perception of NATO in the wake of the virus; the newly discovered importance of the state and especially the welfare state; and Europe's response.

II. THE ROLE OF THE USA AND CHINA

The US election campaign gives a glimpse of what might come after the elections and the COVID crisis. US President Donald Trump chose two issues to campaign on: China and immigration. These issues are not new and have generated an international conflict with China as well as domestic discrimination during the four years of his presidency. The campaign and the COVID crisis have accelerated both trends, and they will remain in the “time after.” Trump announced a halt to immigration amid the coronavirus pandemic and, after protests, specified that it would be temporary. At the same time, anti-Asian racism has increased during the spread of the virus in the US and elsewhere.

Trump chose China and immigration as his main campaign topics to divert attention away from his own incompetence in failing to react in time and downplaying the danger of the virus. Once the danger became obvious, he blamed his predecessor Barack Obama, the Democrats, immigrants, and China. In other foreign policy areas, the president cannot claim success: the “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran did not bring Iran to its knees, the charm offensives towards North Korean leader Kim Jong Un did not lead to nuclear disarmament, his Middle East “deal of the century” is doomed to fail because it was rejected by major stakeholders in the region and around the world, and the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) can hardly be sold as a “colossal victory” by the president.

Trump also started to speak of a “war against the virus” to appear as a military commander. By all definitions of war, the pandemic is not a war. According to Clausewitz, war is “an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will.” In addition, there must be a centralized command structure for all warfighting parties. If it were a war, according to

which “the utmost use of force is necessary” (Clausewitz), the US with the by far the largest military in the world would not have a problem to defeat the virus.

The indirect reaction of the world was an increasing feeling that the US cannot serve as a global leader in times of crisis. In the past, Europe looked to the US after it entered decisively into both world wars and provided the Marshall Plan aid after 1947. The US was also considered to be the protective power against the Communist Bloc. Europeans tried to look away from the atrocities during the Vietnam War in the sixties and seventies, but it was harder to do so during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was conducted under false pretenses.

In spite of China’s harsh reaction to suppress the spread of the virus, the perception of China will not go unscathed because of its initial hesitant response and the number of dead and infected. The economies of both the US and China will suffer a significant toll. It is unlikely that either will emerge from the crisis as the undisputed leading superpower.

Most countries in the world do not want to be entrapped in a future great power conflict. They also must learn to manage international crises themselves – not without the US, but also not by waiting for the US to do so. Since Europe is not in the position to take on this role either, we can expect a more dangerous and polarized world.

III. THE ROLE OF THE NATO

The US military is reducing its military exercises in Europe because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Is Russia becoming less of a threat to the US and NATO than the pandemic? A large part of NATO's exercises is designed to improve NATO's internal cohesiveness and coordination. They are not directly related to external threats. Therefore, they have a strong autistic dimension and would continue even if external enemies disappeared and NATO didn't know about it. The same is true for NATO's defense expenditures. Russia's military expenditures are only eight percent of those of NATO. If Germany spent two percent of its GDP on defense, as the US and NATO request, it would exceed Russia's defense expenditures. There is no direct proportionality between defense spending and threat analysis. This pattern will also stay in the post-corona era. The expenditures tell more about NATO's internal burden-sharing than about external threats. Fighting Covid-19 will enhance NATO's capabilities to deal with different challenges. Pandemics have played a minor role or have been ignored in the doctrines and strategies of NATO and its member states as a challenge altogether – or at least thus far.

The perception of Russia by NATO and the US will probably not change after the pandemic weakens or ends. Mainstream media in the West, which functions as a seismograph, already accuses Russia of using the virus to spread disinformation and downplay Russia's aid to Italy. To use a historic analogy, the last worldwide pandemic in 1918-1919 did not improve great power relations. It is possible, however, that a different positive narrative about Russia's help could prevail, as the EU, including the European Central Bank, failed to provide adequate aid not only to Italy and Spain but also to Africa. China and Russia stepped in and have filled this

void to some extent. The US was very successful, for example, in building a very positive image through the Marshall Plan after World War II.

Security relations between NATO and Russia will not change much, as the security establishments on both sides might not want it. They are eager to preserve their own kingdoms. However, we can expect a thaw on other levels, i.e. science, research, technology, academics, and think tanks, but also in companies that are doing common research. In these areas, co-operation will be indispensable, as the fight against the global pandemic demonstrates. That is of significant importance, and over time it could also enhance political and security relations between the West (including NATO members) and Russia.

IV. THE OLD AND THE NEW ROLE OF THE STATE IN EUROPE

Over the last two to three decades, the idea of the state has been challenged in the wake of the debate over globalization. The argument was that the state was too weak and too small to deal with global issues and simultaneously too big for local problems. In addition, the emerging trend of nationalism and populism was attributed to the state. For many observers, the so-called nation-state is responsible for these developments. They conclude that the nation-state is the main obstacle for globalization and it promotes nationalism.

The state and the nation are very different species, with distinct origins and histories. Ethnically and historically homogeneous nation-states are a political construct designed to give the idea of the nation more power and secure its survival. Because the state is an administrative unit with the legitimate use of force (M. Weber), a weaker state would strengthen the next strongest actor: a powerful political and ethnic nation. The privatization of force would be the consequence, what Hedley Bull called “neo-medievalism”.

The corona crisis of 2020 has confirmed once again how important the state is to secure the survival of society and the economy. Thus, different entities and persons, such as companies and artists, are calling for support from the state. Most countries have to rely on their public health systems to treat patients infected by Covid-19. In many countries, the states pay for part-time work in order to avoid unbearable unemployment rates. Artists who usually work as freelancers get support and small projects by the state. The “welfare state” all of a sudden appears to be indispensable.

All this has nothing to do with the image of a homogeneous nation. A decay of the state would lead to the loss of many of these functions. A solution for nationalism lies not in the abolition of the state but in the separation of the state from the nation. To address the problems of the nation-state, the state has to be de-nationalized and de-ethnicized. The nation, culture, and ethnicity should become private matters. Social issues are to a large extent the responsibility of the state – social relations not so much. The administrative tasks of the state should not be weakened by criticism of the artificial nation-state.

A state's activities and actions can also have a decisive impact on politics and the economy. Leaders of states that contained outbreaks rapidly and took decisive measures, such as South Korean President Moon Jae-in and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, won more support and trust from their populations than leaders who used war rhetoric, such as French President Emmanuel Macron and US President Donald Trump.¹

History can provide some insights into the impact of a state's actions. State interventions, such as social distancing, can have positive effects on the economy by limiting spikes in infections and avoiding mass casualties. A study of the economic impact of the 1918 Spanish flu in the US found that cities that implemented early and extensive non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) suffered no adverse economic effects over the medium term. In fact, cities that intervened earlier and more aggressively experienced a relative increase in real economic activity after the pandemic subsided.²

¹ <https://s2.washingtonpost.com/camp-rw/?trackId=596b53a3ade4e24119b19b36&s=5ebcc125fe1ff654c2dc9f66&linknum=7&linktot=73>

² https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Papers.cfm?abstract_id=3561560;
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/pandemic-economy-lessons-1918-flu/>

V. EUROPE'S FAILINGS

The political engagement of the EU is a requirement for many conflict areas. This fact is recognized by the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) of 2016: “In a more contested world, the EU will be guided by a strong sense of responsibility. We will engage responsibly across Europe and the surrounding regions to the east and south. We will act globally to address the root causes of conflict and poverty, and to promote human rights. [...] The Union cannot pull up a drawbridge to ward off external threats. Retreat from the world only deprives us of the opportunities that a connected world presents.” Nevertheless, the EU has not been very successful in engaging in international conflicts. It could not develop policies on China, the Middle East, or East Asia independent of the US. It is mostly reactive to the US concerning trade issues with China, Korea, and Iran.

When it comes to pandemics, the EUGS seems to have been prescient. It states that “we will, therefore, redouble our efforts on prevention, monitoring root causes such as human rights violations, inequality, resource stress, and climate change – which is a threat multiplier that catalyzes water and food scarcity, pandemics and displacement. [...] On health, we will work for more effective prevention, detection, and responses to global pandemics” (Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy, 2016). However, preparations to prevent and monitor pandemics were largely disregarded. The result was that, after the outbreak of COVID-19 and its spread to Europe, desperate member states had to react mostly by themselves.

Despite the fact that the EU is considered to be a peace project, there was an unfortunate idea by some experts that the EU would require crises to promote and strengthen its integration.

Once again, the corona crisis has demonstrated that the opposite is true. But this was already true for previous crises that the EU faced: the financial crisis of 2008-9, the Ukraine crisis of 2014, the refugee crisis after 2015, and Brexit. However, no matter the causes, there are no tensions between EU member states that might lead to military conflict, and the EU has avoided collapse. After a state of shock, the European Union (EU) could negotiate a recovery package for by the corona-pandemic the most affected members in May 2020. Unfortunately, this forced the EU to concentrate again on itself rather on its multilateral efforts.

VI. EUROPEAN VALUES: COOPERATION AND NOT CONFLICT

Just as in the second half of the 19th century, the world today is witnessing a breakdown of multilateralism, the emergence of nationalist and ethnic xenophobia, the demonization of adversaries, the depreciation of international institutions, withdrawals from international agreements and treaties, and an expanding arms race.

The post-corona world will likely be less globalized, less integrated, less wealthy, and more polarized. A European response to these developments might be to revive some of its ideas and principles of the past. The document that best expresses European values is the Conference on Security and Co-Operation (CSCE) or the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. Notably, it did not label enemies nor even opponents or adversaries, while many contemporary security and defense strategies define other states as “opponents”, “adversaries”, or “enemies”. The Helsinki Final Act requested cooperative security and considered security to be indivisible. It developed a Decalogue of humanitarian values and supported economic cooperation. It allowed the changing of borders only peacefully and by agreement.

The Helsinki Final Act and the subsequent process could provide a guideline for resolving current conflicts without replicating them. The CSCE process was based on three “baskets”: bilateral and multilateral co-operation relating to security; the fields of economics, science, technology, and the environment; and in humanitarian and other fields (today the OSCE’s three dimensions: the politico-military, the economic and environmental, and the human dimension). The Final Act recognized the indivisibility of security in Europe as well as a common interest in the development of cooperation throughout Europe. CSCE

participating states pledged to refrain from any form of armed intervention or threat of such intervention or any other act of military, political, economic, or other coercion against another participating state. Accordingly, they would refrain from direct or indirect assistance to terrorist activities. The participating states reaffirmed their willingness to intensify such cooperation, irrespective of their systems. At the same time, the Helsinki Final Act was the midwife of the civil society movements in Eastern Europe.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates just how timely this document is. The pandemic vividly shows that not only is security indivisible in Europe but so too is health indivisible across the world. Health is a global common good. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the fields of economics, science, technology, the environment, and humanitarian affairs is indispensable. The categories “opponents”, “adversaries”, and “enemies” cannot be applied to the virus. It is the enemy of all and does not distinguish between small and big states, nations, ethnicities, cultures, or religions.

It is not only necessary to find a vaccine and a cure but also to find out what conditions are favorable in the transmission of viruses and bacteria from nature to human beings; not only virology plays a role here but also climate change and social behavior can create an environment conducive for new diseases. Blaming China will not solve these global challenges, but instead cooperation in humanitarian, environmental, health, and economic issues will. Hegemonic struggles should not have a place in the post-corona world, although the same states will seek to maintain their positions. This is true on both the global as well as regional level.

VII. CONCLUSION

The US will not remain the world leader alone, but it will remain engaged in global and regional developments. While Europe is not a major political actor in a purely geopolitical perspective, the Helsinki Final Act could serve as a guideline that is instructive for the corona and post-corona world. It does not identify enemies, nor even opponents or adversaries. Instead, cooperative measures should not only include issues of security but also health, technology, and the environment. These are all indivisible. Europe should take its lead from these principles to help prevent a slow-motion breakdown of the values that it holds dear, including effective multilateralism, functioning international institutions, interdependence and interconnectedness, military restraint and support for peace, engaging adversaries in dialogue, and common and cooperative efforts in science, technology, the environment, and health. This does not exclude competition for the best and most successful ideas, which should and will be shared eventually for future progress. European states could, for example, facilitate to set up both a regional and global early warning and monitoring system for pandemics and diseases comparable to the monitoring system of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Organization (CTBTO). Part of the system should be global communication and data collection center that quickly can provide information to all member states. Political engagement, rather than higher defense spending, offers a solution for Europe to increase its global leverage. The other scenario would be the world after the Spanish flu and World War I, when 50 to 100 million lives were lost, great power conflict resumed, and Germany tried to achieve hegemonic dominance in Europe and the world.