

Thinking Like a Geopolitical Power

Germany and Europe in a world defined
by US-China competition

In the summer of 2019 the European Council on Foreign Relations published a report that tried to answer “How Europe can regain the capacity to act” in a world of rising great power competition and eroding international institutions. According to the authors, in order “to prosper and maintain their independence in a world of geopolitical competition, Europeans must address the interlinked security and economic challenges other powerful states present – without withdrawing their support for a rules-based order”.

The report argued that the EU should learn to think like a geopolitical power. And it is my conviction that this can happen only if Germany learns to think as a geopolitical power and that Germany’s Presidency of the EU is the time for Berlin to show its capacity to do so. This of course will involve persuading the German public, 49% of which favour a continuation of German restraint in foreign policy according to the present survey for The Berlin Pulse. However, as Yogi Berra advises, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” This is exactly how Germany should approach its 2020 Presidency of the EU. It is not an easy choice, bearing in mind domestic problems, the prospect of a slowing economy, and growing tensions within the EU. But if Germany wants its presidency to make a real difference, Berlin should place the EU’s relations with the US and China as well as the adoption of a European



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strategy for dealing with a world defined by US-China competition on top of its agenda.

Germany is the EU member state best positioned to force the Union to come up with a comprehensive strategy at a time when most member states are looking inward in denial of Europe’s growing irrelevance in the world. At present both European policy elites and publics are choosing to ignore the critical impact of Sino-US tensions on almost all aspects of policy. Brussels’ current position is that of a retired power. Europeans may be outspoken on the eroding liberal order, but their actions are risk-averse and rarely strategic. A recent ECFR survey indicated that majorities in all of the 13 largest

member states preferred the EU to remain neutral in case of a conflict between the US and China or the US and Russia. What is less clear is the meaning of European neutrality. Could Europe remain neutral if forced to choose between the US and China, e. g. with regard to technology, trade, or defence? We should not mistake the hope that Europe would not be forced to make such a choice for a strategy.

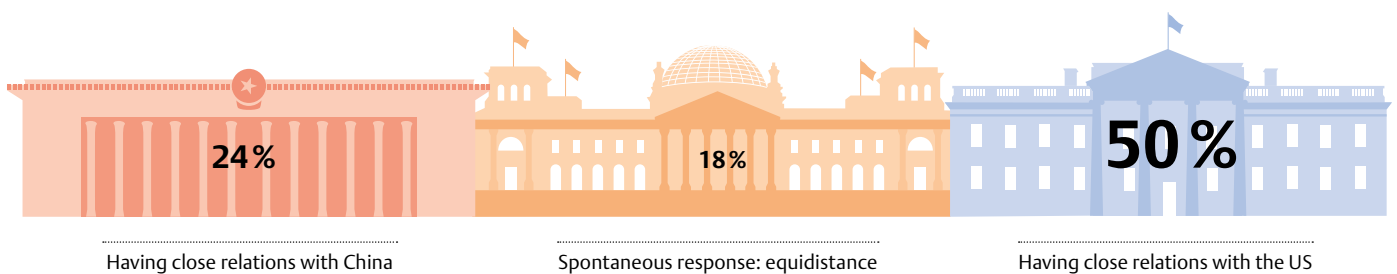
This may be hard for Europeans to swallow, but the post-Trump world, should it arrive in 2020, will not resemble the pre-Trump world. Under Trump's presidency, rivalry with China has become the organizing principle of American foreign policy, and virtually the only area of effective bipartisanship between Democrats and Republicans. Only a few lost souls in Washington continue to believe that China's economic development will lead to a political opening. Instead, there is consensus that allowing China to join the World Trade Organization in 2001 was a mistake, and that, should America fail to contain China's geopolitical reach today, it may be impossible to do so tomorrow. America's China anxiety recognizes the fact that China's market-friendly, big-data authoritarianism poses a much more dangerous threat to liberal democracies than Soviet Communism ever did.

But even if Trump and Xi came to an agreement on trade, conceivably such a deal could increase US pressure on transatlantic trade. Regardless of who will win the White House in 2020, Europe stands to lose valuable time should it continue hoping to avoid a choice it will inevitably be pressured to make. But a strategy does not postulate siding with Washington against Beijing or, unlikely, vice versa. Instead, any strategy must spell out what the EU should do in order to avoid falling victim to US-China confrontation.

Psychologists have found that street criminals tend to target those who behave like victims. Germany's Presidency should prioritize convincing the EU not to behave like a victim. ✖

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- 1 Mark Leonard and Jeremy Shapiro "Strategic sovereignty: How Europe can regain the capacity to act", ECFR, June 2019 https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/strategic_sovereignty_how_europe_can_regain_the_capacity_to_act
 - 2 Ivan Krastev, Mark Leonard & Susi Dennison, "What Europeans really want: Five myths debunked", ECFR, April 2019 https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/what_europeans_really_want_five_myths_debunked

What is more important for Germany ... ?



2019: don't know 6%, no answer 2%