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WAR AND PEACE IN THE 21ST CENTURY 2020: A World of Two or Three? The US, China and the EU in a New Global Order

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"A World of Two or Three? The US, China and the EU in a New Global Order" was the subject of the eighteenth edition of the War and Peace in the 21st Century seminar, held on January 18th 2020. Organised in collaboration with EsadeGeo - Center for Global Economy and Geopolitics and supported by Barcelona City Council and "La Caixa" Foundation, the seminar provided expert insight into the current and future state of the international relations system and the future of the liberal international order.



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The world appears complex, diffuse and uncertain, and differs on many fundamentals from the Cold War environment of confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. What, then, is the new world order? Both US allies and rivals continue to receive contradictory messages from the country, as it makes full use of its foreign and commercial policies to strengthen the interests of President Trump's "America First" policy. At the same time, news outlets and social media fret about China's emergence as a rival superpower, not only to the United States but also to the Western liberal order. The European Union is reinforcing its diplomacy, but it still hesitates to decouple itself from the Trump administration's isolationism or to fully embrace the rise of China.

This year's conference was charged with discussing how a new distribution of power might go hand-in-hand with substantial changes in the international order. It was structured into two panel discussions: "The United States, China and the New Global Order", and "A Third Pole? Articulating an EU voice for the new political cycle". Contributions came from the US, Hong Kong, Russia, the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain.

In her opening statement, **Laia Bonet**, Third Deputy Mayor of Barcelona, emphasised the emerging role of

new actors, such as global cities, in shaping the world order positively. In her view, cities like Barcelona are contributing to multilateralism and the spreading of European values such as democracy, human rights-based action, climate change and social equality policies. Global cities contribute to setting the international agenda and need to be present at the international decision-making table.

Her words were seconded by **Javier Solana** (President of ESADEGeo and Honorary Chairman of the Board of CIDOB). Rather than confrontation and competition, Solana insisted that emphasis should be placed on cooperation in the field of international relations. He called for further collaboration between Western states and China, and for strong leaders to step up to defend good governance and multilateralism, as the way to engage in global governance.

The stage was then set for discussion of the first topic, moderated by **Judy Dempsey** (Senior Fellow at Carnegie Europe and Editor in Chief of *Strategic Europe*): the prominence of the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the international chessboard, alternatives to the current model and the position of Russia in the new world order.

Bipolarity or multilateralism? The debate between confrontation and collaboration

Different answers may be given to the question: “When did China become relevant again?” Some point to 1964, when the Asian country detonated its first nuclear device, allowing it to enter what was still a very exclusive club of states capable of shaping the global order by sheer force. Others would point to the PRC joining the United Nations (UN) in 1971, taking the place of the Republic of China and, more importantly, China’s accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001. But whenever it started, what is now widely accepted is that China now competes with the US in military, economic and even soft power terms.

As **Robin Niblett**, Director of Chatham House, stated, it is not the case that for the past fifty years we lived in a liberal international order; what we enjoyed was a liberal rules-based order, especially in the economic field. Niblett argued the US and China are centre stage in global competition. He considered that the “emergence” of China has ended, and the government of Xi Jinping has shifted into

peacebuilding, runs counter to the preference in Washington for bilateral solutions.

Bipartisan relations and the rivalry between the US and China were also discussed by **Shaoguang Wang** (Emeritus Professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong) and **Dimitri Trenin** (Director of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Moscow). On the one hand, Wang first referred to China as a big beneficiary of the current rules-based global order and dismissed any desire to substantially transform it: “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”. China performs better in a multipolar world, which enables it to track the direction of its domestic progress. This, in Wang’s view, should be the focus of China’s central government. An uncomfortable standstill between the two superpowers will be the norm for the foreseeable future.

On the other hand, Trenin was not as confident of the current global order’s continuity. He drew on Russia’s experience in the last century to talk discouragingly of bipolarity, which leads to states taking sides, something that ultimately runs against their long-term interests. Russia’s

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a phase of consolidation, ready to face the US head-on. Although this is unlikely to develop into a full-scale military conflict, examples of these struggles have already surfaced: ongoing tensions in the South China Sea, China’s rapid military expansion in terms of capabilities and installations overseas, and the so-called “trade war”.

International dynamics also suggest that multilateralism is being abandoned in favour of establishing and renewing bilateral relationships. The US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and the failure of international covenants, as highlighted by COP25 and NATO’s 70th anniversary commemoration, makes global governance more difficult and increases the complexity of addressing global problems, such as climate change and international terrorism.

This position was reinforced by **Heather Conley** (Vice President for Europe, Eurasia and the Arctic, CSIS). Her assessment was that the perception of US decline was nothing new. It has actually been growing over the last 20 years as a result of the shift from great power competition towards counter-insurgency strategies. The complex nature of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the context of the Global War on Terror, where victory is no longer linked to military success but to a multilateral approach to

priority is to establish as many productive relationships with as many partners as possible, but in regard to the world order, it seeks to become a country that is “alone and free” of external impositions, with a preference for the preservation of the status quo. Trenin introduced the idea of “bipolarity plus”, where the plus, the others, matter at least as much as the leading two, the US and China. Rather than a world structured into two blocs led by two superpowers, the world is becoming more fragmented, and powers like Japan, Russia and the EU can be as decisive by balancing power or bandwagoning as by acting independently and shaping regional events. However, he questioned the EU’s real capacity as a great power based on its lack of capabilities.

Is the EU willing and able to become the third pole?

This second panel, moderated by **Anna Bosch** (Foreign Affairs Correspondent, TVE), reflected upon a perception that is widespread in European discussions: the European Union is far from a coherent organism, which is reflected in its being too feeble. **Ferdinando Nelli** (President of the Istituto Affari Internazionali) considered that the European Union Global Strategy (2016) was insuffi-

ent to deal with the current global order as it stands. The EU's ability to influence abroad, even in its most immediate neighbourhood (Libya, Syria and Ukraine), has been undermined and contested by external powers, such as Turkey and Russia.

However, as with the US, Europe's diminished power is neither recent nor unexpected. Factors such as demographic decline, loss of GDP share and trade volume, the crisis of the international liberal order and the discord between the EU and the US limit the EU's chances of becoming a third pole. This discord, also mentioned by Judy Dempsey, is probably caused by the Western tendency to misunderstand and oversimplify global problems. She exemplified the issue by expanding on the case of Ireland: European public opinion tends to believe the country's most pressing issue is Brexit, not realising that the driving factor in the upcoming elections in Ireland is homelessness.

That is why, according to **Phillippe Le Corre** (Research Associate at the Harvard Kennedy School), Europe must

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play to its strengths to keep being relevant, even if it cannot act as states do. The EU is currently acting around the world by fostering resilience and partnering with a vast pool of actors, both state and non-state, intending to boost its influence, trade and provide development aid.

Although Eurosceptic voices claim Europe's sole purpose overseas is "to be seen as doing something", the web of connections and trust European initiatives end up building has no parallel with any effort sponsored by other global powers. While US aid campaigns are usually met with scepticism due to their interventionist nature, and Chinese initiatives are seen as a new colonial wave, the EU does not have such problems, because its sheer nature prohibits such readings. As stated at the conference, it may be that the EU simply "cannot make it" to the global power competition.

Finally, the complex nature of the inner workings of the European Union prevents it from being more efficient in dealing with China head-on, although many voices, inside and outside the EU, call for just that. The absence of a coherent EU foreign policy, set against the centralisation of the foreign policies of the US and China, weakens the EU's external action, which cannot follow standard power relations. In this regard, the deconstruction of the power system paved the way for the session's third debate of the session.

Deconstructing the bipolar reality: Feminism, youth and new power dynamics

Drawing on the more positive trends in the debate, a challenge emerged to the current understanding of global politics at different degrees and levels. First, the fact that there can only be one ruling world order system was questioned by different attendees, particularly **Shada Islam**, director of Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe.

While Heather Conley portrayed the bipolar relation as "a concept that we are familiar with" which is "therefore ... more attractive to fall into", Islam described the coexistence of systems, which leads to the multiplicity and pluralisation of messages. Europe should be capable of acting as the bridge between the traditional system – more belligerent, hierarchical and male-dominated – to a system based on collaboration, plurality and peaceful approaches.

She also advocated redefining the concepts of war and power to move beyond their confrontational nature and

incorporate collaborative and coordinative elements. A subsequent question was raised, are cooperative geopolitics possible? The EU ought to be able to work in partnerships with countries that are both like-minded and otherwise, and the European Commission must be able to "coach" member states to work constructively with China in policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the 2030 Agenda.

Cristina Gallach, former High Commissioner for the 2030 Agenda in the Spanish government, seconded her claims by stressing the importance of sticking to European strengths in terms of societal changes, technology, energy and the environment, defending European values (democracy, human rights and dialogue) and being the champions of multilateralism.

The conference also became a contest of acronyms. Javier Solana introduced the 3 Cs (Confrontation, Competition and Cooperation); which paved the way for the conference. Heather Conley put forward her 3 Ds (Demography, Decoupling and Digitalisation) to describe the EU's uncertainties over the next decade. Finally, Cristina Gallach gave us SDG (Society-inclusiveness, inclusive Dialogue and Development, and the Genderisation of politics) – guidelines for the liberal international order engaging fruitfully with the coming future.

In sum, the discussion of the nature of the global system, its actors and their relations, centred the debate in the sessions. In his concluding remarks, **Pol Morillas**, Director of CIDOB, returned to the multiplicity of actors and diffusion of power as the main points of today's agenda. In contrast with the bipolarity based on spheres of influence that dominated the Cold War, power relations are today more complex than a "world of two" reloaded would suggest. Without diminishing the importance of the power of states, it is clear that solutions to today's ever more interconnected problems require a broad consensus of different actors that ought to seek cooperation rather than confrontation, including by actors such as cities who do not fit traditional understandings of international relations. The view of the system and how they are likely to perform depends on which of the three actors we are talking about: while the US prefers market flows and China is directed by state regulations, Europe should come forward with its emphasis on normative power to provide a unique position that contributes to the reform of the multilateral, rules-based global order.