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»Systemic Challenge: Geopolitics in Times of Corona

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Introduction

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It was under the motto “Together for Europe’s recovery”, that Germany took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union on 1 July 2020 for a period of six months. The focus of the German EU Council Presidency’s programme is on mitigating the corona pandemic in the immediate term. However, it also applies to strengthening Europe’s ability to act beyond its own borders, since geopolitics is playing an increasingly important role. Only in this way can Europe defend its interests and assume its responsibility in the world.

At the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung we advocate for a strong, united Europe that is capable of action, for the transatlantic partnership as well as for a partnership and rule-based international order. The theme of security represents a focal area of activities pursued throughout the foundation. As we are all too aware that we simply cannot take our security for granted. Hence, foreign and security policy considerations and a clear commitment to European and Euro-Atlantic integration govern our actions at the foundation’s more than 30 locations throughout Europe and North America. Dialogue with political leaders represents an important element when managing and coordinating these issues.

Every year, a conference comprising the heads of country offices also brings together high-ranking government, parliament and party representatives with a goal of determining the location and strategic focus of the foundation’s European and international work over the coming twelve months. Owing to the corona pandemic, the conference could not take place as a face-to-face event in Berlin as usual, and was instead transferred to the digital space: from Moscow to Stockholm, Geneva and Madrid right through to Washington, staff abroad were connected with one another as part of a video conference.

At the start of July, more than 35 colleagues spanning five time zones held discussions on current political developments and challenges underpinning the foundation’s international work. The spectrum of themes ranged from major foreign and security policy issues – the future of transatlantic relations, the relationship with China and Russia, multilateralism under crisis – through to specific European policy decisions – EU Council Presidency and recovery package.

In this context, the Deputy Chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the German Bundestag, Dr Johann-David Wadehul MdB, presented his theories on “Systemic Competition – Geopolitics in Times of Corona”.

Dr Wadephul emphasised that the pandemic acts as a catalyst for developments which, for a long time were lying dormant or were openly played out and as an incubator for completely new developments, and outlined systemic challenges and instabilities as well as strategic challenges in order to then conduct a sober analysis of the EU's role and capabilities: "From a global perspective, the EU is – still – an economic power. As regards foreign policy, it is a regional power at best, while merely a dwarf in security policy matters". In light of the above, Dr Wadephul MdB called for the EU to focus on fulfilling its core priority tasks. Below you can find out how these core tasks are defined and what the most important foreign policy tasks are.

Facing up to Systemic Competition – Introductory Theories

Introductory theories at the hybrid staff conference of the Department Europe/North America of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. on 2 July 2020

The corona pandemic acts as both a catalyst for developments that for a long time have been lying dormant or were openly played out, as well as an incubator for completely new developments. The world still finds itself in the midst of a pandemic. That's why statements made about a world after corona are still premature – yet trends are emerging.

Systemic Challenges and Instabilities

1. Authoritarian doers versus democratic procrastinators? The corona crisis makes systemic competition glaringly obvious: which social system is proving to be the most effective in managing the crisis? The would-be "authoritarian doers" compete against the "democratic procrastinators": supposedly faster decision-making of authoritarian systems, technocratic-analytical decisions versus "political" processes of consensus, fast and far-reaching allocation of resources versus a diffusion of competence etc

This is nothing new. Thus, over the last two decades in large swathes of East and South East Asia, and progressively in the Middle East, the example of the technocratic-capitalist benevolent authoritarian state (primarily Singapore; but increasingly China's own claim to power), has taken root as the ideal image of its own state development, which is increasingly supplanting that of the liberal democracies of Western Europe and the US (Parag Khanna).

2. Especially in direct comparison between China and the US, the image of an egoistic, isolationist, sclerotic (and ailing) hegemon of yesterday (US) threatens to be contrasted with a solidary, globally active, dynamic (and thanks to a better approach: quickly recovered) world saviour of tomorrow (China).

3. In order to counter this, long-term discourse surrounding the reaction to corona needs to be **based on whose holistic reaction was the most effective**, as opposed to who reacted fastest. Against this background, the "democratic procrastinators" have only a limited window of opportunity.

4. States that have become largely integrated into the globalised economy will bear the economic brunt of the pandemic. Either because they acted as "workshops of the world" (such as Bangladesh), or because they benefited from the exceptional mobility afforded by globalisation prior to corona owing to a particularly strong focus on tourism (including Egypt and the Seychelles) The precarious economic foundation of many states will be exacerbated by restrictions and by a sharp decline of their economic clout – especially in Africa and the Middle East.

5. Economic downturns and insufficient health care could serve to further undermine satisfaction with and trust in state leadership. Even for financially strong states, the COVID-19 crisis bears the risk of eroding citizens' confidence in their own state welfare system. This is particularly true for states (such as the

Arabic Gulf States or Libya) that avail themselves of the government model “state financial/health care in return for people’s acceptance of politics”.

6. States may exploit measures for stymieing the pandemic so as to create an ever more authoritarian and repressive government model by employing permanent emergency regulations. This also includes expanding surveillance measures by portraying them as an instrument of pandemic crisis prevention and state health welfare, so as to confront citizens with a choice between civil liberties and the protection of their own health.

7. There is also the fear that regimes and governments whose political image or legitimacy has been eroded, will **seek outlets for this discontent**. History has shown that this often leads to an **aggressive foreign policy with strong nationalistic tendencies**.

Strategic Challenges

1. Our value- and rule-based international order is being increasingly challenged – with China wanting to change this to the greatest extent possible (according to its principles into a sinocentric global order), and having Russia as an ally within the framework of an ever-closer strategic cooperation. What’s more, the US only advocate this order to a limited extent, while progressively calling it into question.

2. The EU faces a growing political, economic and technological challenge from **China**. Our economic and technological edge over China and other Asian states is on the wane. It is likely that China (with Russia) will pose a direct security policy challenge to Europe.

3. Russia is a superpower acting destructively primarily against the Western community of values. It successfully uses its few instruments of power (military might/nuclear weapons, energy, right of veto in the UNSC and limited “soft power” available to it in the cyber and disinformation sector) to prevent what it considers to be unpopular decisions for the purpose of weakening and dividing, destabilising, threatening and blackmail-

ing as well as destroying existing orders. However, it is currently unwilling and, above all, substantially unable to create stable orders and to (help) shape global political challenges in a constructive way.

4. Our transatlantic partner in the US, which is coming under enormous strain from the economic repercussions of corona, will become an ever more difficult competitor in economic terms and a less reliable partner in security policy matters than previously – certainly when it comes to our immediate neighbourhood in the Near and Middle East as well as in North Africa.

5. Migration from Africa and the Near and Middle East to Europe is likely to increase in light of the political, and above all economic and social pressures and distortions caused by the corona pandemic.

A Sober Analysis of the Role and Capabilities of the EU

1. From a global perspective, the EU is – still – an economic power. As regards foreign policy, it is a regional power at best, while merely a dwarf in security policy matters. Neither China nor Russia nor the US nor many Asian states take the EU seriously as a security policy factor; and events in Africa are likely to reinforce this image. The EU is not even capable of creating security and freedom for Europe in its immediate vicinity (Syria, arguably also Libya).

2. In light of this, the EU will have to focus on what is most important – defending against the greatest dangers. Is there a joint understanding in the EU as to what constitute the greatest foreign and security policy dangers? With regard to China, and perhaps even to Russia, whereas this does not really exist for our immediate neighbourhood in the Near and Middle East and in Africa! And is there not also a danger that the member states will focus even more on their own traditional interests than in the past? **This makes the old task of finding joint foreign policy responses even more difficult, yet more urgent.**

3. After all, the European Union has sufficient joint positions and interests in order to tackle these problems. There are strong levels of consensus among the member states when it comes to democratic and social values. They pursue the joint goal of safeguarding “their” value- and rule-based international order. They are convinced that even in a globalised world transformed by corona, no European nation can exist on its own. That’s why we can also assume that **there is a broad identity of interests with regard to optimally fulfilling the EU’s core tasks, which individual member states are unable to cope with.**

What Is to Be Done?

The EU must therefore primarily focus on fulfilling its core tasks. These are:

- › *safeguarding the value- and rule-based international order,*
- › *preserving the strong economic position of the EU in the world,*
- › *common foreign and security policy,*
- › *combating climate change,*
- › *protecting external borders and*
- › *joint provision when fighting against pandemics.*

In all areas of EU policy, that which is indispensable for EU cohesion must be ensured.

1. The safeguarding of “our” value- and rule-based international order against systemic challengers such as China and Russia must become our main focus. If we don’t succeed in this, it will have dramatic ramifications on our values, interests and ways of life. The European Union cannot overcome this existential challenge alone: the already close cooperation with global value partners must be developed into an assertive community of interests.

The EU needs to hold a serious and widespread debate on how an ever more dynamic and multi-polar world is not necessary conducive to an international order in line with European values, standards and interests. Furthermore, it must

make it clear with which instruments they wish to safeguard this “their” order.

2. In global competition, a robust EU economy is both our strongest and most effective instrument for exercising our influence on preserving the value- and rule-based international order and protecting our interests. Accordingly, we need to do everything in our power not only to maintain our economic clout, but also to improve it where possible – especially against systemic competitors like China. That’s why overcoming the economic and social repercussions of the corona crisis in the EU is also of considerable importance for foreign policy.

3. As a consequence of the corona pandemic, it is necessary to examine where certain key skills and capacities for ensuring **greater autonomy and independence of the European economy and industry** should remain in or be returned to the EU or – for reasons of cost – could be transferred to close European partner countries (Turkey, Ukraine etc.).

4. Preserving and strengthening EU standards for democracy and rule of law at home represent the main tasks of a value community such as the EU, in particular if these are called into question by systemic challengers. In view of frequent violations to these standards by certain EU members and the ineffectiveness of Article 7 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), the EU needs to adopt a rule of law mechanism with the agreement of a medium-term financial framework: awarding structural or cohesion funds must be subject to compliance with EU standards in the future.

5. Possibilities for military cooperation and integration need to be intensified so as to strengthen the EU’s limited ability to act on a military level Especially in light of limited financial funds, emphasis should be placed on what is necessary and feasible – with respect to cooperation as well as to combating the greatest security policy challenges.

6. We need to reach a consensus within the EU about what the most important foreign policy tasks are. In my view, they are as follows:

- › **On the first: The EU needs to prevent foreign powers from creating additional problems** in our back yard or within our own territory. China skilfully attempts to do this with its Road and Belt Initiative, which is why we urgently require an EU-China strategy. Moscow is trying to do the same using the means described above.
- › **On the second: The EU must pay more attention to how the countries of the Western Balkan develop** which does not mean making allowances with accession criteria, but rather more economic development funds, as well as more, but honest, empathy (not the feigned empathy of the EU Commission). This needs to incorporate a reflection on alternatives to full membership in the event that candidate states are unable or unwilling to fulfil the criteria – also as an intermediate step to provide encouragement on the long, and after corona even longer, road towards Europe. At the same time, more loyalty must be required from the Western Balkan countries in return for political and financial support for the incremental implementation of its EU perspective.
- › **On the third:** The resources of the EU's connectivity strategy as an alternative to the "Belt and Road Initiative" are limited when compared to China. They must primarily be used as a defence against Chinese influence in Europe and with important European neighbours.
- › **On the fourth: The EU must strive for an enhanced and deeper cooperation with key partners in its immediate neighbourhood.** That applies to Turkey, it applies to the Eastern Partnership. The concept of individual cooperation with the EaP states must above all enable resilience against Russia – for the Eastern partners as well as the EU!

To that effect, the Eastern Partnership needs a more strategic focus, at least for the partners Ukraine, Moldova and – to the greatest extent possible – Belarus.

- › **On the fifth: Turkey is not just any security partner! For the EU, Turkey represents a bulwark against security policy challenges emanating from the Near and Middle East** such as terrorism, migration etc. For this reason, it must be in the interest of the EU to improve relations with Turkey and to provide it with greater support – politically, economically, financially and as regards security policy.
- › **On the sixth: it is in the EU's own interests to demonstrate more empathy with its policy for Ukraine. The strategic goal must be to modernise Ukraine around eastern Ukraine's area of conflict, such that it has an exemplary policy-changing effect on Russia.** Accordingly, it is imperative that the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement be implemented faster. At the same time, the Minsk negotiations require the utmost caution and strategic patience, since Putin's Russia has no interest in a settlement that results in withdrawing its armed forces from eastern Ukraine and restoring Kiev's sovereignty.
- › **On the seventh: The EU needs a more coherent policy on Russia.** Here the guiding principle must be that the EU develops a more effective resilience against a Russia operating in joint forces with China as a systemic challenger, with the aim of changing the international order to the detriment of the West. Putin's Russia simply cannot be a partner as long as it repeatedly violates international law, threatens Europe and does everything to weaken and divide the EU and NATO. We finally need to abandon the illusion that we can transform Putin's Russia by means of cooperation or trade. A selective engagement with this Russia should be sought when it is of special interest to the EU – particularly its security –, and must comply with clearly defined criteria.
- › **Bear in mind: the fate of Africa has direct effects on Europe.** Hence we need to devote more attention and resources to it, which is

why the EU-Africa Summit in Autumn is so important. As a priority, the European Union, together with other partners from the international community, must reinforce its efforts to stabilise and develop the Sahel. What's more, we must not allow Africa to be more at the mercy of Chinese and, in the meantime, of Russian influence.

7. European-American relations: creating political rifts or building transatlantic bridges?

Will corona serve to fan the flames in the transatlantic trade conflict? Whereas in the past it was primarily about sales figures as well as import/export balances, in future it could be a matter of owning high-tech companies (such as biotech) that are defined as strategically important. Under the heading "Safeguarding Strategic Industries", a fight over companies and technologies could break out, especially if the US defines national security much more broadly than prior to the corona crisis.

With an eye to the future, the US threatens to pay more than just lip service to a new phase of isolationism – and this time as a protection against "viruses from abroad". The "America First" policy proclaimed by Trump as an official strategy is rapidly developing into a "Fortress America". We are already witnessing this with its migration policy (wall at the Mexican border); in the defence against terror (since 2001 significantly tightened entry checks and surveillance even vis-à-vis citizens from alliance states); in the conflict with Iran and China (pressure on partners to take a hard US line); and in trade-related matters. Corona could "escalate" this insofar as the US is increasingly guarding itself against threats and dangers from the outside, and withdrawing into its "fortress".

Furthermore, transatlantic differences bubbling at the surface or openly played out are at risk of escalating. One example here is the Iran issue, whereby EU states, given the severity of the pandemic raging in Iran, once again refuse to apply the "maximum pressure" advocated by the US. Or in questions pertaining to debt policy in developing and emerging countries, in which the EU states have already argued the case for

facilitating debt relief and conditions for borrowing such as via the IMF; whereas the US tended to adopt tougher conditions for the respective states.

Last but not least, we need to step up the fight to preserve NATO and make our contributions to it: Should Trump be re-elected President, we will also need to ensure the survival of NATO as a guarantee for European security.

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