

# WHAT EUROPE CAN LEARN FROM CHINA, RUSSIA AND THE US

- **Position Paper Series** -

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## **What Europe can learn from Russia, China and the US.**

By Diana Popa

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### **❖ Europe**

While the world shared in the upheaval caused by the tariffs imposed by the new US administration, Europe continued to be confronted with major security, economic and political challenges determined by the consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its spillover effects. The escalation of the conflict in the Middle East also has strong reverberations across Europe, leading to legal, moral and political clashes and manifesting through protest movements. This accumulation of events or multiple crises, together with elections being held in many European states in the recent timeframe have exacerbated existing conditions and given rise to debates that challenge the very foundations on which the European project has been carefully constructed and has continued to develop in a West to East accumulation.

In Europe, current calls for new bi-lateral or multilateral partnerships, alliances and diplomatic ties meant to compensate the effects of the "trade war" and to replace a potential sudden void determined by a US isolationism or withdrawal from Europe as a top tier region of interest, contribute to weakening the very foundation on which the political and executive democratic mandate was founded on, synchronically and diachronically. These debates are reinforced by already existing conditions allowing for practical erosion of what traditionally were seen as the strengths of the democratic system, an erosion that accelerates the outliving of democratic exercises, shortens democratic cycles, and exacerbates conflicts from within.

In Europe, recent elections in many states gave rise to public debates about what the country's priorities should be in this context of national and international competing and often conflicting interests, putting left wing and right wing solutions face to face. Elections have become intensely emotionally charged, and in some cases even contested events and a revival of right wing parties has been noticed across Europe.

Major shifts on the political spectrum often manifest as a result of accumulation of factors and are best explained in their historical context. At an individual level, it has been argued that one



more likely embraces the left at a young age, as the principles of the left often attract young minds, and that it is the lived experience - age - that comes to shape perspectives, often leading to a shift towards the political and philosophical right. The measure in which this shift occurs is thus influenced by both individual and historical context. Yet, through the lens of traditional political Western philosophy, the case was also made that the left is inherently flawed and doomed to fail because of its set goals of being moral and just in what is - I would add - a battle of supremacy of principles becoming one of survivability of principles.

Internal and external collisions with alterity, leading to the existence of opposition forces, are needed for the functioning of the political system. In a space of enabled choices, the left and right of political thought need each other in order to become practiced, lived experiences and assumed positions, as collision with alterity is needed for boundaries to become visible. Internally, while the co-existence of alternative views has grown to be seen as the trademark of democratic rule, existence of alterity should not mean universal accommodation. Democracy developed and functioned as a political system in a limited span of differences. The continuous stretching of this span eventually weakened the very thread of democratic fabric, and the more it accommodated, the more worn out its fundament became, up to the point that the material's strength could no longer support the heavy loads of divergent forces. In its accommodating positions, in trying to be equally just and equally moral, the West lost its own self-perception. Faced now with multiple international crises, the West tries to re-exercise the moral function it once had, is faced with the effects of its erosion from within and, in the case of Europe, is faced with a world that no longer perceives it as the centre of Western thought and power it once was.

Externally, since the end of the Second World War, Russia and China have been the alterity the West has used for reflecting its own position and view over the world. They have offered in this regard a constant reference point and enabled the construction of a cohesive image of the self. The cohesion of the Western construction as a unified contrasting force to the Red Block has started to erode, by means of simultaneous centrifugal forces slowing down and accelerating centripetal ones weakening its core. Core diluting accommodating behaviour made system penetration possible and weakened resistance towards what prior had clearly been *the other side*. With the end of the Cold War and the perception of the ultimate victory of democracy as the end of conflict, democracy lost its external opponent and reason for keeping up defence capabilities, therefore becoming porous. The West's struggles for existence thus started from within, once self-protection mechanisms were removed, following the belief that

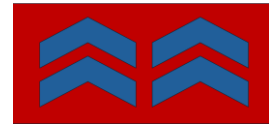


the “end of history” had been witnessed and that democracy – what was *at the time* the unified visible force that opposed communism - was destined to be embraced by all. Since then, during a time when external opposition forces seemed to dissolve, the West became accustomed with mere survival, slowly and unwarily losing the strength of its core convictions and core identity. In not having to fight external opposition forces, the manifest exercise of existence, as a matter of constantly and consciously lived choices and beliefs, became a mere self-indulging survival.

### ❖ **Russia and China**

Revisionist and traditional adversaries of the West in terms of values, declared and practiced geostrategic positions and interests represented by what has come to be called the “Axis of upheaval” formed by Russia, China, Iran and North Korea, have been much more stable in their ideological and political geostrategic alignment than have Western powers been in theirs. The opponents of the West have had a much more constant positioning and manifestation of their view of the world and more pragmatically assumed the reasons for chosen incursions. Much like the argument that the right does not aim to be moral, while the left strives to do so and therefore it is inherently doomed to fail, the assumed position of this axis is less struck by changes in ideological alliances and ideological slippages than is the West. Parallels regarding military conflict or potential conflict come to underline this difference in perspectives. Many commentators have mentioned that the way Europe reacts to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine will determine or influence how China reacts in relation to Taiwan. However, this reflects a Eurocentric perspective. China has a proactive vision of the world and a different time horizon for its strategy. It pursues strategic goals in what it has called the hundred-year marathon, prioritizing certain objectives only in terms of timespan not in terms of actual accomplishment, and not in terms of either – or. In doing so, it stabilizes and strengthens its position, thus allowing it to further pursue those long term goals.

Russia and China are comfortable with who they are. They are not apologetic when faced with contestation and, perhaps more relevant for the argument here, they are constant in their positions and long term objectives, much unlike the democratic Western world, internally eroded by self-doubt and accommodating positions.



## ❖ The US

Changes in US politics have further destabilised the position of the West as a united front, determining even more adaptation behaviour on the part of Europe, having to scramble for more security and trading partners. Debates around the consequences of the US tariffs call for finding alternative trading partners in this new shifting world, as solution for lowering dependencies and associated risks. While politicians battle out diplomatic alternatives often for countering first mover effects and plugging economic holes in a constant game of playing catch up instead of pursuing long term assumed strategic objectives, European defence preparedness is suffocated by harmonisation efforts of competing and redundant coordinating and policy oriented structures, having little financial absorption capacity in terms of impact of actual defence readiness, power projection capability and lethality. This “safety boat” strategy only further weakens long term stability and autonomy of the region, providing a safety net for current leadership often at the cost of future generations that will have to historically rationalize the choices made today. Endless debates of finding alternative partners for trade, defence, critical materials, partially mimic the objectives and behaviours of China, Russia and the US, but without actually overtly assuming its expansionist functions. Worse than this, it mimics the criticized behaviour, but for the wrong reasons, forced to do so by the first choices of others. In doing so it risks becoming double hypocritical, once in abandoning its previous highly held principles used for defending what once were value based strategic partnerships and secondly in articulating a behaviour that it finds blameworthy in its opponents, even though, it would argue, in the pursuit of different goals.

US reiterations about pivoting towards Asia, the demand for greater spending on defence from its NATO allies and the newly introduced tariffs have thrown European security and economic prospects off balance. In this, blame should not be thrown on states pursuing own agendas. After all, politicians, no matter orientation, give primacy to the interest of their own state. Pointing fingers, commenting on perceived declining nature of democratic rule and style of leadership of a certain country is of little use to one’s own dependent or weak position in relation to that country. Yes, the challenges and crises that Europe faces are multiple. Both of the two major challenges - strengthening its military defences and restabilising its economic security - were caused by external factors, exacerbated by foundational dependencies built in by decades of path depending choices. Yet great powers choose and *set* their course and have proactive stances in the world. Confronted with the changes in the status quo, into which it had



comfortably grown, Europe is now forced to simultaneously reconsider its internal priorities and external roles. On the world stage, instead of looking for new trade partners in order to compensate for the effects of what has been labelled as “the trade war” it should uphold the approach which it had turned into the lighthouse of its position in the world and up live those values and standards.

Yes, the US wants to pivot towards the Indo-Pacific while at the same time put America first. Yes, Europe is forced to reconsider its priorities and partnerships, but this should 1. not come at the cost of long term advocated position at the risk of looking hypocritical, 2. not be opportunistic in terms of savings in transactional costs, short terms political and economic gains and 3. not be done by means of accommodation driven by reactive response to external factors. In this pursuit, it should look to its traditional partners, recent or distant.

Across Asia, Europe has domain specific collaborations. Japan for example has become a reliable partner in the region for joint NATO exercises, with additional structures and NATO member states partnerships such as GCAP. Pursuing these Europe – Asia partnerships should be thus done not through mimicry of behaviour but through upholding assumed positions. Again, great powers set their own course and stay the course, regardless of international criticism or clashing views. By this, great power means not only hard power, but actually being the symbol of a stable position that is recognized as such no matter what. Whether it is economics, military capabilities, technology, or a certain way of seeing the world, some or all of these aspects together. Both setting and staying the course and living by the values it has so long defended and at the same time criticized in terms of absence in others or adapting, not to new economic or political options of others but to new ways of governing the world will mean a transformative process for Europe. If change is the chosen course, it should be change with the courage of denouncing abandonment of certain positions as a matter of choice, not as a matter of necessity. Either way it will be a painful process. Yet again, standing up for whatever the course of action is, showing commitment to the assumed position and not being apologetic or reactive about it, is something that Europe can learn from China, Russia and the US.



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**About the author.**

Diana Popa has over 17 years of experience in research and academia and has authored numerous reports and scientific articles. Recent research and analysis focus on resilience as part of defence programmes, emerging disruptive technologies, in particular Artificial Intelligence in high risk areas, including defence.

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