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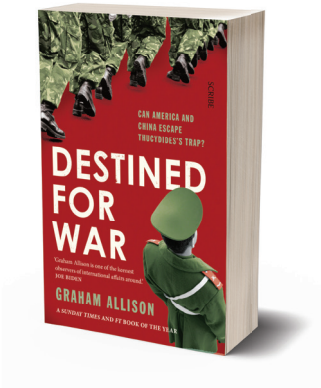

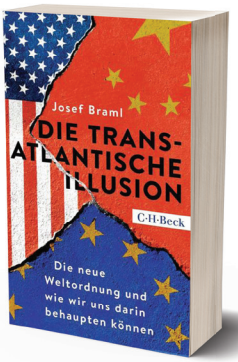

The Lost Global Balance

Recent publications on geopolitical change

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THE LATEST BOOKS ON GEOPOLITICS, although written from slightly different perspectives, have one idea in common. Their starting point is the obvious geostrategic shift from the Atlantic to the Asian hemisphere. What does this dramatic power shift from West to East bear for European states? China's rise to hegemonial status is without any doubt the greatest political and economic challenge of our times. It implies a completely new global order, including the redefinition of Western (i.e. American and European) interests, power and limitations. Western Europe and Northern America have lost their claim to be, on a global scale, the most influential socio-economic and cultural formation. Today, Asia represents roughly 75 percent of the human population, worldwide. China's national rise and global

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economic expansion is perceived as a challenge, if not aggression, to historical Western dominance. Western supremacy, established after World War II, belongs to the past or is, to say the least, fading away.

Particularly interesting for political analysts of today's global tensions is the redefinition of Western Europe as a geopolitical player.

In his latest speech at the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Chinese leader Xi Jinping addressed a message (Yiu, 2022; Böge, 2022) towards the delegates, political analysts and decision-makers abroad: "The world has entered a new period of turbulence and change. External attempts to suppress and contain China may escalate at any time. We must therefore be more mindful of potential dangers, be prepared to deal with worst-case scenarios, and be ready to withstand high winds, choppy waters, and even dangerous storms." Since Russia's invasion into Ukraine, the "dangerous storm" has already become a sinister reality, reshaping not only the relations of Western states towards Russia, but also towards the People's Republic of China (Gujer, 2022). Recent publications, both by intellectuals and politicians, reflect upon this new stage of globalization and the risks of direct and indirect conflict between the two hegemonial powers, the United States and China.

Harvard professor Graham Allison already published in 2017 his influential study "Destined for War". Allison's main idea is the potential conflict between a rising and a declining power, described for the first time by Greek historian Thucydides. Although this conflict is not a necessity, it is – in the eyes of Allison – highly probable (Allison, 2022, p. 47): "The contest between a rising and ruling power often intensifies competition over scarce resources. (…) The attempt to deny a state imports it judges crucial for survival can provoke war." As an historical pattern, the precarious constellation of rising and declining powers can be perceived in the bloody conflicts between Germany and France (1870/1871), the two World Wars (1914–1918; 1939–1945) and in the Asian-Pacific conflict between America and Japan (1941–1945) (Allison, 2017, p. 244). Whether every hegemonial contest inevitably ends in war or not, remains an open question. History knows no ending. But Allison makes his point by underlining the tensions and potential fields of conflict between the United States and China: a massive US trade deficit, import taxes, unsolved juridical questions, geostrategic ambitions of both sides in the Asian-Pacific, different understanding of the status of Hongkong and Taiwan. To lose hegemonial status is as hard as to gain it. Although it seems to be clear, that these lines of conflict are solely between the US and China, Europe cannot stand aloof.

Particularly interesting for political analysts of today's global tensions is the redefinition of Western Europe as a geopolitical player. In the end, behind Russia's war against Ukraine lies an open question. Who will represent the ultimate, the strongest power in Europe? Russia's invasion was based on the Kremlin's assumption of Western-European decadence and weakness, result of contradictory and competing interests among European states. Europe seems to be preoccupied with itself and its peculiar problems: minority rights, neglection of the educational sector, declining military spendings, questioning of state authority, sexual liberation etc. And of course, there is always a political interest to distort and exaggerate these tensions between state and civil society.

The final outcome of the war in Ukraine will prove whether Putin's assumption of Western weakness was accurate or not. A long, cruel and devastating conflict in the very heart of Europe – who might have thought this could possibly happen in the 21st century? The very fact that the Ukraine conflict came as a surprise conveys a shocking lack of analytical competences in European governments and political institutions, particularly in Germany. Nevertheless, the European willingness to support Ukraine in this war is stronger than expected by the Russian president and his close circle. How are these tensions, how is this conflict, reflected in recent publications?

Norbert Röttgen, chairman of the influential Foreign Affairs Committee of the German parliament, has written "Manifesto in Times of War – Never Helpless Again!" (Röttgen, 2022). In his book, he describes the dilemma of German and European foreign policy between political independence and economic cohesion (Röttgen, 2022, p. 122): "The systemic conflict with China will not only define the relations between the West and China, it will affect all international relations in the foreseeable future. A new Cold War with China is not in the interest of Germany and Europe. Possibilities of cooperation with China should be searched for in any field." Yet, Röttgen favors a revival of Transatlantic relations, both in economy and defense. Although America strictly follows its own national interests, often conflicting with the European understanding of foreign policies, it still is the strongest and most potent ally of Western European states. Röttgen describes the possibility of a renaissance and "revitalization" of Transatlantic relations in geopolitics and economy (Röttgen, 2022, p. 110). But he also concedes, that America has changed over time. The populist slogan "America first!" only reveals the true priorities of American foreign policy.

Under the Biden administration, the greatest geostrategic challenge for the US still is, unsurprisingly, China. The hegemonial conflict between both powers doesn't leave Western Europe in a neutral position. President Trump's erratic decisions, nationalistic rhetoric and overt contempt of European peculiarities have proven that the golden age of Transatlantic relations belongs to the past. The alliance demonstrates unanimity, but only as far as European interests are in line with America's self-perception of political and economic dominance – and vice versa. Although an unchallenged hegemon in the West, America needs allies, too. The US still is, without any doubt, the most ardent supporter of Transatlantic interests in Europe. No wonder, that Polish president Andrzej Duda addressed Joe Biden in Warsaw as the representative of the strongest military force (Duda, 2022): "We thank you for your unique leadership, strong leadership at this juncture (…) and we hope for a decisive and firm leadership of the United States in the North Atlantic Alliance, and also for the enhancement of Euro–Atlantic ties."

Norbert Röttgen has written his book after the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Russia's aggression in Eastern Europe tightens, if only momentaneously, the relations between European Union, NATO states and the US. As in times of Cold War, the West has a common enemy. Nevertheless, beyond this surface of shared interests, Röttgen clearly sees the symptoms of an alienation. The United States have their own geostrategic agenda – unfortunately, Europe has none. Röttgen strictly

recommends more European independence in defense, geostrategy and economy. But it is also clear, that Europe's position in a multipolar world is rather weak.

The US are still the geostrategic driving force in Western Europe. But, as Braml claims, the United States have lost their political reliability.

Western Europe is far from being the third global power, apart from the US and China, in the big game for planetarian hegemony. An equidistance of Europe between China and the US is completely utopian. Röttgen is adamant on one point: economy and geostrategy are intrinsically intertwined. Economic dependence – as Russian gas exports for Germany have proven – comes with the price tag of strategic weakness. This decisive mistake, Röttgen writes, should by all means be avoided when it comes to Sino-European relations. Norbert Röttgen recommends the strengthening of Transatlantic ties, and at the same time the reshaping of a European position of its own right, built on military power, economic strength and a culture of freedom and innovation. These ideas represent the conservative mainstream in Germany. Influential Bavarian politician Alexander Dobrindt recommends as well the "strengthening of Transatlantic trade relations" (Dobrindt, 2022). Political reality, in the meantime, is much more complex and self-contradictory. The most recent example of the dilemmas and limitations of Röttgen's and the conservatives' geopolitical concept are the tensions within German government upon the question whether or not state-owned Chinese shipping company COSCO should acquire a part of Hamburg harbour's infrastructure.

Josef Braml, German expert on US foreign policy, sees the Transatlantic relations in a slightly different perspective and more critical light than Norbert Röttgen (Braml, 2022). In his latest book, "The Transatlantic Illusion - The New World Order and How We Can Hold Our Ground", Braml analyzes a situation where American national interests prevail over European idiosyncrasies. In Braml's interpretation, Europe's geopolitical weakness after World War II hasn't come to an end, yet. The US are still the geostrategic driving force in Western Europe. But, as Braml claims, the United States have lost their political reliability. America's trade war on China is not in line with economic interests in Europe, particularly not Germany's with its export-orientated industry. Europe should develop its own geopolitical strategy, define and claim its own economic interest, recommends Braml. America is still a friend, but alienation and diverging interests have become manifest since the days of Trump administration. In other words, Braml's opts for more European independence – intellectually, economically, politically, but also in all questions of defense and security (Braml, p. 154). Would that be Europe's tea party? No worries, Braml's ideas remain purely hypothetical. "Europe's unity in all economic and financial matters would strengthen its position in the global economic competition" (Braml, p. 155). But Braml warns to take this idea literally: "An equidistance of Europe between America and China" (Braml, p. 108) is for him not an option. Europe belongs to the Western hemisphere and Transatlantic relations remain fundamental.

As long as Europe's military forces lack both, technical superiority and deterrence, Europe cannot present itself convincingly as third power block between the United States and China. Braml therefore opts for a renaissance of strong French-German friendship. France and Germany, argues Braml, have always been the economic driving forces of the European Union, and the accelerator of democratization and pluralism. Unfortunately, this view on French-German relations is only partial. For the time being, French president Emanuel Macron and German chancellor Olaf Scholz try their best to overcome bilateral tensions, misunderstandings and diverging viewpoints on the war in Ukraine and its consequences for Europe. France criticizes German particularism when it comes to protect Germany's own economy; Germany is irritated by Macron's self-conscious attitude in foreign policy. Braml's vision of a strong Europe lacks a truly unifying and realistic vision that reflects the interests of all EU member states. Not even the war in Eastern Europe brought European states together to agree on a common political strategy. Germany's reluctance in the export of arms to Ukraine is openly criticized by Eastern European allies like Poland and the Baltic states. Finally, Braml's book reminds us that behind the mistrust between Europe and the US lies a truth deeper than national peculiarities. Europe is simply too weak to defend its own interests. It will take decades to overcome this dependence from US supremacy.

Every geopolitical equilibrium is vulnerable and reflects a dynamic balance of power. The war in Ukraine, restricted to a single geographic region on the Eastern outskirts of Europe, already proves to have had a tremendous impact on geostrategies, both in the US and China. Europe rethinks – and probably will reshape – its economic relations with China; particularly German economy is heavily invested in joint ventures with Chinese companies. Christian Geinitz describes in his book with the alarming title "China's Grasp for the West – How Beijing Invests in our Economy" (Geinitz, 2022) the rise of China's socio-economic system from a marginalized so-called third world country to the challenger of Western supremacy in the fields of innovation, technology, infrastructure, logistics, digitization and defense. Seen with Western eyes, China's new status comes as a threat to democratic, competitive and capitalistic societies. Geinitz describes in many examples China's economic expansionism. To Geinitz, the most significant indicator of China's claim to hegemonial status is the Belt and Road Initiative, BRI (Geinitz, p. 330): "German politicians and entrepreneurs have understood, they can neither ride nor tame the Chinese dragon." Therefore, Germany and the European Union "need an ambitious industrial policy to strengthen Europe as an economic region of innovation, infrastructure, social partnership and free trade" (Geinitz, p. 331). Like Norbert Röttgen, Christian Geinitz favors the revitalization of "Transatlantic ties, including Great Britain" in order to withstand influence, dependence and, possibly, dominance by China. Röttgen, Braml and Geinitz all agree in the perception of European weakness; but they dissent on the remedies.

Röttgen favours a revival of Transatlantic friendship. Braml discusses the European potential of harmonious Franco-German relations. Geinitz warns to underestimate China's expansionism. Realpolitik would paint a different picture. In the real political arena, the US administration is more preoccupied with the changing situation in Asia as a challenge to

US hegemony than with European peculiarities. China, on the other hand, is clearly considered by European governments as a threat. It is seen as "a tough competitor" and "a rival", to quote Joseph Borell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs (Reuters, 2022). Nevertheless, European economy is heavily dependent on China, for two main reasons. First, China is the biggest national market worldwide and offers enormous possibilities for products "made in Europe". Second, China is the leading export nation of cheap consumer goods, and materialistic Western consumer societies are essentially built on the low production costs in China.

Returning from his recent trip to Beijing, German chancellor Olaf Scholz reflected upon Sino-German relations (Scholz, 2022): "Even in changed circumstances, China remains an important business and trading partner for Germany and Europe. We do not want to decouple from it. (…) We will (…) dismantle one-sided dependencies in the interest of smart diversification. This requires prudence and pragmatism. A significant amount of trade between Germany and China concerns products where there is neither a lack of alternative suppliers nor a risk of dangerous monopolies. Instead, China, Germany and Europe benefit equally." For 2023, the German government will announce its new China strategy. In a world order that has totally lost stability, a rational balance between economic and strategic aspects, between partnership and rivalry, seems to be practicable for both sides (Chazan, 2022). No one assumes that European states will be able or even willing to protect their strategic and military interests by themselves. "Europe First" is simply too American for the old continent.

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