The European Union in a polycentric world: what next?

A view from a Russian Europeanist

by Dr Nadezhda Arbatova
Head of European Studies, MEMO
Academy of Science, Moscow

The end of the East-West confrontation removed the threat of a global conflict. This has, however, resulted in the crisis of the Euro-Atlantic partnership, namely the growing security gap between the USA and the European Union, the emergence of a new China with global ambitions, the rise of the assertive post-Soviet Russia and numerous regional actors – India, Japan, Turkey, Iran, Brazil and others. Compared to the European “concert of nations” of the nineteenth century and the bipolarity of the twentieth century, today’s international system is far more complex and global in scale. States and transnational players can be simultaneous rivals and partners at different levels and on different issues.

Multilateral cooperation versus new bipolarity

However, the modern polycentric world is strongly influenced by the evolving balance between two opposite trends – multilateral cooperation on global challenges and a new bipolarity. This new bipolarity is developing within the same capitalist system and can be defined as a growing divide between liberal and authoritarian capitalism. The former is mostly represented by the EU, the USA and their allies, while the latter by China and Russia. Strictly speaking, nowadays, the only truly federated power centre is the United States, whose economic and military potential guarantees its political influence in the world’s affairs. China is approaching these standards. The EU and Russia represent two opposite models. The former is an economic power centre while the latter is a military one. In order to become a real centre of power, Russia needs to modernise its economy based on exports of raw materials.

There is a growing understanding in the most liberal part of the Russian political elite that without radical modernisation, it will be marginalised in the modern world. However, economic modernisation cannot be conducted in line with Russia’s political modernisation, in order to attract EU into non oil and gas industries, Russia will have to re-establish a reasonable and balanced division of state powers and create an independent judiciary as well as arbitration bodies able to manage and restrain the bureaucracy and corruption. It is also recognised that Russia cannot achieve modernisation outside the technologically advanced international community, First and foremost represented by the United States, the European Union, Japan and others. The current crisis in the Russia-West relations makes modernisation prospects unlikely.

Aside from this, the modern polycentric world is strongly influenced by a relatively new phenomenon – the global spread of anti-globalist or populist nationalism. Despite the common features, this phenomenon has a pronounced national specificity – egotistic nationalism in the US, neo-imperial nationalism in China, great power nationalism in Russia and anti-European nationalism in the EU. These trends are developing in the context of increased regional conflicts, the threat of international terrorism and the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Strategic autonomy for Europe

In recognition of these trends and changes and a growing understanding that the security of Europe is becoming more and more a European issue, this is reflected by the EU strategic autonomy, PESCO, and the heated discussions about the creation of a European army. The Euro-Atlantic partnership, as it was during the Cold War, no longer exists today. And with the current uncertainty about the readiness of the United States to come to the aid of its allies, Europeans have no other chance than to think about their own defence. In order to become an influential power centre in international relations, the European Union needs strategic autonomy. It should be noted that the desire of the EU for military autonomy does not cause much concern at the official level of Russian leadership. Russian President Vladimir Putin has openly recognised that the desire of Europeans to be independent, self-sufficient and sovereign in the field of defence and security is completely natural.

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China, Russia and the EU are converging on the need for strategic autonomy.

However, the European Union cannot ignore the fact that Russia, despite the current crisis in its relations with the West, remains a major player in the global arena. Europe’s way ahead

No doubt, European integration is the greatest project of all times. But it is also true that the European Union is currently experiencing the most difficult period in its entire history, being tested under the pressure of several threats: the world economic and financial crisis, a migration crisis, crisis in relations with Russia and others. But it is an anti-European nationalism in some of the EU Member States – and nothing else that creates a true existential threat to European integration and its proper place in a polycentric world.

It is obvious that the vector of the EU defence policy will be largely determined by the EU’s relations with its key partners. Most likely, NATO will be transformed towards a functional division of labour between the allies, where Europe will play a regional role in ensuring international security, and the US a global one. The Chinese challenge – China’s growing economic and military power, coupled with its global ambitions – will also remain in the foreseeable future a strong incentive to build the EU defence potential, and under the best scenario to meet this challenge together with its allies and partners including Russia.

Europe’s way ahead

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The normalisation of Russia-West relations?

There is no doubt that peace in Ukraine is a fundamental precondition for the normalisation of Russia-West relations. However, Russian leadership sees the current international order as being dominated by the United States and NATO, presenting an existential threat to Russia’s security and interests. This system, from a Russian perspective, has failed to satisfy Russia’s recovery from the crisis of the 1990s. Attempts to transform the existing Euro-Atlantic security system have not yielded any noticeable results. On many occasions Russia sent messages (Putin’s Munich speech of 2007, Medvedev’s proposal on a new European Security Treaty of 2008) to its Western partners about its deep dissatisfaction with the existing system of European security. Consequently, the appeal to the international community to come back to the well-established tradition of the past and create a genuine post bipolar order, or at least commonly agree on rules of behaviour, appears justified.

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