Geopolitics: Navigating at stormy times and under foggy conditions

A Background Note provided by Cercle Européen Renert

1. Introduction

While the world seems to be back at a situation that some compare with the 1970ies, both in terms of conflicts and economic challenges, the famous "end of history" and a too confident belief in the power of democracy, freedom and globalisation, have definitely turned sour. At times, where too many fall for the omnipresent and constant noise of daily if not hourly news that are often overturned before screens change, an extended analysis of the geopolitical situation seems unnecessary.

By way of example, whatever one would note today about Europe's challenge in the area of defence is likely to be challenged by the NATO summit early Juli in Ankara. And we would underline that too much attention on short-term events distracts Europe from its real task. How can Europe navigate at times where both compass and paper charts fail to provide answers? Admittedly, for too long – in particular after 1989 – Europe has operated in seemingly still very placid conditions.

Neither the increasingly competitive edge of China, nor the global financial crisis, Covid and the more recent hostile signals from across the ocean were more than complex situation for which both methods and procedures hadn't failed to be good enough.

Though enough wake-up calls were made, such as President Macron's Sorbonne speech, former Chancellor Scholz Zeitenwende or Canadian Prime Minister Carney's Davos intervention have led to deep-diving reflections. Europe including its intellectual elite seems stuck in very good analysis that stops short of fresh avenues.

The constant changing political landscape in many European countries is another distraction. Too much doom and gloom is fortunately contradicted by sometimes unforeseen outcomes such as the recent Hungarian parliamentary elections. Yet, the trend towards more navel-gazing is far from being over.

2. Questions for Discussion

Given the overall situation the following questions are put forward for the discussion:

- Can Europe translate the inspiration (President Macron, President of the European Council Antonio Costa, other Heads of State and Government) to become a recognised power?
- Would this aim require to rethink current methods? If so, how could Europe still be able to adhere to its (founding) principles? Which of these are seen to be indispensable?
- Europe is often seen to be less powerful than the US or China. Is Europe a middle-power or should it use more proactively extended leverage (such as in trade matters)? And if the latter, what would that mean for other areas?

- Other middle powers (e.g. Canada, Saudi-Arabia, East-Asian countries) similarly seek alternative alliances. Europe seems to have (limited) success in South America. What can Europe learn from such attempts in defining its strategy?
- More generally, are strategic approaches in volatile times too static?
- Multilateralism was seen as rule based and thereby predictable, inclusive and cooperative and therefore peace-promoting, in general crisis resistant. The disregard of many of its institutions and rules mean for Europe what?
- How can Europe balance the geopolitical elements of its successful enlargement policy with the need to secure the full application of the Acquis principles?
- How can Luxembourg use positive developments such as the DSRB (Defence, Security and Resilience Bank) to foster its European added value?