

HOW THE GREAT POWERS HAVE LOST THE OPPORTUNITY
TO COOPERATE?
COVID-19 CRISIS-CATALYST OF THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE
POWER RELATIONS IN THE GLOBAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the world is facing a new and provocative challenge. COVID-19 pandemic crises have a huge impact all over the world, causing multiple deaths and negative consequences for all the sectors of societies. The pandemic crisis took to a reconsideration of the values and to a restructuring of the priorities and of the needs. The world, crushed by the coronavirus crisis, is experiencing a destabilization of the health, economic and political sectors. The weakening of the people's trust in authorities and political class took to a polarization of the society. The population was divided between those that recognized the existence of the virus and those that didn't believe in it, between those that have agreed with the measures against Covid-19 and those that haven't agreed, between vaccinated and unvaccinated.

The article emphasizes the implications of COVID-19 pandemics concerning the restructuring of a new geopolitical architecture. In the new epidemic context and amid the tensions between US and China, we are witnessing to a reconfiguration of the power structures. China becomes an important actor in global economy and in international affairs. The "battle" on economic, commercial and geopolitical stage between China and US will be the turning point in the future. The relations between US and China will influence European actors and European borders. How will the European Union continue to function and how all the tensions between the great powers may affect the Eastern Europe security policy are the main challenges of the European Union.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemics, China, US, Eastern Europe, cooperation.*

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INTRODUCTION

The tension between the great powers, USA and China, has led to restructuring of the power poles and a renegotiation of relations between countries, all these having strong effects on Europe and the world. The United States, which have been hit hard by the coronavirus crisis, with high scores of unemployment, were facing unprecedented violence. Dissatisfaction with anti-COVID measures was doubled by anti-racism protests. The killing of an African American citizen by a white police officer provoked protests around the world.

As Margaret Carlson¹, who moderated a Brussels Forum² session mentioned, there were two pandemics in American politics, “the pandemic of racism and the pandemic of the virus”. What happened in the American streets affected also US elections. The killing of an Afro-American in the American streets by a policeman took to great protests all over the world. Floyd’s death has split the nation: “Trump has blamed ensuing riots and looting in various cities on far-left extremists and blasted governors whose states have seen unrest for being "weak." Democrats in turn have accused the president of fanning the flames with his charged rhetoric” (King, Groppe 2020).

The violent death of George Floyd became the catalyst for the protests against “racial violence”. It was brought into question the concept of “white supremacy”, term used by Trump in his 2006 electoral campaign. As some editors (Wildermuth 2020) claimed, Floyd’s death was “treated” as a landmark” used for electoral campaign. The Democrat Party used this event as an attack track for Trump. Joe Biden’s supporters used the “racism” issue as electoral theme. In these circumstances, the Democrat party tried to attract the vote of Afro-American electorate. The violent manifestations that spread in many countries and the tensions between US and China changed the balance of power and had unprecedented effects on Europe, especially at regional level on geopolitical and economic levels, mentioned and explained in the article.

Europe, amid the coronavirus crisis, was experiencing destabilization at health, economic and political levels. The weakening of the population’s trust in state authorities regarding the measures imposed against the spread of the virus took to great reactions among population. The population was spread between those that have agreed with the measures against COVID-19 and those that haven’t agreed and then in vaccinated and unvaccinated population. Solidarity, a core value of the European Union, has proven to have little effect in the crisis situation, exposing both old and new rifts in the EU. It is the case of Italy that battled the coronavirus and felt abandoned by the countries of the Union in the time of crisis.

¹ Margaret Carlson is a columnist for the Daily Beast, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/author/margaret-carlson>

² Brussels Forum, The German Marshall Fund’s. <https://brusselsforum.org/>

EU member states have failed to provide health care and supplies to Italy during the coronavirus outbreak, affecting EU cohesion. The EU has shown its fragility in times when countries in need were looking for solidarity and cooperation. However, even EU reinforced financial aid to support Member states and their economy, this will not improve the situation, taking account that the funds are allocated directly to companies, not to national governments.

However, in spite of these, there were some gestures of solidarity amongst European countries in times of all kinds of crisis, not only in COVID crisis. For example, the Romania helped Greece “for putting out fires that were affecting an area close to Athens”. Romania sent to Greece 142 firefighters, 8 trucks of putting out forest fires, three tanks, a command centre, two Multirisc containers, an intervention vehicle, as well as other means of logistic support³. Also, while we are writing, Romania is passing through hard times, with hundreds of deaths and thousands of infected people⁴, so the authorities asked help from Europe “for emergency assistance to fight pandemic”⁵. “5,200 vials of antibody drugs were sent from Italy to Romania, as well as 200 oxygen concentrators from the rescEU medical reserves, hosted in the Netherlands, and 50 oxygen concentrators from Poland. Denmark will be sending 15 ventilators and eight oxygen concentrators” (Martuscelli 2021). In turn, Romania helped Italy when the country faced a large number of infections caused by COVID-19. So, as the Crisis Commissioner Janez Lenarčič said, “the latest deliveries to Romania prove that EU solidarity works both ways” (Martuscelli 2021). Solidarity becomes a key subject and a challenge nowadays. Values of trust and solidarity are the main solutions to recovery from the current crisis. The worsening of the COVID-19 situation will lead to economic scarcity and uncertainty in the future. The COVID-19 crisis will hit the Europe economy. Also, the current situation emphasizes the fragility of health system from Europe, especially those from Eastern Europe (see Romania). The deficiencies from the health care system will be more visible and will lead to huge problems in the managing of the pandemic. Beyond the crisis caused by the virus, the confrontation between US and China becomes the key element that will dominate the geopolitical scene and it seems that China has become the most important actor from the international stage.

How will the European Union continue to function in a new geopolitical architecture, how the power structures will rally and how all the tensions between

³ “Romania sends 142 firefighters in Greece in new mission for putting out fires”, Agerpres, 20.08. 2021, <https://www.agerpres.ro/english/2021/08/20/romania-sends-142-firefighters-in-greece-in-new-mission-for-putting-out-fires--766762>

⁴ COVID-19: Romania in eye of storm with record infections and deaths, Euronews, Updates: 19.10. 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/10/19/romania-in-eye-of-covid-storm-with-death-rate-among-world-s-highest>

⁵ Romania asks EU for emergency assistance to fight pandemic, October 15, 2021, Pledge Times, <https://pledgetimes.com/romania-asks-eu-for-emergency-assistance-to-fight-pandemic/>

the great powers may affect the Eastern Europe security policy are the main challenges of the European Union. The escalation of the tensions between the US and China in the new context of coronavirus crisis which became a catalyst in the great competition between the two powers will lead to great destabilization around the world, with social and cultural consequences at global level.

THE IMBALANCE OF AMERICAN POWER

The tensions between US and China started when President Trump offended China, using the phrase “Chinese virus” and saying that the virus came from a laboratory in Wuhan. The Chinese government, in turn, launched the theory that the US military has brought the virus to China. There have been several exchanges between the US and China, beyond the issue of the virus origin that stressed how tense the relationship between the two great powers was. The State Department accused China of allegedly conducting secret nuclear tests with very little explosive power despite an international agreement ban signed by Beijing (Gordon 2020).

The report entitled “US Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China”, drafted by the US Presidency emphasized that the US is “in strategic competition” with China. “In response to Beijing’s challenge, the US administration has taken a competitive approach regarding China, focusing on a clear assessment of the intentions and actions of the Chinese Communist Party (...). Our goal is to defend the national interests of the 2017 US National Security Strategy. We want to: protect American people, our homeland and our way of life; to promote American prosperity; to maintain peace through power; to expand American influence” underlined US Presidency⁶. The rivalry between US and China has deep roots, political and economical ones. The most recent was the trade battle. In January 2020, the two powers signed a deal, but some issues remained unresolved. US leader has accused China of “unfair trading practices and intellectual property theft”⁷. China has accused America that is trying “to curb its rise as a global economic power. Trump’s tariffs policy aims to encourage consumers to buy American products by making imported goods more expensive”⁸. The pandemic amplified the rivalry between the two powers and this tension will last and will have repercussions on global level.

⁶ “United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China”, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/U.S.-Strategic-Approach-to-The-Peoples-Republic-of-China-Report-5.20.20.pdf>

⁷ BBC News, “A quick guide to the US- China trade war”, 16 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45899310>

⁸ BBC News, “A quick guide to the US- China trade war”, 16 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45899310>

The Washington Administration admits that Beijing is a “challenge” for the American people, “One Belt, One Road” project allegedly established for this purpose. It constituted an “umbrella” used by Beijing “to describe a series of initiatives, many of which seemed to be meant to reconfigure international norms, standards and networks, to advance China’s global interests and vision, but also to supply domestic economic needs”, the report read⁹. Former deputy director of China’s State Administration stated that the strategy was to build a “Chinese Marshall Plan” (“One Belt, One Road” project). As Xu Shanda explained, “such projects would (...) pave the roads for Chinese goods and services to enter new markets, as one of the explicit goals of Xi’s strategy was also to find outlets for China’s excess production capacity”(Zhou, Hallding, Han 2015). As McMaster underlined in his article from *The Atlantic*, “the Belt and Road Initiative has created a common pattern of economic clientelism” (McMaster 2020). Beijing offers loans for countries in needs and, if these are in debt, Chinese party forces their leaders to align to Beijing’s foreign policy agenda.

Also, in a paper developed under the auspices of the Congressional Research Service, entitled “Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense-Issues for Congress”¹⁰, China and Russia are mentioned as the main competitors for the US. McMaster was talking about “strategic empathy”. As Shore mentioned, strategic empathy involves a country’s perceptions of the world and how these perceptions influence the politics. US strategy upon China and vice versa will depend on their strategic empathy. At the India-US forum, held online on 12th October 2020, US deputy Secretary of State, Stephen Biegun, launched the US proposal to establish a new NATO in the Indo- Pacific region¹¹. This new organization could be set up to counter China’s tendency to expand its sphere of influence to the region. Attracting countries like India, Japan or Australia, US policy in Asia pursues a single purpose: China’s isolation and discouragement.

The actions of the former American president confirm these rivalries. Donald Trump has announced that the US are withdrawing from the Open Skies Treaty. The former US president said that Washington is leaving the treaty because Russia hasn’t fulfilled its commitments. There were voices saying that the decision to withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty was a step forward for the deconstruction of the international arms control regime between major nuclear powers, an escalation of a new arms race and the continued attempt to bind and freeze Chinese military power (Parmar, Bwardway 2020). The Democrats saw this as a dangerous plan that would lead to a destabilization of allied relations¹². Also, the US withdraw

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Congressional Research Service, “Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress”. Report. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R43838.pdf>

¹¹ Ananta Centre, *The US- India Forum*. 4th Edition. Report, 12 October 2020, <https://storage.ning.com/topology/rest/1.0/file/get/9110387101?profile=original>

¹² Mehta, A., Gould J., “Trump Administration prepares to leave Open Skies Treaty, Defense News, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2020/05/21/trump-admin-to-withdraw-from-open-skies-treaty/>

from the Intermediate- Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty because of Russia's violation of the treaty will lead to a deeper engagement of China to protect Beijing's interests. Joining the arms race in the region of the Pacific and Asia, China may be engaged in "a trap of competitive strategy" (Kuo 2018).

In his speech, Jens Stoltenberg said that "Russia, terrorism, the coronavirus pandemic and the rise of China are the main challenges to the Alliance and NATO. The rise of China changes the global balance of power, multiplies threats to open societies and individual freedoms and increases competition for our values and way of life. NATO 2030 is about how we adapt to this new normal¹³. In the future, the international stage will be the confrontation arena for US and China over global supremacy. As Stoltenberg stated, ten personalities from ten NATO member states will be part of the committee that will reflect on the improvements in the North Atlantic political process. One of the experts, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State A. Wess Mitchell argued that the US and Europe "should use the epidemics as an opportunity to the united front to confront with China" (Mitchell 2020). As Wess Mitchell stated, the European states shouldn't be economic dependent on China. Anna Fotyga, one of the members from Poland, maintained the same opinion-critical sectors of the economies "can no longer be dependent on the red Chinese dragon. She underlined that an economic realignment is needed" (Fotyga 2020). A new economic strategy is necessary for Europe in its relationship with US and China.

The relations between countries will not be the same in the new Cold War time. The tension between China and SUA will be the test for Euro- American relations. The Europeans are more reluctant in their relations with US. A study conducted in Germany in 2020 by the Pew Institute and the Kerber Foundation showed that "only 37 percent of German respondents believe that relations with the United States are a higher priority for their country than relations with China. This is 13 percent less than it was in the same survey of public opinion in 2019" (Bordachev 2020). For the first time in the history of transatlantic relations, the great leaders of the main European powers are thinking how to position themselves. In a changing balance of power with a strength of China's capabilities and the US's effort to maintain the dominance, Europeans had to determine their own place. On a short term, Europe will function in a way to preserve its resources and opportunities; it will play a "speculative bipolarity" game, as Bordachev highlighted. On a long term, Europe will seek an independent role in international affairs. How will evolve US- China relations in the new geopolitical structure and which will be the social and geopolitical implications for Eastern Europe?

¹³ Lupitu, R., "Jens Stoltenberg a lansat procesul de reflecție "NATO 2030": Alianța trebuie să rămână puternică militar, unită politic și să acționeze global înfața provocărilor Rusiei și ascensiunii Chinei", Calea Europeana, June 8, 2020, <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/jens-stoltenberg-a-lansat-procesul-de-reflectie-nato-2030-alianța-trebuie-sa-ramana-puternica-militar-unita-politic-si-sa-actioneze-global-in-fata-provocarilor-rusiei-si-ascensiunii-chinei/>

SOCIAL AND GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR EASTERN EUROPE

“The European Union must not choose between the US and China. Europe needs “strategic autonomy to defend its interests”, concluded European Foreign Minister Josep Borell¹⁴. He said that “it is not desirable for the EU to interrupt economic and tradecooperation with China, nor to abandon multilateralism. The EU should look after its own interests, Borell stressing that “strategic autonomy” is “much more understandable than ever, as the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted Europe’s dependence on the global Chinese market for medical supplies”¹⁵. Borell emphasized that the rivalry between US and China is more and more pronounced and the pandemic is intensifying it. But beyond global disorders, said the head of European diplomacy, the EU should take advantage of these events and, if it wants to play a role in the new order, it should solve its internal problems.

Europe is still largely economically dependent on China, but European geopolitics cannot be detached from the US, so the EU will have to be quite careful in this game between the two powers. There are some tensions, for example, related to the development of the 5G network in Europe. However, the Huawei group actions are blocked by Washington, which wants to exclude it from Europe due to the risk of Beijing’s espionage.

China’s economic interests have been quite visible in the past. The “One Belt, One Road” project was an initiative to spread China’s soft power to create a viable space to encourage economic exchanges and to create a new international system that would decouple the world from the United States. China’s actions will continue in the future, trying to attract Eastern European countries, using them to be a gateway to Chinese exports to Western Europe. The report “China’s influence in Southeastern, Central and Eastern Europe: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries” mentioned that “Eastern Europe region can serve as an entry point into the rest of Europe for BRI land and maritime projects” (Brattberg *et al.* 2001). Also, the opportunity for China’s firms to invest in Eastern Europe, “a region less economically developed” (Ibidem), took to Beijing’s greater presence in the region.

CHINA-US RELATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS IN EASTERN EUROPE

Eastern Europe is also at the crossroads of Kremlin and American interests. Things are starting to change, including militarily. Last year, Trump announced the

¹⁴ Lupitu, J., “Josep Borell: Uniunea Europeană nu este neutră în confruntarea SUA–China. Împărtășim același sistem politic cu SUA și un vrem să îmbrățăm sistemul politic cu China”, Calea Europeană, 2 iunie 2020, <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/josep-borrell-uniunea-europeana-nu-este-neutra-in-confruntarea-sua-china-impartasim-acelasi-sistem-politic-cu-sua-si-nu-vrem-sa-imbratisam-sistemul-politic-din-china/>

¹⁵ Ibidem

withdrawal of American troops from Germany. A part of the soldiers was deployed in Poland, others were moved to Belgium, Italy or back in the US. As Brad Landon, analyst at the CNN stated, “the US personnel troops stationed in Germany have been viewed on both sides of the Atlantic as the foundation of the post-World War II order” (Landon 2020). US officials saw this move as a “gift to Russia”, as Mitt Romney stated (Ibidem). This raise concerns in the region about Washington’s commitments on security at the eastern border of the European Union. Eastern European countries need their Western allies to counter Russia’s aggressive actions, and Romanian Defence Strategy¹⁶ underlines it too. Washington’s decision to withdraw its troops from Germany will affect the eastern flank on a long term. The head of the German Parliament’s foreign relations committee, Norbert Roettgen stated that this action would decrease NATO strength. “The US’s military clout will not increase, but decrease in relation to Russia and the Near & Middle East” (Landon 2020). The last US reduction troops from Germany from 2012 took to Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Even the troops are moved to Italy or Belgium, “Germany is key, because it is central to both the ‘old Europe’ to the west and the newer states to the east” (Ibidem), Hertling said. The action to move the troops from Germany will strength the Russia’s power and influence in the European eastern flank.

On the other side, the fact that Poland offered to receive some of the American soldiers withdrawn from Germany showed Poland’s position concerning the relation with the West. Any initiative coming from the West leads to a counteraction of Russia in the East. Moscow used disinformation on the origin of COVID-19 or on measures against the spread of the virus to undermine the confidence of EU member states. Historian Douglas Selvage said that Russia has been using a disinformation operation (“Denver operation”) designed by the KGB and STASI in the 80’s¹⁷. It claimed that the US invented AIDS and it was using the disease as a biological weapon.

On the same pattern, Sergey Glazyev, Russian politician and economist, a full member of the Russian Academy of Sciences accused US of having produced COVID-19 “as a tool of the American hybrid war”¹⁸. The spread of the false information about the virus origin is an opportunity to undermine the West’s credibility. Trump used the same logic when he stated that the virus was fabricated in Wuhan laboratory. The disinformation about COVID-19 origin spread by the

¹⁶ “Romanian Defence Strategy” (Strategia Națională de Apărare a Țării 2020–2024) – Document submitted to the Romanian Parliament https://media.hotnews.ro/media_server1/document-2020-06-4-24036061-0-stategia-nationala-aparare-2020-2024.pdf

¹⁷ Kramer, M., “Lessons from operation “Denver”, the KGB’s massive AIDS disinformation campaign”, The MIT Press Reader, <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/operation-denver-kgb-aids-disinformation-campaign/>

¹⁸ Kolesnyk, D., “The USSR in the early 1980s blamed the US for AIDS. Parallels with COVID 19?”, Gagra Institute, <https://gagrainstitute.org/covid-19-and-russian-disinformation/>

great competitors led to a deepening of tensions between US, Russia and China. The world leaders had to prove their cooperation in a face of a common threat, but all their statements gave way to dissociation and misinformation. China has promoted “conspiracy narratives”, too, said the European Agency in a report. “China has continued a global disinformation campaign to deviate the blame for the pandemic and to improve its international image” (Eder 2020), the report claimed.

The Vice President of the European Commission, Vera Jourova mentioned that Russia has spread false information “to provoke fear” and China “tends to resort to propaganda”¹⁹. Many of this disinformation has spread in Eastern Europe, where there are some actors who would have interests in spreading false information to discredit Western allies. This happened with the wave of the fake news that spread in Poland concerning a so-called interview with a US military commander who ridiculed military operations between NATO and Baltic allies executed few days before (Vandiver 2020).

The war will be fought on the eastern flank where destabilizing forces will try to incline the balance to the east, China trying to attract the market of the states from this area. The “battle” on economic and geopolitical stage between China and US will be the turning point in the future. Despite head of European diplomacy’s statements that Europe must stand somewhere in the middle, it is hard to believe that we can talk about a neutral position. It would be as if, in the Cold War times, Western Europe had declared itself neutral in confrontation between US and Soviet Union. “The hard core” of Europe, (naming here Germany and France) has multiple interests to maintain its relation with China. Germany showed in the past its perseverance to follow its interests in spite of its commitments. For example, Germany has continued the project North Stream 2 in spite of American worries.

As Trump’s mercantilist view of foreign policy, countries took resources and made security arrangements concerning their immediate benefit. And it is not only about Trump. Interest on mercantilism functions where the relationship between economy and politics come under discussion. As Ahmed and Bick underlined in their article on Carnegie Institute, “the discussion of mercantilism has reappeared (...), as the United States struggles to (1) come to terms with the underlying causes and consequences of the 2008 financial crisis, (2) restore higher and more inclusive economic growth, (3) address a multitude of new challenges in labor markets due to rapid changes in technology and globalization, and (4) contend with the rise of China and the success of its alternative model of state capitalism – a model that has generated more than three decades of sustained economic growth” (Ahmed, Bick 2017).

Concerning transatlantic relationship, Trump’s mercantilist approach encouraged bilateral negotiations instead of multilateral ones. The former president proposed a

¹⁹ Lupitu R. „Raport UE: Conspirațiile și dezinformările dinspre Rusia și China privind COVID-19 pot pune în pericol în viața oamenilor”, Calea Europeană, April 22, 2020, <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/raport-ue-conspiratiile-si-dezinformarile-dinspre-rusia-si-china-privind-covid-19-pot-pune-in-pericol-in-viata-oamenilor/>

cut of funding for US diplomacy and “he pulled the US out of a series of international agreements, including the TPP and, most recently, the Paris climate accord” (Ibidem). Trump’s perspective concerning transatlantic relations emphasized US national interests regarding international norms and trade affairs thus Obama’s vision of “multi-partner world”. According to “a transcript of Donald Trump’s meeting with The Washington Post editorial board²⁰, Trump’s mercantilist view of transatlantic relationship is a zero-sum approach concerning foreign policy. “By putting America’s interests first has been the driving force behind Trump’s statements and policies and has caused much concern in Europe about the US’ security posture regarding NATO”²¹. Trump supported UK decision to leave the EU and criticized NATO. He considered that Europeans weren’t “reliable partners” because they didn’t meet their financial obligations to NATO. All these affected transatlantic relations.

Biden administration has continued “a hard approach to China”²². The Diplomat magazine underlined that “since President Joe Biden took office, Washington has been more than eager to demonstrate the importance of strategic competition with China” (Xinrong, Dingding 2021).

A poll conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations in 12 EU member states in May and June 2021 “shows that most European citizens tend to agree that the cold war is back” (Krastev, Leonard 2021). ECFR’s survey shows that 63% of the citizens believe that is a new Cold War between US and China. “They see the growing rivalry between the United States and China as the new geopolitical reality. But this new confrontation has a twist: most Europeans do not feel that their own states are part of the new cold war (especially those from the Eastern Europe, as the poll showed- for example: Bulgaria). When it comes to their own countries, only 15 per cent say they are definitely or probably in a cold war with China, while 59 per cent believe their country is still uninvolved” (Ibidem). The Europeans think that the confrontation between US and China is only a Brussels problem, not a problem that concerns each country. However, the China’s political and economical influence in Europe is significant. There are European policymakers that want “to find areas for cooperation with Beijing on global challenges, but also to further deepen the economic relationship through more trade, more investment, and more activity by European companies in the Chinese market” (Oertel 2021). But, in the same time, many European countries (including Eastern European ones) are reluctant concerning China’s policy and strategy.

²⁰ The Washington Post. (2016). A transcript of Donald Trump’s meeting with The Washington Post editorial board. March 21, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/03/21/a-transcript-of-donald-trumps-meeting-with-the-washington-post-editorial-board/>

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Joe Biden’s China policy, South China Morning Post, <https://www.scmp.com/topics/joe-bidens-china-policy>

The Europe, especially Germany became more reluctant in relations with US and doesn't want to abandon its relations with China. Berlin doesn't want to dissociate from China because it has an economic strategic interest: German exports to China reached 107 billion dollars, twice as much as China's combined exports to the next three EU countries (France, Italy and Netherlands)²³. On the other hand, Germany is reconsidering its position towards Russia. Berlin's position will affect Eastern European regional security policy. A disengagement from Western policy will make Eastern European border more vulnerable. Some NATO Eastern European allies fear that US attention is focused on Pacific region and "the Pentagon could cut its military presence on NATO's eastern flank" (Gould, 2021). To reassure the American presence on the Eastern flank, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited Black Sea nations (Romania, Ukraine and Georgia).

In the new context where US took a reluctant position concerning NATO and the tension between US and China have led to a position of insecurity for Eastern European countries, the COVID-19 crisis deepened their economic and social problems. The multiple crises from Eastern European countries (especially from Romania) will lead to destabilization that could provoke social disorder.

CONCLUSIONS WHAT DOES THE FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

The tension between US and China will lead to a re-establishment of the balance of powers in the world. As Borell stressed, the EU will look after "strategic autonomy", trying to establish connections according to its interests. However, we cannot speak of a decoupling of Europe from United States, especially from military perspective. Poland and Romania remain the two poles of the Western Alliance. The two countries had demonstrated so many times the strengthening and the cooperation with NATO and, implicitly, with USA.

The COVID-19 crisis might put the region in front of a difficult choice: strengthening the feeling of unity and solidarity, as a reaction to an enemy from the outside, an invisible one, with which both developed and least developed countries have to deal with; or, on the contrary, increase the differences between countries, deepening the cleavages that existed since the 2008 economic crisis.

The world is entering in a phase of destabilization and uncertainty. It depends on the ability of each state to manage the pandemic crisis and to restart the production and the consumption. The evolution of things is also unclear in the Eastern European countries. In the new epidemic context, the poverty and

²³ Lazescu, A., "Cum se raportează Germania la Europa de Est, Rusia, China și relațiile transatlantice, June 15, 2020, <https://www.ziaruldeiasi.ro/stiri/cum-se-raporteaza-germania-la-europa-de-est-rusia-china-si-la-relatiile-transatlantice-ii--255579.html>

unemployment in Eastern European countries might increase. In the new context of the increasing of infections number, there is a concern regarding the evolution of the economy sectors. “Real GDP growth is expected to slow significantly in Bulgaria to 2.9% in 2020 and 3.1% in 2021 due to weaker domestic demand growth and in Hungary GDP growth is forecast to drop to 3.2% in 2020 and to 2.8% in 2021”²⁴. Besides these, dysfunctional healthcare services and the lack of resources, equipment and doctors could create enough problems in the context of the increasing of the number of infected people with COVID-19 virus.

The COVID-19 crisis is also accompanied by a political, strategic and military competition. Cooperation between the great powers in the face of a common enemy has not taken place. On the contrary, dissensions have arisen and the great leaders have entered in a phase of strategic competition. In the future, the world may no longer be multipolar. The great powers will struggle for their supremacy in the world. In the competition between US and China, Europe became “a huge stake from political point of view”²⁵. As Sergiu Medar showed, 17+1 initiative represented a way of China’s promotion of business interest for CEE countries, but, of course, besides that, it is a political interest, too. Beijing is trying to attract CEE countries to its sphere of influence. The same thing is with “The Initiative of the Three Seas”. But not all CEE states are open to these initiatives. As Sergiu Medar underlined, “besides Hungary (who doesn’t have a close relation with EU and US), Serbia and other Balkan states that don’t have a program to be a part from EU, the other CEE countries avoid a political involvement with China”²⁶. Relation between China and CEE shouldn’t be followed with the whole region, but with every country from the region.

Meanwhile, US also try to attract CEE countries and to counterweight China’s interests in the area. US infrastructure investment is a main priority for Central and Eastern European countries. The Three Seas Fund’s role is to invest in transport, energy and to reduce regional development discrepancies. The two powers battle is to attract in their sphere of influence CEE countries. Trade, technology, intelligence, investments are the keys used by China and the US to gain the supremacy in the area. It depends on each state’s options and redefinitions of external objectives to attract their partners and to restore the balance of power.

²⁴ European Commission. European Economic Forecast, Winter 2020. February 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/ip121_en.pdf

²⁵ Medar S., China începe ofensiva europeană. Prima țintă: statele central și est-europene. Monitorul Apărării și Securității. October 8, 2020, <https://monitorulapararii.ro/china-incepe-ofensiva-europeana-prima-tinta-statele-central-si-est-europene-1-33674?fbclid=IwAR28rXkMz8cAc0XBuTUZyREHv3M7200tj1k-LRPFZrgeqiVRd61dmNFHAsY>

²⁶ Medar S., China începe ofensiva europeană. Prima țintă: statele central și est-europene. Monitorul Apărării și Securității. October 8, 2020, <https://monitorulapararii.ro/china-incepe-ofensiva-europeana-prima-tinta-statele-central-si-est-europene-1-33674?fbclid=IwAR28rXkMz8cAc0XBuTUZyREHv3M7200tj1k-LRPFZrgeqiVRd61dmNFHAsY>

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