

The World After the Pandemic: European Unity and the Challenge of Reviving Multilateralism

by Sonia Bianconi

Covid-19 has dramatically re-focused the world's attention on the adverse implications of globalisation. Coming on the heels of the 2008 financial crisis, the global pandemic has further weakened the image and credibility of the United States, causing the West to lose appeal compared to a more authoritarian but equally efficient East.

Different schools of thought exist on the pandemic's geopolitical impact. Some see the health crisis as an event of historic magnitude,¹ others maintain that Covid-19 has not really changed anything² and others still believe the

pandemic has acted as a mere accelerator of phenomena well underway prior to the advent of Covid-19.³

According to this latter view, the virus has merely confirmed pre-existing trends. These include a "waning American leadership, faltering global cooperation [and] great-power discord"⁴ as well as underscoring the urgent need for the EU to remain united if it is to assume a stronger stance internationally.⁵

[org/10.1017/S0020818320000351](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000351).

³ Richard Haass, "The Pandemic Will Accelerate History Rather Than Reshape It", in *Foreign Affairs*, 7 April 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1125883>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Davide Fiammenghi and Andrea Locatelli, "How Will Covid-19 Change Europe's Security Policies?", in Alessandro Colombo and Paolo Magri (eds), *The World and the Pandemic. Europe's Hour?*, Milan, Ledizioni, March 2021, p. 100-108, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/node/29455>.

¹ See John R. Allen et al., "How the World Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic", in *Foreign Policy*, 20 March 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/world-order-after-coronavirus-pandemic>.

² Daniel W. Drezner, "The Song Remains the Same: International Relations After COVID 19", in *International Organization*, Vol. 74, Suppl. 1 (December 2020), p. E18-E35, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000351>.

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Indeed, well before the pandemic's outbreak, US relations with Russia and China were already suffering, and discussion within the EU on the need to assume more international responsibilities was also well underway, seemingly confirming the above thesis of Covid-19 acting as an accelerator of pre-existing international dynamics.

The US, China and Russia: Existing tensions and new fractures

While the incoming Biden administration promised a radical shift in US foreign policy compared to Trump, US policy towards China is one domain of continuity between the two Presidents. Two emblematic events marked a year of continuous friction between Washington and Beijing: Trump's blaming of China for the virus outbreak in March 2020 and the bitter verbal clash between Biden administration officials and Chinese representatives at the Sino-US Summit in Anchorage in March 2021.

These developments underscore how the US's fear of being supplanted as the world's hegemonic power is not merely linked to political contingencies but represents a structural concern that has only grown stronger since the outbreak of the pandemic. It is not by chance that the US's most recent annual threat evaluation report identifies "China's push for global power" as the number one strategic threat facing the US.⁶

⁶ US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, 9 April 2021, p. 6-8, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=852427>.

As for relations with Russia, the peculiar chemistry between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin has been followed by a new rift with the ascent of Joe Biden. During his first hundred days in office, President Biden has sent out harsh signals towards Moscow, even calling Putin a "killer", an almost "Trumpian" slip of the tongue that left many in the international community surprised.

During a global health crisis, the need for international solidarity should be paramount. Yet, tensions between great powers have not only persisted but multiplied. Even the manufacturing and distribution of vaccines have become a pivotal instrument to increase the geopolitical influence of these states. The so-called "vaccine diplomacy" pursued by China and Russia – as well as the United States – is another example of a fraying of multilateralism and the growing efforts by global powers to compete in the realm of soft power with the aim to expand their influence.⁷

What role for the European Union?

Within this international context of growing polarisation, when the virus first reached Europe, the Union was unprepared to respond, with internal divisions and the prevalence of national interests again emerged. During these initial phases of the pandemic, each country thought for itself, closed borders and halted the export of medical equipment.

However, with time, European institutions improved their efforts.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Underscoring the shared nature of the Covid-19 threat, the EU ultimately moved to strengthen its internal cohesion, unity and solidarity. It is worth noting that no similar efforts emerged in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, or during the so-called migration crisis of 2015, when the EU's reaction failed to develop united policies based on shared responsibility among member states. A rediscovered sense of brotherhood has instead marked the response to the pandemic by EU institutions.

In this sense, Monnet's well-known dictum that "Europe [will] be built through crises, and [will] be the sum of their solutions"⁸ would seem to perfectly reflect the current situation. The pandemic has been tackled as a European problem: the Commission took charge of the negotiations with pharmaceutical companies to acquire vaccine doses and ensure a fair distribution among member states.⁹

In the same spirit, the 750 billion euro recovery package was launched with the aim to tackle the socio-economic impact of Covid-19, while promoting a green and digital transition. Most importantly, the effort implied the acceptance by EU members of the communitisation of debt and the sharing of the risk derived from the considerable loan to fund the recovery

package. This was a decision of historic significance, made possible by France and Germany's overlapping interests.¹⁰

Considering these developments, the health crisis could finally push the EU to take a significant step forward in its integration path, a challenge that is also facilitated by the formalisation of Brexit. If it is indeed true that the UK's exit has represented a major economic and military loss for the Union, undermining the functionalist utopia that the integration process was in fact irreversible, it is also true that European foreign policy may benefit from it in the future. In the past, London has consistently shown hostility towards ceding national prerogatives to Brussels, thus effectively blocking progress on European integration, meaning that the road towards further integration may now be easier to pursue.¹¹

Thus, one may posit that 2021 has been defined by trends that may actually turn out to be favourable for the EU, both due to the reaction to Covid-19 and the closure of Brexit and, even more so, because of Biden's election. After the Trump era, the transatlantic bond, dented after four years of US unilateralism, has found great benefit in the success of Biden, whose presidency now offers a four-year window to revive

⁸ Jean Monnet, *Memoirs*, London, Collins, 1978, p. 417, <https://archive.org/details/memoirs0000monn>.

⁹ European Commission, *Von der Leyen on European Vaccine Strategy: Making the World Safe from the Coronavirus*, 17 June 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_20_1120.

¹⁰ Beda Romano, "Cohesion among Member States: An Endless Back and Forth", in Alessandro Colombo and Paolo Magri (eds), *The World and the Pandemic. Europe's Hour?*, Milan, Ledizioni, March 2021, p. 88-98, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/node/29455>.

¹¹ Tim Oliver et al., *The Impact of the UK's Withdrawal on EU Integration*, Brussels, European Parliament, June 2018, <https://op.europa.eu/s/slW6>.

the transatlantic alliance.¹²

Of course, the EU still has several challenges to face. Even now, under Biden, the transatlantic bond continues to be characterised by internal fractures deriving from disagreements on specific issues, especially when it comes to Beijing and, more recently, on the ramifications – and a lamented lack of coordination – on the US's Afghanistan withdrawal.

Another worrying phenomenon affecting Brussels's performance in the international arena is the rise of nationalistic and populist trends inside the Union that, by enhancing the lack of cohesion among member states, weaken the ability of the EU to speak and act as one.

Finally, the crisis of multilateralism, further worsened by the pandemic, continues to be one of the main challenges for the EU: trying to address the root causes of this issue needs to be one of the main pillars of Brussels' external action.

Strengthening European external action: A two-track process

During a time of continued crisis for liberal democracy and the rise of authoritarian development models, the EU, as an advocate of human rights and rules-based multilateralism, should actively seek to reverse both trends.

¹² Steven Blockmans, "EU-US Relations: Reinventing the Transatlantic Agenda", in *Intereconomics*, Vol. 56, No.1 (January 2021), p. 5, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-021-0943-3>.

In this respect, the adoption of a two-track foreign policy strategy is crucial. On the one hand, it is essential for Brussels to relaunch dialogue with Washington,¹³ a historic ally and like-minded partner with which the EU should cooperate on key priorities, like the governance of technology, human rights and support for the rules-based international order.¹⁴ On the other hand, Atlanticism must necessarily be accompanied by a more inclusive multilateralism¹⁵ that hinges on existing international organisations and involves both institutions and private actors.

Only through these two integrated strategies will the EU be able to contribute to the resolution of global problems (e.g. the pandemic or climate change) while at the same time standing firm vis-à-vis autocracies both near (Russia, the Western Balkans, Belarus or Hungary) and far (China).

To this end, the strengthening of the EU's external action and unity of intent is essential. Decades after Kissinger's famous quote on not knowing what number to call when he wanted to speak with Europe, we still do not have a clear answer to this question.

¹³ European Commission, *A New EU-US Agenda for Global Change* (JOIN/2020/22), 2 December 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0022>.

¹⁴ Anthony Dworking, "Built to Order: How Europe Can Rebuild Multilateralism After Covid-19", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, 1 April 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=70167>.

¹⁵ European Commission, *Strengthening the EU's Contribution to Rules-Based Multilateralism* (JOIN/2021/3), 17 February 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021JC0003>.



Single member states are still too strong, while the supranational dimension of the Union succumbs to the intergovernmental one, revealing a major structural weakness of Brussels in its international projection. In this regard, a reform of the consensus-based decision-making process is essential: only through qualified majorities or via differentiated integration will the EU be able to react to crises quickly and effectively.

Defeating Covid-19 through concerted global action

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown once again how integrated global societies are and how difficult it is to sever these links. If the origin of the virus lies in globalisation, it is only through multilateral cooperation that a sustainable solution to the problem can be found. At the same time though, Covid has further weakened multilateralism and the rise of “vaccine nationalism” has been responsible for the increase of global divisions and inequalities.

In addition, the COVAX Alliance failed to vaccinate people in lower-income countries, whereas the World Health Organization has been attacked by many for its initial handling of the crisis and the recommendations it later issued on how to tackle its spread.¹⁶

Paradoxically, while Covid-19 has highlighted the fragility of

multilateralism, it is also a reminder that pandemics respect no borders, and that international coordination has become more necessary than ever. The battle against Covid cannot be won through individual efforts within each state but only through concerted global action.

In light of all this, a strong Europe that speaks with one voice is essential to revive multilateralism and to recover from the most severe crisis that the 21st century has known. To achieve this, the Union should transform the Covid-19 crisis into an opportunity by focussing on a number of essential dimensions. EU's to-do list for the next future includes: overcoming the unanimity rule, promoting differentiated integration, strengthening the enlargement strategy, supporting global fora as means to maximise international influence and encouraging dialogue with the US vis à vis challenges near and far. Only by ticking off these different dimensions will Brussels improve its role internationally and, hopefully, resolve Kissinger's dilemma once and for all.

14 September 2021

¹⁶ Martin Russell, “World Health Organization. Is It Fit for Purpose?”, in *EPRS Briefings*, May 2020, p. 5, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2020\)651910](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2020)651910).

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