The USA-East Asia and the Struggle to Reform World Order: What Role for Europe and the UK After Brexit?

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is threefold: firstly, it provides a stocktake of the current (parlous) state of the decaying, and so-called, liberal world order. Secondly, it identifies the key obstacles inhibiting the prospects for the reform of that order. Both decay and the obstacles to reform are exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Especially, it looks at the equally parlous relationship between the USA and China, as it has unwound in recent years and asks how the future development of the US-China relationship will determine the reform of world order over the next five to ten years. Again, a question profoundly influenced by Covid-19. Thirdly, the paper asks what role the EU\(^1\) might play in the debate over, and practice of, the reform of world order after Brexit. Before developing the substance of the paper, let me set out in point form the paper’s conclusions.

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M. Reilly and C.-Y. Lee (eds.), A New Beginning or More of the Same?, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-9841-8_2
(i) The future of world order is fraught. The American-led world order is over. The successful development of a new world order that is at the cooperative and consensual end of the cooperation-conflict spectrum will be determined by a number of factors in what I shall describe and explain as the growing conflict, between states and civilisation states in general and the USA and China in particular.

(ii) There will, of course, be important players other than the USA and China in this process of reform: notably Russia, India, some BRICs and—depending on how it responds to its self-proclaimed “existential crisis”2 under the 2020 Commission of Ursula Von der Leyen—the EU.

(iii) Brexit, as a reflection of the populist-nationalist zeitgeist, is a symptom of the dilemmas of modern world order but it is not a determinant factor. The role of the UK as a major international player, now out of the EU, will become increasingly irrelevant. For sure, its international role will remain secured by its formal presence as a member of the Security Council, the G7 and G20 and other ancillary international institutions, but its ability and influence to impact the debate over world order will be diminished.

So, UK plays little role in this essay except to the extent that it has implications for the EU’s behaviour. By way of caveat, this essay acknowledges that not everyone shares my working assumption that Brexit does not presage a new age of UK influence in international relations rather than seeing it as but a delusional fantasy tied to the psychological legacy of empire: what Bernard Henri Levy in his London stage play Last Exit Before Brexit calls not a “national rebirth but a plunge into the void.” And as Phillip Stephens in the Financial Times, perhaps in less polemical terms, describes it, “British exceptionalism has reached the end of the road.”3 But, interestingly and in sharp contrast to my view, yet another prominent French analyst notes, Brexit is not a nativist project rather than a rational exercise rooted in British historical and philosophical traditions and likely to prove a pragmatic success once it extracts itself from the naively utopian club that it is the EU.4 One is tempted to ask, what has Monsieur Roche been smoking? Nothing in the contemporary economic and political order suggests anything other than that the temper of the times
is not propitious for his optimistic reading of the UK’s future as a major international actor.

(iv) We must expect the dialogue over world order to be at best attenuated and at worst non-existent while the world’s major players are still ruled by so-called “strong man leaders” exhibiting narcissistic and authoritarian personalities: notably, Xi Jinping, Putin and Modi; the lesser strongmen of the likes of Orban, Erdogan, Bolsonaro and Duterte; and the “wanna-be” strongmen such as Trump and his junior partner Johnson still (for the time being) constrained by their democratic institutional settings.

(v) The future of world order will exhibit one of at least five alternative trajectories (further precision would not be prudent at this stage):

a. A partially revived semi-liberal, but post-hegemonic, order of the kind envisioned by US and European liberals. This order would keep much of the diplomatic and institutional infrastructure of multilateralism, but with a greater role for other major states. In this order, negotiable reform is possible provided some accommodation can be found for Chinese and the other emerging big power interests. No system is viable if major powers do not feel some ownership of it. This will depend more on US flexibility than Chinese.

b. Not dissimilar to the first scenario is what Amitav Acharya calls a “multiplex” world order in which reform is negotiable but increasingly limited to dialogue between consolidating and manageable regional structures like the trans-Atlantic, East Asia and Eurasian structures. It will be a global order of regions.

Both these first two scenarios will be reliant on the growing hybridity of non-state actors in international relations to substitute for the increasingly limited influence of international institutions. We might call both eventualities “reformist transformations,” which are not as strongly revisionist as trajectories c-e below.

c. An increasingly nationalist, antagonistic, great power contested order with US and China competition at its core (see also Wang in this volume). This scenario can be found in the writings of US realist scholars and analysts. Prospects for negotiated reform in this scenario are equally, if not more so, as limited as the
first two scenarios—especially as long as we are in the era of hyper-realist “strongman” politics.

d. An Asian (China) dominated world order as envisaged most prominently by pundits such as Kishore Mahbubani and Parag Khanna. While economic, political, and social trend data would suggest this is a most likely scenario, a question mark still hangs—and will continue to hang—over the wider attractiveness of the Chinese model for the future of that order. Resistance in Asia to Chinese political influence is much stronger than resistance to China’s growing economic position.

e. New interest in civilisational dialogue suggests that a multi-civilisational world order is not impossible. Not unlike the nationalist model (scenario c), this suggests an irreconcilable ideological standoff and polarisation amongst the major competing “civilisations” with the prospect of negotiated reform highly improbable.

This paper revolves around an implicit, and at times explicit, backdrop of the arguments for and against these competing scenarios of world order. Part 1 provides an aperçu into how we (should) think about world order in the contemporary era. Part 2 takes a more detailed look at the US-China relationship and its implications for world order. Part 3, in keeping with the theme of this volume explicitly at Europe and elements of its relationship with Asia as a factor in the shaping of the post-liberal world order.

**PART I: THREE WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORLD ORDER**

Scholars and practitioners have traditionally used two sets of distinct lenses through which to analyse world order: the *politico strategic* and the *economic*. For too long, these lenses have been used separately. This separation is no longer appropriate. Moreover, we must now also use a third set of lenses, which can be called *cultural and civilisational* (for a full elaboration of this proposition, see my report, *Civilisations, States and World order: Where are we? Where are we heading?*). The increasing recourse to the language of the “civilisational state” by China, India, Russia and Turkey especially—but not exclusively—necessitates the
importance of this third set of lenses. It recognises that the pursuit of three distinct and separate roads to analysis is no longer useful. Thus, what Albert Hirschman calls a necessary exercise in cross-disciplinary “trespassing” becomes crucial. This is, of course, messy, but it reflects the threefold complexity of the modern world order identified below:

(i) The changing nature of the political world order: Put boldly, we have never had a liberal world order. Notwithstanding the use of that nomenclature for over 50 years, we have only ever had a geo-spatially partial and selectively liberal American World Order (AWO) underwritten by an occasionally “self-binding US hegemony.” This AWO is challenged now more than at any time since 1945.

It is not an exaggeration to talk about the end of a US-led liberal order. Challenges to a US-led liberal order are multi-dimensional. In point form only, they are reflected in:

- The emergence of a “populist-nationalist zeitgeist”;  
- The emergence of the new “Great Game” in Asia and Eurasia;  
- The backlash against economic globalisation and international economic openness;  
- US assistance in the challenge to its own order over time through poor domestic and international policy choices. It is worth noting here that the internal US challenge to the liberal order did not begin with Donald Trump. While Trump was an accelerator, he was not the original instigator; he was a symptom, not a cause. A growing US froideur towards a genuine liberal openness had been emerging throughout the administrations of the previous four presidents (Bush Sr., Clinton, Bush Jr., Obama).

(ii) The changing nature of international economic order: The international economic order is in as much trouble as the political order. The changing theoretical context casts massive policy shadows. There are, of course, genuine questions to be raised about the lasting relevance of comparative advantage as a theory of international trade in the contemporary era. To what degree do its principles remain relevant when trade in services (at 70% of world trade) exceeds trade in goods and where ideas and data flow freely, and most recently digital services are provided remotely? Its universal applicability in sectors built on digital
platforms and reliant on cross-border networks for their success is now constrained.\(^\text{15}\)

Comparative advantage as a state-based theory of trade has further suffered from the denationalisation of trade and the de-location (“off-shoring”) of manufacturing from the G7 (from 2/3 to less than 50% of global total) to the fastest-developing countries (notably China) and the development of global value chains.\(^\text{16}\) Data also support the argument that de-globalisation, or certainly the slowing of globalisation, has picked up the pace; the global trade regime has exhibited gradual shrinkage and protectionism since the global financial crisis of 2008.\(^\text{17}\) In this context, four factors are important:

- The political implications of this change in economic theory are politically profound. In an era when trade is principally conducted through complex supply chains, opposition (often rabid and hysterical) to an open, liberal trading regime has become the favourite weapon of populist politicians actively encouraging an era of “new mercantilism.”\(^\text{18}\)
- US international economic policy has undergone a major change in both theory and practice. The theory, discourse and practice of multilateral trade diplomacy have given way to a discourse and practice of securitised, bilateral, transactionalist economic warfare.\(^\text{19}\) This has put major stress on the international economic system. The effects of changes in US policy are not restricted to the US-China relationship alone. Allies and third parties are equally affected.
- The utility of international economic institutions as vehicles for collective action problem solving and dispute resolution, especially but not only the WTO, is increasingly challenged.
- The international financial system is fragile, and the prospects of a currency war between the USA and China are growing.


textbf{(iii) The changing nature of international cultural order:} Contest at the international level has moved beyond geopolitics and geoeconomics and now also reflects a growing contest around issues of a cultural and civilisational nature. This is reflected in a number of factors, five of which should be mentioned here:
• The growing resistance to the assumed universalism of “western values.”
• The re-assertion of the historical traditions of the great civilisations, notably China and India but also Turkey and others.
• Renewed talk of the prospects of a “clash of civilisations” of the kind initially envisaged by Samuel Huntington\textsuperscript{20} and increasingly underwritten by seemingly politically irreconcilable narratives emanating not only from the historical civilisation states such as India and China but even the USA.
• The USA is not immune from this trend. Its position is captured in the words of Donald Trump: “The West will never be broken. Our values will prevail. Our people will thrive. And our civilisation will triumph\textsuperscript{21}” and Kiron Skinner, a former Assistant Secretary of State, who saw the Cold War with Russia as “a fight within the Western family” while China, by contrast, was the “first great power competitor that is not Caucasian.”\textsuperscript{22}
• The rise of “quantum politics\textsuperscript{23}” in which digital communication, social media and atomised, individualist online activity (inevitably aggressive and self-feeding) have revolutionised the nature of politics, both domestically and internationally.\textsuperscript{24}

In sum, the ways of seeing international order are multiple; the major challenges to the future of the international order are equally multiple. The future is not certain. As Robert Kagan pointedly notes, “jungles can grow back.”\textsuperscript{25} Above all, it is the deteriorating relationship between the USA and East Asia in general and the USA and China in particular over the last several years that has provoked the most concern and which will be the major factor shaping the future.

**Part 2: The USA, China and World Order**

It has become clear that the negative US trade imbalance in the US-China relationship is merely a second-order problem that has become the rationale for a much bigger contest for global ascendency. This is a contest to be the global leader in the development of advanced technology, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and indeed ideas. We are witnessing not merely a rhetorical securitisation of US economic policy discourse but a more intense and direct economic and political response to economic globalism in general, and the ascendency of China as a rival global economic and
political power in particular. Geopolitical rivalry now appears to be a more significant driver of international commerce than the principles of trade theory. Section two reflects on these challenges for world order reform.

(i) From Trade War to Strategic Competition: Why was President Trump so convinced the USA could triumph in his contest with China? One answer came via Twitter:

Trade wars are good, and easy to win. Example, when we are down US$100 billion with a certain country and they get cute, don’t trade anymore — we win big. It’s easy.\(^2^6\)

But Trump’s political economy is not good. The US trade deficit with China exists because China exports four times more to the USA than vice versa, while the US deficit on goods trade with China turns into a surplus when services (70% of US GDP) are taken into account.\(^2^7\) And, as economists have pointed out ad nauseam, the US deficit is homegrown mainly on the back of tax cuts, low savings and high spending.\(^2^8\)

Yet it was always a brave assumption that China would converge on a Western model. As a consequence, US strategy has, and is, undergoing change leading us to ask to what extent is a US aggressive nationalist and transactionalist bilateral strategy in the economic domain securing Chinese adjustment as opposed to simply fuelling a growing ill-will and competitiveness between the two powers with all the attendant negative consequences for the wider geostrategic relationship? As John Mearsheimer in a classical realist argument has asserted (and it is an assertion, not scientific analysis), China will rise but is unlikely to rise peacefully, and US strategy is now one that goes further than trade.\(^2^9\) It is trying to disrupt China’s rise across the major policy domains of security, economy and technology rather than simply securing a deal that lowers the temperature in the trade domain.

This strategy can now be documented in several official and semi-official venues. In the broadest geostrategic context, the US National Defense Strategy released in January 2018 treats China as a “revisionist power” actively competing against the interests of the USA. The strategy sees an unambiguous “threat… to US security and prosperity… [with]… the potential for these threats to increase in the future.”\(^3^0\) The document, somewhat breathlessly, argues that the USA could lose a future war against Russia or China as it loses its competitive edge and its military advantage erodes, while rivals innovate and blend conventional, cyber
and non-military capabilities in key strategic regions of the world. As one Brookings analyst’s reading of this document suggests: “US military superiority is no longer assured and the implications for American interests and American security are severe.”  

The USA argues that China has made its way to its position as a global superpower at the expense of, and on the back of, the USA. It has mocked US assumptions of the post-Cold War (or more precisely post-Nixon) era that China could and would smoothly integrate into the global economy as a cooperative, rather than competitive, rising power. In so doing, it has come to challenge US prosperity and longer-term security to which the USA must respond. Strategies of engagement pursued by previous administrations (both Bush and Obama) have not seen China become the open political economy that such strategies were expected to lead to after China had been welcomed into the WTO. Previous administrations, as Campbell and Ratner note, had always over-estimated a US ability to steer China in the direction it wanted.  

As it emerged over 2018, the real US targets were not trade imbalances but China’s unique model of capitalism (especially its approach to government support, intellectual property and technology transfer) and its extensive networks of global supply chains. The tariff war is turning out to be but the initial stage in a process in which the USA would like to see a wider decoupling of China from the global economic order. This attempt at decoupling represents a reversal of 40 years of US policy of trying to incorporate China into the global order as a good citizen. But it is a battle that will probably fail given the width, depth and level integration of the global supply chain economy and China’s centrality to it. China, because of its infrastructural and industrial base and the sheer size of its educated workforce, is central to most of the world’s major global manufacturing chains. No other country can match it. 

The specifics of the Chinese economic challenge to the USA are further revealed in other investigations. The USTR identifies the discriminatory elements of the practices central to China’s economic model, especially in technology and intellectual property.  

This investigation identifies the US intent to roll back China’s activities. Specifically, the USA argues, not without foundation, that China’s technology transfer regime exhibits inter alia (i) unfair foreign ownership restrictions; (ii) non-transparent and discriminatory licensing systems and review processes; (iii) restrictions on joint venture partners’ abilities to protect their intellectual property in contrast to the unfair structural support given to the Chinese partners to
acquire the technology. In addition, as part of a strategy for technology transfer, China gives targeted government support for its outward investment regime in key “encouraged” strategic industries (especially IT and AI) and investment acquisitions (manufacturing capacity, power generation, high-speed rail). By contrast, investment by US companies in China, the report argues, is extremely difficult to reciprocate.

Taken together, these activities are argued to have three adverse effects for the USA: (i) they threaten the competitiveness of US industries in strategic sectors; (ii) they undermine US abilities to lead and sustain innovation; and (iii) China also gains from cyber intrusions and theft. As the USTR report says “Chinese state-sponsored cyber operators continue to support Beijing’s strategic development goals, including its S&T advancement, military modernisation, and economic development.”

China, of course, argues that US complaints about its technology transfer are exaggerated. It argues it complies with both the norms and practices of the WTO, especially with regard to intellectual property. With regard to technology transfer, it argues that this is a logical part of a development strategy with a strong historical pedigree in the history of the industrial policies of other now developed countries and simply reflects the strategic interests and relative bargaining power of the counterparties to any deal. The nurturing of new technologies and innovation are central to legitimate development.

Further, the Chinese Government argues its intrusive industrial policy is diminishing over time as it becomes more market-focused (and importantly for our understanding of world order, it sets itself as a champion of multilateral agreements and lowering of trade barriers), and also moves to open up the Chinese economy to foreign investors. As Xi said at Davos: “As globalisation deepens, the practices of ‘law of the jungle’ and ‘winner-take-all’ are a narrowing road that leads to a dead-end… Inclusion and reciprocity, win-win and mutual benefits is the widening and correct path.” This Chinese rhetoric is not, of course, always matched by its deeds. It has, since the time of its membership, always played fast and loose with the principles of the WTO.

But the game has changed in two fundamental ways in the last two years—(i) the contest has now become a full-blown economic and politico-strategic contest between the two powers and (ii) the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated this contest.
Firstly, the USA now wants more than simply the balanced trade relationship that Trump was demanding at the beginning of his administration. The USA wants key elements of global supply chains reclaimed from China and back in the USA. The USA wants significant changes in Chinese domestic policy, notably a dramatic decline in, if not the end of, domestic subsidies and other protective activities such as patent and technology acquisition from foreign partners in return for contracts. In short, the USA wants an end to China’s Made in China 2025 strategy. The USA also wants to rein in Chinese cyber technology that advances Chinese technological industries at the expense of the USA. Indeed, according to the FBI, Chinese corporate espionage is now a critical national and security threat as Beijing exploits American technology to develop its own economy.  

An aggressive approach towards containing Chinese technological advance is one of the few policy areas that has secured a robust bipartisan consensus in the USA. Indeed, there is evidence that a wider consensus towards an increasingly adversarial approach towards China is gaining considerable support amongst the wider US population too. Even some of Trump’s most high profile and trenchant critics, such as George Soros, worry that he was not focused directly enough and behaving hard enough towards China. In a similar vein, the US Chamber of Commerce and the American Chamber of Commerce in China in their joint Priority Recommendations for US-China Trade Negotiations, see the major concern as not trade imbalances but the systematic violation of intellectual property rights, forced technology transfer and direct state intervention into the economy. The difference between the chambers and the administration is that the chambers, in contrast to the administration, are keen to multilateralise outcomes of the bilateral negotiations. 

Secondly, political differences between the two countries get progressively more fractious as the zero-sum nature of the relationship escalates as they both search for their Covid-19 scapegoat and the ideological high ground. Both the USA and China have suffered blows to their international standing and prestige arising from Covid-19—the USA for its incompetence in handling the virus and China for its widely understood duplicitous cover-up. They have both made and continue to make obvious mistakes. China has practised the sin of overreach and the USA the sin of abdication and under-commitment. The future battle between them
in a post-Covid-19 containment era will be different from those of the pre-Covid-19 contests.

Conflict will be less about traditional sources of conflict in the domains of security and deterrence (although traditional security contests do exist in the Indo-Pacific). Instead, the future contest will be about securing primacy in the principal global systems of exchange: to see who will control the networks, standards and platforms. It is a zero-sum competition in which both are battling to establish suzerainty over global digital, cyber and AI technology, but in which neither is likely to predominate. If the trend continues, and the USA continues to lose international ground, it will lead to a more China-centric world. But China’s path to global supremacy is not without obstacles.

No agreement on the shape of a new world order is likely to come about between the USA and China given the contemporary mood in Washington. For many influential figures in the Trump administration, China is an existential threat to the USA, similar to how Japan was perceived in the 1980s. Combating long-term competition with China (and Russia) by all means short of war was identified as a strategic priority. It was captured in late 2018 in what the media called Vice President Mike Pence’s “Churchillian Iron Curtain speech” to reset the US relationship with China by halting its growing influence over both the international economic and geo-politico-security regimes. The USA might talk of transforming China but what it really means is halting its further rise with attendant implications for globalisation and the current structure of world order.

This contest has been identified as at the heart of an emerging new “Cold War” as these powers battle for control of the new technologies, especially AI and robotisation. If the end of the first Cold War kick-started a surge in global economic integration, the beginning of any new Cold War between the world’s two largest economies could have the reverse effect. It could produce division and fragmentation in, and disrupt the operation of, the global economy. Both the global trade and financial system could unravel. Any ensuing geopolitical tensions would also damage technological innovation as technology transfers and cooperation decline. Talk of a “new Cold War” might be overhyped and not the appropriate historical metaphor. Yet the clash between the world’s two major powers could be even more damaging than the original Cold War. Notwithstanding US-China antagonisms, the two countries are dramatically economically interwoven in a way that the USA and the Soviet
Union never were. As Martin Wolf notes, the USA cannot damage China without damaging itself.\textsuperscript{43}

The preceding discrete discussion of the current US-China standoff is appropriate given its salience as the principal actor in how we might, or might not, reform the world order. It allows us to identify the respective competing visions of world order of the two chief protagonists.

The USA, under the presidency of Donald Trump, was an economically revisionist but politically status quo power. Its economic record on globalisation is mixed: while massive benefits have been secured for and by US cosmopolitan and corporate elites, other sections of the US community have suffered disastrously negative distributional consequences as inequality has grown. This is especially the case in those manufacturing communities that have undergone de-industrialisation. Politically, the USA has not coped well with its declining global status; notwithstanding that much of its difficulty is self-inflicted by bad policy choices and was rapidly exacerbated after the arrival of Donald Trump. Hence, the USA wants a revisionist bilateral, transactional and mercantilist economic world order which puts China back in its place through a process of decoupling. But in the political order, it wants a status quo, which sees it remain as the unchallenged global political leader.

By contrast, China and indeed India are economically status quo powers and politically revisionist powers. Both great powers have benefitted massively from economic globalisation and are, not surprisingly, invested in the reform of globalisation, not its overthrow. They are more wedded to more comprehensive, dare one say multilateral, international economic reform than the USA. But they are keen on the revision of the international political order where they want a greater share in the global decision-making processes than they have had in the past. They want no repeat of past historical humiliations, be it the Opium Wars for China or the legacies of British imperialism in India. They also want recognition of their great historical and civilisational standing as well as their great power status. Any new world order must reflect their interests.

Even if a trade deal with the USA is possible, some Chinese leaders are now asking, “why bother?” And they have grown more aggressive in the Covid-19 era. The depth, breadth and difficulty inherent in the growing US-China conflict do not lend themselves to the prospect of serious dialogue on how to fix the global order. Expectations of Cold War are rising. Some argue both sides are looking for a fight, and Covid-19 has given them one. A significant problem is that policy on the US
side is short-termist. Driven by the recognition that it can do China real economic damage in the short term (1–5 years), the USA under President Trump seemed less concerned with the longer-term implications. The Trump administration made it clear that it had embarked on a more adversarial position towards China. Perhaps it is better, in China’s view, to cut its losses now and get ready for the next Cold War. However, nationalism is not just a factor in Trump’s America. It is also a factor in Xi Jinping’s equation as well. Bolstered by a reading of Chinese history of the last 100 years, Xi is determined to shed any signs of weakness.

**Part 3: Europe in the Reform of World Order and the US-China Relationship: A Role?**

Europe is something of an outlier in the current debate over world order when contrasted with the centrality of the USA, China and to a lesser extent Russia. This is a pity. The EU is an unambiguous supporter of an international order underwritten by liberal principles and multilateralism built upon the practices of collective action problem solving via international institutions. With its lingering love for an idealised multilateral order that never really was, the EU is what I would call a status quo yet reformist (rather than revisionist) power. Yet its effectiveness as a policy actor has been curtailed by its self-acknowledged “existential crisis” of the last five or so years. The five elements to the crisis—the Greek debt crisis; irregular arrivals of migrants and asylum seekers from wars in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq; heightened terrorism in major European cities; Brexit; and the growth of populist-nationalist identitarian politics throughout large parts of Europe that have rocked the European project—are well understood in policy circles. What is less well understood and articulated is the adverse effect that this existential crisis has had on the EU’s ability to play a positive role in the reform and stabilisation of international order.

While the EU should be a major player in any reform process, it currently engages in little more than what we might call the politics of “muddling through” in the face of US policy over which it has little or no impact. The best recent example of EU vulnerability to US pressure is the impotence shown in the face of Trump’s unilateral withdrawal from the Iran agreement and the pressure that the USA has put on the EU to conform to its sanctions policy. This has characterised not only the EU
response to its own crises but also the worsening state of the international order over the last few years.

But while this could be simply read as the first act of a play where the USA tries to force Europe to come into line with its policies towards China and Russia, this is not, in my judgement, likely. There is a sharp divergence of EU thinking with that of the USA on issues of global order and especially relationships with China and Russia. The EU, while cognisant of the downsides of Chinese international policy—especially its penchant for intellectual property theft—is more pragmatic than the USA and strives hard for a strong relationship with East Asia and an accommodation with China as the trans-Atlantic relationship deteriorates. The more Donald Trump saves some of his choicest critiques of trade policy for European allies—even to the extent of describing Europe as “almost as bad as China”—the more nervous the EU becomes. Classic here has been the Trumpian absurdity that European (read German) auto imports represent a threat to American national security, thus offering the opportunity for the USA to respond with tariffs. Increased tariffs in the wake of the adverse October 2019 WTO finding on excessive EU Airbus subsidies can be expected to further exacerbate tensions in the relationship.

Notwithstanding the size and depth of the economic and politico-security partnership and people-to-people links between the USA and Europe, the negative impact of Trump’s rhetoric and practice on US-EU relations, on both sides of the Atlantic, may not abate quickly even after he leaves office. While his anti-China campaign generated a growing bipartisanship on China competition in the USA, his anti-European rhetoric has, conversely, undermined traditional US bipartisanship on Europe. As of late 2018, only 47% of Republicans, as opposed to 78% of Democrats, still favoured the NATO alliance. Similarly, positive European views of the USA are dipping dramatically as the EU finds itself—keeping in mind that Europe does €400 billion trade with China a year—caught in the middle of the US-China standoff.

To be precise, the EU explicitly rejects a Trumpian view of world order, especially his bilateral-cum-transactional hostility to multilateralism. So, the question for this chapter is to ask what role the EU might play in helping reform the international institutional order, and especially help mitigate the standoff between the USA and China? Any answer will be as variegated as multilateralism itself is variegated according to issue area. Multilateral activities in the domains of climate change and sustainable
development—evinced by Paris and the Conference of Parties (COP)—operate differently from in the domains of trade, like the WTO.

The EU knows what it does not like about the current international order, but it lacks a coherent current strategy to secure what it does like. It risks becoming a pawn rather than a player in the new “Great Game,” or as the European Council on Foreign Relations calls it, the “chessboard on which great powers compete.”\textsuperscript{50} The EU does not think like the other geopolitical powers and currently has an underdeveloped voice in the debate over world order. Some analysts have argued that the EU should strive for geopolitical equidistance between the USA and China, a situation in which it develops a strategic autonomy and attempts to reform and secure an international order absent the participation of the two major protagonists.\textsuperscript{51} Indeed, France and Germany, \textit{sans} consultation with its trans-Atlantic ally, have recently launched \textit{The Alliance to Support Multilateralism}.\textsuperscript{52}

Others argue that equidistance is not an option.\textsuperscript{53} Notwithstanding its economic strength, the EU lacks the joined-up clout to contest US, Chinese and even Russian political-strategic power. As \textit{normatively} persuasive as the EU might be—or thinks it might be, noting that it sets considerable store by its normative power\textsuperscript{54}—this on its own would be insufficient to attract adherence to its way of thinking from other states in the system when pitched against US and Chinese political-strategic influence. Moreover, the paucity of the current trans-Atlantic relationship notwithstanding, the ties across that ocean, both political and economic, are still determinant factors in European political security thinking and practice (especially in the absence of a European deterrent force) and European economic well-being absent its own champions in the domains of technology and AI comparable to those of either the USA and China.\textsuperscript{55}

The difficulties of securing joined-up cooperation with the USA in key policy areas should not be under-estimated. The problems stem not from the unwillingness of its allies to cooperate with the USA but from the US insistence on pursuing its own approach and expecting partners simply to fall into line. It is not just on Iran that the USA under Trump warned the EU to bring its policies into line with those of the USA. Trump’s Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned the EU that failure to freeze out Huawei from next stage (5G) telecommunications in Europe would have a negative effect on the trans-Atlantic relationship.

The EU and the other major actor Japan have effectively been given a “take it or leave it” proposition to cooperation by the USA vis a vis China
rather than the opportunity to develop a collective strategy. For example, the putative EU-Japan-US initiative developed by Japan in 2017 to coordinate legal action against China at the WTO on technology transfer was dismissively relegated to second place behind US direct unilateral action against China. While Europe and Japan had worked hard to coordinate their trade strategy, both were concerned not to get caught in the crossfire of an exacerbating, long, wide and deep US-China conflict which has now become about more than just trade imbalances. But in what amounts to a sign of the times, both appear equally as concerned not to alienate China as the USA. A strategy to avoid choosing sides in the face of the US-China conflict should logically see a Europe-wider East Asia partnership—especially with Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asia—continue to grow.

And, on close inspection, the foundations for a common approach by Europe and Asia in support of a sound, rules-based multilateral trade regime exist. It can be found in the surprisingly strong similarities of philosophy and practical policy approaches towards trade regulation found in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) on the one hand and Europe’s recent agreement with Canada (CETA) on the other. Rather than being passive recipients of US bullying, the two regions of the world that represent 31% of global GDP and 40% of global trade could, as Zaki Laidi et al. note, send out an important message in support of multilateral principles.

Perhaps the final factor in an understanding of EU policy towards a wider global cooperative endeavour is its relationship with Russia, along with the degree to which the development of a Eurasian geopolitical sphere will affect its relationship with East Asia in future—whether it is post-Brexit or not is irrelevant. The key issue is whether Russia will act as a buffer or a conduit between Europe and Asia. While it is easy to suggest that the infrastructural development of the BRI across central Asia is clearly facilitative, the politics of the process may be less so. Russia is not an easy issue for Europe. It has been less a beneficiary of economic globalisation and, as a consequence, is less economically and politically invested in international economic and political reform in the way that the EU is.

While clearly a revisionist power in its attitude to the current world order, Russia’s aims are more limited but no less strongly held. Politically, it wants a restoration of prestige lost in the collapse of the Soviet
Union and the expansion of NATO into what it considers its legitimate orbit after the end of the Cold War. It wants to reassert its own sphere of influence. But its internal problems are as great, if not greater than those of Europe. The issue for the future is the degree to which its governing economic and political elite, deeply concerned with system maintenance, are, in the words of Anders Aslund, capable of ensuring the survival of the Russian “kleptocratic state.” Can, in this context, Russia move from being the “spoiler” that invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea to a positive contributor to world order reform? It is powerful enough to cause trouble. But does it (read Putin) have the ability and strategic vision to contribute to world order reform? The answer will turn on (i) how its rapprochement with China proceeds in the geoeconomic and geopolitical space that we now think of as Eurasia, and (ii) how the relationship with the USA develops post-Donald Trump.

Clearly, Russia is becoming more strategic in this space than when it looks westwards and across the Atlantic. The USA by default (or Trumpian design) is making it easier for Russia to play a greater international role and greater China-Russia closeness is clearly developing on the basis of strategic pragmatism, not, as in the past, ideology. The level of economic integration is not, to date, great. But US pressure is proving an important external catalyst for closer economic cooperation between Russia and China. Practically, this cooperation could take place through enhanced cooperation between the Chinese BRI and Russia’s Greater Eurasian Partnership. It is, for example, not impossible that in the longer term, the two powers will move away from the use of the US dollar for their trade transactions. Indeed, initial steps to bypass the US dollar in their trade relationships have been taken with the introduction of a mechanism for mutual settlements envisaged by 2020.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has tried to assess the attitudes and roles of the major players towards the reform of world order. It is not an optimistic paper. What was once known as the global rules-based order might now be better called a “Fight Club.” This reflects a great power rivalry not dissimilar to that of the nineteenth century with all the potential to create a bifurcated global order built on the equally long-standing concept of spheres of influence. But this growing antagonism between the USA and China could offer space for China to lead in the area of international reform. Given that the
USA is increasingly reluctant to invest in the infrastructure of a multilateral world order, and to the extent that China is prepared to make positive and serious gestures—as opposed to its Covid-19 “mask diplomacy”—in the direction of a multilateral order, then there is the opportunity for easy diplomatic wins for it. The USA cannot berate China for playing fast and loose with the rules and norms of the international system at the same time that it is disinvesting from it, especially given the role of the USA in developing and shaping these norms and rules in the first instance.

As former Australian PM Kevin Rudd pointed out, Trump’s tough trade rhetoric bolstered Xi Jinping’s hand at a time of difficulty for the Chinese economy. Moreover, it allowed Xi to make patriotic, nationalist appeals to resist US pressure with the attendant effect of hardening negotiating positions rather than encouraging dialogue. China is increasingly playing to its strengths not only as a super-sized global economic power of 1.4 billion people but also as a civilisational state with an unbroken history and culture of many components, but one dominant (Han) culture.

Moreover, China’s current domestic troubles notwithstanding China will, later if not sooner, replace the markets and suppliers that have been lost in the USA. And it has to do nothing but sit back and watch global trust in the USA among both its economic and political partner, including long-term allies, continue to decline. To the extent that China is seen to stand up to US “bullying,” this enhances its global image. In this context, international relations can go in one of the two directions. But for China to lead, it needs more than just economic success. It must also continue to provide a “story of attraction.” China, says Professor Danny Quah, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, needs a better “soft-power story.” This relates especially to the battle of ideas vis a vis the USA if it is to have a major influence on the reform of the international order.

A positive Chinese input into the constructive reform of the liberal order would enhance its soft power. It is not even beyond imagination to see China support the expansion of some of the liberal elements of the international economic order in the face of US opposition, especially in the trade and investment regimes. On balance, further integration into an expanded and reformed liberal order seems to be China’s currently preferred strategy to that of creating a parallel order with the primary objective of confronting liberal norms with all the aggravation that entails. But the implications of the rise of the civilisational powers for traditional Western liberalism are not trivial. Competition among great powers has
returned. Great power rivalries are unlikely to ameliorate until a new order that reflects all interests emerges.

For the mitigation of great power rivalry to happen, it may well mean liberals need to prioritise lower-order goals such as the preservation of international openness rather than the continued propagation of universal values. The crusade for liberal universalism is seriously curtailed. From a Western perspective (on both sides of the Atlantic), the maintenance of global openness might be a best-case strategy. But the achievement of openness is no simple matter for the USA alone. Fortunately, China has an interest in openness, especially international economic openness. China, along with Russia and India, is also intent on securing a more equal political order. Indeed, the rapprochement between China and Russia is, in part, explained by “the inability to construct an inclusive world order that accommodates all major players after the Cold War.”

If this reading is correct, then to directly address the theme of this volume directly—“Europe and East Asia: new opportunities or more of the same after Brexit”—then prospects for closer cooperation in this reform process between China (and East Asia generally) and Europe should not only be possible; they are also desirable. The determining factor from the European end is not the departure of the Brits. That has been factored into EU foreign policy thinking. The EU has, for the last two years or more, been thinking “beyond Brexit.” For sure, in terms of impact on economic size and military capability, the UK departure will be a considerable loss to the EU. But in terms of solidarity and cohesion among the remaining 27 members and the ability to pursue a joined-up foreign policy, it could prove to be a boon. There will be outliers within the 27, with the prime examples being Hungary and Poland. But they will be easier to manage without the UK’s presence, and the EU is showing a higher resilience than many of its detractors appreciate.

The factor that will cast the major shadow over policy is the ability of the Commission to reset the course of European foreign policy. The EU should be at the centre of a debate over the reform of world order. It should—to the extent that it can do so without being drawn excessively into China’s political orbit—be able to cooperate with it. But should does not always translate into will. Although the High Representative for European Union Affairs, Josep Borrell, is committed to engagement and cooperation towards China, the travel of policy will be determined in Paris and Berlin as much as Brussels.
It is fair to say that the timing overall has not been, and is not, Europe’s best friend. Its new Strategic Vision Statement, rolled out in 2016, could not have come at a less propitious time—at the height of populist fervour, the time of the Brexit referendum and on the dawn of Donald Trump’s presidential electoral success. This was unfortunate, to say the least. But the EU cannot now simply jettison the strategy and start again. And nor should it. There is much in the strategy that is sensible and worthy. But Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen and Borrell are trying to have it both ways by pursuing a contradictory set of actions: voicing a more forward-leaning strategy for a “Geopolitical Commission” in keeping with fundamental geopolitical trends in international relations, while at the same time continuing to espouse its multilateral discourse.70

In the context of these new dynamics, propelled by the vagaries of Trumpian logic (sic) the EU-East Asia relationship cannot be separated from the trans-Atlantic relationship. Assuming residual vestiges of trans-Atlantic mutual regard remain, the EU must use its good offices to work with the incoming administration of President Biden to mitigate the changes in US thinking and practice towards East Asia under President Trump. To be precise, the state of the trans-Atlantic relationship has a direct bearing on European relationships with East Asia. The imperatives for enhanced EU cooperation with East Asia, if any are needed, grow as those across the trans-Atlantic deteriorate. But the EU-East Asia relationships are impacted by the poor state of affairs in the relationship between the USA and East Asia. This was especially the case when the USA had a president so easy to take offence at the behaviour of allies if he felt that their policy ran counter to his own, invariably quixotic, approach. Nowhere was this more so the case, with the exception of Iran, than with China where allies such as Japan, South Korea and the EU were not expected to contribute to collective policymaking but to simply “fall in line” with the US approach to policy.

Preserving, let alone enhancing, the EU relationship with East Asia in the era of Donald Trump required deft, indeed at times impossible, diplomacy. How the High Representative and indeed the Commission in general (especially Trade and Competition Policy) will fare in this task with the Biden administration is yet to be determined. More important still is how the EU generally deals with the wider structural changes besetting the reform of world order at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Great Britain, in or out of the EU, has no bearing
on the six major obstacles to world order reform discussed in the paper and captured in point form below:

- The negative impact of the rise of “quantum politics” and the changing nature of political dialogue the world over.
- The rise of the civilisational state and the negative impact of enhanced civilisational and cultural difference that is enhancing conflict and coercion at the expense of consensus and cooperation.
- The weakening and growing strain on the venues and agents of dialogue. Specifically, we are seeing a decline in diplomacy in its traditional role as both an institution and a set of practices and a decline in multilateral institutions as venues for diplomacy and collective decision making.\(^\text{71}\)
- Growing disillusionment with (liberal) democracy as an instrument of “voice.”
- The role in international politics of “strong man” leaders of major powers, practising a leadership characterised by narcissistic and authoritarian personality traits.
- The under-representation of women in leadership roles. A dialogue excluding more than 50% of the world’s population is inevitably destined to be limited and lacking legitimacy. And here the European Union is something of a beacon light in otherwise bleak terrain.

Creating a meta-narrative of culture and civilisation required for world order reform, despite being several millennia in the making, has not and will not come about overnight. As one observer has noted,

Moral narratives have enabled humanity to extend their cooperative units from the family to the tribe to the village to the city-state and from there to empires and nations. We now require narratives that enable us to extend our social and political boundaries to address the global problems arising from our global economy.\(^\text{72}\)

Our genetic and cultural evolution has not yet extended to cooperation to reform global order. It has to be the next step. But the paradox of organisation and atomisation fuelled by “quantum politics” and social media far outweighs humanity’s capacity for cooperation, let alone its ability to build a global civilisational dialogue. The possible rise of Huntingtonian “clashism”\(^\text{73}\) and irreconcilable civilisational narratives—the
third way of looking at global order identified in this paper—perhaps as much if not more so, than geopolitical and geoeconomic conflict, is emerging as the major problem facing global order. We need an as yet unsecured system of cross-cultural discursive and negotiating practices that operate across multiple levels if we are to progress the debate over the reform of world order.

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