

# Where stands Europe in a changing world?

An open letter to Mark Leonard

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Where stands Europe in a changing world?

Europe faces fundamental geopolitical changes caused by a decline in US global power, the rise of China and Asia, a re-assertive Russia, the emergence of multiple regional powers and the many intra-state armed conflicts in its neighborhood. To this come the effects of continued population increases, especially in Africa and the Middle East, scarce resources, global warming, pandemics, mass migration, to name only a few. Where stands Europe in all of this?

Mark Leonard, the founder, and co-chair of the European Council on Foreign Relations and one of the most influential political analysts in Europe, in a recent paper, suggests that Europe must find its place in what he considers to be a world of great-power confrontations. He argues that the West must unite against advancing authoritarianism and asks: “Could China become the new glue for a transatlantic alliance that has been drifting apart?” Sadly, such Cold War-like rhetoric has become mainstream among many Western political analysts. The most worrying aspect of this is that it provides the justification for a dangerous new global arms race. Yet, new weapon systems will not bring security; they can only destroy but not build anything new, least peace.

In the attached letter to Leonard, Schulenburg tries to counter some of his main arguments and argues to replace Western fixation with great-power confrontations with more peaceful international cooperation across countries with different political systems that are based on the UN Charter and its principles. Europe must not fall into a new Cold War trap and instead help to build bridges.

Schulenburg’s letter was written before the storming of the US Congress and President Biden’s Inauguration speech. However, we have left his letter as it was, in part because these recent events only seem to confirm Schulenburg’s main argument that not great-power confrontations, but intra-state conflicts are today’s foremost security challenges.

Schulenburg holds Mark Leonard in high regard and his open letter is meant as a contribution to a much needed public debate about the future role of Europe in the world.

# Open letter to Mark Leonard

Dear Mark,

Thank you for sharing your policy paper, [Geopolitical Europe in Times of Covid-19](#). With the turmoil of the US elections now mostly over and President-elect Biden to take office soon, it is indeed time to take a fresh look at Europe's position in a changing world. However, as interesting as I find your analysis, I see the world quite differently.

## Europe must build bridges, not dig trenches

We probably agree about the need to defend our liberal democracy, to further European integration, and to maintain a special relationship with the United States. We may also agree that Europe must become more autonomous in pursuing its interests and in developing its own responses to its security challenges. However, I cannot agree with your assessment that international relations are held captive by great-power rivalries and that we are back in a bipolar world in which fair-minded democracies face off against malevolent authoritarian regimes. For the same reason, I cannot agree that Europe's options are defined by a great-power game between the US and China. Political developments are too complex, and the world has become economically and socially too interconnected, to base Europe's future strategy on a view that seems reminiscent of Cold War thinking.

Russia, whose military expenditures are only about 6% of those of NATO, can hardly be the military threat we like to allege. On the other hand, China's technological and economic challenges are real. However, confronting these challenges with a Cold War toolkit of ideologically and militarily dominated approaches is a mistake. We would risk deepening global political hostilities, suffocating economic development, and entering an arms race – all without any guarantee of winning. Worse, this would sap resources and energies needed to solve the world's real burning problems that are also affecting Europe's security.

Europe must not take this path of confrontation. Despite all the existing disputes among great and small powers, political and economic differences worldwide are much smaller today than at any time since the end of World War II. If we drop our increasingly unrealistic claim for ideological, economic, and military superiority, it should be possible to agree on common rules for an international political and economic order that would ensure global peace in the 21st century. Europe must be the driving force for greater international cooperation [built on the UN Charter](#), in which UN members, irrespective of their political system or size, vowed to reject the use of military force, replace confrontations with cooperation, and uphold human rights.

## Great-power rivalries or intra-state conflicts?

The dominant security challenges of our times maybe not great-power rivalries but intra-state, and in the case of Europe, intra-union, conflicts. Internal conflicts are driven by population increases, economic inequalities, scarce natural resources, the adverse effects of climate change, pandemics, and the failure of states to find solutions.

The US is more divided than ever, with divisions along not only political and social but also ethnic, religious, and geographic lines. Trust in US democratic institutions is eroding, and violence never seems far away. Every year, as many people are killed in the US by firearms as during the entire six years of the Ukraine conflict. These worrying developments are driven by internal factors and not by any great-power competition.

The EU is also gripped by internal divisions. Its second-largest economy, the UK, just left the EU on unfriendly terms, and Turkey, a candidate for EU membership, is pursuing vastly different regional policies. Anti-EU parties and EU skepticism remain strong. The funding and implementation of the European Recovery Plan have the potential for conflicts among the EU's rich and poor members. Moreover, the idea of penalizing member states for not falling in line touches the most sensitive problem of EU integration: the relations between an increasingly powerful EU Commission with limited democratic credentials, and member state governments, which are democratically elected.

China's 'One-China' policies and its attitudes towards Hong Kong, the Uighurs, Tibet, and even Taiwan are motivated by worries that internal division, rather than an outside military attack, could threaten its national unity. Similarly, Russia's policies may be spurred by fears of how developments inside and outside its borders could threaten the integrity of what is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country spread over vast territories. The situation in the rest of the world is not much different. States everywhere are threatened from within their own countries, rather than by hostile neighbors.



Nowadays, virtually all violent conflicts in the world are between the armed forces of states and politically and/or criminally motivated armed non-state actors. We rather entered an [era of armed non-state actors](#) than of [great power rivalries](#). It was the 9/11 attack on the US by al-Qaida, an armed non-state actor, that drew the Western military into many intra-state conflicts involving armed non-state actors. Despite all our military superiority, we could not win, leaving mostly chaos and anarchy behind. Armed non-state actors and not any great power may pose our prime future security challenges.

## Europe or Asia-centred great-power rivalries?

You argue that a geopolitical shift in great-power rivalries from a US-Soviet to a US-China confrontation is weakening Europe's position, as it is no longer at the center of great-power attention. This sounds as if Europe's security would be better served if it were in the line of fire between the two superpowers.

Europe's concern must be to avoid being side-lined by China and, more broadly, Asia that is becoming the world's new economic powerhouse. According to Standard Charter predictions, by 2030, China's GDP will be double, and India's GDP one-third larger than, that of the US. Other Asian countries with large populations, such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Vietnam, are catching up. In global economic rankings, the US will drop to third place and Germany to 10<sup>th</sup> place. No other European country will make it into the top 10 economies. We may question such calculations but can hardly dispute that they reflect an irreversible trend.

The recently signed Asian trade agreement (RCEP), which includes China, all 10 ASEAN countries, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Singapore, creates a trading bloc that unites one-third of the world's economy, including countries with the highest economic growth rates. Europe should welcome this, as it creates a huge area of political stability and economic opportunities. It may not be such a bad idea for Europe to join China's Silk Road project. We may, at least, be able to influence and benefit from Asia's rise.

While you reflect on how we should position ourselves between the US and China, Europe's real strategic challenges are much closer to home. Central Asia, Africa, and the Islamic world, not China, are our immediate neighbors. Europe, not the US, inherits the instability we helped create in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, the Balkans, Ukraine, Georgia, and the Sahel.

A Europe that must deal with these external security challenges, while still having to overcome internal divisions, cannot afford escalating hostilities towards Russia and China.

## Rules-based or power-based international order?

You claim that a shift from a Europe-preferred rule-based to a US-driven power-based global order would leave a militarily weaker Europe exposed. I cannot see this. Ever since the end of the Cold War, the West's relations with the world have rested on the projection of military and economic power. In the 30 short years since the end of the Cold War, the West has conducted seven major military interventions and several smaller military support operations as well as armed and funded opposition and militia groups around the world. Although the US-led, most European countries participated.

If anything, we are moving away from a Western-dominated, power-based global order. Its costs and our failure of winning these armed conflicts, and not any pressure from Russia or China, triggered the US decision to withdraw from its military interventions. Europe may have little choice but to follow.

You lament the decline of an international rules-based order. However, what rules do you mean? In the post-Cold War years, the rules were exclusively ours. We decided unilaterally when to intervene militarily. We reintroduced the concept of pre-emptive wars. We bombed cities and civilian targets. We conducted targeted killings. We financed regime-change activities. We armed unsavory militia groups. We flouted human rights. We denied prisoners any legal rights. We imposed sanctions that were harmful to local populations. How can we blame other countries for doing things that we ourselves do, often on a larger scale?

Even if we are convinced that our political system is superior, shouldn't we begin playing by the same rule book? In this context, you never mention the UN, its Charter, or its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Though weakened, they remain the pillars of an international order, agreed to by 193 states.

## Cold War rhetoric or a WWI fate

You present confrontations with Russia and China as a conflict between two incompatible political systems, in which authoritarianism replaces communism as a threat to us. This is Cold War rhetoric. It does not reflect today’s geopolitical reality. We rather live in a multipolar world in which a wide range of political systems have emerged that are rooted in the histories and cultures of the respective countries. We may not like some of them, but to stigmatize them collectively as authoritarian and anti-Western is farfetched.

If anything, similarities exist in the situation that led us to WWI in 1914. Back then, our European ancestors thought too that they were caught in a great-power competition. Then, as now, this led to a media frenzy of stories about the evil nature of enemy countries and the wickedness of their leaders. In Germany, for example, France was the *Erbfeind*, an inherited blood enemy, and Russia compared to Mongol hordes who only killed, raped, and plundered. Questioning such allegations was tantamount to treason. It is shocking that in each of the belligerent countries, most of the intellectual elites, including many on the left, joint such hostile rhetoric. Can we observe something similar today?

Then, as now, talk of great-power rivalries was accompanied by huge military build-ups and unprecedented advances in military technologies. Today’s military expenditures are the highest since the end of the Cold War, and all indications are that we are on the verge of a new arms race. What did the European powers want to achieve with such belligerent postures back in 1914, and what do we want to achieve now? In 1914, they did not know, and – I guess – we do not know today either.

When two chance shots from a primitive handgun killed the Austrian Archduke in the remote city of Sarajevo in the summer of 1914, it took just one month to set ablaze first in Europe and then the world. Caught in their own propaganda and compelled by military logic, European powers sleepwalked, to borrow Christopher Clark’s metaphor, into World War I. Are we sleepwalking into a militarized conflict again, only today with worse consequences?

## Digging trenches or building bridges

Europe must not get dragged into another great-power game and instead avoid repeating the mistakes of the 20<sup>th</sup> in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For our own good, we must develop a greater understanding of countries such as Russia, China, and the likes, and begin to critically review how we contributed to international tensions. We are very much part of the problems and those we see as adversaries must be part of solutions.

It was the UN Charter that ended the two World Wars that begun in Europe. Thus, Europe should have a special responsibility in upholding the values and norms set by the Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This, and not any ideological and military bravado, would make Europe many friends around the world.

Mark, let us build bridges and not fall back into digging trenches.

Warm regards,  
Michael

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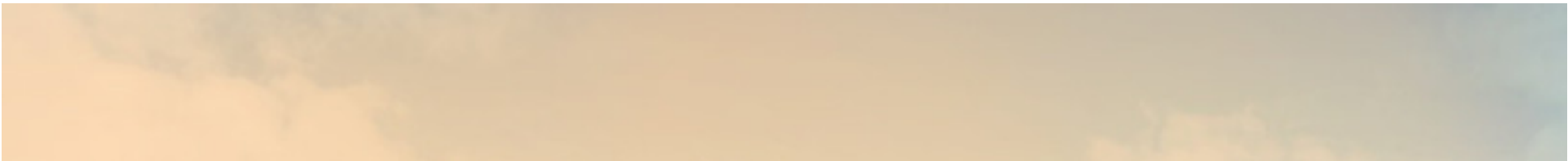
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### Michael von der Schulenburg

Michael von der Schulenburg, former UN Assistant Secretary-General, escaped East Germany in 1969, studied in Berlin, London and Paris and worked for over 34 years for the United Nations, and shortly the OSCE, in many countries in war or internal armed conflicts often involving fragile governments and armed non-state actors. These included long-term assignments in Haiti, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Sierra Leone and shorter assignments in Syria, the Balkan, Somalia, the Balkan, the Sahel, and Central Asia. In 2017, he published the book ‘On Building Peace – rescuing the Nation-State and saving the United Nations’, AUP.

Author profile















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