



Brexit, Trump and Europe's Geopolitical Awakening **A Lecture by Prof. Luuk van Middelaar** **25 August 2017**

Prof. Luuk van Middelaar, Professor at the Europa Institute of Leiden University and formerly policy adviser and speech writer for the first President of the European Council, Herman van Rompuy, opened his public lecture on “Brexit, Trump and Europe's Geopolitical Awakening” by explaining why Europe is now geopolitically relevant despite the often heard edict of “Europe as an economic giant but a geopolitical dwarf”.

He went on to elaborate on the undisputable facts of the EU's economic power - being the world's biggest consumer market, the main source of Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs), also in the Asian region and a standard setter for products in the world; and a degree of truth with regards to the EU being a geopolitical “dwarf” because of its own self-image as a normative power that eschews geopolitical power balancing. However, with the retreat of the US as the global champion of the free world, and under pressure from authoritarian leaders like Putin and Erdogan in its own neighbourhood, the EU has come to realise the need to step up in the geopolitical game to defend the multilateral liberal order.

According to Prof. Middelaar, Brexit in June 2016 and the election of Trump in November 2016 have been a dual shock for the EU. The first one Prof. Middelaar called the “Brexit and Trump moment”, was seen as a populist revolt on both sides of the Atlantic, with voters rejecting globalisation, immigration and open markets. The second shock came from the “Trump-NATO moment”, when Trump questioned the relevance of NATO, sending a geopolitical wake-up call to Europe.

Prof. Middelaar brought in the “domino theory” to describe the fears of disintegration brought about by Brexit. The “domino theory” which was used to describe the fear that Southeast Asian countries would fall one after another into the hands of communists. There was fear that Brexit would lead to one EU member state after the other leaving the EU. The French election in spring 2017 was a cliff-hanger for Europe, which showed again – in the first election round - that the electorate was divided. Fortunately, Macron – a pro-European – won the elections, providing a moment of relief all over Europe. This put paid to the danger of the “domino theory”, and the belief that the populist storm has been put to rest. However, Prof. Middelaar had a word of caution that while the storm has subsided for now it may re-emerge in the future, if fundamental worries of the voters concerning migration and globalisation are not addressed.

With the election of Trump and his “America First” approach, it has become obvious that Europe can no longer rely on the US for its security. He concluded that if geopolitical challenges are not dealt with convincingly, that the populists will smell blood and return. The EU thus has to change its game and the EU needs to step up to offer protection in many fields, e.g. trade. This already has an impact on the EU-China relations, with the EU demanding more reciprocity from China when it comes to opening up each other’s markets.

During the second shock over Trump’s questioning of NATO, Europe has come to the realisation that it has “to take its destiny in its own hands” (a quote from German Chancellor Angela Merkel, which has become symbolic of embracing the idea of a multi-polar world). Prof. Middelaar opined that with Trump putting the security guarantees for Europe into question, and the risk that the EU will not be able to provide this protection, other political “entrepreneurs” will offer other means and ways to address this challenge. In order to understand this new challenge, Prof. Middelaar highlighted a few historical events, one being the sovereign state which was invented in Europe after the Thirty Years’ War in the 17th century, and the second one being the two World Wars, to explain why Europe has developed an urge to create a post-nationalist and post-sovereign world, with the French-German reconciliation at its centre, and focusing on delivering economic prosperity to its people (for which the EU received the Nobel Peace Prize five years ago).

However, this promise of a different world from its historical past, which is embodied in the EU and its institutions, also has a downside, namely the hesitation to act - out of post-colonial guilt and fear of doing wrong. Prof. Middelaar further outlined that when he talked of “Europe’s geopolitical awakening”, he actually meant “re-awakening” after being in a geopolitical slumber for 70 years.

A new American-European relationship has to be reconceived after Trump questioned NATO's "one for all and all for one" doctrine, and then pulling the US out of the Paris Climate Agreement. Those events led to Merkel's famous "beer tent speech" and her statement that the times that "we can count on others are over and Europeans must take their destiny in their own hands." This speech led to discussions on both sides of the Atlantic on whether this was the end of the American-led world order and the end of "Pax Americana". According to Prof. Middelaar, Merkel embraced with her speech the multi-polar world order and came to the realisation that if "we want to exist as actors on the world stage we have to act as Europeans" - an idea which France has followed since 1945.

Prof. Middelaar illustrated the geopolitical awakening of the EU by highlighting how the EU dealt with two crises, one being the crisis in the Ukraine and the other the refugee crisis (2015/2016). He concluded that there are real signs that the EU is changing its approach towards the outside world, which he describes as one that is moving away from "politics of rule" to "politics of events", the latter referring to preparedness to deal with the unexpected surprises of history. However, Prof. Middelaar closed his lecture by pointing to some open questions and doubts which remain, for instance, if the voters will support joint European action.

Several interesting questions were raised by the audience. One questioned if the change in EU-US relations is permanent or a temporary blip and that the transatlantic ties would swing back to normal if Trump exit the office early (either through impeachment or resigning). Prof. Middelaar saw Trump as an accelerator of a long term trend which already started a few years ago. For example, on NATO, the US has been asking its allies to spend more for some time now. A new US administration might give hope that the US would return to support the multilateral world order.

On whether the EU can play a stronger role as a security provider in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, Prof. Middelaar said that the EU is still not a big player when it comes to hard power. The main focus of the EU as a security provider is currently on stabilising the situation in Africa to address the migration issue, and in its own neighbourhood when dealing with Russia. For the Asia-Pacific region economic cooperation is more important than hard power.

On the question if the development of a "politics of events" mean that Europe will become more reactive, Prof Middelaar elaborated that the "Old Europe" of building a market which is still very important but it is basically about creating predictability and rule-making. However, this focus on politics of rules-making become weaknesses in situations of immediate crisis, e.g. when dealing with the sovereign debt crisis in Greece when the latter was close to bankruptcy. There were no rules which said what to do in such a case. However, it has become obvious that the EU has only shown

capability to act when it was in “survival mode”, which Prof. Middelaar sees as a “risky strategy”. What needs to be developed in the years ahead is a stronger capacity to also think forward.

Asked if there is a perception within the EU that one of its member states should fill the global leadership role with the gap created by the US retreat, Prof. Middelaar pointed to the difficulties that Germany has, for historic reasons to take on a leadership role, and most recently also from an economic angle because of Germany's role in enforcing austerity measures during the financial crisis resulting in strong anti-German sentiment in the affected countries, such as Greece, Italy and Spain. In Prof. Middelaar's opinion only a combination of countries can fill the leadership vacuum. Hence Germany alone cannot sustain the leadership role. That is why the election of Macron is so important because he wants to establish a strong French-German relationship, which Prof. Middelaar saw as a necessity for the success of a global European leadership.