

# The European Battleground: Geopolitics & the New Nationalism



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International affairs today are strongly influenced by two factors. The first is geopolitical: the economic and strategic relationship between the United States and China is now the most important in the world and increasingly characterised by rivalry rather than cooperation. The second is ideological: in a range of countries we are seeing a backlash against globalization and the rise of a new nationalism: this is, for example, expressed by the administration of US President Donald Trump as putting “America first”. These factors have created heightened risks for Europe as well as other regions.

## Europe/China

Japan was much quicker than Europe to see that the growth of China’s economy was changing the global strategic balance. The strategic “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific region by the administration of former President Barack Obama was one wake-up call. President Trump’s more aggressive approach to China has broad backing in the US. European policymakers may grasp the importance of China intellectually, but on a day-to-day basis they tend to be more preoccupied by their own neighborhood, including Russia and the Middle East.

For many years, they have seen China in commercial terms as a growing market for European firms and a source of infrastructure investment. As part of the Belt and Road Initiative, 16 countries participate in a partnership called “Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries”, and even in the United Kingdom, Chinese companies participate in plans to build new

nuclear power stations. But more recently awareness of security risks has risen in Western Europe: examples are the growing concerns about China’s moves to obtain advanced technology, e.g. by acquiring European high-tech companies, and about the potential security threat from the supply of 5G telecoms equipment by Huawei. The European Union shares many of the concerns expressed by the US about China’s industrial and trade policies. If the US had been looking for allies in its struggle with China, it could have probably have obtained support from the EU, but it was not.

## Russia: China’s Best Friend ...

A different context is provided by the alliance of convenience between China and Russia. For 20 years they have been the leading partners in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its predecessors, and they now engage in bilateral military exercises on land and sea. This has echoes of the Sino-Soviet relationship, but the balance of forces has been reversed. China’s economy is now eight times bigger than Russia’s and growing faster. In 2017 Russia was the top supplier of crude oil to China, and it has dropped its inhibitions about selling its latest military equipment, as shown by the supply of Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets.

But what draws the two countries together is not so much practical considerations of this kind as shared objectives. Both of them see the US as their principal adversary, constraining their own exercise of power and influence. They both aim to weaken Washington’s international alliances and challenge the international order, which was largely created by the US and its allies in the postwar era. Both resist international efforts to promote democracy and human rights. The leaders of both countries see such policies as advantageous in defending their own internal legitimacy and gaining popular support. No wonder Chinese President Xi Jinping has called Russian President Putin his “best, most intimate friend”. If China aspires in the long term to become the dominant force on the Eurasian landmass, then Russia is an essential partner.

## ... But Poses a Strategic Threat to Europe

It is not, however, inevitable that Russia should be drawn so closely into China’s orbit. From a European perspective, it is well understood that Russia is an important neighbor, a major energy supplier and a large potential market for trade and investment.



Photo: <http://kremlin.ru>

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, July 26, 2018

Russia's position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and its influence in international affairs should make it an important strategic partner. From Russia's perspective, Europe can provide much of the investment and technology which is needed to create a modern, industrial economy. There is a strong mutual interest in developing dialogue and cooperation.

The problem is that Putin has made a different choice. There is much debate about the reasons for this; but Russia's behavior in recent years has made it virtually impossible for European nations to have a constructive relationship with it.

One after another, Russia has used their internal divisions to destabilize neighboring countries and to take over part of their territories by force. Ever since the war with Georgia in 2008, it has exerted effective control over two regions of that country, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which it claims are independent states. A similar situation obtains in Moldova. In 2014 Russia responded to unrest in Ukraine by sending troops without official uniforms into Crimea and annexing it. This amounted to the first forcible annexation of European territory, and the first forcible re-drawing of a frontier, since 1945. The vast majority of the international community condemned it, and the EU and US imposed sanctions on Russia, but its illegal occupation of Crimea continues. Russia followed this by intervening with similar methods to support separatist movements in eastern Ukraine, where the war, which has probably claimed over 10,000 lives, continues: a significant part of Ukraine's territory remains outside government control. Although Russia's attention has recently been diverted to its intervention in Syria, its seizure of three Ukrainian naval vessels last November shows that it is keeping up the pressure.

Not surprisingly, this pattern of Russian behavior has caused anxiety that it could be repeated in other neighboring countries with Russian-speaking minorities, including the Baltic States, which are NATO and EU members. Since the Georgian war, Russia has embarked on a sustained program to modernize its forces and improve their capacity for joint operations. This includes annual large-scale exercises on a rotating basis in each of its five Military Districts, plus a series of no-notice "snap" exercises. These can be, and have been, used as a cover for military intervention. In addition, Russia has increased its incursions into the airspace of NATO members. In response, NATO has been improving its own capability for rapid reaction. It has, for example, stationed four allied battle-groups in the Baltic States and Poland on a rotating basis, and increased the size and speed of the NATO Response Force. This is not a return to the dark days of the Cold War since conditions in Europe have changed in numerous ways, but it is striking that, whereas 15 years ago NATO felt confident enough to launch operations outside its Treaty area (e.g. in Afghanistan), its attention is now focused back on the direct threat to its members from a more aggressive Russia.

That threat is not just a conventional military one: it is a form of hybrid warfare, involving the deployment of conventional and irregular forces in conjunction with psychological, political and cyber



*Unidentified soldiers at Perevalne military base in Ukraine in 2014*

assaults. Russian media outlets have become channels not merely for putting forward Russia's point of view but for advancing conspiracy theories and throwing doubt in the public mind about inconvenient facts. This in turn is amplified by Russian activity on social media, which has been shown to be extensive and mainly designed to stir up anger and division in Western societies. Last year, for example, US prosecutors published considerable detail about how the Internet Research Agency, a troll factory in St. Petersburg, used social media to interfere in the 2016 US presidential election.

The Russian government is also widely using its capability for cyber-attacks and doing so in a way which blurs the boundaries between criminal and state activity. A few examples have been publicized. In February 2018, the US and the UK identified Russia as the source of the NotPetya ransomware attack, which originally targeted Ukraine but is estimated to have caused over a billion dollars of damage to companies in Europe, the Americas and Asia. In October, the UK identified Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU, as responsible for a number of other specific hacking and ransomware attacks and listed 12 aliases which it had used. Among its targets were the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA). At the same time, Dutch authorities revealed how they had caught GRU operatives in the act of spying on the OPCW in The Hague and how one of their laptops linked them to a WADA conference in Switzerland. Their interest in WADA derives from the revelation in 2014 that the Russian state had been involved in systematic doping-taking by Russian athletes, and the subsequent investigations.

Their interest in the OPCW had an even more sinister origin – the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the UK in March 2018. The OPCW confirmed that a rare nerve agent of a type called Novichok had been used. Later, a British woman unrelated to the Skripals found the residue of the Novichok poison in a waste bin and was killed by it. All the evidence points to the GRU as having been responsible for this too. The leaders of France, Germany, the US and UK jointly condemned "the first offensive use of a nerve

agent in Europe since the Second World War”, and 30 nations and international organizations together expelled over 150 Russian diplomats in protest. The incident recalled the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006 with a radioactive substance called polonium.

This European experience of Russian behavior may well have lessons for Japan's leaders in their relations with Putin and his government.

### Europe's Ideological Challenge

Meanwhile, within Europe itself, there has been a rapid increase in support for nationalist parties in recent years. In Hungary and Poland such parties form the government; in other countries including Austria, Italy and Slovakia, they are part of a government coalition; and in many others they have increased their share of the votes in elections. The history, policies and leaders of these parties vary, but there are some clear common themes:

- Hostility to the “elites”, who are seen as pursuing their own interests at the expense of ordinary people;
- Support for the nation-state, and hostility to international organizations, including the EU;
- Hostility to immigration and multiculturalism (and in some cases to Islam), which are seen as threatening national identity.

Such parties and such attitudes have existed for many years. What is new is the upsurge in support for them, and there have been many attempts to analyse what lies behind it. I suspect that there are three factors above all.

a) The first is economic. Globalization has benefitted many people around the world, but some in developed countries who lack advanced education and skills feel it has brought rapid change and insecurity but little, if any, improvement in living standards. Their dissatisfaction with their prospects and their sense of having been left behind seem to have come to a head when the financial crisis of 2008, followed by the euro crisis, brought a period of economic stagnation. Strongman leaders offering simple solutions and a return

to some of the certainties of the past appear attractive.

b) The second is cultural. During my lifetime the UK and other European countries have gone through rapid social change. New, more liberal attitudes towards gender, race, religion etc. have become accepted in the media and enshrined in laws, but not everyone is comfortable with these changes, particularly outside the large cities. The nationalist parties claim to be defending traditional values (and in some cases Christian ones), and often win greater support in rural areas and small towns and among older people.

c) Both these strands come together on the issue of immigration, and if there is one thing which has boosted the far right, this is it. The large inflow of immigrants from the Middle East in 2015 was a defining moment. In Germany, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) began as a party opposing government policy on the euro but only really took off when it switched in 2015 to focus more on immigration: it is now the leading opposition party in the Bundestag. The Hungarian government built a fence along its southern border and continues to play on fears of immigration. In Italy, Matteo Salvini, the interior minister, has increased his party's poll ratings through his tough line on immigrants coming by boat across the Mediterranean. And there are plenty of other examples.

### European Integration at Risk?

There is, therefore, a strong challenge to the established political order in Europe, and in some ways that may be no bad thing. There seem to me two aspects, however, which could pose fundamental problems for the EU. The first is the hostility of the nationalists to the EU itself as a supranational organization, and the second is that in some instances they challenge the basic democratic values on which the EU is built.

On the first of these, the evidence so far is reasonably reassuring for the EU. The UK is the only country which is seriously thinking of leaving. Even at the height of the euro crisis Greece decided not to do so. Across Europe there continues to be widespread support in opinion polls for EU membership. In some countries nationalist parties have even decided to tone down their anti-EU rhetoric when it appeared to be a vote-loser. The central European countries which have rejected some EU policies, such as fixed quotas of refugees, derive substantial benefits from the EU single market and its structural funds. The present Italian government which initially talked up its determination to challenge the EU's limits for national budget deficits has in the end compromised.

Moreover, it would be wrong to believe that the nationalist wave will continue unabated. It is in the nature of the democratic process that parties wax and wane, and there appears to be a limit at least in Western Europe to the share of voters who are willing to support the far right. The situation varies considerably from country to country, and by their nature nationalist parties do not naturally cooperate with each other. Although they are expected to increase their number of seats in the European Parliament elections next May, they do not sit as a united bloc but belong to four different groupings. If the key to

*Photo: EPP Summit, Brussels, March 2017*



*Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and German Chancellor Angela Merkel*

their growth has indeed been immigration, mainstream parties are developing new policies in response, and action by key governments has already produced a sharp drop in arrivals on the two main routes into Europe. Indeed the main impact of the nationalists in the long term may turn out to be changes made, for better or worse, to the policies of mainstream conservative parties.

None of this is intended to minimize the importance of this trend. There will be more tough arguments and difficult elections, and further progress in developing EU integration may be slowed down. But the main reason at present for blockages in EU reforms is not so much the rise of the nationalists as more traditional policy disagreements, such as in the eurozone.

In the long term the challenge to fundamental EU values may be more serious. The Hungarian government, for example, has taken a series of measures to limit the independence of the media and the judicial system and to restrict the activities of civil society. A particular target has been the Central European University founded by George Soros, which had to move most of its courses out of Hungary last December. Attacks on Soros have sometimes had anti-Semitic overtones. The Polish government has also carried out a series of judicial “reforms”, which have been criticized for reducing the independence of the judiciary. Such developments challenge the very basis of the EU as an association of democratic countries committed to the rule of law and human rights. Nor are they only an issue in countries with right-wing governments: recent actions by the Romanian authorities to weaken anti-corruption institutions have also caused concern.

Such issues are not easy for the EU to tackle. Under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union a member state can be deprived of its EU voting rights by a unanimous decision of EU leaders if there is a serious and persistent breach of EU values, but the process is lengthy, and Hungary and Poland are likely to defend each other. Moreover, this is a highly political issue, and a punitive approach may only serve to strengthen nationalist feeling. Skilful tactics and strong political will are required, and it may well be hard for the EU to obtain clear-cut results.

### The American Angle

The two issues I have highlighted – the Russian threat and the upsurge of nationalism – converge. Putin likes to claim that he is defending Christian civilization and values, and many (but not all) of Europe’s nationalist leaders have close links with him and oppose the EU’s sanctions on Russia. The risk is therefore that Europe’s response to Russia becomes divided and ineffective.

In such circumstances Europe has often benefitted from a strong lead provided by the US. Moreover, in military terms, although European governments are promising to spend more on defence and there is even talk of a European army, the reality is that NATO depends heavily on American military might. It is therefore a problem that Trump shares almost all the attitudes of the nationalists. He has been highly critical of mainstream European

Photo: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse/42444673425/in/album-72157697284924301/>



US President Donald Trump with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, July 11, 2018

leaders, seems to admire Putin, is a big fan of Brexit and has even sometimes sounded doubtful about NATO. The US Congress has taken a harder line than the president against Russia and in defence of NATO, but perhaps the biggest risk that Europe faces is outside its own control – the unpredictability of the present US administration.

### Brexit: an Error, But Not the End of the UK

In the midst of all this, the British people have decided to leave the EU. I believe that this is a historic mistake. All the factors I identified earlier as being behind the rise of nationalist parties in Europe contributed to it. As I write this, I have no idea on what terms Brexit will happen or even whether there will be a second referendum.

Even so, it is possible to exaggerate the negative impacts. Economically, the British economy (the fifth or sixth largest in the world) will suffer slower growth in the transition to new trading and regulatory arrangements. But UK business has many strengths and it will adapt: the City of London, for example, will continue to be one of the two largest financial centers in the world. A quick look at international comparisons shows that the UK has four of the top 10 universities in the world, the second-highest total of Nobel Prizes, the second-largest exports of services, the third-largest ODA spending and the seventh-highest defense spending. Even outside the EU, it will continue to be an active participant in world affairs, as a permanent member of the Security Council, a leading member of NATO and other international organizations, and one of the larger countries in Europe. Moreover, when the excitement about Brexit has calmed, the UK will still need to cooperate closely with its European neighbors, and they with it. That is an unchanging geopolitical fact.

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