

2021: A geopolitical forecast

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The coronavirus pandemic continues to have a firm grip on large parts of the world – the US and Europe have been hit especially hard – while China crowns itself as a “winner”.



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US President Joe Biden has taken office under rather memorable circumstances and Russia is projecting its “full strength” towards an opposition politician. In the Middle East, an alliance against Iran is being forged. What does all this bode for 2021?

The following geopolitical trends can be discerned:

China seizes the opportunity

2020 was a year of geostrategic “success” in that China was able to bring its own outbreak of the coronavirus quickly under control by way of stringent measures while at the same time gaining ground in the battle for influence against the USA. Hong Kong was put back under political control, the protest movement has been kept in check. Signals aimed at Taiwan to start getting “comfortable” with the idea of reintegration are becoming more and more apparent. At the beginning of the year, Beijing demonstrated military might and resolve by sending military jets into Taiwanese airspace. Taipei’s partners – the USA in particular – have been warned against supporting independence efforts and threatened military consequences. The developments around Taiwan and in the South China Sea are therefore increasingly becoming an expression of growing Chinese self-confidence and belligerence.

Beijing achieved a major foreign policy coup with the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). 15 countries – from Japan, South Korea and Vietnam to Australia and New Zealand – want to reduce tariffs, and in around 10 years’ time, they could account for about 50% of world trade. The signing of the agreement probably marks the beginning of a geo-economic power shift in the Western Pacific and exemplifies the participating countries’ pragmatic way of dealing with the rise of China.

China, the virus’s place of origin and in part responsible for its rapid global spread, has actually seen slight economic growth in 2020, which is likely to increase in 2021. The situation looks much worse in the USA and Europe, where vaccine rollouts are eagerly anticipated in order to get back on track. The highly irritating presidential race in the USA further helped Beijing’s propaganda efforts. They portray the Chinese

system as superior, while democracy is shown to be crisis-prone and incapable of taking decisive action.

With the global distribution of Chinese coronavirus vaccines already underway, China has an exceptional strategic tool at its disposal to help it push the narrative of superiority and moral leadership in a “community of common destiny for mankind”. An excellent distribution network for this is already available in the form of the New Silk Road (BRI), which, for several years now, has also seen the development of a medical component (“Health Silk Road”) and is undoubtedly going to help a lot of countries – but will likely create dependencies at the same time.

The US faces many challenges

The inauguration of the 46th president of the USA, Joe Biden, has brought hope to a lot of people in Europe in particular. But they are likely to be in for a disappointment. “America first” is probably going to remain the national policy maxim for quite some time, albeit articulated in less crass terms. Herculean tasks still remain, however. On the domestic front, tensions between Democrats and Republicans ought to be reduced, the pandemic contained, and the economy reset as quickly as possible.

On the foreign policy front, the main task is countering China’s rising influence and regaining international leadership. The return to the Paris Climate Agreement is a first step in this direction.

In international politics, it is probably that Biden will focus most of his attention on developments in the Indo-Pacific. Here, the current situation surrounding Taiwan is a first test. Many US allies in the region – from Japan, South Korea and Vietnam to Australia – will be watching closely to see just how reliable the US really is in the face of Chinese threats. After all, their security and fundamental orientation towards China or the USA are also at stake.

All of this is also relevant to the Middle East, for there, too, a geostrategic realignment is taking place with a critical examination of the US position. The most urgent question here is the attitude towards Iran now that the strategy of “maximum pressure” has failed. A positive start could be seen in the relation-

ship with Russia, Washington being able to quickly agree to an extension of the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty. However, little can be concluded from this for the time being.

Rising tensions in the Middle East

US President Donald Trump was able to score one last foreign policy victory towards the end of 2020 – the rapprochement of the Arab states of Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan and Morocco with Israel. Saudi Arabia is still holding back, but one can assume that the state will come around on the issue as well. The potential of this agreement (dubbed “Abraham Accords”) goes much further than the planned expansions of cultural and economic ties. With this rapprochement, the Arab world is abandoning the security policy dogma that Israel is “enemy number one”. As a result, the hitherto dominant Palestinian question has slipped into the background while the threat posed by Iran has become the new focus of defence-policy efforts.

In that way, the parties basically acknowledged two geostrategic realities: First, that the wars in the region since 2011 have benefited Iran’s efforts to gain influence and second that the USA’s willingness to support a (military) confrontation with Iran has its limits. In view of Israeli and Arab fears that Tehran is continuing its nuclear weapons programme, plans to prevent this are now likely to be rolled out jointly. A successful continuation of the nuclear agreement (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action/JCPOA) of 2015, which was de facto put on ice by the US withdrawal in 2018, is not something that they will want to count on, and Israel was opposed to the agreement since the very beginning. Biden’s decision in early February to end support for Saudi Arabia’s war with Yemen could provide additional reason for scepticism.

Considering the upcoming elections in Iran and the restraint shown by the US, tensions in the region could quickly gain traction, with unforeseeable consequences for security in the region or, for example, for shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. Talks between the US and Iran – in whatever shape or form – will therefore be an essential benchmark for future developments in the region.



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A screen display showing „early discovery, early report, early quarantine, early diagnosis, early treatment” during the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak in Hefei, Anhui, China.

What does this mean for Europe?

The transition of power in the US may raise hopes for the return of the “good old days” and for an improvement in transatlantic relations. But the fight against the pandemic has clearly shown that especially in times of crisis politics is led by interests and not sympathies. The US President’s initial commitments to NATO should not obscure the fact that only limited US resources and political attention are going to be allocated to Europe.

It will therefore not be enough to count on the return of the US as a strong partner. US President Biden will have his hands full dealing with domestic challenges and shaping the future relationship with China as a new global competitor.

Europe must therefore focus on its own role and capabilities in order to be perceived as an independent player on the international stage. This may become especially necessary in efforts to reach a nuclear agreement with Iran, deal with authoritarian powers such as Russia or Turkey and work out global challenges such as climate change, migration or the use of outer space.

PHOTOS: ZHOU GUANHUA, BEGETEELT