



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

China, Europe, and the US: Are Changes Coming to the World Order?

by Roie Yellinek

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 496, June 13, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The German Chancellor's daily routine has been attracting wide attention of late. Angela Merkel met recently with US President Donald Trump, followed by meetings with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang. Merkel expressed some of her colleagues' thoughts after meeting Trump by saying, "Europe can no longer completely rely on its longstanding US alliance." The timing of the Chinese visit, shortly after Trump's visit, was not coincidental. China has a vision of joining forces with Europe to counterbalance the US, and President Trump's reception in Europe made this vision more plausible.

US President Donald Trump's visit to EU headquarters in Brussels on May 24-25, 2017 caused major discomfort among members of the Union. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the strongest leader in the EU, spoke for several of her colleagues when she said, "Europe can no longer completely rely on its longstanding US alliance."

Merkel's words caused a firestorm. Until recently, the strength of the transatlantic alliance had been largely taken for granted. Trump's declaration that the US will not endorse the Paris climate treaty, signed in 2015, unless changes are made further destabilized US relations with Europe.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Germany a few days after Trump's departure. (Modi's visit was planned prior to Trump's, so it should not be viewed as having been coordinated to strengthen Indian relations at the expense of US relations.) Modi and Merkel discussed several geopolitical issues, but their main focus was on economics and cooperation.

The tightening of relations between these two powers makes sense. Economic relations between India, the second-largest country in the world, and Germany, the strongest economy in Europe, are very limited. Both countries could benefit from a stronger relationship. After the visit, Merkel's spokesperson announced that "the Indian prime minister is a partner who can be counted on" – language that might be interpreted as containing a pointed reference to the less satisfactory meeting with Trump.

The Chinese visit, which began the next day and lasted for two days (May 30-31), was one of a series of meetings that have been held annually by the two countries' leaders since 2004. China has vast economic relations with Europe, and with Germany in particular – about a third of EU exports to China come from Germany. It appears that the timing of this visit, shortly after that of Trump, was not coincidental. In the meeting between Li and Merkel, they discussed the crisis in North Korea and the tightening of relations between China and Germany. This seems particularly important to the Chinese side, as both President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li have visited Germany recently.

After his visit to Germany, Li attended the 12th China-Europe business summit, at which he met with President of the European Council Donald Tusk and President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker.

This meeting frenzy might represent a statement of intent regarding possible changes in the alliance structure of China, the US, and Europe.

China hopes to join forces with Europe as a means of counterbalancing the US. The overall reception given to President Trump during his visit, as well as to his decision regarding the Paris Climate Agreement (which he explains was intended to create jobs for Americans), brought this vision closer to fruition. The Chinese leadership, which aspires to show more dominance in the international arena by fighting climate change and air pollution (even though China is surely one of the biggest contributors to such pollution), saw an opportunity to gain international support and influence. Hence the Chinese prime minister's visit to Germany to discuss tightening relations.

The main ways China can strengthen relations with Europe while indirectly weakening the old transatlantic alliance are: 1) ratification of the international climate agreement by China's leaders; and 2) wide-ranging trade agreements and the Chinese Belt & Road initiative.

The Middle Eastern countries that geographically connect China and Europe must consider the consequences of these changes on their status in the new world order. It is very possible that this geographic connection can boost the region's importance. The Belt & Road initiative, which will pass through the

area, will contribute to the interests of the countries along the route as well as to those of China.

But will this be translated into a continued Chinese presence, or into intervention in local conflicts? It is hard, at this point, to imagine the Chinese taking action (rather than simply making declarations) outside eastern Asia. Moreover, is a breakthrough in the war in Syria possible if China and Europe joined forces?

Europe's position on this is complicated. Its role in the region dates back hundreds of years and cannot be expected to change quickly. The fighting in Syria has foundations in the colonial era and decisions that took place at that time regarding national boundaries. This is not something in which the Chinese will eagerly interfere.

Israel, whose main ally is the country threatened most by enhanced China-Europe relations, must tread lightly. Israel can try to be a mediator of sorts between the three sides. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who recently met with the American and Chinese presidents and who also keeps an open and friendly channel with Germany's chancellor, can position himself at the highest levels of the international political arena. Success at this sort of mediation, or even a good, honest attempt, can improve all three sides' attitudes towards Israel, both today and in the foreseeable future.

Roie Yellinek is a doctoral student in the department of Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family