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# INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

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*Who Will Save the  
Liberal World Order?*



# INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

4 | 2018

## Editorial

Dear Readers,

The liberal world order is in crisis. Signs of internal disintegration combined with new external challenges are creating a maelstrom of conflicting interests that certainly gives grounds for concern. The fact that, now of all times, the United States is increasingly abandoning its role as defender and guarantor of the “Pax Americana” is seriously exacerbating the situation and poses the question: who will save the liberal world order?

In his interjection, Sebastian Enskat points out that the crisis of the liberal world order is a crisis of self-confidence above all else. Despite all our self-criticism, we have to ensure that we do not slide into defeatism. Instead, we need to reflect on our strengths and continue the success story of the last 70 years.

This article is followed by an interview with Olaf Wientzek, who maintains that Europeans need to make a stronger commitment to security policy if this plea is to become reality. Europe must also seek closer alliances with partners such as Japan, Canada or Mexico; countries that share the values espoused by the liberal world.

In this search for global partners, Patrick Rüppel calls on Germany and the European Union to direct their attention to Asia in particular. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) could provide a suitable platform for promoting cooperation on a wide range of policy areas.

China’s activities pose a particular challenge in the area of development and trade in this respect. While the European Union is still developing and improving strategies for contact with Asia, China is presenting a *fait accompli* in the countries of the Indian Ocean and thereby overtaking regional competitors such as India. Europe must not miss its chance for stronger involvement in the Indian Ocean, warns Christoph Hein.

Simon Primus and Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi paint a gratifyingly positive picture of how African citizens are leaning towards liberal democracy. Surveys carried out by the Africa Barometer underpin the authors’ argument that the continent is much more open to democratic values – such as tolerance towards minorities – than is often assumed.

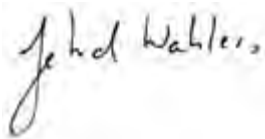
The Arab world, on the other hand, continues to be affected by the ramifications of the “Arab Spring”. Islamist and authoritarian models of government have failed. Thomas Birringer and Thomas Birringer suggest that Europe can and must focus on strengthening liberal forces in the region, not least since developments in our southern neighbourhood have a direct impact on us.

Finally, Stefan Reith turns his attention to Latin America. He appeals to Germany and Europe to incorporate the democracies of the region as equal partners in an alliance of values. Hence, particularly in light of China and Russia’s growing influence in this region, it is important to work with the US, not against it.

The crisis of the liberal world order may be making itself felt all over the world, but the contributors to this issue demonstrate that the underlying processes are by no means irreversible. However, we can only succeed in rescuing the liberal world order if the associated burdens are shared by as many countries as possible.

I wish you a stimulating read.

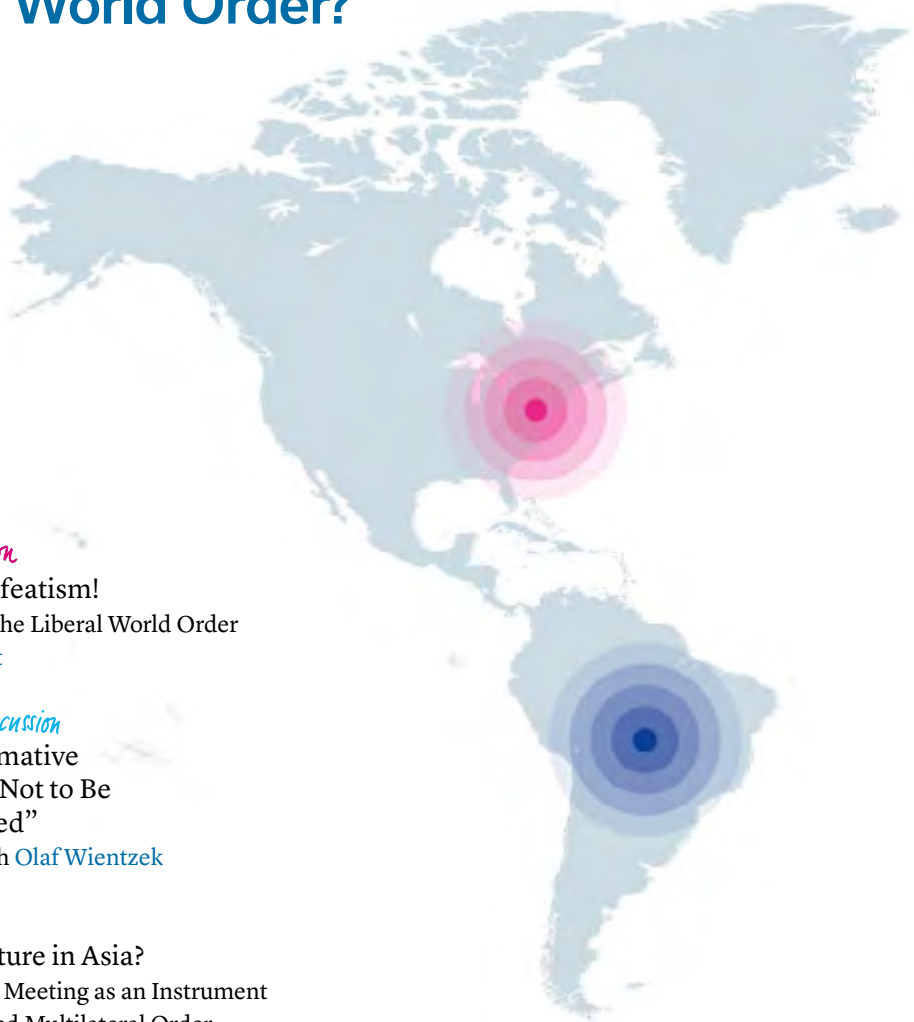
Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gerhard Wahlers". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped 'G' at the beginning.

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**Dr. Gerhard Wahlers** is Editor of International Reports, Deputy Secretary General and Head of the Department European and International Cooperation of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (gerhard.wahlers@kas.de).

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*Interjection*

Who Will Save the Liberal World Order?

# Down with Defeatism!

On the Crisis of the Liberal World Order

Sebastian Enskat



The crisis of the liberal world order is a crisis of self-confidence above all else. Despite all our self-criticism, we must not fall prey to defeatism, but should instead reflect on our own strengths and continue the success story of the last 70 years.

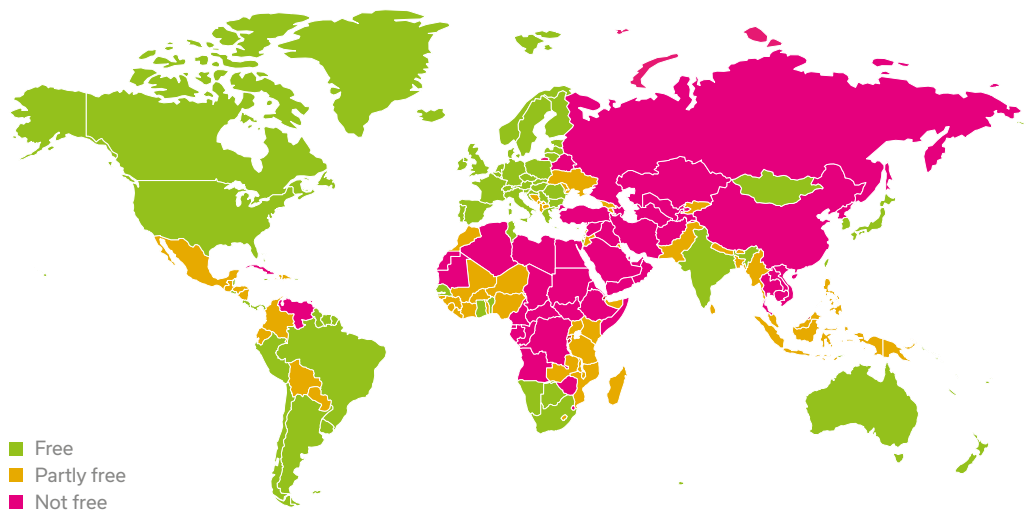
There are perhaps more original ways of starting an article on the crisis of the liberal world order than to quote an author mockingly referred to as “the most-quoted but least-read American intellectual of our time”.<sup>1</sup> We are talking about Francis Fukuyama and his now famous prophecy regarding the “end of history”. Back in 1989, Fukuyama wrote: “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”<sup>2</sup>

The sense of optimism about the future of the liberal world order could hardly be more pronounced than in these words. What is more, it is equally clear that very little remains of this

optimism. It suffices to take a quick glance at the titles of a few of the books that were all published over the past year: “Suicide of the West”, “How Democracies Die”, “Democracy and Its Crisis”, “The Road to Unfreedom”, “Why Liberalism Failed”, “The Retreat of Western Liberalism”. The list seems to be never-ending, and demonstrates how drastically the mood has changed: moving from almost limitless euphoria to an apocalyptic mood, from the end of history to the end of the liberal world order.

Generally speaking, and especially when examining such complex topics, now is not the time to rely solely on moods, and certainly not on a few sensationalist book titles. It is, therefore, worthwhile to take a sober look at what has actually changed in the last 30 years.

**Fig. 1: Freedom and Democracy Worldwide (2018)**



Source: Own illustration based on Freedom House 2018, n. 3.

## Aspect 1: The Crisis in Figures

We know that trying to measure democracy or freedom is no trivial matter, but quite a few institutions are trying to do just that. Foremost among these is *Freedom House*, which has been publishing its *Freedom in the World Ranking* every year since 1973. If we look at the ranking for 2018, it quickly becomes clear that freedom and democracy around the world are not in *such* bad shape. After all, almost half countries are regarded as free, about one third as partially free and “only” one fourth as not free (see fig. 1 and 2).<sup>3</sup>

So why are we all lamenting the decline of the liberal world order? As is so often the case with statistics, so much depends on perspective or, more specifically, the data selected. If we look at the global distribution of freedom broken down by population number rather than by country, the result is somewhat less positive: more than one third of the world’s population is not free, and only approximately the same number of people live in freedom (see fig. 2).<sup>4</sup>

If we only look at the trend over the past twelve years, we are confronted with an even bleaker picture. It then becomes clear that we are experiencing an alarming negative trend, particularly when bearing in mind that Europe and the USA are now also contributing to this trend (see fig. 3).<sup>5</sup>

But the overall picture also requires us to consider the last twelve years in a broader context and, for example, look at the trend over the last 30 years – since the publication of Fukuyama’s “End of History”. Only then does it become apparent that the overall long-term trend is still extremely

positive, even if there has been a slight decline over the last few years (see fig. 4).<sup>6</sup>

In the end, the key question will be whether this decline is in fact a reversal of the trend or whether, in retrospect, the last few years will be seen as merely a slight hiccup in a generally upward trend.

## Aspect 2: Of Threats New and Old

Not just for Fukuyama, but for the majority of people engaged in international politics at the end of the 20th century, the end of the East-West conflict was *the* point of reference in all

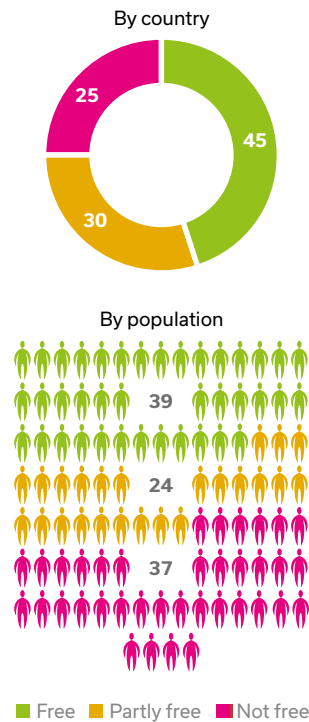
matters revolving around the world order. This remained the case until the second major turning point in recent decades: 9/11.

This said, global terrorism did not appear overnight on 9/11, even though this is the impression that has taken hold in the public consciousness for obvious reasons. However, since September 11, global, almost exclusively Islamist, terrorism has ranked top of the list of threats facing the West<sup>7</sup> – and this sense of threat does not seem entirely unjustified, at least in as much as Islamist terrorism is indeed about attacking the West and what it stands for and, if possible, destroying it.

However, the fact that this is the declared aim and that many people perceive it as a major threat does not mean that global terrorism does

in fact pose an existential threat to the liberal world order. The subjective feeling that terrorist attacks are increasing in the West is belied by the facts – for example, in Western Europe many more people died in terrorist attacks in the 1970s

**Fig. 2: Freedom and Democracy Worldwide 2018 (in Per Cent)**



Source: Own illustration based on Freedom House 2018, n. 3.

and 1980s than have been killed since 9/11.<sup>5</sup> Without trying to make light of the situation, it can be said that when it comes to terrorism the perceived threat is much greater than the actual threat.

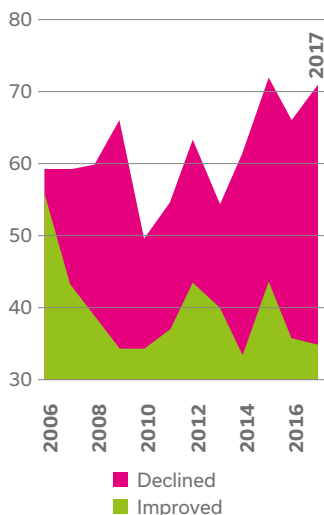
Paradoxically, the exact opposite can be said of a second threat, which should not go unmentioned here – Vladimir Putin’s Russia. While current polls show that an overwhelming majority of Germans (83 per cent) still do not perceive Russia as a threat,<sup>6</sup> there are good reasons to argue that Moscow’s aggressive and destructive foreign policy is doing much more damage to the liberal world order than Al Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State put together.

This is by no means intended to insinuate that a Russian military attack on NATO territory is likely to happen any time soon. Rather, it is merely to point out that conflicts surrounding the world order are not only fought using tanks and fighter jets. They also manifest themselves in the form of “little green men”, proxy wars in the Middle East, destructive action in international forums, cyber-attacks and secret service operations, meddling in elections and all that which was referred to as propaganda in the past, and that today mainly plays out on social media.

The alarming realisation is that our opponents, above all Russia, have become much better at attacking us by non-military means and are therefore meticulously targeting our

**Fig. 3: Twelve Years of Decline**

Number of countries that declined and improved in aggregate score (2006 – 2017)

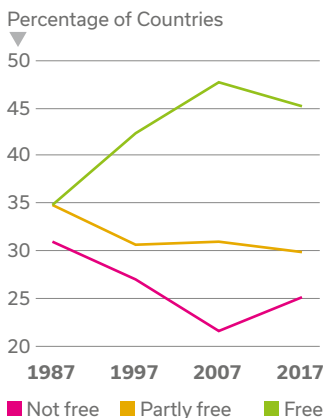


Source: Own illustration based on Freedom House 2018, n. 3.

that has given the West decades of prosperity and peace. Furthermore, looking beyond the West, the situation is often much better than the latest prophets of doom and the widespread sense of defeatism, would have us believe.

**Fig. 4: Freedom in the Balance**

After years of major gains, the share of Free countries has declined over the past decade, while the share of Not Free countries has risen.



Source: Own illustration based on Freedom House 2018, n. 3.

weaknesses. Of course, this does not mean we should helplessly submit to these attacks. But: We need to take the threat they pose very seriously.

### Aspect 3: The Dialectics of Globalisation

Even today, there is no doubt that globalisation, the growing international interdependence of individuals, companies, institutions and societies, is a fundamentally positive development. It also goes without saying that the now approx. 70-year-old project of a liberal world order based on values and principles such as freedom, democracy and the rule of law is a unique success story

In his book *Factfulness*, Swedish health expert Hans Rosling highlights how a change of perspective can help us to view things in a broader, more fact-based context and hence do away with supposed certainties about the state of the world. In the last 20 years alone, the proportion of the world’s population living in extreme poverty has more than halved. The last decades have been the most peaceful in human history. Moreover, even in low-income countries, 60 percent of all girls now have at least a primary education.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, this does not mean that everything is running like



A lost generation? "When surveys show that young people in the West say they do not believe it is essential to live in a democracy, then that is the real problem." [Source: © Simon Dawson, Reuters.](#)

clockwork, and we cannot ignore the many problems that have recently arisen because of the increasing dissolution of boundaries. For example, this includes the fact that not every region of

the world and stratum of society benefits from the achievements of the liberal world order to the same degree (keywords being over-promising and under-delivering). The dissatisfaction



of those “left behind” is becoming increasingly problematic for the entire system. This is taking place from inside, as reflected by the rise of left and right-wing populist movements and

candidates all over the world, and from outside, such as when the wealth gap – exacerbated by the consequences of climate change – contributes to an unprecedented rise in migration.

Another development that also falls under the heading “dialectics of globalisation” is the increasing success of countries that have benefited a lot from globalisation over recent years but that otherwise have little to nothing to do with the values and principles of the liberal world order. Of course, China is first and foremost among these, but it also applies in varying degrees to states such as Singapore, Malaysia, Qatar and Kazakhstan, to name just a few.

The success of such models, often referred to as “authoritarian capitalism”, calls into question the West’s long-held belief that social and political freedoms are indispensable prerequisites for economic success. In contrast, authoritarian systems such as that of China are demonstrating that they can be superior to the liberal democracies of the West in many respects, for example, when it comes to carrying through the digital transformation without fuss and quibbles, or launching mammoth projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

### **Concluding Remarks**

My previous remarks have highlighted the fact that the liberal world order is in crisis in many respects. This is borne out by the statistics, a number of serious threats, and challenges at home and abroad. Nevertheless, the following applies: the crisis of the liberal world order is a crisis of self-confidence above all else. If Fukuyama’s words at the beginning of this article reveal one thing, it is the belief in progress, which has long been part and parcel of the liberal world order project the belief that the the freedom of the individual, the freedom of societies and the freedom of exchange between societies, is ultimately to the benefit of all. Over the past 30 years, this supposedly unshakeable faith has given way to an excessive, exaggerated sense of despondency.

Admittedly, the strong upward trend since the early 1990s has faltered somewhat over recent years, the West is facing some serious threats and major challenges, the liberal world order is anything but perfect, and the euphoria that followed the end of the Cold War was certainly exaggerated in some quarters.

Yet it is an equally excessive reaction to simply fold tent at the first gust of wind, when faced with the first major crisis, and proclaim the end of the liberal world order.

So what should we do instead? Three final points:

1. We should realise that the “struggle” for the liberal world order has only just begun and that we have much to lose and therefore much to defend. When surveys show that young people in the West say they do not believe it is essential to live in a democracy, then *that* is the real problem.<sup>8</sup> When we no longer appreciate the achievements of the last decades, begin to take them for granted or relativise their value, then *that* is the real problem.

Of course, an integral part of liberal societies is to critically question one’s own actions. However, such a self-critical attitude is only meaningful if it arises from a normative, fundamental conviction that is not itself at issue.

2. We should stop focusing on the here and now or the last few years and start taking a longer-term view. Anyone who has ever had dealings with China will know that the Chinese perceive time in a different way. For them, it does not matter what happens in the next two, three or ten years. It is all about what the world will look like in fifty, one hundred or even a thousand years.

Our strategic thinking does not have to be quite so long term, but if we limit ourselves to legislative sessions and annual or semi-annual assessments, this tends to obscure our view of longer-term developments.

3. We should not allow ourselves to be panicked by our own symptoms of crisis or by the success of others. To give just one example: the history of the European Union is in many respects a history of crises that have been overcome, and in retrospect the Cold War period might seem very clearly drawn and stable, but in fact the West was under at least as much pressure as it is today.

As for the success of competing systems, there is no doubt that even authoritarian systems can have economic success in the short and medium term. But it remains to be seen whether these systems are capable of guaranteeing long-term prosperity – the kind of prosperity that leaves no one behind. It is clear that freedom is not a prerequisite for economic development, but there are countless examples that demonstrate how economic development also leads to heightened calls for freedom.

In any case we are, well advised not to fall into defeatism, but instead to reflect on our own strengths and continue the success story of the last 70 years. The end of history may be further away than Fukuyama believed in 1989, but it would be equally premature to proclaim the end of the liberal world order.

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**Sebastian Enskat** is Editor-in-chief of International Reports and Head of the Department Global Order of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

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- 3 Freedom House 2018: Freedom in the World 2018: Key Findings, in <https://bit.ly/2B4wj7t> [11 Dec 2018].
- 4 Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach / glh Centrum für Strategie und Höhere Führung 2018: Sicherheitsreport 2018. Results of a representative survey, in: <http://bit.ly/2SD1Vdq> [11 Dec 2018].
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*Under Discussion*

# “The EU’s Normative Appeal Ought Not to Be Underestimated”

An interview with Olaf Wientzek, European Policy Coordinator at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

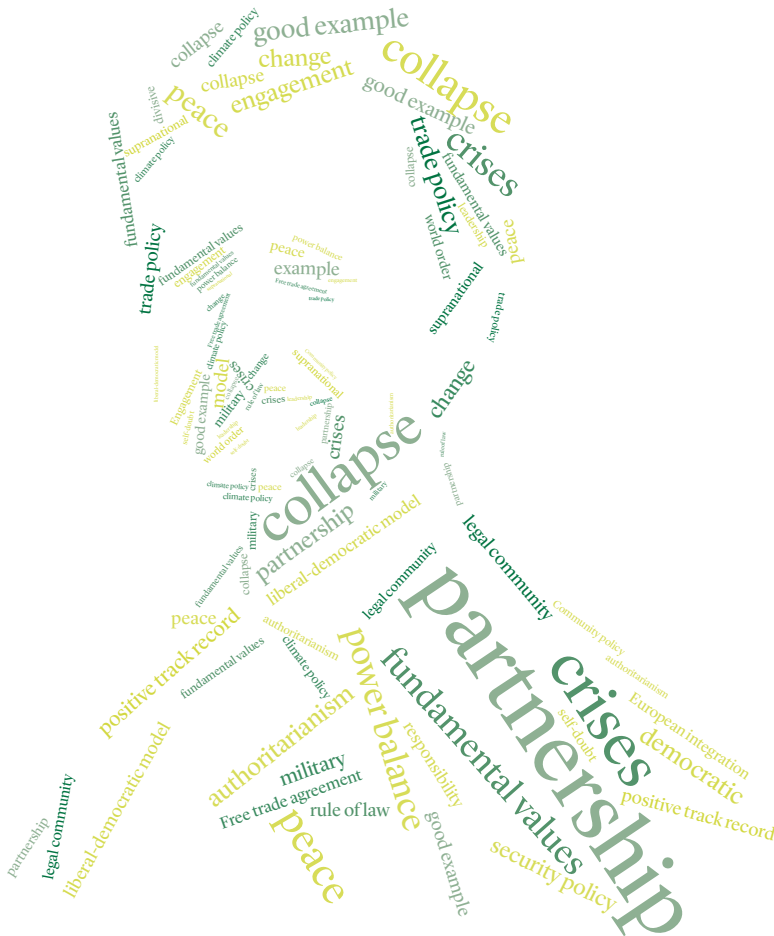


Illustration: © racken.



*Ai: Mr. Wientzek, the US's withdrawal from international agreements, the advance of authoritarian influences, and divisive tendencies within Europe – some see this as the end of the liberal world order. Are their fears justified?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** We are indeed experiencing a gradual change in the balance of international power.

It is possible that we are in a kind of transition period towards a new world order. Regarding the examples you cited, three comments: Firstly, we must distinguish between temporary and structural changes. For instance, US withdrawal from international agreements is not insignificantly related to the current leadership; as such, it is not necessarily a permanent condition. On the other hand, the US demand for stronger security policy commitment on the part of its European allies is well-known, and will likely intensify. Secondly, the resilience of existing structures should not be underestimated. The coming withdrawal of a member state from the EU – namely, the United Kingdom –, has not triggered a domino effect on other member states thus far. If anything, the experience has acted as a deterrent. Since then, the determination to hold the EU together has generally increased among key actors. And thirdly, a change in the existing world order is not to say a collapse of existing structures and alliances. Despite all the crises, the collapse of the EU in the coming years remains an improbable scenario.

*Ai: You mentioned the call for greater European commitment to security policy, which is an important point. Many parties, not just the Americans, accuse the EU of willingly ceding the role of “global policeman” to the US, and thereby having little to offer when it comes to countering the erosion of the liberal fabric. Given its many internal problems, is the EU even capable of filling the gap left by the US's retreat?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** Fully filling that gap, is - at least in the short term - highly difficult. The response must

vary according to the policy area. In the area of trade policy, the EU has performed well ever since the TTIP was put on hold: Free trade agreements have been concluded with Canada and Japan, amongst others, and an agreement with Mexico is close to completion. This area is simpler, however, because EU trade policy is a Community policy - i.e., supranational, and not subject to the principle of unanimity. I am a bit more sceptical regarding security policy: Much has been done in the last two years, but the EU is miles away from “strategic autonomy”. Here, the backlog is still considerable. This issue should therefore be one of the priorities during the next European legislative period. Efforts here are impaired by the intergovernmental nature of EU foreign and security policy, as EU member states must approve decisions unanimously.

*Ai: The disagreement between heads of government is one thing, the unwillingness of the population to support such decisions is another. EU-scepticism has increased significantly across the continent. Isn't that the much bigger problem?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** Framed in such broad terms, I do not see that to be true. On the one hand, in many

(but not all) EU countries, populist and EU-critical forces are gaining in importance. On the other, support for the EU has increased significantly since the Brexit referendum. As recent Eurobarometer surveys have shown, the majority of EU citizens are not opposed to European integration per se, although there are significant differences between countries. What many citizens object to, however, are the priorities the EU has set. The impression is that the EU – which is a well-oiled legislative machine – regulates many details that EU citizens care little about. In areas in which there has been broad support for “more Europe” for years, such as internal and external security, the EU’s offer has been but modest. Both legislative and enforcement powers are lacking. Accordingly, a stronger role for the EU in these issues would be important. However, this cannot be achieved without a further transfer of national sovereignty.

*Ai: Stronger EU commitment requires, as you say, reliable partners in other parts of the world. Who do you consider to be potential partners?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** Even after Brexit, the EU has great interest in maintaining a close partnership with the United Kingdom. And, despite all the current difficulties, the US remains an indispensable partner. Additionally, of course, there are the countries that identify with the value canon of the liberal world, such as Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, and the Mercosur states. The liberal-democratic model, as represented by the EU, will be increasingly challenged by alternative authoritarian models in the future. If we want our values to influence future international norms, we will seek to forge partnerships with those countries sharing not only our interests, but also our values. Such partnerships should be proactively and urgently forged with key sub-Saharan African countries that fulfil these criteria. In addition, depending on the policy field, all countries that support an international rule-based order, international institutions, and multilateral solutions to global challenges should be considered. This would, for instance, include China in the area of climate policy, although I am much more sceptical in some other policy areas. What is important is to support fora – such as the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) – that seek to maintain this order. If we move from the global level to the immediate European neighbourhood, Ukraine and Turkey must certainly be included. Further escalation of the economic or political crises in Turkey would have severe consequences for the EU. A successful political and economic transformation process in Ukraine, on the other hand, could contribute to the stabilisation and development of the EU’s entire eastern neighbourhood.

*Ai: Let’s dwell a little longer on the issue of authoritarianism, which is challenging the EU both from outside, and from within. If I understand you correctly, the current cooperation with authoritarian systems is a pragmatic decision and indispensable in certain policy areas. Nevertheless, the question remains as to how the EU should deal with authoritarian tendencies and regimes if it wishes to succeed in the competition between systems, and thus in the struggle for a liberal world*

*order. A satisfactory answer does not yet seem to have been found, especially since authoritarian tendencies seem to be on the rise even in some member states.*

**Olaf Wientzek:** You mention two different aspects here: The first is dealing with authoritarian external partners; the second is dealing with authoritarian tendencies within the EU. Perhaps we should first concentrate on the external dimension. It is difficult to formulate a universally valid rule here. In some regions, the EU can only choose between competing authoritarian states. In such cases, the balance between interests and values is often invoked, or that between reform and resilience. In the long run, I see no conflict between them. If we consider our immediate neighbours, I believe there will be no long-term stability without the democratic political and economic transformation of these countries. It is therefore in the EU's best interest to give its full support to efforts by Ukraine, Morocco, Georgia, and Tunisia towards economic and political reform. Much more should be done here, especially towards the countries in the EU's southern neighbourhood. I consider the narrative of stability through authoritarianism to be no more than a fairy-tale in the long run. In short, wherever we have a choice, such as in our immediate neighbourhood, we should promote democratic aspirations.

*Ai: From your point of view, what is the best way to achieve this? How can the EU convince its immediate neighbours, when these are faced with difficult circumstances, that democratic reforms are preferable to, for instance, a shift towards authoritarianism?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** Despite legitimate concerns about the spread of autocratic rhetoric, the appeal of the EU should not be underestimated. The EU's positive track record is clear. This is often more clearly recognised from outside the EU than from within it. Merely consider the long period of peace in the countries of the EU. This may be an overused example, but it makes it no less true. The successful political and economic transformation process in the post-Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe as well as in the Baltic States also demonstrates the strength of the European model. Of course there are also defensive reactions and problematic developments in these countries. Nevertheless, democracy in these countries is far more firmly established than in other regions of the world that are undergoing transformation – one has but to look at the post-Soviet space beyond the Baltic States.

We in the EU, and in the Western world generally, have a tendency towards exaggerated self-doubt in the face of serious problems. Ironically, this is even a good sign, since it shows that critical voices are not being silenced. In authoritarian countries, this does not happen, or hardly happens at all. I have doubts as to whether alternative models would be considered this successful. In any case, none of the countries of the Western Balkans or of Eastern Europe has yet voluntarily abandoned their European ambitions in order to instead join other trade blocs, such as the Eurasian Economic Union. Even Belarus and Armenia – which had to take this step under enormous political pressure – are sending strong signals of rapprochement towards the EU.



After every rain: The EU's success rate looks quite respectable despite drawbacks. Source: © Dylan Martinez, Reuters.

*Ai: Nevertheless, we are witnessing authoritarian powers celebrating unforeseen successes in Eastern Europe, gradually undermining the democratic nature and prevalence of the rule of law in certain countries. While these developments do not necessarily entail the departure of these countries from the EU, they do signal a dangerous retreat from common European values, which, in turn, may impact the EU's normative influence on the outside world. This is especially true if the EU appears to have no effective means at its disposal to counteract such dangerous internal tendencies.*

**Olaf Wientzek:** Your concern is justified. However the EU has not been idle: With the support of most member states, the Commission has responded to the worrying assault on the rule of law made by the current Polish government. Moreover, much attention is

currently focussed on Poland and Hungary. In my view, there are alarming developments in Romania, which are getting far too little attention. I also don't believe that the "old" member states are immune to such developments. In fact, the existing EU instruments for such cases have so far shown themselves insufficient. This includes the Copenhagen Criteria, within the framework of the accession process. Then there is the Article 7 procedure, which is being initiated against Poland and Hungary for violations of the rule of law. This can lead to the suspension of the country's voting rights, although such an outcome is unlikely. These instruments are not enough. First of all, the EU needs to address more regularly the rule of law situation in its member states, and not to wait until a crisis has already arisen. I therefore believe that we need, first, an annual review of the state of the rule of law in all member states. Secondly, we need the possibility of reducing EU funds if and when it can no longer be assumed that the courts are independent. The EU is also a legal community, not just an economic and solidary community. This fact is often forgotten.

*Ai: In your opinion, therefore, expanding the existing EU toolbox is a matter of urgency. Which member states do you think would be most capable of pushing for such reforms?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** Support from Germany and France would be indispensable. But it would not

be enough: Time and time again, we see that in a 27-state EU, a functioning German-French tandem is a necessary but insufficient condition for a functioning EU. Support from other EU states is therefore required. Belgium, Sweden, and the Netherlands, amongst others, have in recent months expressed support for some of these ideas, or for similar proposals. Especially when dealing with sensitive matters, the broadest possible alliance should be sought out. Some member states – not just Poland and Hungary – oppose such ideas. Interestingly, however, their reservations are not shared by all Central and Eastern European countries. As a general rule, broader alliances are necessary. In Berlin, we sometimes tend to focus solely on France. Certainly, France remains Germany's most important partner in the EU. But exchanges with and involvement of partners such as Italy, Poland, Spain, the Netherlands, and the Nordic countries must be intensified.

*Ai: Germany should thus play a more active role. What would that look like, in concrete terms? And do you currently see any willingness in Germany to make a more active contribution?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** First of all, as the largest member state and a founding member, Germany has a duty

to lead and to give fresh impetus to the EU – in a spirit of partnership. It is in Germany's interest to ensure the cohesion of the EU as a whole and also to resist calls for a rapid encapsulation of an avant-garde core.

Second, there are duties that derive from this leadership role. Germany should feel itself particularly committed to upholding the fundamental values of the EU. It is, moreover, of comparatively greater importance for Germany to comply with the rules than it is for other countries. Given Germany's relative size and power, any violation of the rules would lead to disastrous effects.

Third, Germany should further involve itself in the area of foreign policy. The other member states expect it. This means providing the necessary financial resources in the area of defence, but also mustering the political will to become more involved, also on a military level, with the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, for instance. This is a requirement that is not particularly popular in Germany, but there is no way around it if we wish to build more trust on the part of France and other EU allies. And without more mutual trust, there can be no viable Common Security and Defence Policy.

Fourth, Germany must become more aware that even domestic policy decisions have a considerable impact on our neighbours. German domestic policy is followed with close attention abroad. This awareness must give rise to the reflex of always considering the implications of domestic decisions on the EU as a whole, on European partners, and even on the Western world. This reflex is still partly lacking. For instance, the political upheaval caused by a project such as Nord Stream 2 can hardly be underestimated – no matter how often it is stressed that the project is primarily an economic one.

*Ai: And, in your opinion, is Germany really prepared for all of this?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** I absolutely see a willingness to assume more responsibility in several areas. There

has been a great deal of progress in foreign and defence policy, although even more could certainly have been achieved. The fact that Germany is prepared to pay more into the EU budget - in return for strengthening conditionality - is another positive example. What is sometimes lacking is the ability to better understand the perspectives of other countries. In addition, there are still a few isolationist reflexes to be found from time to time. This is apparent both from the debates about CETA and about the increase in defence spending, but it has also been observed in other policy areas. To put it bluntly, many people still dream that Germany could be a kind of large version of Switzerland, but from my point of view that would be very dangerous. To return to your opening question, if Germany assumes a responsible, value-based, partnership-based leadership role in the EU, I think there is a good chance that Western and European norms will also shape the world of tomorrow. However if Germany were to shirk this responsibility, it would not only substantially weaken the EU, but also greatly exacerbate the crisis of the liberal world order.

*The interview was conducted by Dr. Anja Schnabel.*

*–translated from German–*



Source: © Dahir Saadij, Reuters.

[Who Will Save the Liberal World Order?](#)

# Is Europe's Future in Asia?

The Asia-Europe Meeting as an Instrument  
of the Rules-Based Multilateral Order

Patrick Ruppel

The world order as we have known it for decades is in turmoil. Countries in Europe and Asia in particular have been profiting from the rules-based multilateral order which provided them with security and allowed them to prosper. Therefore, they are strongly affected by the current volatility. Instead of relying on other powers, countries in both regions should work together and proactively shape the future of multilateralism through the Asia-Europe Meeting.

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## Introduction

The international community is confronted with severe challenges – migration, terrorism, climate change, and cyber threats, just to name a few. None of these topics can be resolved by individual countries or stakeholders alone since they are not only transnational but interconnected. Yet, we observe a return of preferences for easy, nationalistic, and unilateral answers. As a result, many of the principles that have guided international politics since the Second World War seem to be changing. This gives way to a new narrative which declares that the old hegemon, the United States of America, is in a state of decline, while the new great power of China is rising and the old American arch enemy, Russia, is re-emerging on the world stage. The narrative further states that traditional patterns of international cooperation are being questioned, big countries once again argue from a position of strength, use force to impose their will on others, deny mutual benefits of collaboration, and that smaller states simply have to accept their fate.

While the rules-based multilateral world order is certainly being tested and changes are taking place, it would be too early to write a eulogy for multilateralism. Especially countries in Europe and Asia, many of which are small and medium-sized and would thus be unable to thrive in a system shaped by a “might is right” attitude, are stepping up to defend the old order. In their search for global partners, Germany and the European Union should therefore not lose sight

of Asia. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is one of the crucial platforms in this regard. ASEM is now well into its third decade and the last ASEM Summit attended by the Heads of State and Government of the current 53 participating partners was held on 18 and 19 October 2018 in Brussels, Belgium. This article will shed light on the competitive advantages ASEM has for Asia-Europe relations and why this time of geopolitical uncertainty may provide a window of opportunity for this dialogue process.

## Challenging Times for the Multilateral System

Indeed, one of the main challenges to the rules-based multilateral order is the *return of great power politics* which, combined with renewed preferences for unilateralist and nationalist approaches, create an unfavourable environment for multilateral cooperative arrangements. This becomes even clearer when existing multilateral agreements are put to the test. For instance, conflicts in the South and East China Sea, the annexation of Crimea, and advancements in North Korea’s nuclear missile programme have highlighted the ineffectiveness of non-binding multilateral agreements. Additionally, these cases have displayed the limited options for the international community to act on instances of non-compliance with international rules and norms.

Secondly, populist leaders who are offering seemingly easy solutions – often involving *protectionist and nationalist concepts* – to complex



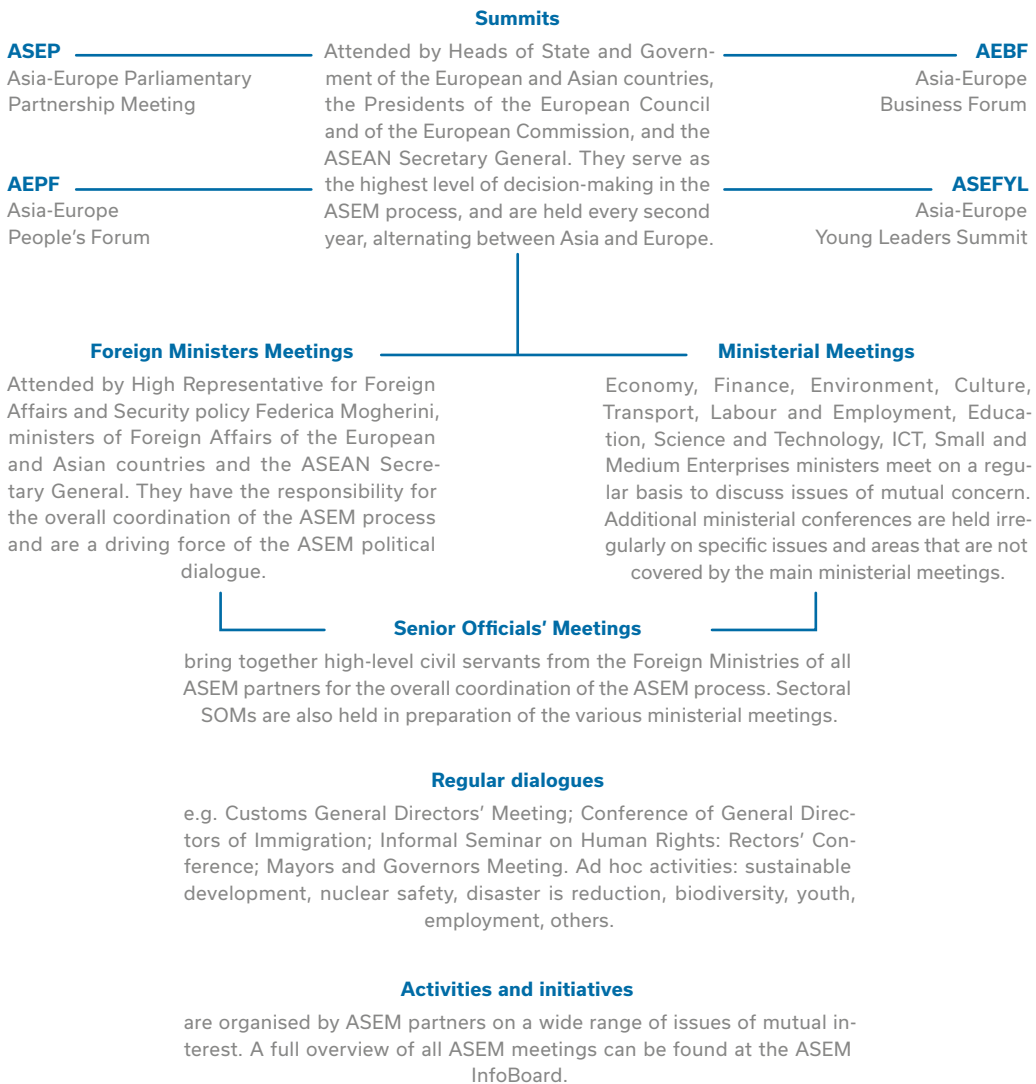


Backward steps into the future: The return of great power politics is increasingly endangering the establishment of multilateral cooperative agreements. Source: © Kevin Lim, *The Straits Times*, Reuters.

challenges, have exploited growing concerns and decreasing societal cohesion within countries. Many of these leaders are less consensus-driven, unwilling to make compromises, seek short-term gains, and question the value of multilateral initiatives as they often do not produce immediate results. They do not look for win-win outcomes, but prefer zero sum games; ultimately destroying trust as well as confidence which are required for multilateral arrangements. The most prominent case is the current foreign policy of the US. Its more nationalistic, inward-looking, and less predictable approach resulted in the withdrawal from previously agreed upon or signed treaties. This not only raises questions about the commitment of the US to multilateralism and the reliability of the longstanding US partnerships in both Asia and Europe, but also reduces

trust in concessions made by the US. This new approach of the long-time defender of a rules-based multilateral order has severe implications for illiberal countries. This is because they feel less obliged to follow international norms or use the developments in the US as a justification to implement illiberal domestic and foreign policies. At the same time, the Chinese leadership portrays itself as the new champion of multilateralism and drives forward economic and investment projects. However, it is through many of those initiatives that the Chinese create dependencies, interfere in the domestic affairs of other states, and promote a form of multilateralism that seems incompatible with a Western understanding of it. Yet, in both cases, it is important to look beyond the official statements and observe the real actions as well as intentions.

**Fig. 1: How ASEM Works – Meetings and Activities Organised at Different Levels**



<b>1<sup>st</sup> ASEM Summit:</b>	<b>12<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit:</b>
1 to 2 March 1996 Bangkok, Thailand 26 participants: <b>European group:</b> 15 EU members and European Commission <b>Asian group:</b> 7 ASEAN members; China, Japan and South Korea	18 to 19 October 2018 Brussels, Belgium 53 participants: <b>European group:</b> 28 EU members, Norway, Switzerland and the European Union <b>Asian group:</b> 10 ASEAN members; Australia, Bangladesh, China, India, Japan, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Russia and the ASEAN Secretariat

Source: Own illustration based on ASEM 2018: ASEM Factsheet, in: <http://bit.ly/2RpSNc3> [7 Jul 2018].

This great power politics goes hand in hand with the *proliferation of multilateral fora*. The political landscape, with regard to multilateral approaches, is extremely diverse, complex, and characterised by different formats. These range from highly institutionalised forms of international or regional cooperation, to informal and non-binding meetings among Heads of Government and resort ministers, and issue-specific dialogues. Especially this informal multilateralism has to continually justify its existence and benefits, and ASEM clearly falls into this category. In times of growing political volatility and hostility within the international system – but also individual nation-states which have direct implications on multilateralism and the support for the current world order –, it is no surprise that multilateral fora face pressure and criticism. This becomes even more imminent in times of scarce financial resources. New fora are also being created either to address a particular challenge collaboratively or because states feel that the current formats do not sufficiently reflect their interests and respective power. For example, emerging regional powers, which contest the existing status quo, might set up their own new projects or institutions to drive their own agenda and shape their neighbouring countries according to their own interests. In the Eurasian context, this is the case with Russia's Eurasian Union, but also China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These developments and the sharp increase in multilateral initiatives have led some experts to the conclusion that there is an oversupply of such fora, ultimately resulting in a phenomenon described as “forum shopping” and “pure summit diplomacy”.

### **Coming a Long Way since 1996**

Against this hostile background and the plethora of multilateral initiatives, ASEM represents an often underestimated approach and one that might possibly be a blueprint for future multilateral cooperation.

Despite sharing a long and eventful history, it was not until 1994<sup>1</sup> that the idea of placing an institutional exchange solely between Asia and Europe was on the agenda. This visionary idea, which was proposed by Singapore's then Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, drove the development of a multilateral framework that complemented the already existing ties between Asia and America as well as Europe and America, and first came into reality in 1996 – the Asia-Europe Meeting was born.

When the inaugural ASEM Summit was held on 1 and 2 March 1996 in Bangkok, Thailand, 25 countries and the European Commission were present. Today, ASEM has 53 partners which together account for around 60 per cent of the world's population, 60 per cent of the global GDP, and 60 per cent of global trade.<sup>2</sup> This clearly illustrates the significance and impact ASEM can have on a global scale. However, the process also has much added value for intra-regional cooperation. For instance, government representatives and leaders of the ASEAN states and the three Northeast Asian nations (China, Japan, and South Korea) met regularly between 1995 and 1997 to discuss matters related to ASEM and coordinate their positions. These exchanges were a final push towards regional cooperation in East Asia, which had faced several gridlocks over the previous years, and eventually resulted in the formation of the ASEAN Plus Three framework in 1997.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this huge potential, ASEM has often been criticised for underachieving and lacking tangible outcomes. This is mainly due to its organisational structure. ASEM is an informal dialogue process – and it is important to recognise it as such – which aims to offer a platform for exchange and discussion on cooperation projects addressing challenges both Europe and Asia are facing. It is neither an institution nor international organisation. It lacks an institutional body in the form of a secretariat. Instead, the main drivers of ASEM are the respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs which are supported by four coordinators – two from Asia representing ASEAN and non-ASEAN Asia and two

from Europe representing the European Union and the rotating EU presidency. This does not mean that ASEM functions on a purely ad-hoc basis and lacks any form of continuity, however. ASEM does in fact have a broad structure (illustrated in fig. 1) and it is important to look beyond the biennial ASEM Summit of the Heads of State and Government. Besides this comprehensive structure, ASEM has created the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). ASEF stands out since it is the only institution to have developed from the 22-year old ASEM process so far. Based in Singapore, it should, however, not be confused with a de facto secretariat as its mandate is to facilitate exchange, promote understanding, and foster relations among the different stakeholders involved in the Asia-Europe Meeting.

**ASEM is less impacted by the great power competition that has hijacked debates in some of the other fora and has resulted in political gridlocks there.**

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Thematically, ASEM focuses on three pillars which reflect the cornerstones of the bi-regional relations – political (including global challenges ranging from security and environmental to humanitarian questions), economic and financial, as well as social and cultural. The overarching theme for all three pillars and activities of ASEM is connectivity, which ASEM aims to achieve in all areas of cooperation. This theme is supposed to go beyond physical connections to encompass people-to-people, institutional, digital, and cultural connectivity. Its informal and open approach without a binding character enables ASEM to provide a platform for political dialogue supporting bi-regional cooperation based on common standards and sustainability. Ultimately, this should also support the rules-based international system and facilitate more binding as well as concrete bi- and minilateral initiatives.

Compared to the other main fora in Asia – the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) –, ASEM is the only one of the four that does not include the United States, but involves all ASEAN and EU member states as well as both regional organisations themselves. Although ASEM is the biggest of the four organisations with 53 partners, it is less impacted by the great power competition that has hijacked debates in some of the other fora and resulted in political gridlocks. Furthermore, ASEM is the sole initiative with a clear European-Asian geographic focus and is in a unique position to shape these interregional relations.

Due to its comprehensive web of different dialogue formats and a holistic approach touching upon almost all areas relevant to Asia-Europe relations, ASEM is well placed to become a driver for rules-based multilateralism. Its added advantage is that its structure reflects a multi-track approach combining all three levels of traditional diplomacy through the inclusion of Heads of State / Government, ministers, non-governmental organisations, businesses, journalists, and think tanks – to name a few. Furthermore, key countries are supportive of the process. For instance, the EU has been using ASEM quite strategically by providing technical assistance to Asian partners and expanding the theme of connectivity beyond physical infrastructure by focusing on aspects of connectivity of institutions, ideas, and people. At the same time, China takes a positive approach towards ASEM as it sees possible synergies with its own Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as with the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB).<sup>4</sup>

**Between Remaining and Becoming More Relevant**

Yet, ASEM also has to address inherent challenges in order to show its benefits and added value. With its many partners, ASEM is one of the biggest international projects outside of the UN system. Naturally, it is difficult to come to agreements which go beyond the lowest common denominator. Hence, many of its conclusions

remain at a superficial level. The division among partners on the future of ASEM is reflected by the long debates on whether a) ASEM needs an institutional base in the form of a secretariat, and b) it has to overcome its informality and produce practical outcomes. Supporters for either of these two approaches – remaining an informal dialogue process vs. striving for tangible results – can be found within the Asian and European grouping. Although some Asian partners generally wonder more about the added value of ASEM if no direct results can be achieved.

### **ASEM has to address inherent challenges in order to show its benefits and added value.**

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The fact that ASEM and its initiatives lack any form of implementing power and rely on the good will of the national governments to act, has understandably raised questions regarding ASEM's relevance. It is often seen to only pay lip service and to be greatly inefficient. This is reinforced by the fact that challenges, which ASEM partners have debated about for a long time, still exist and that only small steps have been taken to adequately address them. This criticism and the demand for ASEM itself to produce tangible outcomes reflect a misunderstanding of ASEM's nature and mandate as an informal multilateral dialogue process. Instead, by focusing only on tangible outcomes, which are difficult to achieve, critics could create a capability-expectations gap and set ASEM up for failure.

Since officials of the participating states lead the process, support for ASEM might also fluctuate depending on the political leadership and, due to the frequent changes in personnel, institutional memory can be difficult to maintain. For instance, only last year, a number of experienced and highly supportive senior officials changed in Ireland, New Zealand, and Myanmar and Mongolia, the hosts of the last Foreign Ministers' Meeting and ASEM Summit respectively.

ASEM's fast growth and its initiation of many projects in different policy areas has resulted in a so-called silo approach with often limited cross-thematic exchanges. In light of the increasing complexity in terms of challenges and the added advantage of exploring interdisciplinary solutions, this division between the various policy fields and initiatives hinders ASEM from achieving its full potential and developing comprehensive prevention as well as response measures.

Although ASEM has declared its goal to establish connectivity in all its dimensions by offering a platform that promotes alliances on a political, economic, socio-cultural, and people-to-people level, ASEM still lacks recognition. Many people have never heard of the Asia-Europe Meeting nor are they aware of the vastness of the process. Then again, some people who do know about ASEM perceive it as yet another project of the political elites that lacks democratic legitimisation and that has no benefit for the people.

Particularly in the context of the aforementioned oversupply of fora, it is important for ASEM to avoid overlaps and remain aware of possible duplications. ASEM must critically examine its current status and implement reforms so as not to lose the confidence of its partners in the process. If reforms are carried out, the format can function as an agenda-setter for Europe-Asia relations, raise awareness, and promote collaborative projects to tackle many of today's transnational challenges.

For ASEM, it will be important to decide whether it wants to remain a forum for dialogue driven by senior officials or evolve into becoming a proper tool for global governance and multilateralism. Recent developments indicate that ASEM could play a more active role. Since the eleventh Foreign Ministers' Meeting (FMM) in New Delhi in 2013<sup>5</sup>, ASEM has taken steps towards providing avenues that may deliver more tangible outcomes through new models such as ad-hoc coalitions and thematic working groups. This enables smaller groups of member countries, who are willing to take action, to



Ready for negotiations: Willingness to compromise, reliability, and trust are major prerequisites for reaching a multi-lateral consensus. Source: © Chitose Suzuki, Reuters.

press ahead with certain cooperation areas, and this in turn helps to prevent political deadlocks. Within such an issue-based leadership model, the large number of partners and their diversity can actually be a strength as countries can work on a wide range of topics complementing their individual capacities. This approach was

re-affirmed at the ASEM Summit 2014 in Milan, the FMM 2015 in Luxembourg, and the Ulaanbaatar Declaration in 2016<sup>6</sup>, but has yet to be operationalised. The 2016 Summit identified many areas for concrete collaboration such as counter-terrorism, maritime security and safety, piracy, drug and human trafficking, migration,



cyber security, energy, disaster management, and higher education. Leaders also affirmed that ASEM must be multi-dimensional and people-centred and should promote both multilateralism as well as a rules-based order. This approach seems feasible to strike a balance between the different perspectives adopted by

the partners. ASEM would be able to remain an open and informal process with comprehensive dialogue, promoting cooperation, and fostering trust at the politically highest level of the leaders. Nevertheless, it would expand on this using an action-oriented approach with more concrete outcomes in the sectoral arena through,

for example, joint exercises, sharing of best practices, and capacity building. Yet, it remains to be seen whether countries participating in those working groups will actually implement policy changes. ASEM could, for example, form a group of experts who can assist in the implementation process. In 2016, the ASEM leaders also established the Pathfinder Group on Connectivity (APGC)<sup>7</sup> for the duration of two years. It defined connectivity and developed a work plan on how soft as well as hard connectivity can be achieved. The last summits witnessed the introduction of a leaders' retreat. ASEM can also use this to facilitate bilateral exchanges and minilateral approaches.<sup>8</sup>

As a second step, it will be important for ASEM to tackle not only specific issues within the wider framework, but to not lose sight of the bigger picture, too. While the softer ad-hoc coalition and network style will allow ASEM to be more practical, less bureaucratic, and focus on selected topics, the partners must promote cross-fertilisation between those thematic areas. Consequently, ASEM will be able to develop holistic responses and solutions to complex as well as transnational, and interconnected challenges affecting a multitude of policy fields.

**As an informal meeting that facilitates concrete actions among its members, ASEM can be a blueprint for multilateralism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

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ASEM also needs to address its lack of visibility and increase support for the process. The initiation of ASEM Day – also agreed upon at the Ulaanbaatar Summit<sup>9</sup> and first celebrated in 2017 – is certainly a step in the right direction. Delivering concrete results deriving from discussions at the ASEM level will automatically further increase visibility and legitimacy. Besides improving the economic, political, social, and cultural relations between the two continents,

ASEM could set and ensure high standards, for instance, on environmental protection, social issues, protection of intellectual property, transparency in procurements, and the sustainability of projects. Through this, ASEM can limit the repercussions stemming from globalisation, which are one of the many factors contributing to the rise of populism. While it may be too early to discuss an ASEM-wide free trade agreement (FTA), partners could look for opportunities to facilitate easier trade and support businesses, especially small and medium enterprises.

Within its framework, ASEM could also contribute to more sub-regional cooperation since countries located in the same geographic area can coordinate and collaborate on the preparation and potential implementation of ASEM agreements. This potential was already visible in the late 1990s and the following ASEAN Plus Three initiative. ASEM could then function as a hub that links up these sub-regions and other multilateral fora in which many of its partners participate as well. If ASEM develops this hub capacity, it can become a marketplace for ideas due to its broad participation of stakeholders from all walks of life. Instead of forcing binding rules and agreements, for which ASEM's ability to domestically enforce them remains limited – as is the case for most other multilateral approaches – and which might cause political gridlocks, ASEM may be the hybrid resulting in concrete actions among selected partners in ever changing groupings. This is all while maintaining trust and confidence in the wider circle of partners, working towards a common goal. ASEM would not be the place for practical solutions itself, but rather the platform where ideas are developed, convergence of interests takes place, and where trust is built. This in itself is a deliverable. Ultimately, such exchanges can produce tangible results when the ideas are implemented in mini- or bilateral formats, or even domestically – something that will also support the principle of subsidiarity. This enabling and supporting character could very well be the future role of multilateral fora in a more volatile and truly multipolar world – thus making ASEM a blueprint for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



## **ASEM as an Avenue to Promote the ASEAN-EU Partnership**

In the current environment, ASEM may also be able to provide the most promising avenue for broader EU-ASEAN multilateralism beyond bi-regional cooperation, but rather jointly within a wider context. This is the declared goal of the Joint Statement on the 40th Anniversary of the Establishment of ASEAN-EU Dialogue Relations<sup>10</sup>, the revised Plan of Action<sup>11</sup> adopted at the EU-ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference in 2017, and the Global Strategy of the European Union on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS).<sup>12</sup> These documents corroborate that the two regional bodies are not only relevant to their specific region and member states, but have the potential to be of strategic relevance in the international system. This can be achieved by not only looking at their own and mutual benefits, but by forming a partnership to contribute to a rules-based international order.<sup>13</sup>

### **ASEAN and the EU should work together and coordinate their positions within ASEM in order to have an impact beyond bi-regional cooperation.**

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In light of this goal, the EU and ASEAN have the potential to use ASEM as a tool to foster effective multilateralism through the approach developed since 2013. They could even multilateralise initiatives such as the BRI and AIIB in order to generate mutual benefits without one-sided gains for the driving force behind them. Together and as long as they maintain their unity, ASEAN and the EU are strong enough and have sufficient leverage to create a multilateral environment in which unilateral actions are more costly even for great powers. Since ASEM is an ASEAN- and EU-driven initiative, the two regional organisations should work together and coordinate their positions in order to have an impact beyond bilateral and bi-regional

cooperation. They could use ASEM to promote better understanding, develop a shared European-Asian vision for the future, and enhance practical cooperation on areas of common interest<sup>14</sup>, for which ASEM's comprehensive structure and multi-stakeholder involvement provide a unique opportunity. All while jointly focussing on preventive diplomacy, confidence-building and discussions on strategic regional security threats within the ARF, which is the only other multilateral forum of the so-called ASEAN centrality approach of which the EU is a partner. In this way, overlaps between the two fora could be avoided or at least minimised.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the huge geographic distance between Asia and Europe, both are directly and indirectly affected by the political developments in the other region. This provides vital opportunities for collaboration and dialogue between the two regions. Many Asian and European countries are strong supporters of a rules-based multilateral system and should work together in order to establish a cooperative environment with preventive arrangements to contain insecurities, build trust, and increase predictability.

However, as outlined in this paper, Europe and Asia are confronted by an environment that is becoming increasingly hostile to international collaboration and multilateral engagements. Growing volatility in the international system with more assertive great powers that focus on national interests as well as unilateral approaches with one-sided gains, and that have a limited willingness for concessions and coordination, pose a severe threat to multilateralism.

Yet, the signing of free trade agreements by the European Union with Japan and Singapore, respectively, are strong commitments to the liberal world order. A joint communiqué, recently released by the ASEAN foreign ministers to uphold the rules-based multilateral order,<sup>15</sup> as well as the commitments by European leaders<sup>16</sup> to this system, show the importance countries in both regions attach to this approach, and send

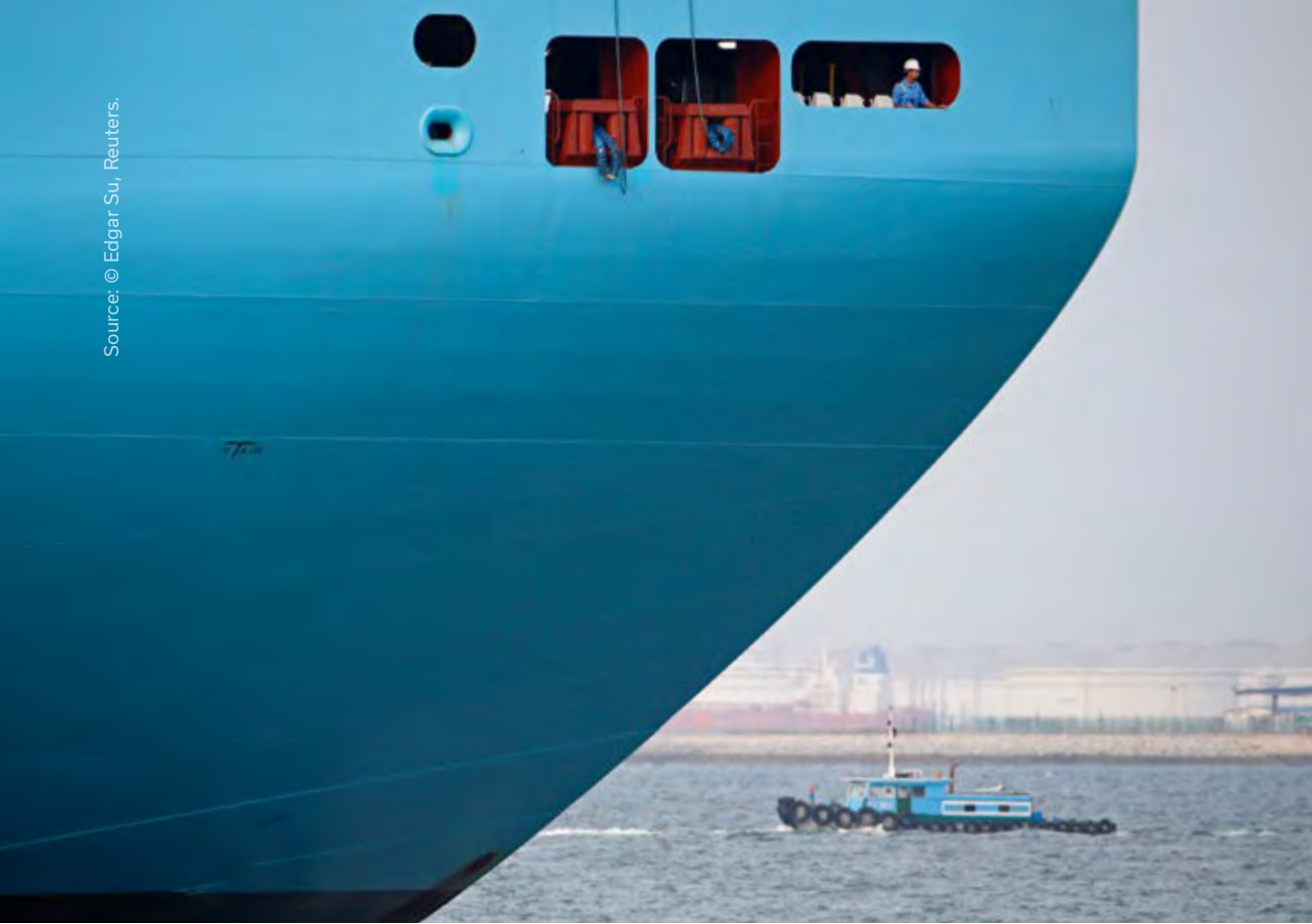
a strong political signal. It further underscores that Germany and Europe have a more than willing partner in Asia to secure the future of multilateralism.

This is also the case for ASEM, which forms the only multilateral track for Asia-Europe cooperation. It thus has a clear geographic focus, and has so far been able to avoid some of the great power dynamics that can be observed in the ARF and EAS. This is not the only reason why we should be confident about ASEM playing a more crucial role in the future. With the enhanced focus on connectivity, the development of ad-hoc thematic coalitions, and identification of common interests, the dialogue process was able to form a unique framework for collaboration and possibly set an example for a 21<sup>st</sup> century form of multilateralism. Its holistic, multi-track approach, incorporating almost all important stakeholders, offers promising opportunities to lead the bi-regional relations and contribute to a Europe-Asia driven multilateral order.

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[Who Will Save the Liberal World Order?](#)

# Region by Region

China's Advances into the Indian Ocean

Christoph Hein

China's advances into the Indian Ocean are without precedent. India is hemmed in and Europe stirred. With the New Silk Road, Beijing is creating conditions that will determine the nature of this trading area. But the reaction is perplexity and temporisation. Yet, Europe still has time to defend its interests on the basis of its own geostrategy.

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**"Whosoever commands the sea commands [...] the trade of the world [...] and consequently the world itself."**

*Sir Walter Raleigh in "History of the World", 1614*

Until little more than a year ago, goatherd Ramoni had never seen a car. Today, however, she is behind the wheel of a monster: an 18-tonne mining lorry from China. Ramoni drives it down to the bottom of the lignite mine pit in the Thar Desert in Pakistan. There it is loaded, and Ramoni drives a winding trail back up to the conveyors that take the lignite to the nearby power plants. Here, five hours by car from Karachi, around 5,000 Chinese workers are creating an energy supply for China's neighbour. That is why Ramoni, a 29-year-old mother of six, is no longer herding goats. She is working at the mine and saving up for a house. Her husband is a reforestation gardener for the area around the pit. The new life that China's assistance to Pakistan has made possible sometimes still feels very strange. But it offers opportunities that her family had never hoped for.

China is penetrating ever more distant regions of the world. There are some whom this helps. But more and more people are beginning to fear the clout of the Chinese advance. The measures taken to counter these efforts, however, testify to a frightening helplessness, which only serves to facilitate Beijing's actions. After the occupation, fortification, and armament of the atolls in the South China Sea, China is now sending feelers farther westward. The western Pacific, on the one side, and the Indian Ocean, on the other, are becoming areas of interest. Meanwhile, the communist government is using its full register of power: from donations and development aid

to military posturing. While Australia is watching the changing power structure in the western Pacific very carefully, Europe has largely overlooked China's advance into the Indian Ocean. In so doing, Europe is missing one of the great geostrategic shifts of the modern day.

In the struggle for the Indian Ocean, three storylines of world power converge: China's advance under the guise of the New Silk Road; India's foreign policy awakening with a view to East Asia and Africa; and the foreign, defence, and economic policy of US President Donald Trump which, of course, often remains vague.

In December 2017, in their National Security Strategy, the US gave a sober description of the situation: "China is using economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda. China's infrastructure investments and trade strategies reinforce its geopolitical aspirations." In short: "A geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place".<sup>1</sup> But what is the response?

### **The New Silk Road**

China's advances into the peripheral zones of its previous sphere of influence is congruent with the execution of a grand plan the like of which the world has never seen before. The New Silk Road passes through land and water. The land

corridor follows the old trade routes through Central Asia, as described by the German geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The sea route passes through the South China Sea, where goods worth 3.4 trillion US dollars are transported each year, through the Indian Ocean, and as far as the west coast of Africa and Europe. The name “Silk Road of the Seas”, or the “Maritime Silk Road”, as China calls its major project, harks back to the Orient and the Far East, to pirates and corsairs, to monsoons and the adventures of the legendary Chinese admiral Zheng He. In reality, this is a strategy that drives countries into dependence on Beijing, with a view to limiting the influence of China’s competitor, India. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), originally called One Belt, One Road (OBOR), was ridiculed when President Xi Jinping outlined it in Astana, Kazakhstan in 2013. Reactions changed from smirks to wonder to growing enthusiasm. For, with a likely investment volume of over one trillion dollars, the financial floodgates were opened on an unprecedented scale.

There is nothing the countries of Asia need more than the construction of ports, roads, power plants, bridges, railroad lines, and pipelines. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates Asia’s infrastructure expenditure at 1.7 trillion US dollars a year – roughly the annual economic output of Canada.<sup>2</sup> Despite the speed of the region’s development, 400 million Asians still live without electricity, 300 million without clean water, and 1.5 billion without toilets. So far, almost 70 countries have signed on to China’s great Asian development project – but not India. These countries are located in Asia, Europe, Africa, and Oceania and account for more than half the world’s population and around a third of its economy. The New Silk Road is supported by Chinese state-owned banks, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and investment funds.

The private sector is enthusiastic. “BRI may be a catalyst for a virtuous cycle of economic development, just as the Marshall Plan triggered the reconstruction and then recovery of war-torn

Europe almost 70 years ago,” said Arnoud Balhuizen, Chief Commercial Officer for BHP Billiton, the world’s largest resource company.<sup>3</sup> “Whether one considers land mass, population, economic size or coastline, OBOR’s potential canvas, reaching from East Asia to the African Horn and across Eastern Europe, dwarfs that of the Marshall Plan.” He also points out that “OBOR will continue to grow.” DHL Deutsche Post, which is pushing the construction of a railway line from China to Germany by way of the world’s largest dry port, says that such connections are enough to “change international trade entirely. But that requires close cooperation between organisations, governments, and countries.”<sup>4</sup>

### **While OBOR stimulates the economy, it also creates dependencies.**

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China’s political stability can only be maintained if the country continues to grow rapidly, and people believe that their children will one day enjoy a better life than they do themselves. Since the export-led growth of the “world’s factory” is no longer sufficient, new fields must be sought out. Those fields can be found in the rest of Asia, in Africa, and the Pacific. In this manner, BRI is an initiative driven by domestic concerns, even though it leads to the construction of urgently needed infrastructure abroad.

After all, BRI also guarantees the supply of oil and gas: “The People’s Republic needs a tremendous amount of energy for its economic growth, and this fact has shaped Beijing’s foreign policy for years,” rightly warns Friedbert Pflüger.<sup>5</sup> Paul Gruenwald, Chief Economist for the Standard & Poor’s rating agency, leaves no doubt: “BRI is all about energy security. If you look at where China is on the map and where the oil-exporting countries are, BRI starts to make sense.”<sup>6</sup> The programme helps to internationalise the yuan. And it gives China the appearance of a big brother who is there when needed.

## The Need for Security

For China, BRI is part of its future security: “To defend itself properly, it needs to establish from where it will gather its food, raw materials, and energy and how to keep its trade routes and supply chains safe.”<sup>7</sup> However, Beijing has tied its own fate to a plan of which it has but an outline. But BRI already creates dependencies. More and more countries are becoming addicted to Chinese money. This means that China’s political influence is growing deep: both into Europe and Africa, as well as, on the other side, into America’s backyard in the Pacific.

Not least because of that, BRI is supported by a rapidly growing army. The need for security has its origins in China’s history: Having experienced the Opium Wars and the Rape of Nanjing, the country intends to never again be the victim of foreign invaders. In the spring of 2018, Xi Jinping declared that a strong navy had never been as important as it is today.<sup>8</sup> It is also active in the western Pacific, more than 8,000 kilometres from China’s southwest. “The core long-term objectives are to weaken America’s capacity to move naval forces closer to the Chinese mainland and obtain access to the deepwater Pacific with its nuclear-armed ballistic missile-carrying submarines, and to weaken the US alliance structure.”<sup>9</sup> The very advance of Chinese companies into unstable countries demands that said companies be protected. This new security architecture extends to the use of private security companies: “European Union member states’ interests will be affected by Chinese private security companies’ international expansion. The companies might contribute to an increase of instability in regions that are strategically important for Europe. At the same time, they could help Beijing increase its influence over host country governments.”<sup>10</sup>

From Beijing’s point of view, the innermost defensive ring is the Chinese mainland. That ring is protected by a second ring. On land, this second ring runs through Tibet and Xinjiang, and at sea, through the fortified islands in the South China Sea. They form a cordon that is

guarded and defended, not least by China’s growing submarine force. This area also contains valuable fishery and raw material extraction, as the conflict over oil drilling off the coast of Vietnam demonstrates.<sup>11</sup> A third defensive ring encompasses the distant western Pacific, America’s backyard, on the one side, and the Indian Ocean, on the other. By funding other governments, Beijing is gaining allies whose voices count at the global level.

## The Example of the West Pacific

“We welcome anyone who supports us,” says Sayed-Khaiyum, the Republic of Fiji’s Minister for Economy. “Because we can use absolutely any help we can get.”<sup>12</sup> From his point of view, it does not matter whether this help comes from Germany, Australia, or China. Beijing is creating allies here as well: According to estimates by Australia’s Lowy Institute, between 2006 and 2018, China pumped around 1.8 billion US dollars into the Pacific islands. Of this total amount, 67 per cent is comprised of loans.<sup>13</sup> The projects range from the construction of the official residence of the Prime Minister of Vanuatu, to submarine cables, to an airport on the Solomon Islands.

Australia’s former minister for international development sharply criticises China’s advances: Concetta Fierravanti-Wells accuses Beijing of driving Pacific islands to dependency on loans, erecting “useless buildings”, and building “roads to nowhere”. The former minister declared, “You’ve got the Pacific full of these useless buildings which nobody maintains, which are basically white elephants ... all of a sudden you see this Chinese road crew building a road to nowhere and you think, ‘hmm, what’s all that about?’”<sup>14</sup> Australian geostrategist Peter Jennings warns of a “cashed-up China which spends money to promote its long-term strategic goals and buys political backing with breathtakingly cynical corruption.”<sup>15</sup>

## The Indian Ocean

In the western Pacific, the Chinese are interested in influence and in the creation of a defensive belt against America and its partner Australia; their interests in the Indian Ocean, however, are more varied. That is where northern Asia, including China, secures its supply lines for vital raw materials. Every year, more than 20 million containers travel between Asia, on one side, and Europe and Africa, on the other.<sup>16</sup> The waters of the Indian Ocean reach 28 countries, which contain around 35 per cent of the world's population, and produce almost one fifth of the world's economic output.<sup>17</sup> Around 64 per cent of the oil traded worldwide travels via its shipping routes, and around 40 per cent of the oil extracted offshore is produced in its depths. Today, more than 28 per cent of total global fishing occurs in the Indian Ocean, and that proportion is growing rapidly.

### Whoever controls the Indian Ocean, controls global trade and energy supply.

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One glance at the bottleneck of world trade is sufficient to comprehend the importance of these waters: The Strait of Malacca, which connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, transports two thirds of South Korea's energy requirements, almost 60 per cent of Japan's, three quarters of India's, and 80 per cent of China's oil needs.<sup>18</sup> In other words, whoever controls the Indian Ocean, controls global trade and energy supply. That is one reason why most of the ports built with China's help are dual use – suitable for naval, as well as trading vessels. From these ports, pipelines to southern China have been constructed to create a land-based supply route for oil and gas – for instance, via Pakistan and Myanmar.

At the same time, China is closing a ring around its major competitor, India. And finally, China hopes to quiet its own troubled western

provinces by developing Pakistan so that it can stop Islamists and terror groups far off in Afghanistan's interior, long before they reach the Chinese border.

The advance into the Indian Ocean illustrates Beijing's comprehensive approach: It ranges from generous gifts to development aid, including loan grants, takeovers, trade agreements, energy purchases, armaments, and the construction of Confucius Institutes that transmit Chinese culture and ways of thinking. "This is China's version of the East India Company, adapted to the times."<sup>19</sup>

The annexation of Tibet also had strategic purposes: the mountainous region provides a boundary to China's rival, India, and is also source to raw materials and water reservoirs. Beijing then closed the ring on India, step by step. Nepal was a natural partner due to its occasionally communist government. Bangladesh and Myanmar in the East, Sri Lanka off India's southern tip, the Maldives, and India's nemesis, Pakistan, are all now more or less tied to China, with enormous investment promises by Beijing and an ever-growing debt forming the basis of these relationships.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka is a clear symbol of the downside of Chinese investment. Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa linked his fate closely to Beijing. China helped him defeat the Tamil rebels, and subsequently provided billions of dollars to expand the island's infrastructure. This is how, amongst other things, the scarcely used container port, Hambantota, and an airport in Rajapaksa's home province, came into existence.<sup>20</sup> When the following government was no longer able to shoulder the debt burden (the interest rate is said to be 6.5 per cent), China assumed an 85 per cent majority share of the port for a period of 99 years – the port happens to be an ideal base off India's southern tip. "The debt deal also intensified some of the harshest accusations about President Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road Initiative: that the global investment and lending program amounts to a debt trap for vulnerable countries

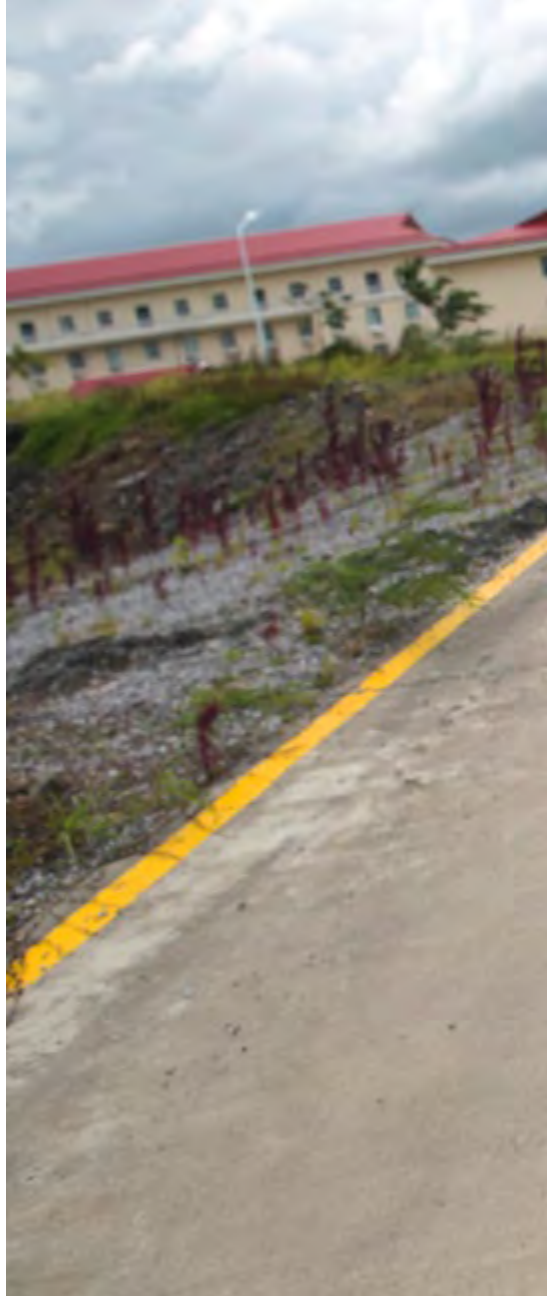
around the world, fuelling corruption and autocratic behaviour in struggling democracies.”<sup>21</sup>

If Sri Lanka is the negative example of Chinese involvement, Pakistan is the largest. The “People’s Republic of Pakistan”<sup>22</sup> is to be developed to the tune of an estimated 62 billion US dollars. Its central axis is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), made up of railways, roads, pipelines, power plants, and opencast lignite mining. China’s involvement extends all the way to surveillance technology and the construction of beach resorts. The flagship is the Gwadar Port on the coast of Balochistan. This is where the land bridge to the west of China begins. At the same time, Gwadar provides the Chinese navy with its next base east of Djibouti in Africa. “Chinese investments in Pakistan’s Gwadar port, where China has a 40-year lease agreement after the Port of Singapore Authority abandoned the unprofitable port in 2013, are similarly part of a larger plan. The [...] China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will link Gwadar port, a planned nearby naval base, and several 10-year, tax-free, SEZs [Special Economic Zones] in Pakistan with China’s restive Xinjiang province through a network of roads, railroads and energy projects.”<sup>23</sup> In Islamabad, the new prime minister, Imran Khan, is facing pressure from Pakistan’s great debt not only to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but also to Chinese creditors.

China’s influence is also growing to India’s east, in Bangladesh. The six-kilometre bridge over the Ganges, which Bangladeshis call Padma, is a symbol of neighbourly assistance. China’s banks provided the lion’s share of the cost (nearly four billion US dollars). The World Bank had previously withdrawn from a loan of over one billion US dollars because it detected corruption on the part of those responsible for construction. Altogether, Beijing is offering Bangladesh at least 30 billion US dollars in infrastructure assistance. Chinese investors also outbid the Mumbai stock exchange in the purchase of a share of the Dhaka Stock Exchange. If private Chinese investments in Bangladesh are counted, the total amount of Chinese involvement could

rise to around 42 billion US dollars – the second-highest amount invested in southern Asia, after Pakistan. Chinese involvement “is also ringing alarm bells in India, which surrounds Bangladesh on three sides and considers itself Dhaka’s natural and principal ally.”<sup>24</sup>

Bangladesh is going down the path that Myanmar – formerly Burma – took years ago under its military junta. China is also involving itself







Close ties: Myanmar has been on close terms with China over the past several decades. [Source: © Soe Zeya Tun, Reuters.](#)

in Myanmar's affairs. The CITIC group won the tender to construct the port of Kyaukpyu, and operate it for 70 years. China is to build a deepwater port worth around seven billion US dollars in the small fishing town of 50,000 inhabitants. It is to ship almost five million containers each year – more than Brazil's leading port, and completely excessive for Myanmar. The government is to take on a share of up to three billion US dollars, which in turn is being

lent by the Export-Import Bank of China. Many are reminded of the Hambantota experience in Sri Lanka. Kyaukpyu – located in the Rohingya province of Rakhine and 400 kilometres away from the economic capital of Yangon, which has its own deepwater port – threatens to become another “Chinese debt bomb”.<sup>25</sup> Cambodia's controversial prime minister, Hun Sen, and the junta in Thailand are also opening their countries to China's mostly state investors.

The Eastern Economic Corridor in Thailand is important for the generals' political survival. It offers China an access point to the Gulf of Thailand – and provides another connection to the ocean for China's southern Yunnan province.

Hambantota, Gwadar, Kyaukpyu – the list goes on. Strategic infrastructure keeps threatening to fall under Chinese influence as a result of excessive debt. And this infrastructure invariably not only offers access to the Indian Ocean, but creates naval bases. As in the South China Sea, the risks in the Indian Ocean are growing due to the potential for an encounter between two competing, heavily armed forces. One miscalculation by a ship's captain could have disastrous consequences.

### **Djibouti, where China has its first military base on foreign soil, is one of the theatres in China's grab for world power.**

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In view of the large-scale projects under Chinese leadership in the Bay of Bengal, the Gulf of Thailand, and the Arabian Sea, an island group far from the mainland seems insignificant. But on the Maldives, a power struggle is underway between democracy and dictatorship, radical Islam and cosmopolitanism. And China is taking advantage. As in the struggle for the Dhaka Stock Exchange in Bangladesh, this is a direct confrontation between China and India: The previous Maldivian government awarded the expansion of the airport in Malé to China, withdrawing the project from India. China is also building a bridge in Malé for about 400 million US dollars. Beijing has also concluded a free-trade agreement with the Maldives and leased an island for 50 years in order to develop it as a tourist destination. What is true for other countries surrounding the Indian Ocean, also counts for the Maldives; “the entry of China as a counterweight to Indian power can seem like an attractive proposition.”<sup>26</sup>

China's presence in the Indian Ocean extends as far as the west coast of Africa. To summarise a few points: So far, Beijing has financed the construction of more than 6,200 kilometres of railway tracks, more than 5,000 kilometres of roads, as well as that of several ports in Africa. The focal point is the first Chinese military base, situated beyond the borders of Djibouti, a few kilometres from the American Camp, Lemonnier. On the face of it, Beijing's westernmost naval base supports its fight against pirates in the Arabian Sea. But it also secures raw material supply routes, and serves to further contain India.

#### **In Search for an Answer: India**

The wave that originated in the Far East, and is washing over the Indian Ocean and the countries it borders, will be nearly impossible to stop. Beijing believes it has found the perfect geo-economic recipe: Problem countries gratefully accept China's offers; dictators and struggling governments can remain in the saddle thanks to funds from Beijing; in return, the far-sighted Chinese government acquires influence and ownership of strategic assets for relatively little outlay.

India, the natural regional power in the Indian Pacific, finds itself at a disadvantage. This becomes particularly obvious when New Delhi tries to beat Beijing at its own game. For instance, India is attempting to counter the Chinese-Pakistani access to the Indian Ocean via the port of Gwadar with the construction of the Iranian port of Chabahar. However, construction is proceeding at a snail's pace, and India is raising the ire of its partner, the US, because of the latter's boycott of Iran. However, India's hopes rest on the US at least using the new port as a gateway to Afghanistan. It also provides India itself access to Afghanistan without needing to cross hostile Pakistan. So far, however, Chabahar has been used primarily for delivering an Indian donation of wheat for the suffering Afghans.

Meanwhile, the most recent Indian project has not yet achieved even this very mild level of success. Together with the largest Southeast

Asian economy, it intends to expand the port of Sabang at the tip of Sumatra. Indonesia's President, Joko Widodo, has prescribed a "blue economy" for his country, including the expansion of ports for the navy. Sabang is strategically located at the entrance to the Strait of Malacca. "India is a strategic defence partner [...] and we will continue to advance our cooperation in developing infrastructure, including at Sabang Island and the Andaman Islands," said Widodo after a meeting with Modi in May 2018.<sup>27</sup>

The Indian prime minister has prescribed an "Act East" policy. But China has always already managed to invest billions before India makes a move. "Since it cannot match China's deep-pocketed infrastructure-focused engagement in Africa, India has tried to differentiate itself by engaging with its diaspora and private sector links to build development partnerships, where India has a comparative advantage in English-language training and research."<sup>28</sup>

But that is not enough. Ultimately speaking, New Delhi has been unable to adequately react to the changed circumstances created by Beijing. Diplomatic pressure remains India's last resort. In February 2016, Bangladesh cancelled its plans to build the China-led deepwater port of Sonadia after India expressed clear opposition to it.

India can only hope that Southeast Asia will learn to ever more skilfully play its previous donors, China and Japan, off against one another. The next step could involve India losing out on one cooperative effort or another, as was the case in Indonesia. This lag is also visible in the military domain. Despite all its upgrades, India is falling further and further behind China. This is shown by the fact that contracts for urgently needed fighter jets and submarines should already have been awarded for decades, and yet have not been.

India has neither the means nor the businesses to compete with the Chinese : After India was ejected from the stock exchange purchase in

Dhaka, the managing director, Majedur Rahman, noted, "We went through a long negotiation and a long period of due diligence, and at the end of it the Chinese bidders won on competence and price."<sup>29</sup> Above all, however, this marks a failure of Indian diplomacy – partly due to its historical burdens – in creating a regional architecture binding in East Asia. This makes China's offers that much more attractive to India's neighbours.

### China's Great Adversary: America

At the end of May 2018, four letters caused a stir. Washington renamed its US Pacific Command. At the historic town of Pearl Harbor, Defense Secretary James Mattis announced that the naval force, nearly 400,000 men strong, would henceforth be known as the US Indo-Pacific Command. "Relationships with our Pacific and Indian Ocean allies and partners have proven critical to maintaining regional stability," Mattis noted.<sup>30</sup> Australian political scientist Hugh White put the matter plainly: "The contest between America and China is classic power politics of the harshest kind. We have not seen this kind of struggle in Asia since the end of the Vietnam War, or globally since the end of [the] Cold War."<sup>31</sup> For Beijing, advancing into distant areas of the world is self-defence; "for Washington, D.C., it is aggression."<sup>32</sup>

**The Quad, which was conceived as an alliance to curb Chinese ambition, is today little more than a chimera.**

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In November 2017, in the Vietnamese port city of Da Nang – the US base during the Vietnam War –, of all places, Trump revived the term "Indo-Pacific" to signify the wider Asian area. The most important criterion, he said, was that it remain "free and open". This idea was not a new one: Ten years earlier, in 2007,

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gave a speech before the Indian parliament in which he coined the phrase “confluence of the two seas”: “The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A ‘broader Asia’ that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form [sic].”<sup>33</sup> Abe, like Trump a decade later, used the term consciously as an alternative to “Asia-Pacific”, which is used in the region’s east. This linguistic comeback was followed by a broadly communicated, but ultimately inconsequential, revival of the Quad – an alliance of four democracies, namely, the US, Australia, India, and Japan, with a view to opposing the party dictatorship of China. Filling this catchphrase with concrete action is, however, proving difficult. The top diplomats of the quartet did meet. Yet, at least since the friendly Wuhan Summit between Modi and Xi Jinping in the summer of 2018, India has shown little interest in an expanded conflict with China – at least before the 2019 election. Following the “Wuhan spirit”, both sides are turning against Washington’s protectionism.<sup>34</sup> At the Shangri-La Dialogue, the Asian security forum in Singapore, in the summer of 2018, Modi announced to an astounded audience that “India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members.”<sup>35</sup> Everyone had expected him to embrace the American strategy. Australia, too, is noticeably losing the will to defend a lost cause and pay the price for its criticism of China. Japan benefits from the fact that countries like Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia are learning to look for alternatives to their dependence on Beijing. The Quad, which was conceived as a loose confederation of those wilful of curbing Chinese ambition, has proven to be little more than a chimera. This is namely due to the behaviour of its members – some being overly cautious, fearing China’s backlash, and others putting their interests above that of the common goal.

Does America, China’s greatest adversary, offer more than rhetoric? “What is the Indo-Pacific

strategy? Many complain about its vagueness. Its most innovative part may be the name itself. Washington probably hopes the rest of the world would stop asking questions [sic], tacitly understand Washington’s intentions, and firmly gather around the US after a few exchanges of glances and together begin to counter China’s rising influence”, the Chinese state press noted with undisguised sarcasm.<sup>36</sup> Almost simultaneously, in the summer of 2018, the Pentagon reported that China was arming its positions in the South China Sea with nuclear weapons.

Indeed, the US has been losing ground in Asia for a long time. There was little follow-up to the “pivot to Asia” announced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in 2011, under the Barack Obama administration. While the Indo-Pacific is being revived rhetorically, the protectionism of the Trump administration is threatening to hit Asia’s export nations hard – which risks discrediting the US as an ally. China, meanwhile, is positioning itself as a helper in times of need: as far back as 1998, at the depths of the Asia crisis, Beijing protected its neighbours by refraining from devaluing the yuan. More and more Asians are viewing the communist dictatorship as the victor in the struggle between systems – it functions more smoothly than the democracies of America and Europe. “Two successive US administrations – Barack Obama’s and now Donald Trump’s – have failed to push back credibly against China’s expansionism in the South China Sea, which has accelerated despite a 2016 international arbitral tribunal ruling invalidating its territorial claims there. Instead, the US has relied on rhetoric or symbolic actions.”<sup>37</sup>

From an Asian point of view, China’s opponents have taken too little action. For instance, at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Mattis spoke of the “importance of the Pacific islands, America’s gateway to the Indo-Pacific” and promised to expand US commitment there. Initial “long-overdue” investments were only a “down payment on the initiatives to come in this important part of the world.”<sup>38</sup> But, once again, little followed. Washington offered 113 million US dollars for digital economy, energy, and

infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific. However, in comparative terms, this only amounts to one one ten-thousandth part of what China is promising. Additionally, the US also intends to support multilateral institutions – but this does not sound particularly convincing given Trump’s behaviour so far. The US also claims to want to involve the private sector more. This could help the recipient countries. But at least 60 per cent of their infrastructure projects are considered “not bankable” because governmental conditions are inadequate. This slows private sector involvement. China, with its superordinate goals, remains undeterred. As undeterred, in fact, as the battle of words between Xi and the American Vice President Mike Pence in late autumn at the APEC meetings in Papua New Guinea. Pence declared the US could offer the better development model without drowning their partners in a sea of debt.

Besides rhetoric, the US is at best delivering pinpricks. Together with Australia, they intend to build a marine basis on Papua New Guinea. Washington also insisted that the IMF only issue new loans to ailing Pakistan under two conditions: if, first, they would not be used to pay back Chinese debt, and second, if Islamabad disclosed the amount of this debt – something Beijing wishes to prevent. Moreover, the US seems to be satisfied with its forces and its bases in Okinawa, Busan, and Yokosuka around the South China Sea, and Djibouti and Guam in the Indian Ocean.

There is almost no discernible, profound reaction to the rapidly changing conditions. The democratic alliance that would defend the open Indo-Pacific area against Chinese expansionist ambitions lacks determination, resources, and opportunities. This gives Beijing a free hand in the western Pacific and all around the Indian Ocean. Underdeveloped countries often have but one option: to open their gates to Chinese money; others offer far too little. In this manner, Beijing is increasingly putting its stamp on vast chunks of the world.

## Where is Europe?

There is no European voice in the struggle for influence in the Indian Ocean. Yet, Europeans, too, have a justified interest in shipping lanes that remain open to the international community, and are not controlled by a Chinese world policeman. But they lack the opportunity to fly their own flag in distant areas of the world. The situation is made worse by Europe’s lack of interest, which seems to have remained fairly constant for years: At the 2016 Asia-Pacific Conference in Hong Kong, Sigmar Gabriel, Germany’s then Federal Minister of Economic Affairs, noted that the difference between China and Europe was that China had a strategy. He did not think of developing his own.

Dodging and looking away is not going to get the job done. Beijing’s advances into the Indian Ocean literally affect Europe. “In the past decade, Chinese companies have acquired stakes in 13 ports in Europe, including in Greece, Spain and, most recently, Belgium, according to a study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Those ports handle about 10 per cent of Europe’s shipping container capacity.”<sup>39</sup>

## American indecision creates a vacuum that Europe must fill.

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American indecision creates a vacuum that Europe must fill. Europe can neither compete with China on the monetary level, nor react by abandoning its standards. But there is still room for manoeuvre. Europeans must firstly consider the challenging region between Myanmar, on the one side, and the west coast of Africa, on the other, as their backyard through which the world’s trade flows. Strategically important nations such as Sri Lanka must be supported in their democratic efforts. Bangladesh and Myanmar are looking for partners. And, of course, there is India, which remains, despite all relationship difficulties, an important anchor in Asia.

It will be almost impossible to push China back. But the significance of the Indian Ocean demands European commitment, which must take the form of critical cooperation with China and the states under its influence. What remains is to colour the New Silk Road, at least around the Indian Ocean, in a slightly more European tint. While Beijing is opening mines, dredging ports, and laying railway lines, Brussels announced an approach in the early autumn of

2018: The European Union is now planning a “connectivity strategy” and intends to provide around 123 billion US dollars for closer networking with Asia by 2027. How and when exactly this is supposed to happen remains unclear.

Meanwhile, the window of time is closing. China is creating facts. “The Chinese are working to a long-term but visible strategy of extending the reach of their military forces [sic]. This



Textile economy: The production and export of textiles is of great importance to the Chinese economy.

Source: © Reuters.

is the armed counterpart to the Belt and Road strategy, as a part of which Beijing encourages approved Chinese companies to buy and build port, road, and rail infrastructure through Central Asia and the Pacific and Indian Oceans, financed by soft loans that can be hard to repay.”<sup>40</sup>

There is no indication that Xi and his party have any fundamental doubts about their strategy of

opening the Indian Ocean – and thus the gateway to Africa and Europe – for themselves.

Of course Beijing also makes mistakes – China is often its own worst enemy. It has had to make adjustments as it advances. Malaysia’s new Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, was the first to strengthen ties with Japan and to criticise China, warning of the latter’s “new colonialism”.<sup>41</sup> He called the projects negotiated with Beijing “unfair”, and then cancelled projects worth over 23 billion US dollars. At the same time, Myanmar’s government reduced the excessive plan for the Kyaukpyu Port by six billion US dollars. In mid-August 2018, the Balochistan Liberation Army carried out a suicide attack on a bus of Chinese engineers in Pakistan. A short time later, Islamabad, concerned about its debt burden, reduced Chinese loans for its largest project – the reconstruction of the railway line between the Port of Karachi and Peshawar – by two billion US dollars. Fear of the Chinese debt trap is growing in Africa, too. “Beijing has to know who it is lending money to and where the boundaries are. African countries ask China for money every day, but China has to learn to say ‘no’.”<sup>42</sup> Finally, India promised 1.4 billion US dollars in emergency aid – which the islands, tellingly, want to use to clear their debts with Beijing. That India is now indirectly paying for them is a peculiar irony of history.

China will react to the growing challenges, but not fundamentally change course. In a video by the state-owned New China TV, Chinese children sing, “The future’s now, the Belt and Road is how.”<sup>43</sup> Europe must not ignore the message.

*–translated from German–*

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[Who Will Save the Liberal World Order?](#)

# Dedicated Democrats against the Global Trend?

Attitudes towards Democracy in Africa

[Simon Primus / Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi](#)

Africa contains more transitional democracies than any other world region. Could the crisis of the liberal world order draw the continent towards authoritarianism? This article suggests that Africa's democratisation may continue despite the current global trend towards illiberalism. Survey responses from 36 societies on the continent reveal a widespread commitment to the practices and principles of liberal democracy.

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### **Africa's Democratisation and Citizen Attitudes**

The global crisis of the liberal world order could become especially dangerous for Africa's historically unstable post-colonial states. Since the 1990s, most of the continent's 54 states experienced a democratic transition with the introduction of new constitutions and regular multi-party elections. The institutional change was rapid and the sustainability of Africa's democratisation is yet to be proven. Could the globally fading appeal of liberal democracy draw Africa towards a new era of authoritarianism and instability?

Indeed, recent developments on the continent hint at a democratic regression. Several democratically elected governments, including those of Zambia, Uganda, and Tanzania have started to curtail civil liberties and to systematically crack down on media houses, activists, and oppositional groups. Meanwhile, fast-growing autocratic states such as Rwanda have become more confident, openly justifying political repression by presenting a positive record in poverty alleviation and development. The negative trend observed, alongside the economic success of some authoritarian systems, has revived debates among policy makers and experts about whether liberal democracy is a viable and desirable mode of governance for African societies.<sup>1</sup>

A crucial factor to consider, when attempting to determine whether Africa will see a new rise of authoritarianism, is the attitudes of ordinary citizens. Citizens who support democracy and embrace democratic ideas will not only consider democratic procedures legitimate, but will also stand up against authoritarian regime change. Citizens with undemocratic attitudes may by contrast be indifferent, and even endorse the abolition of democratic liberties in situations of political or economic crises.<sup>2</sup>

Most experts are highly sceptical about whether Africa's citizens are dedicated democrats. Common theoretical arguments, narratives, and anecdotes suggest that African value systems rather favour strong authoritarian rule and, in some ways, contradict the principles and practices of liberal democracy. The global discussion on a crisis of liberal democracy may further fuel such tendencies and depress commitment to democracy, allowing political elites to curtail civil liberties and democratic competition without facing much resistance from citizens.

However, the traditionally negative image of democratic attitudes in Africa is not backed by new results from public opinion polls. This article summarises insights from recent Afrobarometer surveys in 36 African countries. Against theoretical expectations, we find widespread and firm commitment to the procedures and principles of liberal democracy. The figures nourish the hope that African citizens will continue to support the continent's democratisation process in spite of negative global trends.

## Concerns about Anti-Democratic Attitudes in Africa

Concerns about popular attitudes in Africa are common among analysts and experts. Ethnic divisions, relatively low levels of human development, and strong communitarian values are thought to constrain the ability and willingness of people to practice democracy and to hold the powerful to account. Before turning to the actual attitudes of African citizens, we shall give a brief overview of the most common arguments.

The most widespread concern regards the role of ethnic identities.<sup>3</sup> The legacy of colonialism has left African states with arbitrary boundaries

in which various language and identity groups are merged into single nations. The exploitative nature of the colonial state hindered the formation of national identities; colonial administrations often created or exacerbated interethnic tensions by relying on ethnic labels as a tool of political control, and favouring certain groups over others.<sup>4</sup> The consequences are most compellingly explained by Peter Ekeh's seminal essay on two publics,<sup>5</sup> which recounts that after independence, African citizens' moral values only applied to pre-colonial identity groups. In this manner, it was felt to be legitimate to rob the nation state and its offices to the advantage of one's own group. Such a primacy of ethnic over national identity constitutes a significant obstacle



Spoilt for choice: The majority of the young African population grew up in a state of law holding regular multi-party elections. Source: © Luc Gnago, Reuters.

for democratic consolidation. People who identify in ethnic instead of national terms and expect resource distribution to be driven by ethnic favouritism will find it hard to accept any but their own group in power, which implies a high risk of electoral violence and political instability.

Another common reservation regarding citizen attitudes is the low level of development of most African states. Advocates of modernisation theory argue that democratic attitudes are to a large extent a consequence of systematic socio-cultural changes brought about by human development.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, better education and economic security induce people to think for themselves and to give priority to free choice, whereas low-income societies (which include most African countries) generally emphasise obedience and subordinate individual freedom to social conformity. Consequently, citizens in non-industrialised societies are expected to comply uncritically with authoritarian rule and sometimes even prefer authoritarian government and the abolition of their own civil liberties.

The modernisation view aligns well with narratives of strong communitarian values which suggest that Africans put the well-being of the community before that of the individual and that they hold extraordinarily strong social bonds with kinship groups defined by family and origin.<sup>7</sup> Such an emphasis on the community urges individuals to accept hierarchies and to align themselves with established structures of authority, which is why communitarian attitudes have been linked to an uncritical citizenry and a culture of silence towards dictatorship.<sup>8</sup> Communitarian values may, moreover, fuel personalised politics in which personal networks replace bureaucratic rules in determining who gets what.<sup>9</sup> Such informal distribution is not only at odds with liberal democracy's emphasis on individual rights, it also makes people dependent on the goodwill of officials, thereby further discouraging them to challenge political authority. These elements, if taken overall, suggest that populations on the continent would provide only weak support for government scrutiny or mechanisms of accountability.

## Issues of ethnic identity and prejudice towards outgroups seem to clash with a positive attitude towards democracy.

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A final frequently discussed issue regarding Africa's political culture is a lack of tolerance towards outgroups, such as foreigners, people of different religions, and homosexuals. The image of low tolerance is partly a consequence of state-orchestrated campaigns and popular hostility against LGBT communities in Africa, which earned the continent the reputation of being one of the world's most homophobic regions.<sup>10</sup> Popular homophobia is often interpreted as an indicator of a larger syndrome of low tolerance towards outgroups, including foreigners and people of different religions and ethnicities.<sup>11</sup> A lack of tolerance would constitute another liability to democratisation. Tolerance is inextricably linked to citizen equality and the protection of minorities.<sup>12</sup> State-orchestrated discrimination against outgroups is, moreover, a well-established tool of authoritarian regimes to deflect pressures for more political freedom.<sup>13</sup>

Taken together, the points above draw a relatively grim picture regarding the willingness and ability of African citizens to practice and promote democracy. Strong ethnic identities might be a constant liability to peaceful elections. In addition, Africans may generally prefer authoritarian rule and subordinating themselves uncritically to political authority, as modernisation theory and narratives of communitarian values suggest. Finally, low tolerance towards outgroups could further weaken the basis for democratic cooperation, and provides a threat to minorities.

However, fortunately, there are reasons to question this worrisome assessment. Narratives such as ethnic divisions and communitarian values cite historical conditions, but African statehood has transformed in recent years. The majority of Africa's young population has been born

and raised in constitutional states with regular multi-party elections. Some scholars promote a learning hypothesis according to which the practice of democracy – even if it is flawed – gradually leads to pro-democratic attitudes.<sup>14</sup> If this is true, it is reasonable to expect a democratisation of Africa’s political culture after 30 years of democratisation. An accurate assessment thus needs to adopt an empirical perspective.

### **The Views of African Citizens**

For a long time, little has been known about the actual views of African citizens. Theoretical arguments hardly got tested empirically because there was simply no data to draw upon. This has changed in recent years, most of all due to the introduction of the Afrobarometer (AB). The AB is a pan-African, non-partisan research network conducting surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and other related issues. Since 1999, the AB has conducted 145 surveys in 36 countries and has changed how researchers conceive of African politics.

Democratic attitudes are a good example of how the emergence of African survey data challenges conventional wisdom. In fact, most concerns about undemocratic attitudes are not backed by the responses of ordinary people. This is illustrated below by recent results from the sixth Round of the AB, which interviewed 53,935 citizens from 36 countries between 2014 and 2015. The samples are nationally representative<sup>15</sup> and altogether summarise the views of more than three-fourths of the continent’s population.<sup>16</sup>

The article presents summary statistics based on the weighted samples of all 36 countries. Such a general overview of 36 African societies is contentious. The continent’s 54 states may have much in common regarding their historical trajectory of state formation but there is considerable diversity in many other respects, e.g. wealth, religion, ethnic composition. In the case of political attitudes, it is nonetheless reasonable to infer some aggregate statements because most of the results are relatively unambiguous and

coherent across countries. To keep the paper straightforward, we do not show country-level results but discuss deviant cases in the text.

### **Ethnic vs. National Identities**

To start with, do public opinion data back the claim that Africans identify primarily as members of ethnic groups, and hardly at all with their respective nation states? The AB asks respondents to choose whether they identify more with their nation, or with their ethnic group. The results given by Figure 1 reveal remarkably strong ties with the national community. A clear majority (81 per cent) of respondents say they identify at least equally with the nation state, including 38 per cent who identify as nationals only. Just ten per cent rank ethnicity before nationality: four per cent of which identify only in ethnic terms and six per cent of which identify more with their ethnic group than with their nation. The figures indicate that African citizens have embraced the idea of a national community. Ethnic identities continue to play a role, at minimum for those 53 per cent who do not feel national only, yet the national identity is overwhelmingly acknowledged. Hence, there is little reason to doubt that Africans can overcome primordial group rivalries and cooperate in a democratic nation state. This holds true for all 32 countries where the question has been asked. The highest share of respondents who rank ethnicity before nationality was found in Uganda, and is still as small as 18 per cent.

### **Commitment to Democratic Institutions**

Another assumption is that Africans may actually prefer strong, authoritarian leadership over democratic institutions. To verify this claim, Figure 2 presents AB’s central indicators on demand for democracy.<sup>17</sup> The figures show strong support for democratic institutions: Two-thirds of the sample (67 per cent) say “democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government”. Respondents, moreover, show little tolerance for alternative forms of government. 73 per cent reject military rule; 78 per cent, one party rule; and 78 per cent, presidential dictatorship without elections and parliament.

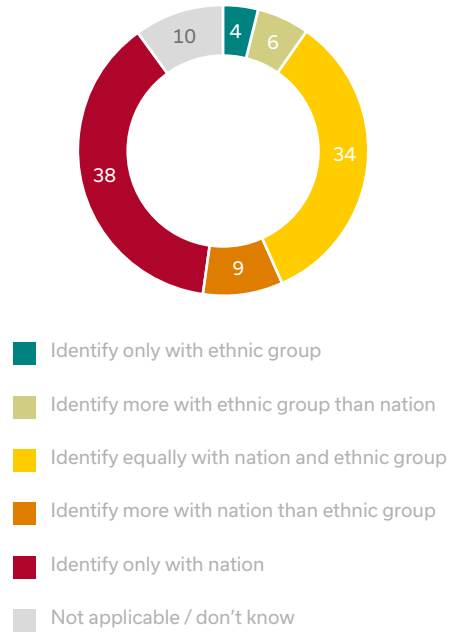
Dedicated democrats should simultaneously prefer democracy and disapprove of all three alternatives. If only those citizens are considered who express pro-democratic attitudes on all four items, the figure falls to 43 per cent. This seems relatively low, but there are significant cross-country differences. Especially the Arab countries in our sample (Egypt, Sudan, Algeria) but also some sub-Saharan societies (Mozambique, eSwatini, and Madagascar) fall sharply below the average with less than 25 per cent dedicated democrats. This being said, many countries markedly surpass the continental average with clear majorities who prefer democracy and reject all forms of non-democratic governance.<sup>18</sup> In most countries, the number of people with a firm commitment to democracy is thus sufficiently high to expect that a considerable share of the citizenry will demand democracy and oppose any attempt at authoritarian regime change. Moreover, further research has illustrated that this popular demand for democracy does in fact indicate a desire for democratic procedures, and is not merely a reflection of economic expectations associated with the word “democracy”.<sup>19</sup>

### Demand for Accountability

Africans might prefer democratic institutions, but will they also call for accountability? Even within a democratic institutional framework, there is a worrisome trend of African rulers evading accountability through the restriction of civil liberties. The modernisation view suggests that African citizens may accept such processes apathetically because social values discourage challenging political authority. So, what are the views of Africans towards mechanisms of political accountability?

To gauge popular demand for accountability, the AB includes a number of questions asking respondents to choose one out of two statements. Both sound favourable, yet one puts the emphasis on accountability, whereas the other points to the efficiency of unaccountable governance. For instance, respondents choose between (1) “Too much reporting on negative events,

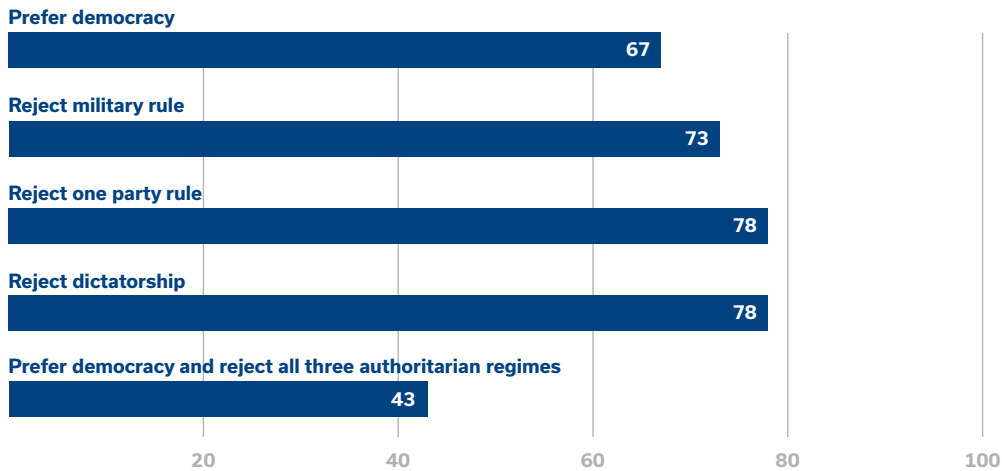
**Fig. 1: Ethnic vs. National Identity in 32 African Countries 2014/2015 (in Per Cent)**



Source: Own illustration based on Afrobarometer Round 6, in: <http://afrobarometer.org> [10 Dec 2018].

like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country” and (2) “The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption”. Figure 3 presents the proportion of respondents who opt for the pro-accountability statement on four such items. In the first three cases, clear majorities favour strong accountability: 69 per cent declare the media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption, 67 per cent state that the President must always obey the laws and the courts, and 53 per cent say citizens should hold the government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions come about more slowly. However, only 28 per cent say the opposition should monitor and criticise the government, whereas a majority wants it to cooperate. The control function of the opposition is thus not well-acknowledged. Nonetheless, the overall image indicates a great deal of support for democratic accountability and does

**Fig. 2: Demand for Democracy in 36 African Countries 2014/ 2015 (in Per Cent)**



Source: Own illustration based on Afrobarometer 2016, in: <https://bit.ly/2hmYhG7> [10 Dec 2018].

not back the view of a culture of political apathy. The results are relatively coherent across countries with few outliers who show a notably lower demand for accountability. Among them are the Arab countries Egypt, Sudan, and Algeria, but also some sub-Saharan societies, such as Mozambique and Guinea.

### The lack of tolerance towards sexual minorities in Africa is still worrying.

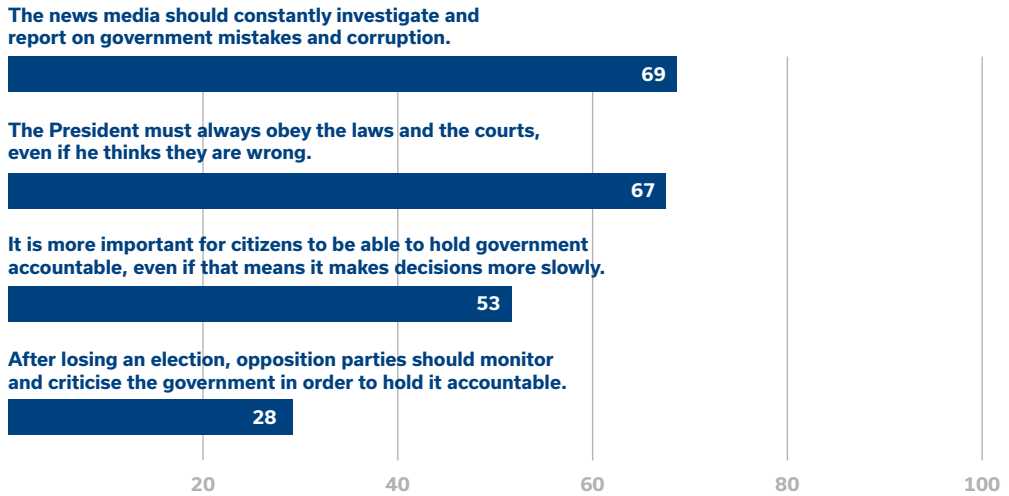
#### Social Tolerance

A final common concern about African value systems is a lack of tolerance towards outgroups, which would be in opposition to democratic citizen equality, and might be utilised by dictators so as to distract from autocratic and arbitrary governance. To investigate tolerance, the Afrobarometer asks respondents whether they would like, dislike, or be indifferent to have people belonging to certain potential outgroups as their neighbours. The reactions are displayed in Figure 4. Interestingly, we find fairly high

levels of tolerance towards four out of five groups. Overwhelming majorities of more than 80 per cent would not mind living next door to people from a different ethnic group, people of a different religion, and immigrants. When it comes to people living with HIV/Aids, the number is slightly smaller – yet, on a positive note, those countries which have been worst affected by HIV crises show extremely high tolerance levels with vast majorities who would accept neighbours living with HIV. Examples include Botswana (96 per cent), Namibia (94 per cent), and Zimbabwe (94 per cent).<sup>20</sup> A deviating and worrisome result is, however, found regarding tolerance towards homosexuals. Across 33 countries (in Algeria, Egypt, and Sudan the question was deemed too sensitive by national survey partners), only 21 per cent would accept homosexual people as neighbours. The only positive outliers are some South African States and the islands of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe, where about 50 per cent would not mind homosexual neighbours. In many societies, the number falls below ten per cent. Among them is Uganda, for which it is very well documented how President Museveni sought to evade accountability pressures through a state-orchestrated campaign against sexual minorities.<sup>21</sup>



**Fig. 3: Demand for Accountability in 36 African Countries 2014/2015 (in Per Cent)**



Source: Own illustration based on Afrobarometer Round 6, in: <http://afrobarometer.org> [10 Dec 2018].

Concern about homophobia is thus certainly justified, especially if it is misused as a tool to deflect pressures for a more open political space by authoritarian leaders. This last point notwithstanding, the prior claim of generalised low social tolerance levels in Africa is clearly unfounded. Most outgroups are, on the contrary, well accepted.

To summarise, we find little support for common narratives of undemocratic political attitudes in Africa in our survey data. Ethnic identities may continue to play a role in African politics, but they are by no means the primary category of identification nowadays. Similarly, the modernisation view that low-income societies generally fail to develop democratic mass attitudes is not backed by the data. Although people in more developed settings (educated, urban) exhibit somewhat more democratic attitudes,<sup>22</sup> macro-level low-development does not seem to prevent the emergence of critical, autonomous, and tolerant citizens. The cross-country distribution of democratic attitudes rather lends support to a learning process, evident in the fact that societies with a more democratic recent history also tend to show stronger democratic attitudes.<sup>23</sup>

All in all, the views of ordinary citizens reveal a remarkably democratic African political culture. Identification with the nation state is widespread, national majorities prefer democracy, endorse strong accountability, and show high tolerance towards outgroups. Theories of political culture generally regard it as sufficient when a critical proportion of the citizenry are dedicated democrats.<sup>24</sup> The share of pro-democratic citizens in most African states is certainly above the threshold to ensure that societies accept democratic procedures and exert effective accountability.

The findings from the Afrobarometer give hope that new African democracies will resist the crisis of the liberal world order and continue on their way towards democratisation. Although political elites may feel encouraged by the global trend to curtail liberal democracy, the strong democratic commitment of citizens constitutes a hurdle for authoritarian-minded elites, which are likely to face protests and popular disapproval if they try to roll back democratic freedoms.

## Africa's Political Culture: Pro-Democratic Attitudes and Civic Action

The crisis of the liberal world order is particularly dangerous for Africa's nascent democracies. An emerging democracy needs dedicated democrats in order to survive. Citizens need to accept the rules of the game, hold the government to account, and – if necessary – defend civil liberties.

Common narratives suggest that the value systems of African societies fail to promote such virtues, and, consequently, that the crisis of the liberal world order might further depress popular commitment to democracy on the continent.

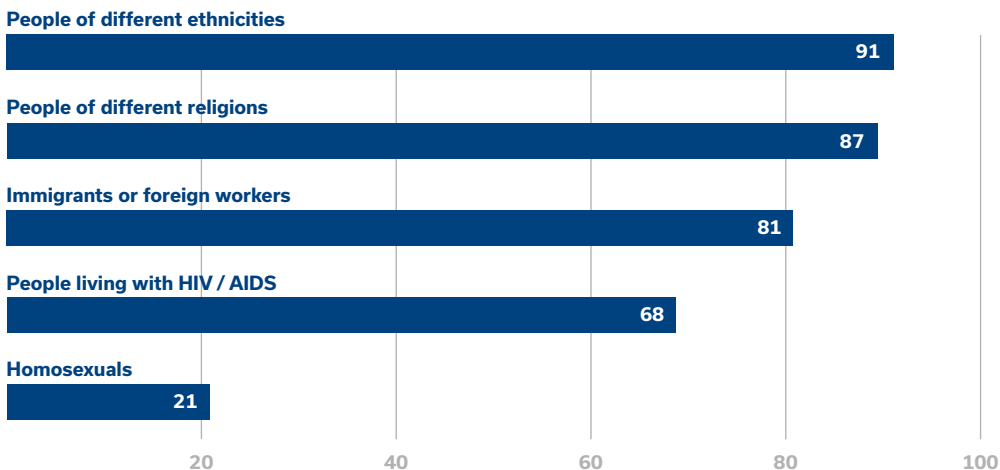
Yet, the public opinion data presented in this paper draw a different picture. Responses by ordinary Africans to Afrobarometer surveys from 36 countries reveal widespread commitment to democratic core principles. This includes identification with the nation state and a preference for democracy over other systems of governance. Most encouragingly, the surveys indicate that people endorse mechanisms of accountability: Majorities support government scrutiny by journalists, courts, and citizens, even if it means less

efficient governance. Finally, tolerance towards most outgroups is high.

Only a few details tarnish the overall pro-democratic pattern. The control function of opposition parties is not well-acknowledged; most citizens rather want the opposition to cooperate than to challenge the government. A second concern is widespread hostility towards homosexuals, which may be further emotionalised by authoritarian leaders. It should also not remain unmentioned that, although the results are generally fairly coherent across the 36 states, some countries systematically deviate. Countries repeatedly found amongst those with least democratic attitudes are, in particular, Arab countries (Egypt, Sudan, and Algeria), and some sub-Saharan states (Madagascar, Mozambique, eSwatini).

However, most societies show a pro-democratic political culture. Moreover, recent events illustrate that these attitudes also lead to political action. In Uganda, journalists, bloggers, and citizens withstand increasing repression by long-term leader Museveni and continue to voice their opinions.<sup>25</sup> In Tanzania, civil society organisations stand up against the detainment

**Fig. 4: Tolerance in 33 African Countries 2014/2015**  
Number of Respondents Accepting Neighbours Unconditionally (in Per Cent)



Source: Own illustration based on Afrobarometer 2016, in: <https://bit.ly/2d5fRZW> [10 Dec 2018].



Election ink: A substantial part of African populations call for democratic forms of government and reject an authoritarian shift in politics. Source: © Finbarr O'Reilly, Reuters.

of, and threats made towards, opposition groups, journalists, and social media activists under President Magufuli.<sup>26</sup> In Burkina Faso, where a popular uprising in 2014 toppled the 27-year dictatorship of Blaise Compaoré, citizens have cultivated a culture of protest and regularly take to the streets to demonstrate for various issues.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, in Africa's more established democracies, peaceful turnovers via the ballot are becoming more common. Gambians unexpectedly voted out long-term ruler Yahya Jammeh in 2016, despite a tightly restricted public sphere. Weeks later, Ghanaian voters dismissed President John Mahama due to an exceptionally poor developmental record. Most recently, in April 2018, Sierra Leoneans, for the first time in their history, recalled the ruling party. The tightly contested election remained peaceful despite relatively

strong ethnic linkages of the two major parties and a history of ethnic conflict.

Overall, the results nourish hope that Africa's democratisation will continue even if liberal democracy's universal appeal diminishes. Africa's political culture seems quite favourable for future democratic gains and it can be expected that opposition leaders, social activists, and ordinary citizens continue to press for democratic reform. The prevalence of a democratic political culture does not, however, guarantee democratic consolidation. In some countries, for instance Cameroon, Rwanda, and Togo, political elites are still highly reluctant to relinquish authoritarian control.<sup>28</sup> Generally, the short supply of democratic politics fails to satisfy the expectations of citizens in many African

states.<sup>29</sup> Hence, most societies still have a long way to go before they become full democracies. A crucial factor on this road could be the solidarity of international donors and policy makers, who should be reminded by the figures presented here that the acceptance of authoritarian rule is against the preferences of most African citizens.

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[Who Will Save the Liberal World Order?](#)

# The Arab World Struggles for Order

Beyond Autocrats and Islamists –  
Is there a Liberal Alternative?

Thomas Birringer / Edmund Ratka

The old order of the Arab world, which emerged from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War and was influenced for decades by post-colonial autocracies, is disintegrating. State collapse and the restoration of authoritarian regimes, religious radicalisation, and jihadist terror have long since dispelled the hopes for liberty and true participation in government raised by the “Arab Spring”. Do liberal forces still have a chance?

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While international structures readjust, the Arab world is struggling to find its own order. Being a theatre of external power projection, and thus of a global competition of governmental systems, Arab countries and societies are first and foremost experiencing severe upheavals, largely characterised by cycles of violence radicalisation. Against this background, this article takes stock of the situation in the region and discusses prospects for development. We will first show how the governance structures in the region have become obsolete, being thus instrumental in bringing about the waves of protest of the “Arab Spring” in 2010/2011. While authoritarianism and Islamism are mutually beneficial to disastrous effect, liberal alternatives struggle to find ground. However, increasing civic awareness and engagement, as well as the presence of reform-oriented young voices – both from the region itself and from the Arab diaspora – mean that positive developments cannot be ruled out, at least in the medium term. The process of forming identities, values, societal models, and forms of government is an obviously protracted one, which we nevertheless believe to still be an open one. This process is complicated by geopolitical friction and rivalries.

### **From the Weakness of the Internal Order to the Revolutionary Impetus**

When, in 2011, on 14 January in Tunis and on 11 February in Cairo, the long-time rulers Ben Ali and Mubarak were overthrown, the contract between the authoritarian rulers – who provided security and social welfare to citizens

who in exchange gave up their political participation – had long since become fragile. While the regimes ossified and enriched themselves ever more shamelessly, a younger generation – better educated and, thanks not least to Al Jazeera and Facebook, internationally better networked – was coming of age. The economies, which were liberal in name only and actually riddled with corruption, were no longer able to offer this generation credible prospects for the future. Monopolies and cronyism, supported by the rulers, had in many places replaced or supplemented the military as pillars of the regime; meanwhile, competition, innovation, market incentives, or a functioning social system were nowhere to be found. The population were largely denied both democratic participation and the protection of the rule of law, as well as the elementary components of basic public services. The core problem of the Arab world has, therefore, been correctly diagnosed as a failure of statehood, which manifests itself through the “blatant neglect and the abuse of the state’s obligation to care for its citizens”.<sup>1</sup>

“From a pile of dust full of individuals, from a mix of tribes and sub-tribes, all bent under the yoke of resignation and fatalism, I created a people made up of citizens.”<sup>2</sup> Habib Bourguiba, champion of independence and Tunisia’s first president and outstanding moderniser left no doubt about who was responsible for his land becoming a nation. This paternalism is typical of the ruling philosophy that developed over the course of independence movements in Arab nations – a philosophy, which stuck. Then, the

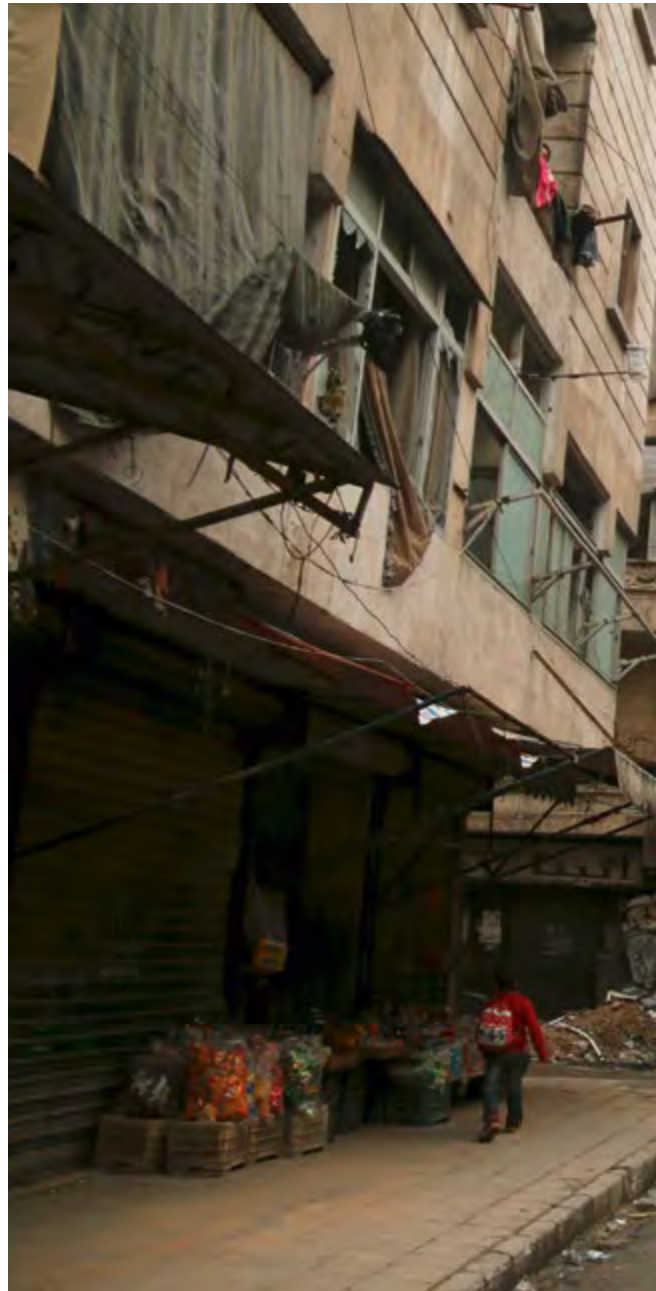
Arab autocrats had nothing more than brutal violence, social favours, and cosmetic reforms in their repertoire when the mass protests erupted in 2010/2011. Their paternalistic leadership style was expressed in their final attempts to sway public opinion. Mohammed Bouazizi, the man whose self-immolation had triggered the protests, was visited by Tunisia's Ben Ali in a staged paternal visit to his sickbed, when the protester was bandaged and in his dying throes. Meanwhile, in his last speech, Egypt's Mubarak addressed the demonstrators in Tahrir Square as "dear citizens, my sons".

to the concept of the "civic state" (*dawla madaniyyaa*), which was supported even by conservative religious forces during the "Arab Spring", which is why he attributes liberal goals to the entire movement.<sup>4</sup> Others consider the demands for a system change, away from tyranny and dictatorship, towards greater powers of self-determination, already granting the protest movement a liberal character.<sup>5</sup> This is countered by the social and ideological diversity of the demonstrators who took to the streets to oppose the status quo, and in support of general principles – as is reflected in the phrases and slogans mentioned

But on the streets, people had long been speaking another language – and demonstrating a new, real civic awareness. Besides the cries of "Leave!" hurled at their rulers, and the demands for work, bread, freedom, and dignity, demonstrators in many Arab countries began using the expressive protest slogan, "The people want the regime to fall!" The Israeli political scientist, Uriel Abulof, considered this change in semantics to be indicative of a "sea change in Arab public political thought". He noted that the construction "The people want" (*as-shab yourid*) for the first time founded a positive nationalism based on self-determination and popular sovereignty. It expressed a new form of political legitimacy and was to take the place of pan-Arab nationalism, understood as liberation from colonial foreign rule, territorial nationalism based on national stability and Islamism.<sup>3</sup>

Whether the 2010/2011 protest movements were really (at least intended) revolutions with an "anarchist method and liberal intention", as American-Egyptian sociologist Mohamed Bamyeh, who himself took part in the Tahrir Square protests in Cairo, characterises them, may, however, be controversial. Bamyeh refers

Dead end: The hope for a positive change that sprouted during the "Arab Spring" has vanished long ago in light of devastating conflicts such as the one in Syria. Source: © Ammar Abdullah, Reuters.





above – but who had no common idea of how the new state should be constitutionally or institutionally organised. It is also for this reason that the revolutionary youth movement, in Tunisia and above all in Egypt, failed to make a lasting contribution to the transformation process, since they did not organise themselves into parties or other types of structured organisations.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the revolutionary impetus, the self-empowerment of at least parts of the people, and the acceptance of great personal risk on the part of individuals, was a powerful liberal spark in the Arab world. What remains of it eight years later?

### **The Revolution Fails, Civic Engagement Remains – to the Possible Extent**

The balance sheet of the “Arab Spring” is devastating. Three states, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, have threatened their very existence and become the scene of civil and proxy wars. Regimes like that of Damascus have ruthlessly crushed protests, and the opposition has splintered and militarised. One generation full of hope has now disappeared into exile, into torture chambers, or has been forced onto battlefields; the next is growing up amongst ruins and



hatred. In the lee of the protests, taking advantage of the weaknesses of the states, extremist ideologies and terror organisations, such as “Islamic State” (IS), have spread. There is a growing longing for security and stability – at any cost. Since 2013, Egypt has again been ruled by a General, one with an even harder hand than his predecessors.

Even in Tunisia, the only country to have embarked upon a significant democratic transition in the wake of the 2010/2011 unrest, surveys show that around half of the population have come to view the revolution as a failure. Goals such as the reduction of unemployment and the development of the hinterland have not been achieved; instead, purchasing power and standards of living have fallen. Even though 57 per cent of those polled view the freedom of speech now enjoyed in the country as a clear success, 80 per cent of respondents think that the overall situation in the country is worse than before 2011.<sup>7</sup>

But what the upheavals of the “Arab Spring” have shown is that existing conditions are not set in stone. Tunisian political scientist, Hatem M’rad, considers the “revolutions, revolts, and demonstrations” in the region to have led to the “birth of a truly independent civil society” which was able to shake established political, military, and religious authorities.<sup>8</sup> This blossoming of civil society was most clearly shown in Tunisia, where it was given the most scope; immediately following the overthrow of the *ancien régime*, thousands of new clubs and societies were formed there. Local involvement – from recycling plastic bottles and renovating the neighbourhood school, to publicly denouncing grievances with the local administration – can be observed, as can the political lobbying of nationwide non-governmental organisations. These organisations played a key role in establishing civil liberties and women’s rights in the new constitution of 2014.

But elsewhere, too, citizens have taken their fate and that of the public, in the widest sense, much more firmly in their own hands. This civic

engagement expresses itself in each country very differently and is context-specific in its scope and quality. The spectrum ranges from complete self-government, as practised for a time by local councils in Syria’s “liberated areas”, to the recurring protests for regional development in the Berber region of Rif, to separate issue-oriented movements. An example is Beirut’s “You stink!” protests during the rubbish crisis of 2015. These protests even gave rise to a new party, supported by independent citizens (but which, also tellingly, failed to achieve sustained electoral success). In the same year, the citizens of In Salah, a provincial town in the Algerian Sahara, protested against test drilling for the production of shale gas because they feared negative environmental effects of fracking. As a result, the Energy Minister was dismissed, and the government announced that Algeria would refrain from extracting shale gas. Recently, in the summer of 2018, the Jordanians forced a change of government following increasingly politicised demonstrations triggered by the announcement of tax increases and subsidy reductions.<sup>9</sup>

These protest movements ultimately replicate a tendency that was visible over the course of the “Arab Spring”: They are spontaneous, issue-oriented, often without prominent leading figures, and less embedded in formal structures than a classical understanding of civil society would generally lead one to expect. It has therefore been correctly pointed out that international players and supporters of democracy should pay much more attention to these new social movements in the search for potential partners.<sup>10</sup>

The individual concessions that the “Arab street” was able to secure from its rulers, and the efforts of citizens to compensate for the shortcomings of state service structures, must not, however, obscure the fact that in most Arab countries (Tunisia again excepted), the leeway for civic engagement has declined significantly in recent years. Legal improvements, partially implemented during the course of the 2011 “Arab Spring”, are being counteracted by obstructive

administrative practices, for example with regard to the registration of non-governmental organisations. At the same time, in view of the growth in strength of “Islamic State”, anti-terror legislation has also been tightened. The provisions concerning what constitutes support of terrorism, most of them quite flexible, suggest an a priori intention to abuse such new laws in the interest of retaining power, and have increased the risks of publicly expressing unpopular opinions. The Arab world has not yet found a way to break the escalating spiral of authoritarian rule and Islamist radicalisation.

### **The Vicious Cycle of Authoritarianism and Islamism**

“Me or chaos. Me or the Islamists.” Now that the hopes for rapid democratic development of the Arab world, which were also widespread in the West in 2011, have been dashed, and Europe sees itself more than ever threatened by migration and Islamist terror, this favourite narrative of Arab potentates is regaining prominence. “It is also important to understand that we must strike a balance between human rights and the security and unity of the country. We are a country of 93 million inhabitants, and when the country disintegrates, you will see that people will flee to anywhere they can,” Egypt’s President al-Sisi told the German public during his visit to Berlin in June 2016.<sup>11</sup> Syria’s ruler Assad, meanwhile, appears in Western media offering himself as a partner in the fight against terrorism (“You can’t fight terrorism without ground troops”<sup>12</sup>). He also asserts his role as guarantor of stability in the region. These declarations, however, can safely be dismissed as cynical propaganda manoeuvres. But as soon as the Syrian regime has secured victory, with Russian and Iranian help, the West and Germany in particular will face hard questions concerning the reconstruction of the Assad-controlled territory, and the handling of Syrian refugees.

“Arab autocrats appear self-confident today, but nobody should be fooled. They are really completely overwhelmed, hypernationalistic, repressive, paralysed, and facing growing crises,”<sup>13</sup>

summarises political scientist, Marc Lynch. The increasing violence of the Arab regimes toward their own peoples, and their oftentimes activist foreign policy, are signs of their weakness and nervousness. Lynch predicts a new insurgency, which will then be significantly more radical. Middle East expert and former French diplomat, Jean-Pierre Filiu, also believes that “despots” in this region cannot be part of the solution, because they are the core of the problem. Their “deep state” contributed to the emergence of an “Islamic State” through anti-democratic sabotage manoeuvres. Unable to control it, they would now leave it to the rest of the world to deal with.<sup>14</sup>

### **Extremist ideologies flourish in the Arab world, where regimes work sometimes with and sometimes against Islamist groups.**

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It is undisputed that the continued poor governance in the Arab world has created fertile terrain for the blossoming of extremist ideologies. The political, economic, and socio-cultural marginalisation of young people has made them susceptible to the promises of salvation and heroism that the “Islamic State”, and other jihadist groups, use so skilfully as propaganda.<sup>15</sup> The violent spiral of repression and radicalisation has become apparent with particular severity in the Syrian civil war, but also in Egypt in recent years: The regime’s violent measures taken against an Islamist opposition – sometimes real, sometimes imagined – strengthen extremist elements and drive them to form armed underground groups. At the same time, Arab autocrats have, at times and selectively, cooperated with forces of political Islam, and this, too, has driven the authoritarianism-Islamism spiral. Their aim was to counterbalance the left-leaning secular opposition, and to win the support of conservative population groups. It is worth remembering that Sharia Law was constitutionally enshrined

as the main source of justice in Egypt as early as 1980, under the actually pro-Western President, Anwar el-Sadat.

After what were widely thought to be “moderate” Islamists won election victories in Tunisia and Egypt, and also gained ground in other countries, such as Morocco and Libya in 2011 and 2012, many in Washington and in European capitals hoped that moderate political Islam could ensure stable, democratic development in the Arab world; the time of military-backed and supposedly secular autocracies seemed to have run out. The responsibilities of government, they hoped, would finally domesticate the Islamists. And even though the coup d'état in Cairo on 3 July 2013 removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power, and the group is on the retreat elsewhere in the region, this idea remains. Journalist Rainer Hermann recently described the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a “firewall against jihad” that was torn down when the Brotherhood were forcibly deposed. Unfortunately, he affirms this development taught young Islamists that democracy does not pay.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, the Islamists' brief stint in power in Tunis and Cairo revealed a relationship to liberal democracy and pluralistic society that is, to put it mildly, ambivalent. Egypt's President Morsi expressly did not involve progressive elements of society, instead imposing presidential decrees with which he attempted to cement the power of the Muslim Brotherhood. Tunisia's Ennahda Party, meanwhile, refrained from dismantling the country's progressive acquis, such as women's rights, only after fierce resistance on the part of civil society. The Ennahda Party subsequently presented itself in an increasingly conciliatory fashion, and since 2015 has governed in a “grand coalition” along with secular bourgeois forces in a spirit of compromise; however, observers debate the extent to which it has genuinely changed. For instance, Ivesa Lübben, observing the Ennahda's “party reform congress” in May 2016, reported a continued “holistic understanding of Islam” and a canon of Islamic values as the basis for the party programme, but identifies “in the party's

symbology and new use of language a farewell to political Islam in favour of muslim democracy.”<sup>17</sup> According to Sigrid Faath, however, religious law remains an Ennahda priority, which makes its stance incompatible with that of a “modern civil state”. Referring to developments in the region as a whole, Faath rightly points out that even when Salafist-Jihadist organisations distance themselves from violence as a political tool and take the legal political route, such efforts do not necessarily mean a departure from their radical fundamentalist religious positions and social agenda.<sup>18</sup>

Can the current phase of upheaval ultimately give rise to the redevelopment and reestablishment of a tolerant, moderate “civil Islam”<sup>19</sup> akin to the one Hermann describes as having characterised urban centres in the Arab world until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century? As long as this question remains unanswered, the dilemma that has confronted liberals in the Arab world and their supporters in the West for thirty years will remain.

### **The Liberal Dilemma – Which Values Can Command a Majority?**

The term “Algers syndrome”<sup>20</sup> is sometimes used to describe the phenomenon of democratic elections putting undemocratic Islamists into power. When Algeria tentatively opened politically at the end of the 1980s, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won the first round of parliamentary elections in December 1991. The military organised a coup, and a bloody civil war followed. In the Palestinian Territories, the radical Islamist Hamas organisation, which was listed as a terror organisation by the EU and the US, won the majority of seats in the Palestinian National Authority's Legislative Council in 2006.

During the course of the “Arab Spring”, as new democratic prospects opened up, this dilemma returned to the agenda with increasing importance. How difficult this dilemma remains for liberals was shown in particularly vivid and tragic fashion in Egypt. Among the millions who, in the spring of 2013, took to the

streets in opposition to the first democratically elected, civilian president of the country, Muslim Brotherhood member Mohamed Morsi, were revolutionary youth movements that had also mobilised against Mubarak and actually advocated a more liberal society. Just like liberal intellectuals, they now denied the competence and legitimacy of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose style of government was increasingly authoritarian and exclusive. They said that the Brotherhood was trying to shape the state according to its ideas. The problem of the “tyranny of the majority” – already identified by Alexis de Tocqueville, and receiving increasing attention today under the buzzword “illiberal democracies” – is particularly striking in the Arab world.

“The Army defended the will of the people,” author and long-time opposition figure Alaa al-Aswani said, in justification of Morsi’s forcible deposition. “As a result, the revolution has the opportunity, for the first time, to achieve its democratic goals.”<sup>21</sup> Al-Aswani has since been banned from public appearances, and nobody was willing to publish his most recent novel in Egypt. The prisons of the al-Sisi regime house not only tens of thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members, but also representatives of the liberal opposition. Human rights organisations estimate that there are a total of 60,000 political prisoners (the number under Mubarak was estimated at 5,000-10,000); they also raise serious allegations of torture.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, Al-Azhar University – which is under the supervision of the Egyptian government, and revered throughout the Sunni-Arab area – defends a rigid interpretation of religion, for instance with regard to women’s rights.

After the troubled years of upheaval, and in view of the collapse of order in the Arab world, many consider a strongman who can ensure a minimum of stability to be the lesser evil. But, given the dedication and suffering endured in hopes of democracy over the last few years, it would be cynical to therefore claim that the people of the region do not want freedom. Surveys continue to indicate broad (although by no means

unanimous) support for democracy as the system of government desired for the respondents’ own countries.<sup>23</sup> But when it comes to spelling out how such a democracy ought to be implemented, there are major differences, which are also country-specific. For instance, while almost 80 per cent of respondents in Libya agree with the statement that Sharia, i.e. Islamic law, should be the only “source of inspiration” for legislation, only one in four respondents in neighbouring Tunisia agree.<sup>24</sup>

### **Islam provides security for societies that are undergoing upheaval and is increasingly important in the individual lives of citizens.**

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The question of how the preference for values will develop in the Arab world remains open. The decline of the more secular pan-Arabism and Nasserism, and the growing disappointment resulting from the misdevelopments that followed independence, have led to the spread of conservative Islamic ideas since the 1970s. In the current state of upheaval, religion may give special support to insecure societies searching for an identity. In their struggles for power, both domestic and external players exploit confessionalism, and thereby foment it. Empirical studies show that religion is today playing an increasingly important role in the everyday practices of young people. Rachid Ouissa, a Middle East expert from Marburg, notes that there has been a decline in political religiosity and an increase in social religiosity; the degree of piety is rising fastest at the individual level, and no longer as a collective social utopia.<sup>25</sup>

Youssef Courbage and Emmanuel Todd already argued more than ten years ago that the declining birth rates and increasing levels of education in the Muslim-Arab world would inexorably drive modernisation.<sup>26</sup> In his most recent book, “The Islamic Enlightenment”, Christopher de

Bellaigue attempts to show that “ideas such as the value of the individual and the advantages of law, science, and a representative form of government ... today are all authentic elements of Islamic thought and Islamic society” – even though they have not yet been able to be translated into political practice.<sup>27</sup>

Even if one considers such theses to be reductionist, it has been possible over the last few years – especially by means of and due to social media – to identify “progressive” lifestyle niches of a youth increasingly connected to the global information community. Women such as the Franco-Moroccan writer Leila Slimani, or the British-Egyptian science journalist Shereen El Feki, are pushing for a more open approach towards long-taboo topics, such as sexual oppression and sexual self-determination, and are aggressively denouncing the patriarchal structures in the Arab world.<sup>28</sup> Moroccan journalist Ahmed Benchemsi observes a “creeping but radical socio-cultural shift” in the region. Liberals could use this shift to push back the established conservative, religious forces. To do so, however, they would have to leave the cities, reach beyond the middle and upper classes, and develop more sustainable, grass-roots-based organisational structures.<sup>29</sup>

In any case, this background seems to indicate that political Islam – proceeding from the Arab world and on the advance globally, and most particularly as seen in its more extreme and violent manifestations – is not at all a serious alternative to a liberal order; it is, instead, a crisis symptom of a conventional understanding of Islam, that is largely ossified and overtaxed by the challenges of the modern world.

### **The Middle East as a Battleground for Competing Systems**

The internal upheavals and transformation processes in the Middle East and North Africa coincide with – and exacerbate – a power vacuum in the region, which thus increasingly moves into the focus of external powers, making the region a theatre for the global competition of systems.

From a geopolitical point of view, in the struggle for a liberal world order, the region is thus more of a playing field for foreign players, than a place of origin for independent ones. At the regional level, three traditional centres of power in the Arab world have swiftly lost their status as international players: Iraq and Syria, which have been torn apart in civil wars, and Egypt, which is primarily concerned with its own affairs after all the back and forth of revolution and restoration. There remains only Saudi Arabia which, led by the young, aspiring Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, views itself as the protector of all Sunnis and indeed of all Arab Muslims. The Saudis are entangled in a hegemonic conflict with Iran, which has in recent years been able to expand its position by supporting Shiite militias in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. But neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran – nor Turkey – play in the world league of power politics. Even the Iranian nuclear programme is aimed more towards regional hegemony than global power projection. No country in the Middle East and North Africa is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, none a member of the G8, and only Saudi Arabia and Turkey are members of the G20.

### **Russia and China are increasingly presenting themselves as alternative political and economic partners in the region.**

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At the same time, the United States, which is becoming increasingly independent of Middle East resources, is gradually withdrawing from the region and becoming less and less willing to invest funds and military power there. This constant survived the transition from Obama to Trump, and will continue. More than 80 per cent of oil exports from the Gulf go to Asia, primarily to China, Japan, and South Korea. Why then, so runs the domestic logic in the US, should the American taxpayer continue to guarantee raw





Visible protest: Young people seek and find ways to make their voices heard in the Arab world as well.  
Source: © Muhammad Hamed, Reuters.

materials security for America's rival, China? It remains unclear who will fill the vacuum that the US will leave behind.

With its regime-supporting intervention in Syria, which has been openly military since September 2015, Russia skilfully outmanoeuvred the hesitant West and established itself as an indispensable player. It is pursuing manifold interests in the Middle East. First of all, there is the centuries-old geopolitical desire for access to the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has had no ally in the region except Assad's Syria. Russia is now presenting itself not only as Assad's defender, but also an alternative partner for many other regimes in the region, from the United Arab Emirates to Saudi Arabia, through Egypt, which was a Soviet ally under the still well-respected President Nasser, all the way to Turkey. There are also domestic policy motives: After the portent of Ukraine,

President Putin is determined to prevent any "colour revolution" in his sphere of influence and in any country allied with Moscow, making an alliance with Moscow a sort of guarantee of continued power for autocrats. Nevertheless, Russia's influence is limited. Beyond Syria, it has scarcely any military presence. Theatres of conflict associated with Syria, such as Iraq, remain largely untouched. Deliveries of modern weapons systems, most prominently to Iran and Turkey, have so far been mainly announcements. It is possible that further geographical expansion of military activities might lead to an overstretch of Russian power projection.

In addition to Russia, China, traditionally an advocate of the principle of non-intervention, is increasingly developing into a system-stabilising player in the region. Although China's relevance there is still much lower there than it is for the development of Africa and Asia, Beijing's

growing global political ambitions have also brought the Middle East and North Africa into the country's focus. At the beginning of 2016, China's leadership published its first strategy document on the Arab world. The Mediterranean region plays a key role in the New Silk Road project (One Belt, One Road Initiative, or BRI) launched in 2013.<sup>30</sup> An example here is Algeria, where in 2013, China replaced former colonial power France as the country's most important importer (although the EU as a whole remains by far its most important trading partner). Egypt has also been trying to diversify its international relationships more strongly since al-Sisi took power, and is looking to the East. The Egyptian and Chinese presidents have met three times so far, and China is a key partner in Egyptian megaprojects, such as the construction of a new administrative capital.

Europe's southern neighbourhood is thus confronted with a changed and dynamic constellation of players. The European Union member states continue to struggle with the challenge of better coordinating their national policy approaches – and those of Brussels. So far, they have been unable to establish a sustained European community of interests, or even of action. This will make leveraging individual regimes difficult as long as European countries remain primarily competitors in the struggle for economic contracts. Moreover, the Syrian civil war has shown, as Roderich Kiesewetter and Stefan Scheller point out, how the “inability of the European states to pull together on issues of diplomacy and development and security policy” contributed to the EU's failure to achieve a political solution to the conflict.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Europe still has enormous potential in the region with which it is linked in so many ways. Despite all its internal crises, Europe remains a source of inspiration and, for many young people in the Arab world, a real place of longing.

## Outlook

“Struggles for freedom deserve respect not only when they are successful, but whenever they are waged,” said then-Bundestag President Norbert

Lammert in 2012, commemorating the revolutionary events of March 1848 also referring to the current protest movements in the Arab world.<sup>32</sup> Although, after eight painful years of upheaval, the “Arab Spring” must be considered a failure, long-term effects like those of the “Spring of Nations” of 1848/1849 may perhaps be hoped for. Authoritarianism and Islamism have, in any case, sufficiently exposed their inability to govern in the Arab world and are destined to fail as long-term models of order.

Restoration that grants only apparent stability may, as European history also teaches us, end in even more violent outbreaks. The rulers of the Arab world – whether oriented towards political Islam or secular authoritarianism – would therefore be well-advised to focus on incremental reforms of the state, economy, and society, rather than on their old methods. Germany, Europe, and the West as a whole must repeatedly demand this of them. To this end, the various foreign policy fields and instruments, such as development cooperation and foreign trade policy, must become even more closely linked. Only then can a sufficient leverage effect of German and European foreign policy be achieved.

## **The fact that Germany is directly affected by the refugee crisis should spur it to active support of liberal democratic development in Arab countries.**

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In any case, the aim of German and European Middle East policy must be the promotion of development geared towards more elements of a liberal order, even if this process is slow and gradual. The goal is not to export a specific European governmental or societal model. Nevertheless, Europe can and should see itself – self-confidently and transparently – as a normative actor. It is important to pursue a broad approach that does not start with democratic



elections, but long before: an independent, vibrant civil society; a diverse media landscape; political parties and educational institutions; an economy based on the market and competition and thus creating incentives for innovation and entrepreneurship; social security systems that liberate people from dependence on patronage; and an independent judiciary that sees itself as such – these are all institutions that must be promoted. The foundations for all this can be laid even under difficult conditions, whether in cooperation or competition with existing ruling systems. To this end, incentives must be offered, for instance in the form of increased economic cooperation. In return, however, Western powers must not shy away from negative reinforcement of conditions.

What happens to Europe’s southern neighbourhood directly affects both Germany and Europe. The refugee crisis of 2015 drove this long-neglected fact deep into the everyday reality of German society and into the German political landscape. Putting up walls will not protect us in the long run. Germany, together with its European partners, must accompany and support the protracted transformation of the Arab world, maintaining a sense of proportion, but remaining courageous and committed.

*–translated from German–*

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[Who Will Save the Liberal World Order?](#)

# The Rediscovery of Latin America

Europe's Partner for Global Governance?

Stefan Reith

While the international order is increasingly characterised by new competition between liberal economic and societal systems on the one hand and authoritarian, state-capitalist models on the other, Latin America is becoming more and more a focus of German and European foreign policy. China's increasingly confident claim to global leadership and the withdrawal of the US as guarantor of an international order influenced by Western values are leading many to recall a sub-continent which had previously led a shadowy existence in international politics, but which in fact plays a central role in the continued existence of a liberal-democratic multilateral world order.

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### Upheaval in the World Order

Almost three decades after the end of the Cold War, the supposed “end of history”,<sup>1</sup> it is becoming increasingly clear that the liberal economic and societal model shaped by the West has not established itself as the global standard. On the contrary, experts of international politics have, in various studies, noted a “crisis of democracy”<sup>2</sup> and growing international influence of authoritarian actors. Many observers believe that this is closely related to the rise of China which, because of its economic strength and developmental progress, challenges the Western model of order, and presents itself as a good example in several regions of the world. At the same time, disunity in Europe due to Brexit, the unsolved challenges of flight and migration, and the retreat of the former protector of the Western community of democracy and values suggest a decline of the so-called West. Whether this “West” is defined militarily, according to NATO membership, or historico-culturally, in the sense of controversial US political scientist Samuel Huntington<sup>3</sup>, the concept of the West is of little use in coping with the current challenges of world politics, which are reflected in contrasting principles and models of order: democracy versus autocracy, free trade versus protectionism, and multilateralism versus unilateralism.

If Germany and Europe want their common system of values based on democracy and human rights and a liberal, sustainable economic system to be accepted as a global standard, they will only succeed by going beyond the traditional framework of the so-called West to find international allies. Democracies in the Asia-Pacific region (especially Japan and South Korea) must be involved in the shaping of a global alliance of values championing democracy, free trade, and multilateralism, as must the greater part of Latin American countries. The community of culture and values shared by Europe and Latin America – so often invoked in soapbox speeches and in various Latin America strategies of years past – must urgently be given life. The stakes are no less than the survival of our liberal-democratic societal system in a multipolar world. Of course, close relations with the US must be cultivated particularly intensively, especially in times of a US president acting unilaterally and without regard for international obligations and partnerships. However, President Trump's America First policy provides an opportunity to systematically deepen relationships with other regions and countries that consider themselves part of a free, democratic community of values.

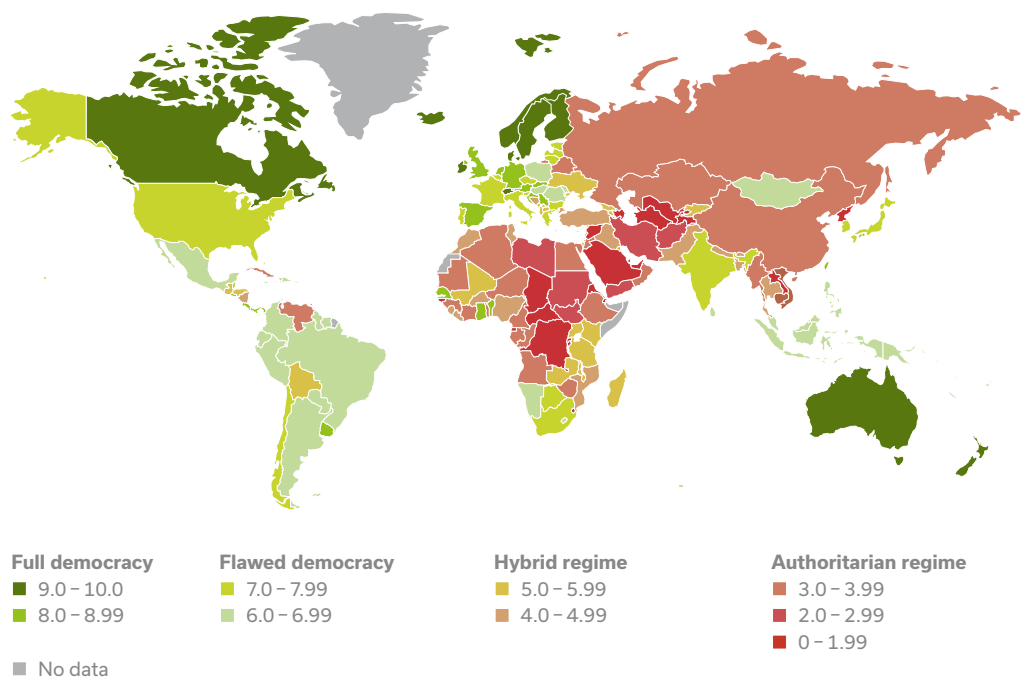
## Latin America – a Natural Partner Region for Europe

A glance at the world map in the 2017 Democracy Index clearly shows why most Latin American countries are important components of this global alliance of values championing liberty and democracy, and should be involved as such. Despite all the difficulties and challenges that Latin American democracies face, the sub-continent is the most democratic region on earth after Europe and North America. While Cuba and more recently Venezuela and Nicaragua can be classified as dictatorships, the region is otherwise characterised by democracies, whether deficient or well-developed. Already today, the EU and most Latin American nations share the conviction in multilateral fora such as the United Nations (UN) that democratic governance and open markets are the basic prerequisite for achieving the sustainable development goals agreed upon in Agenda 2030. These joint

efforts need to be further strengthened and coordinated. Together, European states (the EU) and Latin American and Caribbean states (CELAC)<sup>4</sup> form a critical mass to promote common values and interests at a global level. Taken together, the two regions have a population of more than one billion, producing more than 40 per cent of the gross world product. With their 61 states, the EU and CELAC together account for almost one third of all UN members.

Economically, the EU and Latin America are closely intertwined. There are trade agreements with 26 of the 33 CELAC states. The EU is Latin America's second-largest trade partner, its largest investor, and its most important partner in development cooperation. Liberalisation of bi-regional trade flows is well advanced. There are free trade agreements with Mexico and Chile which have just been or will soon be updated. There are other agreements with Columbia, Peru, and Ecuador. Negotiations

**Fig. 1: Democracy Index 2017 (Scale by Rank Classes)**



Source: Own illustration based on The Economist Intelligence Unit, in: <http://bit.ly/2LbQLd8> [11 Dec 2018].



Soy for China? As part of the “New Silk Road”, China has also become one of the most important investors and lenders for Latin America. [Source: © Paulo Whitaker, Reuters.](#)

with MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay) resumed in 2016 after years of stagnation, and are far along. However, the talks have stalled again, and the successful conclusion of the talks under the Argentinian presidency of the G20 were not accomplished before the elections in Brazil in October 2018. Given the protectionist policy of US President Trump, an agreement with MERCOSUR would be not only symbolic, but also of great strategic significance. The value of this trade agreement would be eight times

that of the one concluded with Canada (CETA) and four times that of the most recent agreement with Japan, which is currently the EU’s largest. At the same time, the EU’s market position would be strengthened at a moment when it was displaced as MERCOSUR’s most important trading partner by China.<sup>5</sup> In addition to MERCOSUR, the Pacific Alliance (Chile, Columbia, Mexico, and Peru), founded in 2011, is also gaining in importance. It is a regional integration alliance that accounts for 34 per cent of the Latin



## Other international players have long since recognised Latin America's strategic significance.

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It appears that German foreign policy has recognised the signs of the times and is tentatively trying to awaken relations with Latin America from the slumber of the last two decades. Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel's trip to Latin America and the publicly celebrated solidarity with Mexico and Argentina ahead of the 2017 G20 summit were clearly visible signals. But foreign policymakers in the German parliament are also showing greatly increased interest in Latin America, as evidenced by an increase in contacts and bilateral working visits. The German Federal Foreign Office is using the 250-year anniversary of the birth of the famous naturalist and Latin America researcher Alexander von Humboldt as an opportunity to intensively promote the expansion of German-Latin American relations during 2019, which will be celebrated in Germany as the year of Humboldt. In view of the current international challenges, the European External Action Service (EEAS) has also initiated an intensive dialogue with European partners, which is to result in a new EU-Latin America position paper. However, other international players have long since recognised the region's strategic significance.

### **Latin America and the Return of Geopolitics**

The history of Latin America is characterised by domination by external powers. 300 years of European colonial rule were followed by 200 years of US dominance, in the north. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 clearly formulated the United States' claim to leadership of both Americas, and until the end of the Cold War, many overt and covert interventions were made to retain the Latin American states within the US sphere of influence. At the same time, the US massively expanded its economic clout in the region. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 meant a deep cut in US foreign policy. In

American-Caribbean region's gross domestic product, 57 per cent of its overall trade volume, and 41.5 per cent of its foreign investment. At a meeting in Brussels in July 2018, the foreign ministers of the EU member states and those of the Pacific Alliance agreed to work more closely together and, in a final declaration, emphasised their joint commitment to democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and a rule-based liberal international trade and financial system.

the struggle against international Islamist terrorism and the “Axis of Evil”, Latin America was not particularly important to the US. The phase of socialist governments in Latin America – particularly linked to the presidencies of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Lula da Silva in Brazil, and the Kirchners in Argentina – deepened the estrangement on both sides. The ALBA (*Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América*) project, financed by Venezuelan oil, aimed to form a bloc of socialist nations under the leadership of Venezuela and Cuba, opposing US influence and its attempts to create a Pan-American free trade zone (*Area de Libre Comercio de Las Americas*, or ALCA).<sup>6</sup> Even under the Obama administration, Latin America was not a focus of US foreign relations, despite its relaxing of the restrictive anti-Castro policy and Obama’s celebrated visit to Havana at the end of his presidency. The crude interactions of his successor with Latin American neighbours and the ruthless assertion of American interests that is President Trump’s America First policy are widening the chasm.

While President Trump denigrates all immigrants as “bad hombres” and has declared that the construction of a wall along the Mexican border and a renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) are core issues of his Latin American policy, other actors, above all China, are filling the vacuum that has arisen. The economic and political penetration of the continent goes hand in hand. Political commentators are already referring to Latin America’s shift “from America’s back yard to China’s front yard”.<sup>7</sup> China has become the most important trading partner of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Peru, as well as the primary creditor of Brazil, Venezuela, and Ecuador. The volume of trade between Latin America and China in 2017 was almost 260 billion US dollars – more than twenty times as much as at the turn of the millennium. As part of the “New Silk Road”, China has also become one of the most important investors and lenders for Latin America. The most important recipients of large-scale Chinese loans have so far been Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, and Ecuador. During the 2015

China-CELAC Forum, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that China would invest 250 billion US dollars in Latin America over the following decade. The primary fields of investment are oil and natural gas extraction; mining; large-scale energy, infrastructure, and transport projects; and, increasingly, the agricultural sector, which is intended to secure China’s supply of raw materials and agricultural goods, especially copper, iron ore, soy, and beef. Another concern is access to and control of trade routes and logistics, as the plans for an interoceanic railway from the Pacific to the Atlantic, or the much-discussed interoceanic canal through Nicaragua show. It is currently uncertain whether a second canal will in fact be built between the Atlantic and the Pacific – this time under Chinese leadership. Even before the protests against the Ortega clan and the crisis in Nicaragua, the major project stagnated shortly after the official start of construction, in 2014. Critics had long doubted its profitability and feasibility because of the immense investments involved and the incalculable environmental damage risked. Nevertheless, it is to be assumed that China will continue to consider the option of a second canal as a strategic option for the future.

### **The economic partnership of Latin American countries with China comes with dependencies.**

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Latin American governments view China’s increasing economic influence, and the associated dependencies created, with ambivalence. For instance, the partnership with China is an opportunity to diversify foreign trade and to emancipate from the US, whose traditional political and economic dominance has, in the view of many such governments, grown tiresome. Additionally, Chinese loans offer good alternatives, particularly to those governments denied financing from credit markets dominated by the US and Europe. This was especially true of countries that had committed



themselves to the “Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” model propagated by Hugo Chávez. China has loaned more than 60 billion US dollars to Venezuela in the past few years, thus securing itself access to oil reserves. The loans are repaid in oil deliveries. In July 2018, it was discovered that the China Development Bank would grant the Venezuelan state oil company, PDVSA, a loan of five billion US dollars to boost oil production. China has thus become the primary financier of a government that not only transformed the country into a dictatorship, but also plunged it into an economic and humanitarian crisis that has since noticeably destabilised neighbouring states.

While Chinese loans mean breathing space for the Maduro regime before the impending state bankruptcy, other governments are trying to extract themselves from the Chinese grip they have found themselves in since accepting their loans. In Ecuador, the government of President Lenín Moreno is busy reviewing the unfavourable agreements that the previous government, under President Rafael Correa, concluded with China. These agreements pledged most of Ecuadorian oil production to China for the next few years. In Argentina, too, President Mauricio Macri pledged before taking office in 2015 that he would subject the contracts the Kirchner government had concluded with China to a detailed review, and that, among other things, a megaproject to build two dams on the Santa Cruz River in Patagonia would be scrapped. However, when the Chinese lenders threatened to withdraw from other financing pledges should he indeed make good on his word, Macri retracted his announcement.

Dependence on Chinese loans and trading conditions is especially problematic for the region’s smaller countries. The loans can easily lead to political dependence and even threaten national sovereignty. There has so far been no situation in Latin America like that of Sri Lanka, where in 2017, following severe difficulties in repaying Chinese loans, the government, in return for debt relief, ceded the rights to use the port of Hambantota to China for 99 years.<sup>8</sup> However,

China’s economic pressure and political influence is already clearly visible, for instance in the implementation of the “One China” policy in Central America. Panama ended years of diplomatic relations with Taiwan last year, instead sending a diplomat to Beijing, and El Salvador followed suit this year. Costa Rica had already taken this step in 2007. According to media reports, the expansion of the Pacific port of La Unión played an important role in El Salvador’s decision. After Taiwan declined the extent of financial involvement desired, China is now taking its place. In Panama, too, a railway project supported by Chinese investments in the amount of five billion US dollars is currently being considered. Due to its geographical location and its canal, Panama is of special geopolitical interest. It was the first Latin American country to officially join the Silk Road Initiative, doing so a few months after it established diplomatic relations in mid-2017. Panama has concluded many intergovernmental agreements with China as part of the initiative; a free trade agreement is now also under negotiation. Critics accuse China of granting targeted loans in Central America in a manner calculated to create dependencies, and in the long-run, in order to control critical, geostrategic positions and sea routes. Strategists in the US Defense Department therefore warn that China is not just pursuing trade policy goals, but making long-term plans to establish naval bases in the Western hemisphere.<sup>9</sup> Currently, however, there are no known security or defence policy cooperation efforts between China and Latin America, apart from support of the UN mission to stabilise Haiti and the sale of military technology on a small scale.<sup>10</sup>

What is clearly visible, however, is China’s effort to gain influence by means of soft power, so as to bind in future decision-makers.<sup>11</sup> Thousands of students study Chinese language and culture at around 40 Confucius Institutes in the Latin American region. In addition, China provides thousands of scholarships for study and further education in China. Invitations are most often issued to government representatives, members of political parties, and young leaders from all

areas of society. At the second China-CELAC Forum in January 2018 in Santiago de Chile, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced a further 6,000 government scholarships, and 600 invitations for Latin American politicians to come to China.

## Russia's geostrategic involvement in Latin America is aimed at the construction of a new military base in the Western hemisphere.

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Russia is another player that is increasing its involvement in Latin America. President Putin made particularly good use of the phase of socialist governments during the 2000s to gain political influence in what is considered “America’s back yard” and to demonstrate Russia’s ability to act globally. Economically, however, Russia plays no significant role in the region as a whole, and lags far behind the US, China, and Europe in foreign trade, lending, and investment. However, targeted cooperation is taking place in the energy and defence sectors. For Venezuela in particular, Russia, alongside China, is an important international ally. Russia supports the Maduro regime with preferential loans and generous debt restructuring in order to secure a strategic position in the country with the world’s largest proven oil reserves. The cooperation between *Rosneft*, a Russian state-controlled energy company, and its Venezuelan counterpart, PDVSA, plays a central role in this. According to media reports, *Rosneft* is said to have granted the state-owned oil company in Caracas advance payments for oil deliveries amounting to six billion US dollars between 2015 and 2017. As security against default, *Rosneft* was apparently promised shares of large-scale production projects and facilities.<sup>12</sup> Given the performance of the Russian economy, investments in Venezuela are a risky bet on the future; they also explain why Russia can have no interest in the fall of

the Maduro regime. Russia has also traditionally maintained close relations with Cuba and Nicaragua, and attracted attention in the last two years with the sale of 50 tanks to the Ortega government, as well as the opening of a training centre in Nicaragua to combat drug trafficking. According to official sources, the centre will train Central American security forces in the fight against drug cartels. Russian arms supplies to the region and the new security cooperation in Central America are a thorn in the side of US security experts. Relations with Cuba have also recently been intensified anew. Moscow abated a large part of Cuba’s debts, modernised the Cuban military, and picks up the tab for ever-smaller oil deliveries from Venezuela. Russian foreign policy projection in Latin America and its demonstrative challenge to the US in the latter’s own sphere of influence serves President Putin’s intention of repositioning Russia as the successor to the Soviet Union and prominent world power. The investment in Venezuela is aimed at enhancing Russia’s own position on the global energy market and securing access to energy resources. The investments also have a geostrategic dimension if they give rise to an opportunity to establish a new military base in the Western hemisphere.

However, since Russia, unlike China and the US, does not have the economic and military means of promoting its interests more prominently throughout the region, it is investing more heavily in other means of influence. The central instrument is the Spanish-language programme of the television channel Russia Today, which is much more professional than other international studios and extremely popular. President Trump’s positions and comments towards the United States’ Latin American neighbours also offer the ideal context in which to discredit the model of liberal democracy and promote Russia’s authoritarian state model as an alternative, or at least to generate understanding and sympathy for Russian interests. Fears of Russian intervention in Latin American political contests, stoked by Putin critics following the 2016 US presidential election, have so far remained unfounded. Opposition to Russia, comparable

to that existent in many European countries, cannot be detected in Latin America because the geographical distances mean that Russia is scarcely perceived as an aggressor, but instead as an important international player that is helpful as a counterbalance to the hegemon in the north. The authoritarian state model, for which Russia and China stand, in their distinct versions, is not intensively scrutinised, either in the Latin American public sphere, or within government circles.

### **Principles and Fields of Action of a Privileged Partnership**

If Latin American democracies are to be won as partners in an alliance of values that champions a liberal world order, German and European decision-makers should abandon outdated concepts and the lip service of the past few years. The declaration of belief in a “European-Latin American family of values”, found in so many papers on Latin America, loses all meaning if it leads to no specific cooperation initiatives. The same can be said of the frequently used term “strategic partnership”<sup>13</sup> when there is no discernible strategy. The concept of a strategic partnership between the EU and Latin America, introduced by the EU Commission in 2005, still lacks a realistic, sufficiently concrete strategy for the EU’s relations with Latin America. Political dialogue and economic cooperation do not complement each other, but are at times diametrically opposed, as the current example of EU-MERCOSUR negotiations shows. In this case, the interests of the European agricultural lobby stand in the way of declarations of political will for deepened cooperation. There has been no substantial deepening of EU-Latin America relations since 2005.

The responsibility for this state of affairs, however, lies on both sides of the Atlantic. Many Latin American governments still have too little understanding of their own role in international politics, the advantages of regional cooperation, and the need to assume international responsibility. Experience has shown that the young nation states of Latin America have serious difficulties

with substantial regional integration, which would imply giving up national sovereignty in certain policy areas. The history of regional integration in Latin America is therefore also a history of failure, as the large number of regional organisations that exist on paper only, but no longer have any political relevance, shows. Against this background, it would be desirable for organisations such as MERCOSUR and the Pacific Alliance to be further developed and given political added value that exceeds the sum of their members. Coordination among Latin American states in multilateral fora could be improved. For instance, G20 states Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico rarely coordinate their efforts to represent their interests in that forum together. Greater cooperation among Latin American democracies, combined with a more active assumption of their responsibility in global challenges would not only enhance the region’s negotiating power at the global level, but would also help it to be perceived by Europe as an attractive partner to be met on an equal footing.

In this context, the term “privileged partnership”<sup>14</sup> could help make relations with Latin American partner states more realistic and more concrete. The basis for the privilege of reciprocal preferential treatment that the term implies would be a joint declaration of commitment to a democratic and free economic and social order in the respective countries, and an obligation to jointly defend such an order at the international level. The content and goals of a European-Latin American community of values and interests would have to be defined and negotiated on equal footing. An appropriation of Latin America for European interests under the guise of a community of values, such as has happened in the past, would be counterproductive. This also applies to the international roles of China and Russia, which are not nearly as negatively judged in Latin America as they are in Europe. While most of the region’s countries feel a deep bond to the democratic European state model and reject the authoritarian counter-model, they still view states such as China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey under Erdoğan’s government as trade and investment partners that make an

important contribution to the diversification of Latin America's own foreign trade relations. The demonstrative restraint of Latin American countries towards the sanctions imposed by the US and the EU on Russia clearly showed that these governments are not willing to automatically make European and US interests and conflicts their own.

**The most important premise of a privileged partnership must be the recognition of the sovereignty and the equal consideration of the interests of the Latin American countries.**

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The term “West” is also unhelpful in this context because its most prominent representatives – the US and Europe – are viewed in Latin America as themselves perpetrators of oppression and paternalism. Secondly, the term continues the logic of the Cold War, in which Latin America was more an arena and a political football in and with which geopolitical conflicts were carried out rather than a true partner. And thirdly, the term implies a demarcation of the West from the East, which Latin American Pacific states in particular are quite open to. Nor does the concept of “the West” help involve democratic partner states in the Asian-Pacific area, such as Japan and South Korea, which are urgently needed as partners in a democratic and free alliance of values.

The most important premise of a privileged partnership must therefore be the recognition of the sovereignty and an equal consideration of the interests of Latin American countries. Many in Latin America would certainly be sympathetic to the concept of an alliance championing the values of freedom and democracy, which would also be open for partners in the Asia-Pacific area. The idea of a return to a Western, Atlantic world order, dominated by the US and Europe is, on the other hand, far less attractive from a Latin American perspective.

A privileged partnership would also mean that the challenges to democracy and freedom in the countries of both regions would be addressed openly, and without moral finger-pointing. Social inequality, corruption, and impunity are well-known deficits in many Latin American countries and thus important fields for cooperation. Europe also finds itself increasingly





Real socialism: Despite Russian investments, the situation in Venezuela is disastrous. Source: © Carlos Garcia Rawlins, Reuters.

confronted with populist and authoritarian tendencies that involve the curtailment of democratic institutions and the rule of law. An open dialogue about common challenges and existing deficits in the free democratic order in both regions, as well as cooperation in developing responses, is an important element of the European-Latin American partnership. The political,

economic, and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela has special significance here, since it has come to threaten the stability of the entire region. The repression of authoritarian tendencies and containment of existing dictatorships is a joint Latin American-European task.

## The German membership in the 2019 / 2020 UN Security Council should be used to advance the interests of its Latin American partners.

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A central field of action is European-Latin American cooperation in multilateral fora. The close cooperation between Germany and Argentina during the handover of the G20 presidency was a good example of what is possible. Coordination and cooperation in UN bodies should be further expanded. A positive example of such coordination is the joint involvement in the United Nations Climate Change conferences, in which Europe and Latin America are pulling in the same direction. Without the commitment of Mexico, and its then Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Patricia Espinosa – now Secretary General of the UN Climate Secretariat –, the Paris Climate Agreement would scarcely have been conceivable. Germany's membership of the UN Security Council in 2019 / 2020 should be used to advance the interests of its Latin American partners. The same is true of the reform debate on the UN Security Council, in which Germany and Europe should support greater consideration being given to Latin America. In the UN Human Rights Council, US disengagement makes close cooperation between Latin American and European democracies especially important, so as to effectively counter the practiced interplay of authoritarian countries in that body. International financial institutions, especially the IMF and the World Bank, also play a special role, since several Latin American partner countries view them sceptically due to their American-European dominance. Enhancing the Latin American role in both organisations could increase the acceptance and effectiveness of both institutions in the region and balance out the role of alternative creditors. An organisation that is given little attention in the debate over multilateral fora is the OECD, which has global significance because of its focus on market-oriented democracy. Following Mexico and

Chile, Columbia is now also a member of the club. Costa Rica is still in accession negotiations, and Brazil, Argentina, and Peru have initiated reform processes as part of a cooperation programme intended to bring them closer to the Organisation. The accession efforts on the part of Latin American countries and the associated internal reform processes should be supported by Germany and Europe.

Another central field of action remains economic integration with and in Latin America; this should continue to be a top priority for the EU-Latin America agenda. The updating of association agreements with Chile and Mexico is on the right track. The association agreement negotiations with MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay) are well-advanced, but have stalled on what had been thought to be the home stretch, partly because of concerns on the part of individual EU countries about the impact on the domestic agricultural sector. Given the protectionist tendencies in world trade, a breakthrough in the negotiations would be an important political signal for free and fair trade, and should absolutely be supported by Germany.

Trade and investment relations show Germany and Europe to be in competition with China and other players. References to the authoritarian character of Chinese state capitalism and unfair practices in implementing large-scale infrastructure projects and lending are often accurate, but not very helpful. Rather, it is a question of turning words into deeds, proving that economic relations with Europe are in fact more sustainable and can be designed to produce long-term win-win situations. The fact that a German consortium was able to win a large-scale project to extract lithium<sup>15</sup>, the raw material of the future, in Bolivia in 2018 was also because the investment agreement provided for the establishment of local industry and a value-added chain, training programmes, jobs, and high environmental and social standards. Many Latin American countries have come to be critical of the frequent violations of just such standards during the course of large-scale Chinese raw material extraction and infrastructure projects. Europeans should aggressively

promote the model of sustainable raw material partnerships and cooperation in building local industry and service economies. European support for the sustainable further development of Latin American commodity economies would enhance both Europe's competitive position and its political credibility in Latin America. Germany could assume an important role here, especially in the fields of renewable energies and environmental technology.

An important and inadequately addressed field of action is the entire area of digitalisation, including the debate about artificial intelligence, cyber security, big data and data protection, electronic trade, and Industry 4.0. China's digital Silk Road extends to Europe and Latin America. While the standards of the digital world order for search engines (Google and Baidu), social networks (Facebook and Tencent), and marketplaces (Amazon and Alibaba) are being set by Chinese and American internet giants, Europe and Latin America largely find themselves watching from the sidelines. Europe and Latin America should thus urgently develop and defend common positions during negotiations concerning global regulations for digital trade, taxation of digital corporations, and cyber security in such venues as the WTO, the G20, and the UN's Internet Governance Forum (IGF). However, this debate is still in its infancy in European-Latin American relations.

### **Ignoring the world's most democratic region after Europe and North America would be a disastrous miscalculation.**

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#### **Conclusion**

The world order is in a state of turmoil characterised by contrary tendencies. The model of liberal democracy is being challenged by authoritarian state models. China and Russia

are only the most visible players. The world trade order is marked by the conflict between protectionism and free trade. The codifying of international policy by multilateral institutions is being challenged by increasingly unilateral action on the part of important international players. Against this backdrop, Germany and Europe should therefore work towards an international alliance of values that supports a world order based on freedom and democracy. The "alliance for multilateralism"<sup>16</sup> initiative, proposed by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, is therefore a move in the right direction, but has two decisive weaknesses. The first is that, despite all the challenges and irritations that President Trump brings to the transatlantic relationship, such an alliance must not be directed against the US, but must do everything in its power to retain the US as a central partner. The second is that the democracies of Latin America must be more prominently involved in the alliance as elementary components and equal partners. When Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland emphasises that it is time for liberal democracies to oppose the increasingly authoritarian tendencies in the world,<sup>17</sup> it would be a fatal miscalculation to leave Latin America out of this mission, since, despite all the shortcomings of the democracies there, the region remains the most democratic in the world after Europe and North America. The 250th anniversary of the birth of Alexander von Humboldt in 2019 – a man celebrated as a "second Columbus", responsible for the "rediscovery of Latin America"<sup>18</sup> – is thus coming just at the right time. The path from a careful rediscovery of Latin America for German and European foreign policy to a privileged partnership worthy of the name can do with every motivation available.

*–translated from German–*

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- 10 Cf. Pastrana, Eduardo / Vera Piñero, Diego 2017: *Transición de poder y orden mundial: el ascenso global de China y su proyección creciente en América Latina y el Caribe*, in: Pastrana, Eduardo / Gehring, Hubert (eds.): *La proyección de China en América Latina y el Caribe*, Bogotá, p. 64.
- 11 Cf. Nolte, Detlef 2018: *China fordert Europa in Lateinamerika heraus - aber verdrängt es (noch) nicht*, *GIGA Focus No. 1*, Feb 2018, p. 5 f., in: <http://bit.ly/2L9vukj> [11 Dec 2018].
- 12 Triebe, Benjamin 2017: *Moskau pokert in Venezuela um mehr als Cash*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung Digital*, 17 Nov 2017, in: <https://nzz.ch/ld.1329391> [23 Aug 2018].
- 13 Brazil is the only country in Latin America to which Germany has been connected since 2008 by a "strategic partnership". A visible expression of this partnership was the 2015 governmental consultation in which Angela Merkel and twelve members of her cabinet participated. The domestic crisis in Brazil and the many international sources of crises that have consumed the attention of German foreign policy pushed Germany's partnership with Brazil into the background; it urgently needs to be revived.
- 14 The term was used in the early 2000s in the political debate about alternatives to Turkey entering the EU. Here, it refers to a close partnership in which each partner literally grants privileges to the other that are clearly different in quality from those that would be included in a standard free trade agreement with other countries or regions.
- 15 A large part of the known lithium reserves is in the so-called lithium triangle in Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia. Two Latin American countries, Chile and Argentina, are responsible for more than half of global lithium production. Cf. Bardt, Hubertus / Hübner, Christian 2017: *Vom Öl zum Lithium: Perspektiven neuer Rohstoffkooperationen*, 14 Nov 2017, in: <http://bit.ly/2RR8ZDp> [11 Dec 2018].
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# A Huge Leap to Green Energy?

The Future of Africa's Energy Supply

Mathias Kamp

The lack of a comprehensive, reliable electricity supply is a central obstacle to economic development on the African continent. In times of climate change, the question arises as to how the rising energy demand can be met in a climate-friendly manner. Western partners, and Germany in particular, emphasise the opportunities presented by renewable energy, but some African countries are already making plans for nuclear alternatives – and fossil fuels are by no means out of the running, either.

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More than 600 million people in Africa live without electricity. If one excludes the better-off North African states, only just over 40 per cent of the population has access to electricity. Even within sub-Saharan Africa, there are significant differences: For example, while more than 80 per cent of South Africa's population has access to electricity, in crisis-ridden Southern Sudan the figure drops to nine per cent. Despite the heterogeneity, it can be generally stated that Africa (south of the Sahara) lags far behind the rest of the world in terms of electricity supply. This is also reflected in energy consumption, of course: nowhere is per capita electricity consumption lower than in Africa – it is only about one third of the global average.<sup>1</sup>

Among the causes, in addition to chronic shortages due to insufficient capacity, is a high degree of supply system inefficiency and enormous inequality of distribution. Almost everywhere, rural areas are particularly affected by energy poverty. But even where electricity is available, supply is often unreliable, and outages are shockingly frequent. Many African cities experience outages regularly. The hum of diesel generators, employed for self-sufficiency, is a sound that is familiar to all.

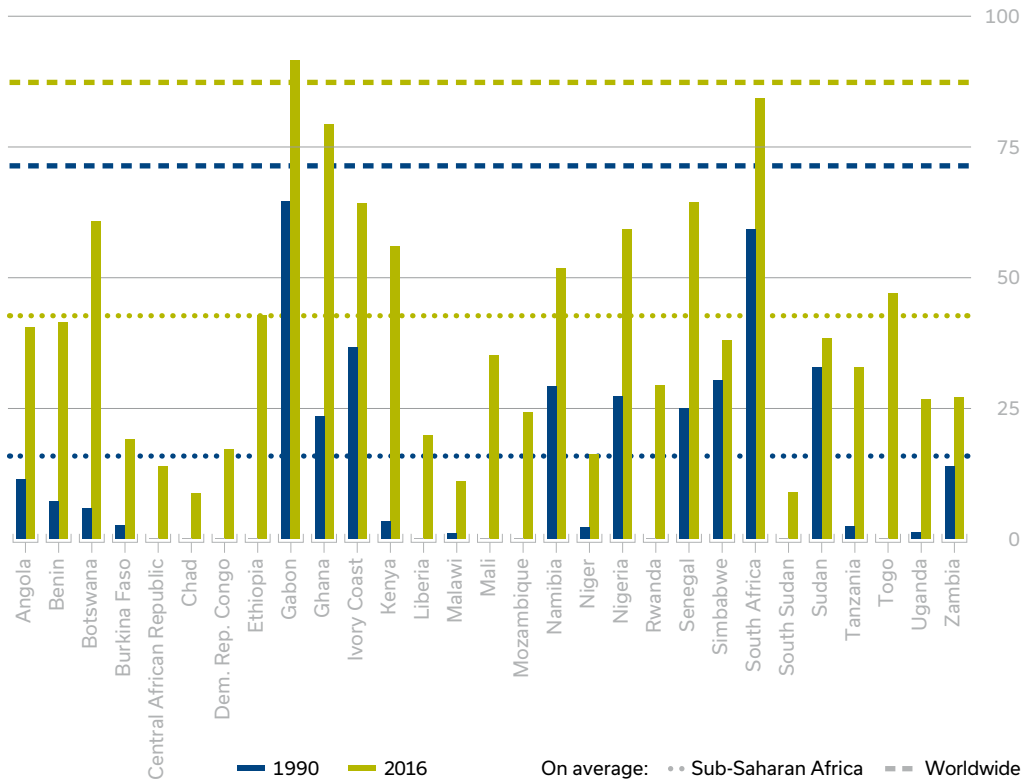
### **Energy Poverty Despite Wealth of Resources**

The shortages cannot be explained by a lack of resources: The continent is blessed with raw materials – and new sources of these materials are being discovered on a regular basis. Africa is a supplier of energy raw materials to

industrialised countries, and its potential for renewable energy is unrivalled by any other region of the world. But in the past, the vast potential has hardly been exploited. The reasons for this are numerous: financial obstacles, wrong development and economic policy priorities, and a focus on export-oriented investment; but also inefficient management, corruption, and poor governance have all played their role. As a result, there is a lack not only of large-scale power plants that could produce the required amount of electricity, but also of corresponding power grids that would be required for comprehensive supply. The actual amount of energy that arrives at the African end user is usually far below both the theoretical and actual production volume. One reason for this is that obsolete, poorly maintained plants, and fuel shortages, result in lower production than is actually technically possible. Another reason is that there are considerable losses in power transmission, due to poor grid infrastructure, damaged power lines, and energy theft. Last but not least is the problem of power plant inefficiency and the dominance of fossil fuels, which make the electricity produced in Africa extremely expensive.

An analysis of the overall energy mix in sub-Saharan Africa shows that electricity accounts for only a small percentage. By far the most frequently used energy source is conventional biomass, primarily in the form of firewood and charcoal for household cooking and for use in small businesses. In sub-Saharan Africa, 80 per cent of the population relies on the traditional use of solid biomass. In power generation, fossil

**Fig. 1: Access to Electricity in selected African Countries (in Per Cent of Population)**



Source: The World Bank 2016: Access to electricity (% of population), in: <http://bit.ly/2SOetPd> [14 Dec 2018].

fuels dominate, primarily coal, followed by oil and gas. With the exception of hydroelectric power, renewable energies account for only a small share. However, there has been rapid growth in the last few years, and renewables also represent the greatest potential for the future.<sup>2</sup>

### Demand is Exploding

Without new strategies and large-scale investment, the already dire situation would significantly worsen. The demand for electricity is positively exploding on the continent. The challenge is not only to overcome the current shortages, but to prepare the energy sector for both a burgeoning population and a growing economy. Nowhere else in the world is the population growing as swiftly as it is in Africa:

According to UNICEF,<sup>3</sup> it will double by 2050 to about 2.5 billion people. At the same time, many African countries are enjoying relatively high economic growth – and there is plenty of room to grow much more. The demand for energy will grow accordingly. The International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA)<sup>4</sup> predicts a tripling of electricity consumption in Africa between 2010 and 2030. A McKinsey study<sup>5</sup> discusses a fourfold increase by 2040, also using 2010 as a baseline and assuming a forecast supply rate of 70 to 80 per cent of the population. Supplying the entire population is likely to remain illusory for decades. A report by the Africa Progress Panel considers it will only be possible, given current development rates, to supply the entire African population with electricity by 2080.<sup>6</sup>

## Energy for Development

Energy poverty and a lack of electricity supply have a decisive impact on economic development and quality of life. They hinder productivity and mobility, and impair education, healthcare provision, and other important social services. In sub-Saharan Africa, it is not just households, but also many schools and hospitals, that must manage without electricity. Important medicines cannot be refrigerated, and life-saving medical equipment cannot be operated. Lack of lighting in a house makes it hard to study after the sun goes down. Household dependence on conventional fuels for cooking results in severe health consequences due to the inhalation of smoke. According to the World Health Organisation, these consequences cause more deaths per annum than malaria and HIV/AIDS combined.<sup>7</sup>

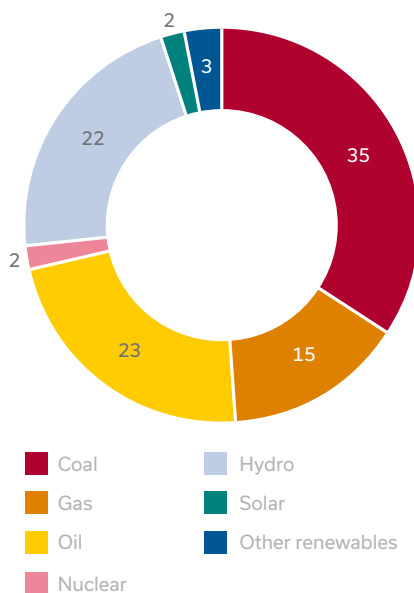
Businesses currently suffer production losses and high costs for electricity, especially when operating their own diesel generators, which is

often necessary. The energy deficit has a negative impact on production costs and competitiveness, thereby hampering economic growth, innovation, and job creation.

Securing access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all is one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda. Beyond this direct goal, the World Bank considers access to energy to be a key factor in achieving all other SDGs. As a report by the World Bank notes, without energy supply, it is difficult if not impossible to promote economic growth and employment, overcome poverty, and advance human development. Almost three quarters of 2030 Agenda's target indicators (125 of 169) are directly or indirectly related to the issue of energy.<sup>8</sup>

Poverty and energy scarcity usually go hand-in-hand. A glance at the statistics reveals that the poorest countries are usually also those with the worst energy supply. While the precise causal relationships are complex and cannot always be clearly proven, numerous studies show a close correlation between energy supply or energy consumption on the one hand, and economic growth, income level, and employment rate on the other.<sup>9</sup> Energy is a key factor for economic transformation. Energy poverty thus represents a decisive obstacle to development in Africa.

**Fig. 2: Electricity Production Capacities in Sub-Saharan Africa by Fuel (2016)**



Source: Own illustration based on IEA 2017, n. 8, p. 79.

## Climate Change as a Key Factor

Africa as a whole contributes relatively little to climate change, yet African countries are especially hard hit and threatened by its consequences. This is partly due to geographical conditions, and partly because of already precarious living conditions, difficult political situations, and the correspondingly weak adaptability such conditions engender. Climate change, and its causes and consequences, must be taken into consideration in all efforts to promote economic development in Africa. The effects of climate change can have a considerable impact on development progress. Economic growth and infrastructure expansion must therefore



### Goal 7 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Ensure Access to Affordable, Reliable, Sustainable and Modern Energy for All

7.1 By 2030, ensure universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services

7.2 By 2030, increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix

7.3 By 2030, double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency

7.A By 2030, enhance international cooperation to facilitate access to clean energy research and technology, including renewable energy, energy efficiency and advanced and cleaner fossil-fuel technology, and promote investment in energy infrastructure and clean energy technology

7.B By 2030, expand infrastructure and upgrade technology for supplying modern and sustainable energy services for all in developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States, and land-locked developing countries, in accordance with their respective programmes of support

be aligned with ecological sustainability.<sup>10</sup> The “old” development paths of industrialised countries, with their dependence on fossil fuels, cannot serve as models.

When it comes to the transformation of the African energy sector, climate change must be taken into consideration in two respects. Firstly, the energy mix of the future should be as climate-friendly as possible. Secondly, the expected consequences of climate change must already be taken into account during the planning stage. For instance, droughts and erratic rainfall can have a severe impact on hydroelectric power generation. Investment in innovative solutions is therefore particularly important, especially in the area of renewable energies.

#### Opportunities for Green Energy

“The enormous demand for energy presents Africa with major challenges. But we should also perceive it as an opportunity to invest in green energy. Africa could be the first continent to be supplied entirely from renewable sources,”

said Federal Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development Gerd Müller.<sup>11</sup> This focus on renewable energies has emerged as a broad consensus among experts, and above all among Western development partners. African governments are also increasingly realising the extent of the immense potential in this area, and are ratifying ambitious plans to promote the use of these opportunities. At least 40 countries on the continent already have renewable energy targets.<sup>12</sup>

And indeed the conditions for using renewable energy sources are better in Africa than anywhere else. Sun, wind, and water offer an incomparably rich green energy portfolio. Experts put the capacity for solar energy at 9,000 to 11,000 gigawatts; for hydropower, at more than 350 gigawatts; and for wind energy, at more than 100 gigawatts. In East Africa, there are additional opportunities in the field of geothermal energy, estimated at 15 gigawatts. By way of comparison: The total power generation capacity of sub-Saharan Africa in 2016 was 122 gigawatts.<sup>13</sup> The potential of renewable energy

sources is thus more than sufficient to cover the continent's future energy needs.<sup>14</sup> According to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), they could provide half of Africa's electricity consumption by 2030.

## **In Africa, the conditions for using renewable energies are much more advantageous than for old energy sources.**

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However, the effective use of the renewable energy potential can only be realised if both the infrastructure and administrative framework conditions are met. This requires coherent political strategies from African governments to support infrastructure expansion, provide targeted incentives, attract investment, and create a transparent, reliable regulatory framework.

From an economic perspective, renewable energies are becoming increasingly attractive and competitive as compared to conventional energy sources. Technology costs are falling steadily, especially in the solar sector.<sup>15</sup> In addition, rapid innovation leads to ever greater efficiency and reliability. This applies not only to energy generation technology, but also, for example, to energy storage systems.

Beyond falling costs, there is a whole range of other factors that favour renewable energies. For instance, their applications are far more flexible. In addition to grid feed-in, they offer decentralised supply solutions – from photovoltaics to small home systems. This makes them especially well-suited to the swift, cost-effective electrification of rural areas. They also contribute to the improvement of energy security, especially for countries that currently rely on fossil fuel imports. Studies that examine domestic African economy discover increased potential for local innovation and value creation. Renewables provide more local entrepreneurial prospects and a greater employment effect than fossil fuel energies do. Another significant advantage is that, as

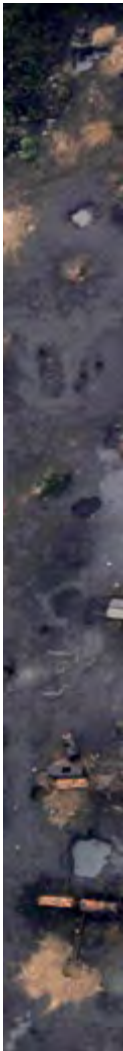
compared to coal and nuclear power plants, projects in the area of renewable energies have relatively short lead times and can be implemented comparatively quickly<sup>16</sup> – with the exception of large-scale hydropower projects.

### **Large Hydropower Projects**

While the share of wind and solar energy is still very low, hydropower already accounts for about one fifth of electricity generation in Africa. This represents only about ten per cent of the estimated technical potential. At full capacity, hydropower could deliver more than three times the current energy consumption of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>17</sup>

Half of the overall hydropower potential is found in the Congo. Investment in hydropower began as far back as the early 1970s with the construction of the Inga I and Inga II dams on the Congo River. A further dam, Inga III, has been in the works for a long time, but construction is delayed. Amid controversy, the World Bank withdrew from the contentious project in 2016. But other partners, including a consortium of partners from China and Spain, remain interested in the project's implementation.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, critics warn of negative impacts on people and the environment. Congo, a country tormented by conflicts and corruption, has not even been able to consistently maintain its old dams. But the grand vision goes still further: The "Grand Inga" project plan includes the construction of the "mother of all dams". Its capacity could be as much as 40 gigawatts – almost twice the capacity of the Three Gorges Dam in China, which is currently the largest in the world.<sup>19</sup> The implementation of this mammoth project would fundamentally change the African energy sector. But at the moment, that implementation seems very unlikely – and given the risks and anticipated side-effects, scarcely desirable.

Elsewhere in Africa, however, things are progressing more rapidly. Ethiopia is already the continent's leader in the use of hydropower and is in the process of expanding its capacity via



several large projects. Much attention is given to the *Grand Renaissance Dam* on the Blue Nile, which is soon to be completed, and is to produce six gigawatts of electricity.<sup>20</sup> But here, too, there is controversy. This is above all due to the fact that the project is a source of tension between the large Nile-riparian states: Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. The Nile supplies almost all of Egypt's drinking water, and a reduction in flow could have dramatic consequences.<sup>21</sup> Although the three countries announced a solution to the conflict at a summit in early 2018, the potential for further tension remains.<sup>22</sup> This example

shows that hydropower requires an especially high degree of regional diplomacy and cooperation.

Meanwhile, further upstream, Uganda is also investing in the construction of more dams. In other regions of the continent, Ghana, Guinea, Mozambique, and Angola, amongst others, are also expanding their hydropower capacities.

But these large projects do not represent the ideal solution to the issue of energy shortages. In addition to concerns about the ecological and



The downside of the oil industry: Sun, wind, and water provide an incomparably rich portfolio for green energy and are a feasible alternative for Africa. Source: © Akintunde Akinleye, Reuters.

social consequences of dam construction, there are also increasing apprehensions regarding the stability of hydropower supplies. The effects of climate change could pose major challenges for hydropower generation. For African countries with a high dependency on hydropower, experts warn of the risk of electricity shortages due to insufficient rainfall and periods of drought. Hydropower can therefore only be a partial element of the future energy mix. Wind and, above all, solar energy will play a key role in the climate-friendly transformation of the African energy sector.

## Many consider it a foregone conclusion that Africa will “leapfrog” to a phase beyond the power-grid age.

### Leapfrogging: Is the Great Leap Coming?

If the African energy revolution is to result in low-carbon energy supply, a considerable effort will be required. Despite the enormous potential for renewable energy sources, a number of obstacles must be overcome first. After all, the concern is not only electricity generation, but also universal distribution. Many experts view the poor condition of existing grids and the entirely inadequate pace of power grid expansion as both obstacle and opportunity. The creation of a comprehensive, centralised grid infrastructure would be a mammoth, near unachievable task, since it would be expensive, protracted and risk-prone. The alternative to a single “big” solution (large power plants with comprehensive grids) is therefore a combined approach based on the diversification of energy sources (with priority given to renewable energies) and many small, decentralised, grid-independent solutions.

The buzzword “leapfrogging” is often heard in this context. It refers to dispensing with or skipping development stages in the course of rapid technological and economic modernisation, and

is therefore referred to in German as “Sprunginnovation”. Africa’s current situation means that many consider it a foregone conclusion that the continent will make a “great leap” to a phase beyond the power grid age. “African nations do not have to lock into developing high-carbon old technologies,” wrote the late Kofi Annan in the 2015 Africa Progress Panel report. “We can expand our power generation and achieve universal access to energy by leapfrogging into new technologies that are transforming energy systems across the world<sup>23</sup>.”

### Multifaceted, Decentralised Solutions

Renewable energies play a decisive role in diversification and decentralisation. Many innovative photovoltaic solutions already contribute to improving quality of life, especially in rural Africa. These solutions go beyond solar modules on roofs; they include numerous mini-applications such as solar lamps, solar cookers, and solar backpacks for schoolchildren. A dynamic local and foreign start-up scene contributes to the rapid spread of increasingly reliable and, above-all, affordable solutions. This also includes German players, such as the start-up *Mobisol*, which delivers complete packages for electrification via photovoltaics in selected African countries. Micro-credit offers make these packages affordable to low-income households.

In view of the very specific and immediate needs of the undersupplied rural population, such offers often represent enormous progress. Nevertheless, they make only a limited contribution to the great transformation required. There is no doubt that large-scale projects – i.e. investment in power plants, solar and wind farms, and the expansion of centralised grids – will continue to play a decisive role for the economy as a whole. They form the backbone of energy supply and are indispensable for supplying cities, industrial centres, and boom regions. But between large-scale power plants and centralised power grids, on the one hand, and individual modules and mini-applications, on the other, there is still a large range of innovative intermediate solutions



that might significantly change the African energy sector. This includes miniature power plants for small communities, businesses, and manageable clusters of consumer households, as well as small, decentralised power grids (mini- and micro-grids). These small grids, most of which are based on solar and wind energy (and to a lesser degree on biogas plants or small hydroelectric power plants), offer promising solutions, especially for remote rural areas.<sup>24</sup> They can improve grid stability and, in many

places, replace the traditional, climate-damaging diesel generators, which still constitute a widespread alternative to the centralised power grid.

Given that comprehensive expansion of central power grids to all rural areas will take decades, decentralised approaches offer a more realistic – and above all swifter – response to the challenges of energy poverty.

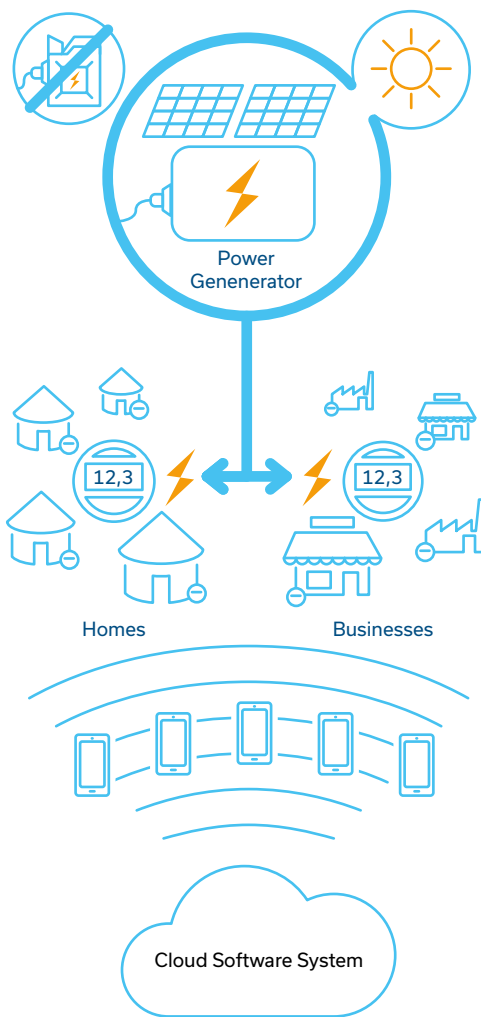
### Fossil Energy Sources Remain Relevant

Despite all the euphoria and pioneering spirit surrounding the opportunities provided by renewable energies, it must not be forgotten that fossil fuels have not been ruled out by any means. Africa has vast oil and gas reserves, many of them entirely undeveloped. From a climate policy perspective, it would be advisable to leave these resources as untouched as possible. But given the energy supply challenges described above, the complete phase-out of fossil fuel use in Africa, as indeed in the rest of the world, is not something that will happen overnight. On the contrary, in the short to mid-term, the use of fossil fuels will likely be expanded in parallel with the development of renewable alternatives, and will thus remain a central component of the energy mix. The International Energy Agency forecasts that in 2030, just over half of the electricity produced in sub-Saharan Africa will still be generated from fossil energy sources (with production capacity doubling from 2016 levels): 21 per cent from coal, 18 per cent from gas, and twelve per cent from oil<sup>25</sup>. Modern gas-fired power plants will probably dominate the future: while the proportion of energy from coal and oil will gradually fall, the share of natural gas in electricity generation will rise, compared to current levels. Technical innovations can increase efficiency and significantly reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

### Nuclear Alternatives?

Another option that is usually consciously neglected in many reports and plans is nuclear power. This is not because nuclear power has no

**Fig. 3: Decentralised Power Grid (Micro-Grid)**



Source: Own illustration.



A light in the dark: To satisfy the growing demand for energy, the use of fossil fuels in Africa will also have to be further expanded. Source: © Sipiwe Sibeko, Reuters.

role to play. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports that a large number of African states are interested in investing in nuclear power. There are more or less concrete plans in twelve African countries. Some African politicians seem to find the option attractive. They see nuclear power as a fast, efficient,

climate-friendly way to escape energy poverty and to stimulate the economy. China and Russia present themselves as two potential partners who, according to some observers, are already in the midst of a fierce race to export nuclear technology.

## Various African countries are considering using nuclear power, with China and Russia as potential partners.

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In some countries, planning is already at an advanced stage. South Africa is the furthest along. Since 1984, the only nuclear power plant on the continent has been located in Cape Town. In addition, in 2015, plans were introduced to construct further reactors with an overall capacity of 9.6 gigawatts – initially with a view to a possible partnership with Russia. Since then, however, much criticism and doubt has been voiced as to the sense and feasibility of the plans, and their future appears uncertain.<sup>26</sup> But other countries are also at the starting point: In 2016, Sudan signed a framework agreement with China which provides for the construction of an initial nuclear power plant by 2027. Kenya also intends to build four reactors by 2030 with Chinese assistance. Nigeria has chosen Russia as its partner, and also plans to build four nuclear power plants. In West Africa, Ghana has dreamt of having its own nuclear power plant since its independence; now there are concrete plans for constructing two reactors. There has, as yet, been no decision on a potential partnership with China or Russia.<sup>27</sup>

It remains to be seen when these plans will come to fruition, if indeed at all. The majority of experts are sceptical. Obstacles cited include: high initial investment; possible environmental consequences and security risks (especially where there is political instability); high technical and personnel requirements; and the pessimistic forecasts regarding profitability. Given the falling costs and rapid innovation in other energy sources, the plans do not seem particularly prudent from a market economy perspective.<sup>28</sup> Some critics therefore analyse them as two things: a dying industry's struggle for relevance, and largely symbolic geopolitical manoeuvres.

## Partnerships for Funding

If the African energy revolution is to become a reality, African governments need not only to set the requisite political and administrative course, but above all to involve their international partners and the private sector in order to overcome the immense financing challenges. Within a very short time, massive investments are needed, and African countries are not in a position to make them unaided. The International Energy Agency estimates a required investment volume of at least 450 billion US dollars<sup>29</sup> in order to halve power outages and ensure universal access to power in cities – and this is still a long way off from the goal of nationwide supply.

One of the key instruments for providing the required support is the Africa Renewable Energy Initiative (AREI), launched at the Paris Climate Change Conference in 2015. Under this African-led initiative, up to ten gigawatts of additional renewable energy generation capacity is to be created by 2020; the 2030 target even rises to 300 gigawatts. Bilateral and multilateral initiatives have provided ten billion US dollars in financing for the first phase (ending in 2020). Germany is the largest contributor with three billion euros.<sup>30</sup> As early as 2013, the US, under Barack Obama, initiated the Power Africa programme, which channels over 50 billion US dollars for investments in the African energy sector via a public-private partnership model. Despite such large-scale programmes, both commitments and actual investment in the African energy revolution have remained below both expectations and targets.

The shortfall is especially large in the private-sector investments, which are urgently needed if the gap between the growing demand and the enormous potential is to be closed. Many investors hesitate to commit themselves in most African countries. It is up to African governments to improve the investment climate, create incentives, and minimise risks. Above all, a proper political and administrative framework is required, namely: fair competitive conditions,

reliable regulations, security of the rule of law, transparent decision-making procedures, efficient bureaucratic structures, and the containment of corruption. But Western partners must also do their part to mobilise more private capital by means of incentives, improved safeguards, and multifaceted partnerships.

### **Summary: Ten Points for a Sensible African Energy Agenda**

In view of the developments described above, the author has identified ten key elements that should be considered in the development of a sensible energy agenda for Africa. They apply to the African countries' national and regional development and electrification plans, as well as international funding programmes, and, last but not least, the dialogue with private-sector players.

1. The agenda's top priority must be to **close the massive supply gap** and **overcome inequalities** in access to energy as soon as possible. Energy poverty is a decisive obstacle to development, which means that the transformation of the African energy sector is a fundamental prerequisite for economic growth and the improvement of living conditions. There is a clear consensus surrounding the idea that the ambitious goals for poverty reduction and economic transformation cannot be achieved without improved electricity supply. This consensus is also reflected in the prominent position of the energy supply question in national and international development plans. This, in turn, provides the foundation for appropriate political action.
2. The agenda must follow a **comprehensive strategy** based on a **holistic understanding** of the situation. This involves an expanded view of the energy issue that goes beyond electricity generation. The various challenges and needs of households and businesses of rural and urban areas, require an integrated strategy with diverse components – a standardised blueprint will not work.

The foundation for this is a further optimisation of the use of comprehensive data, so as to correctly align the strategy to suit regional and local characteristics. The data revolution, and especially the emergent possibilities offered by Open Data, will greatly facilitate such alignment in future. An example for this is the energydata.info data platform<sup>31</sup>, in which German Development Agency, GIZ, is also involved. Comprehensive studies, such as the mapping of wind and solar energy capacities in Africa, undertaken by the University of California, Berkeley<sup>32</sup> facilitate the focus on solutions in electricity generation and supply that are adapted to specific geographical conditions.

The wide variety of players means that, with a view to creating a comprehensive strategy, a multi-level approach is best, with special attention given to the promotion of regional and local solutions. While national governments do play a central coordinating role, local players and innovative start-ups can – at least in the short to mid-term, and especially in rural areas – realistically do more for electrification than centrally planned, comprehensive projects, the implementation of which often remain as pipe dreams for a very long time.

3. Due to the challenges posed by climate change and the opportunities presented by technical innovation, **renewable energies should clearly remain at the centre** of the agenda.

The signs are favourable: One, is that political pressure to fund environmentally friendly technology is mounting in view of the already noticeable effects of climate change. Another, is that technical innovations continue to present new opportunities, and the cost of producing energy from renewable sources is falling steadily. In the African context, various studies reveal not only the enormous potential of green electricity, but also indicate its economic attractiveness – both in terms of cost projections and expected

employment effects. The corresponding declarations of political intent seem promising, but the extent to which actual implementation keeps pace with them remains to be seen.

4. The goal of an intelligent, sustainable, climate-friendly energy mix can be achieved only **in phases**. In the short and medium-term, conventional energy generation will continue to play a role, even though carbon-neutral energy supply remains a fixed long-term goal.

The focus on renewable energies outlined above should not obscure the fact that many African countries are just beginning to develop their large oil and gas reserves. It would be foolhardy to believe that these countries' governments could be convinced to leave these reserves unexplored in the ground. Compromise is necessary – and will only be achieved if the alternatives prove to be economically attractive through innovation and investment. The answer to nuclear alternatives is easier: neither are they desirable, nor do they make economic sense.

5. Investments in **micro- and macro-solutions** can complement each other in useful ways. Decentralised solutions must be promoted in parallel with the capacity expansion of central power grids. The African energy sector of the future will be a combination of micro-grids, regional and supra-regional power grids.

The realisation that there need not be one single great success, but that instead there are many opportunities for smaller needs-based solutions, facilitates cooperation among many players. This is also reflected in the design of various funding programmes, which focus specifically upon the innovative power of local initiatives and start-ups. One example is the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development's (BMZ) "Grüne Bürgerenergie für Afrika" (Green Citizen Energy for Africa) project, which is aimed at supporting decentralised,

people-oriented energy supply in rural areas, modelled upon the 850 energy cooperatives in Germany.<sup>33</sup>

6. In addition to the issue of energy generation, investments must also be made in **technical progress** for **energy efficiency** and improved **storage capacities**. Since firewood and charcoal will remain relevant for rural households for a long time to come, even the promotion of more efficient stoves and cooking methods can make a considerable contribution to improving quality of life. Energy consumption can also be reduced via improved **user behaviour** by means of education and awareness-raising measures. The work of GIZ in Africa is particularly noteworthy in this area.
7. **Regional cooperation** and integration will be key if ambitious solutions are to be reached. Interconnected networks can contribute greatly to capacity expansion, increased efficiency and energy security. So-called power pools facilitate cooperation among national electricity providers. The leader among them is the Southern African Power Pool (SAPP) in southern Africa. But West and East Africa have also produced similar networks. Additionally, conflicts can be avoided through regional cooperation, especially in the area of hydropower. One successful example of this are the recent agreements concluded between the Nile-riparian countries.
8. The transformation of Africa's energy sector requires **massive financial resources**. Both international partners and the private sector are needed. Reliable partnership must form the basis for mobilising the necessary investments. National players must actively promote private sector involvement. The large-scale initiatives mentioned above, such as AREI and Power Africa, show that there is a willingness to be involved, even if these initiatives have so far fallen short of expectations. Further initiatives are therefore called for. From a German perspective, investment

partnerships that are part of the Compact with Africa, further detailed below, show the greatest potential for opening up new avenues of involvement.

9. The energy agenda must be based on **realistic expectations of the economic effects**. The positive economic effects and growth stimulus provided by electrification will not come to fruition overnight. The benefits will emerge in the very long term. The concern is therefore to correct exaggerated expectations and to work with realistic forecasts. Rapid effects will initially be observed in conurbations where a number of positive factors have an impact (general infrastructure, education, local entrepreneurship, access to markets, etc.).

10. Without **promoting the optimal political and administrative framework conditions**, the ambitions for the African energy revolution are doomed to failure. Part of the agenda must therefore include an active dialogue concerning standards for market economy, democracy, and the rule of law.

### **Conclusion: African Energy Revolution is in Germany's Interest**

Various German initiatives, such as the Compact with Africa as part of the G20 or the BMZ's proposed Marshall Plan with Africa particularly emphasise the interest in funding renewable energies in Africa. The transformation of the African energy sector rightly receives special attention in German development cooperation. It is a key factor in improving the quality of life, achieving sustainable, dynamic economic growth, creating economic and professional prospects for Africa's young population, combatting climate change, and securing peace and stability on the continent. Germany's commitment in this area is thus, not least, a contribution to combatting the causes of refugee flight.

The African energy revolution is important for the German economy, too. Current developments offer great potential for projects that could

be very interesting for German companies. The African energy sector offers the German economy promising markets for its products and services. German technology and expertise are in demand. But although Germany is a recognised leader in the area of renewable energies, China has surpassed Germany in this field by now. So far, existing incentives and investment security appear to be insufficient to provide the necessary push for a German private sector that is hesitant about involvement in Africa. But greater involvement by German companies would clearly benefit both sides. Strong efforts by German companies could contribute to putting the African energy revolution on the right course, making it innovative, inclusive, sustainable, and climate-friendly.

*—translated from German—*

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