



Metis

Study

Worst Cases

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Summary

Worst-case scenarios play a crucial role in strategic foresight. This study will use theoretically derived geopolitical scenarios to prepare decision makers for possible

negative developments in the future. Plausible yet particularly adverse security policy developments will be outlined and their implications for the security of Europe and Germany discussed.

Worst cases – thinking outside the comfort zone

The development and analysis of worst cases aims to anticipate plausible negative extreme developments that, unlikely as they may be, would have profound effects. Systematic analysis and discussion of unfavourable scenarios will prepare societies, organisations, governments and armed forces to anticipate and rapidly comprehend crisis situations and thus remain responsive and proactive. Incorporating worst-case scenarios into strategic planning will allow decision makers to develop more robust and resilient strategies. It can also raise public awareness for long-term negative security developments and their implications. Thinking in terms of worst cases thus promotes a culture of foresight and risk awareness that is essential for long-term survival and success in an uncertain and fast-paced world.

Basic theoretical assumptions: Power transition theory

The scenarios below are based on assumptions derived from power transition theory (PTT). Power transition theory contends that the international system is characterised by continuous shifts in power between states, which may lead to phases of instability in the global order. Based on their military and economic capabilities, states are categorised into middle and great powers as well as a dominant nation. The dominant nation establishes a hierarchical order, projects its national preferences onto the international system and provides systemic collective goods. States that are satisfied with this order will form a coalition with the dominant nation and benefit from political and economic advantages. States that benefit little from the international order will be

dissatisfied with the system and compete. If the relative power advantage of a dominant nation decreases, this can lead to a phase of instability as a dissatisfied great power attempts to challenge the position of the hegemon. As soon as a challenger comes close to 80 per cent of the power of the hegemon, a preventive war becomes more likely. If a challenger overtakes the dominant nation in power-political terms, a global war is almost inevitable (see Fig. 1).

Due to China's disproportionate increase in power since 2000, the world today is already in the early phase of power transition, which is reflected in numerous regional military conflicts, political and economic competition, and a loss of effectiveness of the global collective goods provided by the US.

Systemic rivalry and polycrisis as a sign of global power transition

The rules-based global order is in the delegitimisation phase, and the West is at a crossroads. Autocracies are actively challenging the status quo, democracies are plagued by short-sighted foreign policy, economic stagnation, domestic instability and self-doubt. As an emerging superpower, China has been challenging the hegemony of the US and openly flirts with the idea of annexing Taiwan. The Russo-Ukrainian war,¹ the war between Hamas and Israel, the conflict with Iran and regional hegemonic conflicts

¹ See "Zeitenwende: The Russian invasion of Ukraine and its implications" Metis Study No. 31 (November 2022).

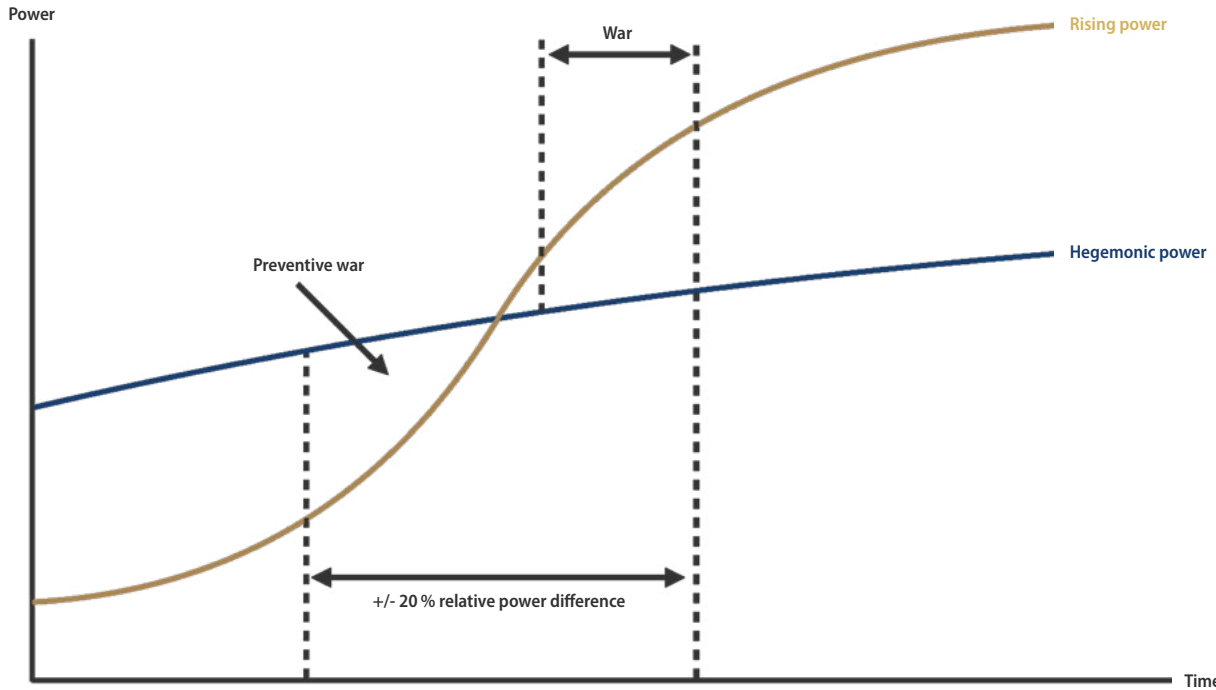


Fig. 1 Critical phases of power transition | Source: author's own work

such as the one between Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia² in the Middle East, as well as the competition for influence in Africa between Russia and France,³ underscore the erosion of US hegemony. Western (specifically European) security is also threatened by hybrid warfare and social and political upheavals.⁴ These developments are a consequence of the shift of relative material power from West to East. Although the world is not yet multipolar, it is no longer irrefutably unipolar. A changing geopolitical order is apparent, one in which the US as the Western lead nation is no longer the hegemon who can exert regulatory dominance over the system.⁵

In this new era of negative peace between great powers, the existing international order is further undermined by the dysfunction of international organisations and the gradual deglobalisation of the world economy. Traditional and established mechanisms of conflict management are failing, prompting regional actors to develop their own solutions and implement them by both military and political means.

The effectiveness and reliability of collective goods, such as the freedom of sea routes, a reserve currency, technological standards, international trade mechanisms and legal frameworks have also been eroding. In Washington, isolationist voices are becoming louder, which calls the global leadership role of the US further into question. Climate change has fuelled this volatile situation by threatening political, economic and social stability worldwide.⁶ Combinations of these factors and their negative manifestations will be outlined below in the form of worst-case scenarios (see Table 1), followed by the implications of each for European and German security and economy.

Worst case #1 Russian victory in Ukraine and sub-state conflicts in Europe

Russia continues to pursue its offensive in Ukraine and expand its control over the four Ukrainian oblasts it has already annexed. It also succeeds in permanently securing its land bridge to Crimea. Russia occupies Kramatorsk, Sloviansk and Zaporizhzhia and advances to Kharkiv in high-casualty battles. Despite Western support, Ukraine is unable to repel the Russian advance and, in a tactical withdrawal, attempts to give up ground to buy time. Military and financial support from the West were already chronically

2 See "What future for Turkey as a member of NATO?" Metis Study No. 3 (April 2018); See "The conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran: How to respond to developments and regional implications?" Metis Study No. 7 (July 2018).

3 See "Stability in Africa", Metis Study No. 34 (May 2023).

4 See "New hybrid threats", Metis Study No. 26 (July 2021); see "Trends and developments in hybrid threats", Metis Study No. 35 (June 2023).

5 See "Relief and re-engagement – German initiatives for stronger transatlantic cooperation", Metis Study No. 22 (January 2021).

6 See "Scenarios: Effects of climate change on Bundeswehr missions", Metis Study No. 33 (March 2023); see "Scenarios for the effects of climate change on security policy in Germany", Metis Study No. 36 (July 2023).



inadequate and are now further declining, which further complicates Ukraine's defence, as do heavy losses of personnel and equipment. In the wake of a Republican election victory in the US, Western support plummets to a new low. Economic decline and fear of a global economic depression are putting a strain on Western economies, with the result that public empathy and support for Ukraine are dwindling. Parties and pro-Russian politicians who want to negotiate with Russia at the expense of Ukraine create strong dissonances in Western decision-making processes, which makes a unified response more and more difficult. Undeterred in its Western course, Ukraine now asks only individual European states for bilateral support, as there is no consensus within the EU and Ukraine Contact Group. Russian successes come at a high price but strengthen the Russian public's support for the war and Putin's position. In the end, after years of conflict, Russia occupies all Ukrainian territory east of the Dnepr.

On condition that Western Ukraine is demilitarised, becomes a "buffer zone" and is denied membership in the EU and NATO, the conflict is frozen and a fragile peace is established on the eastern border of the EU. Russia uses this phase of peace as a strategic break to reconstitute its armed forces and consolidate its rule in occupied Ukraine by oppressive means. The Kremlin also gears its long-term policy toward military conflict with the West. The EU and NATO, too, prepare for a possible future confrontation but are hampered in this by many internal differences and national particular interests. Moreover, pro-Russian voices in some member states openly favour the political and economic normalisation of relations with Russia. Moscow uses this lack of unity to further divide and destabilise Europe. Strategic corruption undermines decision-making processes in European states and creates new dependencies in the energy sector, while hybrid interference and disinformation increase social polarisation.

Implications

A Russian victory in Ukraine that results in annexation of the territory east of the Dnepr and demilitarisation of the rest of Ukraine would have far-reaching implications for Europe's security. NATO would face either Russian territory or a zone of forced Russian influence along a border of more than 4,000 km from Finland to the Black Sea. This would keep European NATO states engaged in Europe. There would be hardly any capacity for supporting the US in the Indo-Pacific region or for international crisis interventions. Eastern European states will focus entirely on deterring Russia, while other security challenges in Africa, the Middle East and Asia will be utterly neglected.

Russia's victory will also improve Moscow's position with its partners China and Iran and will also settle doubts the two may have about Moscow's military and economic resilience. Success in Ukraine will also allow Moscow to reactivate frozen conflicts in Europe earlier than feared.

Crises caused by Russian minorities in the Baltic region or in the de-facto regime in Transnistria will then have to be expected. Russian interference will also lead to conflicts and local wars in Bosnia, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Armenia, and Georgia. It is also conceivable that other pro-Russian governments in the EU will push their country's withdrawal from the Union. Moscow will also openly woo Turkey, for example, by granting Turkish zones of influence in the Caucasus, Central Asia, Syria and Iraq. As a result, Russia's increased involvement in Africa and the Middle East will further destabilise the European periphery and exhaust EU crisis management mechanisms through forced migration to Europe.

The polarisation of Western societies will be deliberately exacerbated by strategic corruption, attacks on critical infrastructures, disinformation, targeted cyber attacks and intelligence activities. In order to impair Europe's economic productivity, Russian sanctions and attacks will target transnational European companies as an extension of European policy. The aim will be to undermine social capital for national and European institutions as well as trust in decision-makers by reducing economic performance in the EU. Europe will face a permanent hybrid war that runs the risk of leading to a hot war with Russia.

Worst case #2 Sahel and North Africa at the centre of systemic rivalry

Russian political interference as well as China's economic investments in the Sahel and North Africa successfully and lastingly exclude European interests in the region. This trend is further reinforced by the EU's current focus on Russian aggression in Europe. Existing cooperations and missions fail. Pro-Russian states leave regional organisations, thereby undermining African integration and cooperation mechanisms modelled on European examples. While Russia is primarily involved in the region through the transfer of military capabilities, training missions, the employment of private security contractors as well as anti-Western disinformation and strategic corruption, China mainly relies on economic dependencies, technology transfer, the extraction of resources and strategic investments. European interests, economic connections and resource transactions are severely affected. In the long term, European states, especially France and the UK, lose all political, economic and diplomatic leverage. Conflicts over water and arable land associated with climate change rage in Africa. Many African states disintegrate and are dominated by mercenary troops who are fighting each other. Contending for resources and influence, great powers intervene and become themselves parties to the conflict; they install puppet governments where they can. Coups and counter-coups alternate. Food shortages increase as the climate crisis continues, leading to further conflicts and migration. Health care and education systems collapse, and diseases spread unhindered. The



Worst-case scenarios				
#1	#2	#3	#4	#5
Russian victory in Ukraine and sub-state conflicts in Europe	Sahel and North Africa at the centre of systemic rivalry	The West at war with Iran through Israel's offensive in Lebanon	Escalation of the conflict over Taiwan and pyrrhic victory of the US	US isolationism under Trump and weakening of NATO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russian success through occupation of Ukrainian territory east of the Dnepr • Demilitarisation of Western Ukraine • Blockade of Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO • Western Ukraine as a buffer zone • Strategic pause for Russia and preparation for confrontation with the West • Disagreement within EU and NATO over how to deter Russia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU and NATO focus on deterring Russia and neglect Africa • Russia and China win out in overall conflict over spheres of influence in Africa • Western interests no longer enforceable • African organisations and states disintegrate • Permanent instability, coups, counter-coups; warlords and mercenaries control the Sahel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Israel's incursion into Lebanon to destroy Hezbollah leads to Iranian-Israeli war • Iranian proxies in the region grow stronger • Israel tries to destroy Iran's nuclear programme through direct attacks • Conflict involves Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq • US and EU drawn into the military conflict on Israel's side 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China commences sea blockade and invasion of Taiwan • US and China in direct conflict • US wins pyrrhic victory • EU increasingly irrelevant as partner to US because of lack of ability for power projection • World remains neutral, only the West involved in sanctions against China 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased US commitments as part of international organisations and NATO • Reduced global US military presence • Americanisation of US foreign policy and transactional economic policy • Primary sanctions against China • Secondary sanctions against EU businesses that continue to operate in China
Implications	Implications	Implications	Implications	Implications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military conflict between NATO/EU and Russia more likely • EU states' engagement in Europe results in limited commitments in Africa, Middle East and Asia • Russian reactivation of previously frozen conflicts in Baltic region, Balkans and Caucasus destabilises EU • EU societies polarised and decision-making complicated by dissonance • More states leave the EU 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nearshoring to Africa to reduce dependence on Asia impossible • Constant sub-state wars along EU periphery • Fragile states provide space for Al Qaeda and IS to regain strength • Increase in terrorist attacks in Europe • Forced migration of millions to Europe as a means of hybrid warfare destabilises EU states 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil war in Lebanon • Failure of the JCPOA • End of Israeli-Arab reconciliation process • Disruption of the bottlenecks Suez-Hormuz-Red Sea • Increasing Russian and Chinese influence in Middle East • Conflict between secular and Islamist factions in Europe • EU foreign policy permanently paralysed by domestic crises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global economic recession primarily affects EU • US weakened in long term; BRICS+ dominate global economy • Economic isolation of the West, rest of the world continues to cooperate with China • US-EU relations damaged • Cyber attacks on critical infrastructure and disrupted supply routes between EU and Asia • EU trails behind in third or fourth place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enormous responsibility for EU to step up in terms of security policy and to reduce power vacuum • Need to ensure own security and supply chains • EU divided into pro-US and pro-China economic blocs • Alternative international organisations such as BRICS+ and Shanghai Cooperation prevail as antitheses to EU and NATO

Table 1 Overview of Worst-Case scenarios

international community faces the challenge of providing humanitarian aid in an increasingly fragmented and destabilised environment.

Implications

On a global scale, these developments will lead to a significant shift in geopolitical power structures. Europe's dependence on external energy supplies and raw materials will become an Achilles' heel, while Russia and China will further strengthen their positions. Nearshoring, de-risking and de-coupling measures aimed at reducing Europe's vulnerability and dependence by shifting markets and production from Asia to Africa will become impossible. International trade routes and supply chains will thus remain at risk. Strategic interests between EU states as well as Russia

and China will clash more and more often, increasing the risk of a direct military conflict. At the same time, terrorist organisations will use the unstable situation to expand their influence, which further exacerbates the security situation worldwide but especially in Europe. Russian interference will create an area of operation, formation and retreat in fragile states for the resurgent Al Qaeda in Maghreb and for the Islamic State, which will carry out terrorist attacks both in the region and in Europe. The economic and humanitarian consequences will also be devastating. Migration, partly forced by Russia and its proxies, will reach previously unseen orders of magnitude; millions will be stranded near the European borders, in the Mediterranean, in North Africa and in Turkey, which will destabilise these states, too. The infrastructure of the border countries will collapse under



the pressure of migration, and humanitarian aid will become increasingly difficult and more expensive to organise. Europe will be exposed to hybrid warfare through forced migration, terrorism and instability on its periphery.

Worst case #3 **The West at war with Iran through Israel's offensive in Lebanon**

Iran capitalises on the deterioration of relations between the West and Russia as well as China and expands its regional influence through proxies (Hezbollah, Houthis, Badr Corps et al.) and diplomatic overtures to the Arab world. Iran's proxies have been increasingly active, especially since Hamas attacked Israel. As a result, the security situation in Israel deteriorates considerably. After Israel has completed its Rafah operation in the Gaza Strip, partially eliminated Hamas and declared the war in Gaza to be over for the time being – or only continues it through low-intensity operations –, it begins military operations against Hezbollah in South Lebanon. Hardliners in Tehran identify this as a direct attack on Iranian interests, begin to move Shia Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon and Syria, and launch large-scale rocket attacks on Israel. An increasingly weakened Netanyahu government now also starts operations against Iranian proxies in Syria and Iraq. In addition, Israeli jets attack military bases in Iran and the infrastructure of the Iranian nuclear programme. The US and Europe are neither able to push Israel to exercise restraint nor to deter Iran from further escalation. The war between Israel and Iran leads to attacks on US forces in the region, resulting in retaliatory strikes and ending the initial restraint of the US. China and Russia provide logistic support to Iran. For China, this is about increasing its influence in the region and keeping US assets engaged in the Middle East, while Russia hopes to benefit from the West's diversion in Ukraine. The United States and some EU states first provide logistic support to Israel, later also sending warships, aircraft and air defence systems. Other EU states criticise Israel's actions. Iranian proxies use the war to expand their attacks to include supply infrastructure in other regions. In addition to ships in the Red Sea, all Western-owned ships in the eastern Mediterranean, the Strait of Hormuz and in the western Indian Ocean are targeted, and some are confiscated. Chinese and Russian vessels are not affected by these activities. Terrorist attacks on Jewish and Western interests are accelerated worldwide, the Sunni-Shia conflict is pushed to the background. Hybrid interference, disinformation and radicalisation deeply polarise public debate in Europe and make it more difficult to reach decisions together. Extremist groups, radical social movements and "useful idiots" are mobilised through social media. In Europe, this leads to mass demonstrations against Israel and the West as well as to targeted attacks on individual figures, Jewish institutions, companies allegedly controlled by Jewish owners, and on parts of the defence industry. In the long term, the West

is thus drawn into the Israeli-Iranian war while having to cope with cultural, ideological and political conflict at home.

Implications

Israel's war against Hezbollah will be much more serious than the war against Hamas. From an Israeli point of view, avoiding a war will carry the risk of an even greater conflict in the future with a better armed and more capable Iranian proxy. The West will face a dilemma. On the one hand, further escalation by Israel's invading Lebanon could lead to military intervention by the US and Europe in order to contain Iranian countermeasures and preserve Israel's integrity. This would lead to further alienation between the West and the Islamic world, an end to the Israeli-Arab reconciliation process, the complete failure of the Vienna nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) and a growing influence of Russia and China in the Middle East. On the other hand, Western passivity would run the risk of years of open conflict between Israel and Iran, with Lebanon then drifting into a civil war. In addition, the risk of weapons of mass destruction being used would increase on both sides. For Europe, the intensification of the conflict will lead to an escalation of domestic radicalisation and polarisation. Antisemitism will increase exorbitantly in European societies, partly because of the increasing number of non-integrated Muslim migrants. Political violence and counter-violence as well as a clash of civilisations between secular and Islamic forces in Europe will be the result. In most European states, the associated domestic political upheavals and coping mechanisms will lead to paralysis in foreign policy decision-making and responsiveness. As a result, numerous European democracies will descend into mob rule and populism will create a breeding ground for future autocratic forms of government.

Worst case #4 **Escalation of the conflict over Taiwan and pyrrhic victory of the US**

China declares a naval blockade against Taiwan on the grounds that it considers its sovereignty, trade routes and reunification goals threatened. Beijing strategically deploys its Navy around the Strait of Taiwan and, in a surprise attack, occupies Taiwanese islands off the coast. This step escalates regional tensions and causes great concern among the neighbouring countries. The international community reacts swiftly, condemning China's actions and calling for an immediate end to its aggressive measures and for an international conciliation conference. However, sanctions are imposed only by Western states; the majority of the international community remains cautiously neutral. China then performs an amphibious landing in southern Taiwan, builds bridgeheads, eventually overcomes fierce resistance along the coast and occupies about a third of Taiwan. The extensive naval and air blockade of Taiwan leads to skirmishes between Chinese and US forces attempting to



supply Taiwan by sea. This escalates into an open war between the two countries. US aircraft carrier groups conduct strikes against the Chinese fleet near Taiwan and the landed troops to avoid escalating the conflict with large-scale attacks on mainland China. In southern China, limited attacks are staged only on ports, logistics centres and military facilities supplying the landed troops. Ultimately, the technological superiority of the US armed forces is the deciding factor, and, together with the Taiwanese armed forces, it leads to the expulsion of the invading troops. China's maritime forces are also defeated at high cost in the Strait of Taiwan. After several weeks, China only holds Taiwan's offshore islands. Most Western states maintain sanctions against China due to US diplomatic pressure, while the rest of the world expands its economic and political relations with China. The conflict ends after the Chinese armed forces lift their naval blockade, clear the Taiwanese islands, exchange prisoners and negotiate a fragile post-war agreement.

Implications

A Chinese blockade and invasion of Taiwan will pose a direct challenge to US hegemony, which the US cannot leave unanswered. Although the US has an extensive network of overseas bases, military confrontation will be costly because of the enormous logistics challenges involved. Moreover, as most European powers will be busy curbing Russian aggression, European support will likely be limited. Regional partners such as Australia, Japan, India, and South Korea will play a more important role in supporting US efforts to contain China. Europe as a traditional partner of the US will thus fade into the background. The conflict will shake the economy around the world, but it will be particularly felt in the West and drastically weaken the power projection capabilities of the US. The success of the US will be tantamount to a pyrrhic victory, as China will be able to compensate for economic losses more quickly. As the majority of states, apart from Europe and individual regional partners, will have remained neutral, the global economic balance of power will continue to shift to the West's disadvantage. Europe, though barely involved in the conflict, will likely suffer the greatest economic damage due to existing dependencies.

If Western economies do not succeed in decoupling from China prior to a conflict, the result will be a global economic depression. Pro-Chinese governments in Europe will choose to circumvent sanctions for their own short-term economic advantage. After the war, US efforts will continue to focus on containing China with the help of regional security partners, while some EU states will try to revive economic relations with Beijing. As a result, the war will mark the beginning of the end of the Western world order and cohesion. Regional tensions will flare up as Russia, North Korea, Pakistan and Iran exploit the weakness of the US to initiate further military provocations in Africa, Asia and Europe and expand their sphere of influence. China

will prepare for another confrontation. Within the EU, both pro-American and pro-Chinese positions will lead to political disintegration and economic decline. At a global level, Europe's standing in comparison to the US, China and India will continue to decline.

Worst case #5 US isolationism under Trump and weakening of NATO

After Trump's election victory, the US and Russia stabilise their relations. The US focuses on China and reduces its global commitments as part of international organisations, including NATO. At the same time, there is a drastic reduction in the worldwide presence of US troops. This negatively affects NATO's deterrence capability, decision-making processes and responsiveness. Washington prefers bilateral agreements with selected partners as well as transactional foreign, security and economic policies. US foreign policy is characterised by indifference towards European affairs. The US attempts to curb China's economic power through sanctions and tariffs. Washington focuses more on energy security and autonomy, access to resources, increasing economic growth, and securing the prosperity of the American middle class. Culture wars and domestic issues such as immigration, crime, abortion, gun control, drugs, workers' rights and trade unions, unemployment and prosperity dominate political and public debates. Trade relations with China are slashed, those with the EU countries are scaled down. EU companies seeking access to the US market are made to relocate their production to the US. The US government pursues arbitrary environmental policies, relying on nuclear energy, fossil fuels, and fracking to generate cheap energy in defiance of international commitments to reduce emissions. Green energy sources are also used, but the necessary facilities must be built in the US.

Implications

The EU will have to compensate for the resulting power vacuum, exert a stabilising influence all over the world and especially on the EU periphery, and protect global maritime supply chains without US support. Europe will also have to learn to hold its ground without help, including against Russian aggression, if necessary. While Trump's isolationist approach will lead to US economic growth in the short term, the effect will not be sustainable as the US will remain heavily dependent on imports of raw materials, rare earths and consumer goods. Thus, while the US will continue transactional trade with China, Washington will impose primary and secondary sanctions as well as tariffs on European companies active in the US in order to limit European-Chinese economic cooperation and protect the US economy. The result will be a drastic reduction in the economic power of the EU. In this way, the Americanisation of foreign and economic policy will severely damage the traditional ties between the US and



Europe. Without a US presence, EU economic interests and businesses that have previously benefitted from US-provided security will suffer a loss of protection, legal security, political and economic support and enforceability of the liberal economic order.

Alternative international organisations under Chinese leadership, such as Shanghai Cooperation and BRICS+, will thus assume a leading role in global security and economic policy. For the EU and other states that previously relied on the hegemony of the US for their security and economic prosperity, participating in such a new organisation would require them to abandon long-standing legal, political, social and economic preferences that determined their constitutions and national identities for decades. In order to ensure its security and prosperity, Europe will also have to compensate for the emerging security vacuum on its own, which it will not be able to achieve in full because of difficult decision-making processes within the EU and a current lack of military and economic resources. The result will be a serious loss of security and prosperity for Europe.

Maintaining Europe's capacity for action

The worst-case scenarios outlined here show negative extremes, some of which are already materialising today. For example, Russia has already consolidated its influence on the Sahel through several coups and the expulsion of Western armed forces. In isolation, every single worst-case scenario poses serious challenges to European and German security, prosperity and social cohesion. Multiple worst-case scenarios at the same time will result in far-reaching political, security, economic and social implications that are unlikely to be overcome. These implications include a global economic depression, high unemployment, financial crises and disrupted supply chains, social unrest and institutional dysfunction of international organisations as well as security conflicts and interstate wars. In the context of such security challenges and conflicting economic objectives, the transformation towards green energy generation and decarbonisation would be further slowed down both internationally and in Europe. Moreover, such developments would threaten the cohesion and resilience of European democracies and the survival of the European Union as a whole.

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