



Aggressive, Assertive and Approximative: how Russia, China and Europe adapt to the changing global order

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What is the common denominator between Russia's interventions in Ukraine and Syria, and China's flourishing strategic investment initiatives, which have grasped so much attention lately, such as the One Belt One Road initiative or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank? They are both the result of foreign policy adjustments to the changing world order. The current period of power transition creates a number of opportunities for rising and dissatisfied powers, but each global actor has developed different adjustment strategies. In this blog post, I will contrast the Russian aggressive diplomacy with China's assertive one, and Europe's approximative responses.

Russia's aggressive diplomacy

Few people consider Russia to be a great power. The Soviet Empire is long gone and, according to most indicators, today's Russia is performing poorly. Its economic productivity and diversity are very low, while corruption is high; and life expectancy is much lower than anywhere in Europe (and many parts of the world). The low price of oil on the markets combined with Western economic sanctions has certainly not helped improve these conditions.

Internationally, however, Russia often behaves as if it were still a great power. In Syria, Vladimir Putin stood against the US to defend the Assad regime and its regional interests. Russia has re-established itself as a Middle East power. In its closer neighbourhood, Moscow seeks to maintain its influence over the former Soviet space, using all its leverages, including force – as illustrated in Ukraine. It has also developed regional initiatives, such as the Eurasian Union, that would bring many of its neighbours within a consolidated Russian sphere of influence. Meanwhile, tensions with the West keep rising. Although relations have been tense for a long time, they have been exacerbated by the Ukrainian crisis.

What explains such aggressive diplomacy? Part of it is posturing. In many regards, Russia punches above its weight, which entertains the Kremlin's discourse that Russia is a great power – or, alternatively, an emerging power (alongside other BRICS nations). Other symbolic attributes, such as nuclear capabilities or the permanent membership to the United Nations Security Council support this narrative. Russia is also taking advantage of a relative power vacuum, in its neighbourhood and in the Middle East. In Ukraine and in Syria, Putin encountered only timid resistance from Western powers.

Another explanation for Russia's aggressive diplomacy relates to its capabilities. Given the poor domestic conditions and the lack of so-called 'soft power', the Kremlin's diplomacy is heavily reliant on 'hard power' instruments. As the saying goes: 'when you only have a hammer, every problem starts looking like a nail'...

China's assertive diplomacy

Contrary to Russia, China's foreign policy relies both of on 'soft' and 'hard' power, across most power dimensions. Indeed, China is not only a rising military power – spending about twice as much than the UK and France combined – but also a huge economic powerhouse. For sure, China will still face numerous challenges in its economic development, as again illustrated by recent slowing growth. Nonetheless, with its huge currency reserves and a state-controlled global investment policy, China is actively using its cash as an instrument of foreign policy.

China has gone on a shopping spree all over the world. Many of these investments have a strategic value of their own (such as investing in new generation nuclear plants in the UK, or buying shares in Greek harbours), but China has made of its investment policy a strategic instrument as such. Through bilateral and regional initiatives, such as the One Belt One Road (OBOR), China seeks to stabilise and develop its neighbourhood first, which will inevitably benefit China in return, while reassuring its neighbours about its intentions.

The launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) earlier this year was also a means for China to challenge Western-dominated financial institutions, and to promote Chinese interests through Chinese-led multilateralism. The AIIB was unexpectedly successful in attracting global support, including in Europe, despite strong US opposition. This was a significant '[soft power success](#)' for Beijing, as it could present itself as a 'responsible stakeholder' to the world, while promoting its own interests and dividing the West. The recent red-carpet-visit of Xi Jinping to the UK confirmed China's success in buying global influence.

Interestingly, China's policy of strategic investments emphasises how much foreign policy relates to domestic policies. Indeed, an economic downturn or unstable domestic conditions could quickly undermine the whole policy. As former US diplomat Richard Haass once put it, foreign policy starts at home. And this is certainly true for China.

Besides its investment policy, China does not neglect hard power. In addition to rising military budget and capabilities, China is clearly flexing its muscles in the East and South China Sea, where it claims many islands and maritime areas. At the UN General Assembly, Xi Jinping also announced that China will significantly increase its contribution to global peacekeeping, while some Chinese experts are debating about a possible security dimension for OBOR (to secure investments or Chinese citizens, for instance).

China's diplomacy is increasingly assertive in its pursuit of strategic interests and global status, but it remains overall balanced between 'soft' and 'hard' power, which makes it overall more effective and, probably, more sustainable – although that will depend largely on China's domestic policies.

Europe's approximative response

In their quest for global status, China and Russia are using very different strategies. As discussed in a previous post, Russia's strategy may [not be as brilliant](#) as some think, and certainly less smart than China's. Yet, both countries actively take advantage of the current period of transition to assert their interests and raise their level of ambition. In contrast, Europeans often appear reactive to international developments and, overall, divided in their response. In Syria, Europeans seem completely paralysed and unable to offer a real diplomatic solution, whereas they are completely divided in their response to China's charm offensive (as described in a [previous post](#)).

EU Member States have different foreign policy priorities, some looking eastward while others look southward. The lack of consensus or coordination usually slows down or weakens Europe's position. Furthermore, Europe's declining resources and capabilities increasingly limit the scope for action. As a result, Europe's foreign policy is approximative. But approximation does not pay off in international relations.

The changing global order requires a strong European response. Recent events suggest that there is room for improvement. What is the EU's level of ambition (if the EU aims for 'global power', then how to redefine its strategic and economic role in 'booming' Asia – in the various meanings of the word 'booming')? What is the EU's vision for the global order, and how to pursue it (hint: simply promoting 'effective multilateralism' may not suffice if the multilateral system is undermined or reshaped by others)? How to respond to the emergence of new powers and to their distinct diplomatic strategies (subsidiary question: can the EU be a 'strategic partner' with all of them, given their diverging long term ambition and competing interests)? How can Member States best contribute? These are some of the many questions that require one single answer, not 28. The EU's current reflection on a new global strategy could be a step forward, but more will be needed – and quickly, because the world is moving, with or without Europe.