'Europe after September 11th' revisited

by Charles Grant

The attacks of 9/11 brought the major powers together. But that unity did not endure, and the world now risks division between the West and the authoritarian powers.

In December 2001 my colleagues and I published a CER report on how the world was responding to the atrocities of 9/11. The tone of 'Europe after September 11th' was gushingly optimistic: "The major powers have come together and committed themselves to fight international terrorism," we wrote. "This alliance promises to be a constructive force in world affairs". We noted several positive geopolitical developments. Some of them proved to be short-lived – and the West has endured a torrid two decades. But though down the West is far from out.

★ The US had re-engaged with the world. George W Bush had started his presidency with a domestic focus, but found himself working with allies and the United Nations. However, he soon abandoned multilateralism and invaded Iraq. His successors sought to reduce American involvement in distant wars. But Joe Biden's clumsy retreat from Afghanistan this summer probably does not signal a permanent shift to isolationism. He wants to refocus on China, and as long as the US sees itself as a power with global interests, it will struggle to avoid military interventions.

★ The EU had strengthened its security co-operation. It did particularly well on internal security, soon crafting the European Arrest Warrant and boosting the role of Europol. More recently it has created a European border guard. On foreign and defence policy the EU has new institutions, such as the 'High Representative Vice President', a quasi-foreign minister, the External Action Service, a quasi-foreign ministry and (so far unused) military 'battle groups'. But the EU doesn't have much more real authority in these domains than it did 20 years ago, when Javier Solana was its chief diplomat.

★ "Since the attacks on the World Trade Centre, Putin has moved deftly to position Russia as a key ally of the West," we noted. The Russian president wanted to get closer to the EU and NATO, and join the WTO. Vladimir Putin supported the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, including the deployment of US forces on former Soviet territory, while he was helpful at the UN and gave US forces access to Russian airspace. But Putin soon turned against the West. The invasion of Iraq in 2003, Ukraine's 'Orange Revolution' against the election of a pro-Russian president in 2004, Western support for Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 and Western criticism of Putin's growing authoritarianism all contributed to this shift.

★ China had used the crisis to improve its relationship with the US, backing it at the UN, sharing intelligence and offering cautious support for its military action. Twenty years on, China has become so strong – economically, diplomatically and militarily – that it sees little

Photo from the launch of 'Europe after September 11th', London, December 11th 2001
(L to R)
Jack Straw, Charles Grant, Nick Butler, Heather Grabbe, Steven Everts and Edward Bannerman

need to defer to the US. Proud of its own model, it believes the West is locked into decline.

Some of our optimism now seems naïve or hubristic. But it reflected the spirit of the age – one in which history had apparently ended, to the West's advantage. The US responded to 9/11 by invading Afghanistan, in order to prevent terrorists using it as a base. That objective has been (for now) largely achieved: though Islamist terrorism remains prevalent in many countries, the US has been spared major attacks.

Terrorists tend to flourish in some of the less prosperous parts of the world. We wrote in the report: "Many of the more virulent forms of terrorism thrive in places where law and order has collapsed, gangsterism rules, weapons are readily available, poverty and disease are rife, and the world economy is distant." Those judgements are still valid, but the West has lacked the commitment and patience to build better polities in places like the Sahel and Afghanistan. It has tolerated excessive corruption and allowed Islamist insurgents to present themselves as morally superior to Western-backed regimes.

Many factors have sullied the optimism of 2001, and weakened the West, including:

1) The conduct and outcomes of the US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. These have greatly damaged America's image. With some prescience, we noted in our report: "If the next phase of the war against terrorism [is] an all-out attack on Iraq…without strong evidence of links between Baghdad and al-Qaeda, and without UN approval, the new coalition would collapse. Not only would the moderate Muslim countries, the Russians and the Chinese peel away from the US, but so would most EU governments." The two forever wars reinforced narratives of Western fallibility. The US also did much else to tarnish its reputation, such as setting off the financial crisis, electing Donald Trump and mismanaging the COVID-19 pandemic.

2) The EU's failure to become a geopolitical force. Its leaders have been distracted by a plethora of problems – the financial and eurozone crises that began in 2008 and 2010 respectively, the immigration crisis of 2015, Brexit in 2016 and COVID-19 in 2020-21. The EU survived them all, but national leaders have been unwilling to let the institutions lead on foreign policy, to invest more in the military capabilities that Europe lacks or to steer their military cultures towards a greater willingness to use force. Thus the economic giant remains a political pigmy. Biden's unilateral withdrawal from Afghanistan reinforces the argument of French President Emmanuel Macron that the EU needs more capacity to act on its own – 'strategic autonomy'. Others prefer to cross their fingers and hope that America will turn up when needed.

3) Russia's re-emergence as a power of sorts, after its weakness in the 1990s. Putin has played a weak hand well. Helped by the oil price rises that began in 2000, he gave the impression of managing the economy professionally and revived the armed forces. He showed he was willing to use force ruthlessly, as in Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2015. Though the economy is stagnating, Putin and his entourage are self-confident, believing that history is moving in their direction – away from liberalism and multiculturalism, and towards greater respect for the nation, faith and authority.

4) China's relentless emergence as a superpower. Those who argued 20 years ago that it could not continue to succeed economically without adopting some democratic principles – including *The Economist* – have been proven wrong, so far. The political system has become steadily more repressive, without any apparent economic cost. Competent economic management has allowed living standards to grow, while military capability has expanded massively. China's largesse towards many developing countries, for example via the Belt and Road Initiative, has bought it diplomatic capital. It offers poorer countries an authoritarian but successful model of development. And in recent years it has become willing to challenge the Americans.

In 2021 there seems little prospect of restoring the global unity of 20 years ago. There is a risk of two hostile camps – the Western democracies and the authoritarian powers – dividing up the world. Many countries, of course, do not want to take sides. But the West should not be too disheartened. Its economies remain far ahead of Russia and China, in terms of per capita GDP, and its societies attract many more migrants than they do. And those two countries often scare rather than charm their neighbours – they have very few true friends. China's increasing assertiveness risks provoking a hostile alliance of its neighbours. Russia's inability to diversify its economy away from natural resource exports may one day undermine domestic support for the regime – and its ability to intimidate neighbours. Under their current leaders neither autocracy is likely to want to work with the West. But as 9/11 showed, history is full of unexpected turns.

Charles Grant
Director, CER @CER_Grant