EU-CANADA NETWORK POLICY BRIEFS

Opening Remarks

Policy workshop on *The EU and Canada in the Face of Changing US Global Policy*, March 25, 2019

by Leigh Sarty[1]

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Opening Remarks for a policy workshop of the Jean Monnet Network on EU-Canada Relations, "The EU and Canada in the Face of Changing US Global Policy" at Carleton University[2]

Leigh Sarty

March 25, 2019

I'm delighted and honoured to have been asked to make opening remarks at today's workshop. I've been an active practitioner in Canada-EU relations -- I served as Global Affairs Canada's Director General for Europe from 2016 to 2018, and enjoyed an earlier stint as Director for Canada-EU relations from 2010 to 2012 -- and in my current capacity as Global Affairs Canada "Scholar in Residence", I've been applying both a practitioner's and an academic's lens to issues touching directly on some of the themes we will be exploring in our sessions today. Let me add however that what I'll say should be considered my own views rather than a statement of Canadian policy.

We have a substantive and ambitious agenda before us. It's also a vitally important one. Pierre Trudeau once famously likened Canada's proximity to the United States to sleeping with an elephant, and I think it's fair to say that -- in keeping with an even better-known turn of phrase -- that elephant will be "in the room" with us here whether we make explicit reference to it or not. I realize our European friends do not have Canada's experience of a shared border with the US, but have learned to appreciate no less than we have the weight of American influence in international affairs, its role in shaping Europe's modern history and indeed its impact on the "European project" itself.

Our common stake in understanding and successfully adapting to Washington's "changing global policy" cannot be overstated. The discussions we have and conclusions we reach today should be a valuable complement to ongoing efforts to advance a Canada-EU partnership that not only benefits Canada and the Member States, but that contributes as well to making our world a better and safer place for everyone.

I'd like to use these brief introductory remarks to provide some context for the expert discussion on specific themes, as well as to pose a question or two, and thereby contribute to the breadth and scope of our conclusions. I'll make three broad points.

First, I don't think it can be stated too strongly that the "problematique" at the heart of this workshop -- "changing US global policy" -- runs much more deeply than Donald Trump or the particular constituencies he represents. His policies are a symptom of other forces – some of which

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have been percolating for years or even decades - and I hope it will be possible today to shed light on what those forces are.

I'd refer any doubters on this point to Amitav Acharya's thought-provoking study of The End of American World Order, which first appeared in 2014, some two years before Trump's election. As our own Minister Freeland has opined, many of those who cast ballots in that election were "animated in part by a desire to shrug off the burden of world leadership", and it is clearly important for those of us in the international community who have benefitted from that leadership and who are struggling with the consequences of its apparent decline to try to understand why that was so.

According to Randall Schweller of Ohio State University, the answer is as straightforward as "Realism 101". As Schweller wrote in Foreign Affairs last fall: "Trump's "America first" agenda is radical only in the sense that it seeks to promote the interests of the United States above all…Declining powers under conditions of low vulnerability tend to reduce their peripheral commitments and look inward (as the United Kingdom did after World War I, for example). It should come as no surprise, then, that so many Americans have finally begun to question their country's long-standing grand strategy of playing the world's policeman and voted for the candidate who vowed to put America first."

Even if we accept such a seductively simple argument -- and I am not suggesting we should -- it raises a host of questions that beg further analysis. If the driving force behind "changing US global policy" is a tectonic -- and inevitable -- shift in the structure of international power, what are the implications of that shift for Canada, for the EU, and for the prospects for global governance? If the benign umbrella of US hegemony was indeed a necessary condition for the postwar flourishing of Canadian internationalism, can the latter continue to flourish in the absence of the former? Was that same hegemony a necessary condition for the unprecedented successes of Europe's postwar integration, and has its erosion been a factor in the challenges the European project has recently faced? To what extent has public support in the U.S. for an "America First" agenda contributed to populist currents now in evidence across Europe?

All this is a long way of saying that charting the future course and impact of Canada-EU cooperation depends importantly on our assumptions about the global context and the nature of that context itself -- in which a declining US may or may not be a decisive factor.

One factor that the organizers of this workshop clearly deem important is the role of Russia, which looks set to figure prominently in both sessions planned for this afternoon. This is wholly understandable. Principled opposition to the illegal annexation of Crimea and Russia's ongoing armed intervention in Eastern Ukraine is a fundamental premise of Canada-EU work together in the security sphere, and all indications are -- alas -- that it will remain so for the foreseeable future. And the Russia challenge is of course a multifaceted one, ensuring no lack of opportunities for Canada-EU cooperation that seeks to address it, from protecting our democratic processes from outside interference to countering Russian narratives that seek to sow discord in its neighbourhood and beyond.

That said, when it comes to Russia -- a country with which I have had the privilege to engage professionally and academically since the twilight of the Soviet era -- I cannot resist remarking on what seems to me to be a growing disconnect between, on the one hand, the amount of attention we lavish on Russia, and on the other, its diminishing relative importance in world affairs.

Let me be clear: this is not for a minute to make light of the challenges I have mentioned, or to dismiss the relevance of the nuclear-armed behemoth on Europe's doorstep that seeks constantly to advance what it sees as its interests at our collective expense. But my very real bone of contention is one of degree. Granting Russia's significance as the world's second-largest nuclear power does not alter the fact that by every other contemporary measure of weight or relevance in the game of nations -- economic trajectory, innovation, demographics, soft power, alliances -- Russia is a laggard, not a leader. Yet judging by the amount of ink spilled daily recounting its perfidy and anticipating its future machinations, one would almost think the Cold War had never ended and Moscow was still the intimidating "other" of a bipolar world.

We can speculate why this is so, but in the interest of time I'll confine myself to suggesting we think about how a more "proportionate" tone in our discourse on Russia might serve our interests, without -- and I can't stress this too strongly -- without yielding in our steadfast opposition to its unacceptable behaviour. Renowned Russia watcher Mark Galeotti touched on this in a recent interview with The Guardian, where he opined that the more we talk up events like the Skripal affair and election interference, "the more power we give Putin" and added, I think only half-jokingly, "we ought to be laughing at the Russians a lot more." I'm not sure that's the answer, but it's certainly interesting food for thought.

The question of Russia's weakness comes into sharpest relief when we consider its relations with China, which transitions nicely to the third of my three points. Just as I question Moscow's prominence in the discourse on contemporary security challenges, I find it striking how often we couple Russia with China as a "combined" counterweight to liberal democracy, let alone periodic speculation about a revived "Sino-Russian alliance" as a force in world politics.

To be sure, existential questions of values, of domestic and of global governance, find Beijing and Moscow on one side of the ledger and Canada, the EU and likeminded democracies on the other, but we do ourselves a disservice if we see the dealings between these two autocracies as anything more than what Bobo Lo has called "an axis of convenience". A principal limitation on that partnership -- as Lo has long argued -- is precisely the power imbalance that seemingly grows by the day: as Xi Jinping's China asserts its regional and even global reach, Putin's Russia scrambles to maintain its relevance.

I raise this because I think it is a big part of the relevant context for today's discussions. It's not just about the elephant in the room; we have to consider -- and please forgive the cliché -- the "dragon" as well. I'm not proposing we recast what is already a finely developed arc for the expert sessions, just once again exploiting my privilege as introductory speaker. Because China clearly figures prominently in the "existential" questions I raised earlier about the structure of power in the international system and possible implications for Canada and the EU.

Time does not permit much more than a fleeting reference to our respective relations with China. Let's just say that for both Canada and the EU, China in 2019 presents both challenges and opportunities, and leave it at that.

But there is one aspect of the China challenge -- and the Russia challenge, and the Trump challenge for that matter -- that makes for an appropriate note on which to conclude these remarks. The poster for this workshop describes an "intuitive feeling" that Canada and the EU "may need to take an innovative and active role in sustaining multilateral initiatives". The main driver cited is "recent tendencies in US foreign policy", but mention is also made of "a broader reconfiguration of global alliances and influence."

I have simply tried to underline how all of these factors are inter-connected, that our collective "problematique" extends beyond "recent tendencies in US foreign policy". What we are dealing with is nothing less than a structural transformation of the international system in which all great power relationships are in flux and the contours of what is to come are as yet unknown.

Against the backdrop of this uncertainty, what we do know -- and can even celebrate -- is that the Canada-EU relationship is well positioned to be a force for relative stability in what are certain to be turbulent times. I say this both as a student of contemporary international change and as a recent practitioner of Canada-EU relations.

Canada and the EU have a keen interest in protecting, reforming and renewing a rules-based international order that is inclusive and sustainable, which we see as critical to address today's most difficult challenges. Promoting the rules-based international order is an important component of the landmark Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA): it serves as a signal to the rest of the world of our joint determination to continue to stand up for inclusive trade, at a time when the global rules-based trading system faces serious challenges.

The Canada-EU Strategic Partnership Agreement -- CETA's political and geo-strategic complement -- represents a renewed and enhanced joint commitment to dialogue and practical cooperation at a moment when both are sorely needed, including most innovatively on global issues such as development, climate change, and energy.

Arguably most significant, this commitment is explicitly framed in terms of values that need championing in our changing times, from "effective multilateralism" to "human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law."

As the 21st century global polity evolves, we are seeing these values challenged from many quarters, and the implications in key issue areas will be the focus of the expert panels that will get underway here in a moment. And if I may conclude on an unabashedly positive note, it's to say that whatever the outcome of those discussions might be -- however contingent, however complex -- the excellent channels that exist between the experts and the practitioners of Canada-EU relations, together with a robust institutional framework undergirded by both CETA and the SPA, ensure that today's conclusions will find appropriate reflection in this important partnership.