

VOLKER PERTHES

Executive Chairman and Director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), former UN Assistant Secretary-General

Steven ERLANGER

I think we will just go down the line from you to Volker Perthes. I am not sure how to translate it, but he is the SWP in Berlin, which is one of Germany's best think tanks. Volker has lots of expertise but has been very involved with Syria questions too. One of the things you might want to talk about is a bit of European foreign policy and defence. So Volker, over to you.

Volker PERTHES

Thank you, Steve. It is better not to translate SWP. It is Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, which is a hard test for anyone who does not speak German, so we call it the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, which is easier. Minister Védrine has already sort of laid out all layers of uncertainties and you asked us what concerns us most. It would probably be fair to say that of all these uncertainties, there are some that concern me less than other things. 10 years ago, we would have said the financial crisis and the economic situation of Europe are the biggest challenge but that is no longer our main concern. At some point in these last 10 years, we would also have said European institutions; I do not think it is our main concern today. In 2016, I thought Brexit would become our major concern that would occupy us for many years and sort of divide Europe; that has not happened. Even the migration crisis is under control for the time being and I guess we are a bit better braced today than we were in 2015, 2016.

Therefore, there are a lot of things that do not concern me as much, even though they are a part of these uncertainties. What concerns me most is the combination of some current developments in our strategic environment. Our most important ally is no longer our most reliable ally. We have experienced unrest in our immediate neighbourhood, which Europe has proven unable to deal with in a convincing manner. A big neighbour has told us again that military power counts, even in Europe. And a rising power, China, is not a benign partner but still has to be a partner because we do not want to decouple, as probably some Americans think they should. These factors and the rise of illiberal movements in our own countries are two inseparable things. I think we already see in some countries that where more illiberal movements get to govern their countries, they are also much closer in their outlook to some of our adversaries outside Europe. That is concerning for me. I think we can go deeper into what Europe should do in this field, but I leave it at that.

Steven ERLANGER

That is also quite a good start because sometimes I think that at the base of all this is really a Europe that is not growing fast enough to provide the money required to keep its wonderful social programmes going. That creates a whole class of people who feel that their lives have been worsened by modernity and I think that goes to the heart of quite a lot of these issues.