

**INTELLIGENCE,  
SECURITY AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY**

**NEW GEOPOLITICS, NEW ARGUMENTS.  
CAN THE EU KEEP UP THE PEACE  
IN THE GLOBAL SECURITY SYSTEM?**

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**Abstract:**

*The COVID-19 pandemic, rough relationships between the most important geopolitical actors (the USA and China), the constant shifts of terrorist phenomenon, and the zombification of economy - all of these are early signals that the global security system is in great distress. The UN seems to lose the compass in this dynamics, failing to provide informed and strong answers to the crisis, giving up control to smaller, regional or specialised, and more practical institutions. In this context, it seems that the EU gets a new opportunity to shape the global security environment, as it has all the instruments necessary to tackle it.*

**Keywords:** *EU, strategic autonomy, crisis management, multilateralism.*

**The frame of reference of the EU's position in the global security system**

In a security environment where geostrategic competition has gained unpredictable values, the EU is, despite some punctual slippages driven by personal ambitions of the leaders of the Member States, a pole of stability. The spectrum of a legitimacy crisis remains current after Brexit, but for medium term the danger of an implosion is not quite possible. However, internal vulnerabilities and acting external threats put pressure on the future of a strategic EU.

Internally, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have brought some dose of uncertainty regarding the mobilization capacity of EU states, but the input of solidarity, despite occasional divergences on

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the allocation of resources, still proves once again, the ability to collectively manage internal security crises. States like Hungary and Poland will continue to be hotspots in European unity, even if for different reasons. Brexit is both a setback and a new opportunity to strengthen continental Europe.

Maintaining EU stability is not an easy task, given a transfer of difficult power in the US, its main global ally, which revealed multiple fractures from a social, horizontal, vertical and transversal point of view of this state. Historically speaking, the democratic rulings have always generated conceptual resettlements of directions of action in the US foreign policy towards the European space and global re-employment, including in geographical areas which have been moved to a secondary place by the Republican Administrations, such as the EU, Latin America and Africa, the latter also in the direct attention of the EU, China and India, alike. But good relations with the EU have always been a key element for the USA, being foreseeable a launch again of the transatlantic partnership, including on the security component. NATO will thus remain an instrument of transatlantic cooperation in which the eastern flank will become essential, including through an increased military presence. In their turn, China and the Russian Federation will court the EU as a strategic economically and a field for practicing soft strategies.

The competition between the US, China and Russia continues to set the international political agenda, on multiple security dimensions, such as the economic, cyber, or the social one. China's aggressiveness in asserting its own influence, on the aforementioned coordinates, lead to a political and security dependency of the EU, with which neither the US nor the Russian Federation will be satisfied. Accelerating the rivalry between the great global powers involves the need for greater cohesion between the EU member states, by defining a strategic common culture.

China is consistently strengthening its profile as a strong international player, capitalizing on the context created by the COVID-19 pandemic in order to be perceived as a generous protector supporting the countries in need, including EU member states, and trying to turn the health crisis into an opportunity to strengthen its ambitions of a global player with hegemonic desires. Beijing's attitude

and the race to take advantage of the opportunities generated by the COVID-19 pandemic in the health, information and economic sectors did not serve those who promoted the renunciation of protectionism.

In the long-term, China may seek to counterbalance US influence in the region, to consolidate the presence of Chinese companies, to influence changes in the EU's perspective compared towards the relevant files for Beijing and the validation of global power position.

In turn, the Russian Federation has shown an increasing level of aggression. Although unlikely to become a direct threat to the EU, in the absence of a trigger outside the European Union, the methods used, from 2008 onwards, to promote it regionally and internationally require a strategic attention from authorities in Brussels.

Aggressive new geopolitical actors in the immediate vicinity, such as Turkey, with hegemonic ambitions, add to the insecurity around the EU, using a tool of pressure and even blackmailing with the issue of illegal migration, in connection with that of terrorism.

Developments in other areas, such as Africa, Asia and South America, will also shape the EU's strategic position. As providers of terrorism and a source of illegal migration, the first two are in the direct attention of crisis mitigation programs and security actions. At the same time, all three geopolitical areas present opportunities for assertion of soft power of the EU; states such as India, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa can be seen as strategic allies in imposing a global power system based on multilateralism.

### **Strategic autonomy – how to transform a crisis into an opportunity**

In order to meet the new security challenges, both internal and external ones, the EU needs to consolidate its strategic autonomy.

The concept of autonomy or strategic sovereignty, often suspected to mask the hegemonic ambitions of France in the political strategic sphere, especially that of President Emmanuel Macron, is not a new one, being circulated in scholastic circles since the 1990s (*Livre blanc sur la Défense*, 1994, p. 49, 50, 52, and 139), but has gained new strength with the rise of global security challenges. Brexit and COVID-19 have, in particular, boosted the identification of one coherent

framework for its implementation. Critics have insisted that strategic autonomy is a recipient of new forms of European protectionism, a proof that the EU re-enters the sphere of geopolitical blocks, respectively the portrait of a “Europe” alone on the road. (*Zandee et. al., December 2020*)

The operationalization of the concept quickly gained the support of many high-ranking politicians, being also included in the European “government programs” of the states taking over rotating presidency (Portugal being the most recent of these, during the first semester of 2021). From Josep Borrell’s point of view, strategic autonomy is represented by the protection the EU’s ability to act in accordance with European interests and reduce dependencies and vulnerabilities. (*Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell, January 2021*).

According to Emmanuel Macron, “based on strategic autonomy, the EU must find the means to decide for itself and not to depend on others” during short term crisis management, such as pandemics or terrorist attacks, but also on long term, such as the effects of climate change or the disruptive technological transition. To this end, it is necessary to reinvent useful forms of cooperation – project coalitions and players, the modernization of European structures and the creation of a uniform field of action, respectively the reconsideration of the terms in which the cooperation is viewed. (*The Macron Doctrine, November 16, 2020*)

Charles Michel chose to define strategic autonomy through his objectives: stability, dissemination of European standards and promotion of community values. (*Speech by President Charles Michel, September 28, 2020*)

The reason for its promotion, however, is difficult to dispute: in a period of geopolitical tension and instability, the EU must be able to act much more independently, to protect and promote their interests and values globally (Csernatoni, November 6, 2020). The EU needs to develop defence and response mechanisms to new challenges such as the new Trump Administration type, another soft crisis of continental or global magnitude, a revival of terrorism, etc. It is essential to gain the

EU's capacity to act alone, if necessary, at least until the mobilization of the Union's natural allies.

Most perspectives on strategic autonomy place it first in the hard field of defence and security capabilities. However, the priority direction in the implementation of the concept is focused on the soft dimension, respectively in civilian crisis management, with occasional military support (especially in the field of physical assurance). Its extensions go towards areas such as economics, finance and trade, regarded as intangible strategic assets.

Arguing, for example, the importance of outer space in ensuring autonomy, Josep Borrell mentions that space security requires improvement of situational awareness to manage security issues such as the response to disasters, surveillance of maritime and land borders and terrorist attacks. The centre satellite from Terrejon de Ardoz, the GALILEO, COPERNICUS or EGNOS programs are part of the tools used in this regard, the first proving useful even in the framework EU military operation IRINI in the Mediterranean. Referring to space security, the European official has moved into the hard dimension, appreciating that it involves the EU's ability to react in the event of a threat to European space assets and monitoring space traffic, this pillar allowing the use of space as a facilitator for European policies including the economic one. (*Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell, January 2021*)

In order to be put into practice, it is necessary to consolidate the EU's economic instruments and diplomacy and a plan of action to increase coherence in the relevant sectors to the external dimension, to strengthen resilience and the capacity to act, to reduce vulnerabilities and dependencies of Member States in areas such as economy, digital, energy, connectivity etc.

This implies internal consolidation, with Germany and France as a hard core, in order to be able to project soft power on the outside, without competing directly with the great powers, on the principle of resilience and by seizing opportunities, focusing at European level on priority issues and delegation to the Member States, through dedicated programs, of the mitigating task of the secondary threats. Cohesion and solidarity will govern the directions to strengthen the European project.

The coordination of efforts on the component of crisis management is expected, especially in the field of public health, and, in parallel, by focusing on the post-pandemic recovery of the European economy. But the order of priorities is rapidly changing, so flexibility is needed: recent examples of security crisis management are: 2008 – economic crisis; 2015 – illegal migration (influx of migrants from conflict areas, in line with organized crime and people trafficking, terrorism); 2020 – the COVID-19 pandemic, already burdened by coordination problems, has shown that mitigation solutions can be found, in the short and medium term, through focusing tools and resources on key elements.

In the long term, investments are to be made in the environment, research and development, digitalization technologies, which will create flexible crisis management mechanisms.

In concrete terms, the consolidation of the EU's strategic projection must manifest in two dimensions: in the immediate vicinity and globally. In what concerns the former, the recovery of Turkey and the Western Balkans is necessary from Russia and the stabilization of Ukraine, by including them in pragmatic cooperation formats, focused on problems to be solved. Detachment of Ankara from Moscow's policies is unlikely to succeed in the short run, as long as energy and political blackmail work – the case of Azerbaijan being the latest example.

Serbia's apparent strategic orientation towards the EU, by supporting the common position on the situation in Belarus, in the summer of 2020, was contradicted by the re-imposition of the Russian-Serbian strategic energy partnership by launching the Turkish Stream pipeline on the Serbian section, the renewal of Russian strategic acquisitions and the resumption of influence actions on the status of Kosovo. Moscow put its levers into operation concerning Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, by stimulating their institutional dysfunction.

With regard to Ukraine, the EU's aspirations can only be in the sense of its political and economic stabilization, the national antagonism being too strong in this state to implement any policies, in the short term.

At the global level, it is necessary to promote multilateralism, an open trade agenda and immediate help in crisis management/disaster

consequences (*Priorities 2019-2024*). Strategic autonomy is needed to avoid turning the EU into a “theatre of operations” between China, Russia and the USA. It is clear that US interests in Europe include the prevention of expanding Russia’s geostrategic influence, using the energy factor and the actions of disappointment, with Hungary and the Balkan states as the spearhead, respectively China, which uses 5G commerce and technology as the “Trojan Horse”.

Against this background, the antidote is to increase efforts so as to better connect economic policy with security interests, mainly by diminishing dependencies at industrial level, more closely filter foreign direct investment and to enhance synergies between the civilian and army industries. Other important elements target supplementing investments in defence, strengthening the EU’s role as a global security guarantor, including in the field of maritime security, strengthening the European pillar within NATO and identifying solutions to improve cooperation and coordination between the EU and the Alliance.

The strengthening of EU military missions and operations through strengthening of European crisis management structures and more consistent efforts for revitalization of PESCO should not be overlooked, in a way that generates concrete results in the second stage of this initiative (2021 – 2025).

The results of massive investments and the achievement of strategic autonomy should also be a maturation of European defence, based on the future technology, to provide the EU with an umbrella in the face of unpredictable evolutions of the global security system. Complementary or not, NATO and the EU must cooperate, respecting the particularities of each institution.

### **EU strategic instruments**

Hard crises are unlikely in the EU, but the number of soft crises will increase. Instruments of crisis management will thus have to be adapted to this trend, taking into account the political dimension and the economic/financial and operating dimension.

Politically, the Annual Foresight Report (October 2021), launched by the EC on September 9th 2020, sets out the challenges facing the EU in the medium and long term, putting the basis of



a methodology for strengthening resilience, promoting open strategic autonomy (European Commission press release of Maros Sefcovic, Vice-president of EC). Closely related to the concept of geopolitical resilience, open strategic autonomy is defined as the EU's commitment for open and fair trade, while preserving the benefits of the open economy and its global partners supporting it to lead a new and invigorated form of multilateralism which the world needs (COM(2020)45).

The open strategic autonomy model aims to define a new system of global economic governance and the development of mutually beneficial bilateral relations, protecting themselves, at the same time, from unfair and abusive practices. Thus, it will contribute to diversifying and strengthening of global supply chains to protect us from future crises and the strengthening of the international role of the European currency. (COM (2020)45)

In financial terms, the European Defence Fund, The Recovery and Resilience Facility and Next Generation EU, are, on a medium-term basis, a baseline for the management of immediate consequences of the crises and the recovery of the EU economy.

The European Defence Fund, launched in 2017, allocates funds worth of €205 million, aimed at increasing the strategic autonomy and industrial competitiveness of the EU (European Commission press release on European Defence Fund, June 15, 2020). On 15.06.2020, the Commission announced that the amount will finance 19 pan-European projects in the field of defence and disruptive technologies. It was announced as a financial instrument that will facilitate a good spending through a combined expenditure, by reducing fragmentation and inefficiency (Margarethe Vestager, Executive Vice-President of the Europe Ready Initiative for the Digital Age), respectively projects that strengthen resilience and strategic autonomy of the EU (Thierry Breton, Commissioner for the Internal Market). (European Commission press release on European Defence Fund, June 15, 2020)

Next Generation EU provides, for a limited period (2021-2024), for response and recovery measures in crisis situations, €500 billion in the form of grants and €250 billion in loans to Member States. Investments are grouped into 3 dimensions: investments and reforms meant to contribute to the solution of crises, launching again the EU by

stimulating private investment, and implementing lessons learned from crises. Areas such as health and preparation for future health crises are targeted, also research and digitalization, strategic investments and critical infrastructure. (Infografic Consiliul UE, 2020)

The Recovery and Resilience Facility, worth €672.5 billion, is channelled to investments in: competitiveness, productivity, environmental sustainability, education, health, employment and economic, social and territorial cohesion, green and digital transition. (Council of EU press release, December 18, 2020). To these a series of tools focused on “problems to be solved” (to-do list) are added.

The REACT-EU package will provide €47.5 billion additional support from current cohesion policy programs. The funding will be targeted at sectors that are of particular importance for an ecological, digital and resilient recovery. They have in view investments for the recovery of the labour market, short-term work schemes, youth employment measures, support for health systems and the provisions of capital work for small and medium enterprises. This support will be available to all economic sectors, including tourism and culture and for essential investments for ensuring the ecological and digital transition, consolidating some already planned investments in the framework of future cohesion programs. (*Cohesion policy action against coronavirus*, 2020)

EU4Health will have a budget of €9.4 billion to strengthen health security and preparedness for future crises in this field. (European Commission, 2021) InvestEU will be supplemented with €15.3 billion in order to mobilize private investments in projects across the Union. By the information dated June 19th 2020, the EU announced that the program will be expanded on a fifth dimension to take into account future needs of the European economy and to promote and secure the EU's strategic autonomy. (*InvestEU Programme*, 2021) An additional €16.5 billion will be provided for external actions, including humanitarian aid<sup>1</sup> to support Europe's global partners. The RescEU strategic reserve will receive an additional €2 billion from the Civil Protection mechanism of the EU for Subsidy and Procurement Managed

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<sup>1</sup> Through *The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument* (NDICI), also known as Global Europe, and *The Humanitarian Aid Instrument*.

by the Commission to increase the Unions's capacity to prepare for and respond to future crises. (*European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations*)

Instrumentally, the EU has begun to strengthen its status and operational capacity of Community agencies, such as the European Centre for Disease Control, European Medicines Agency, European Defence Agency, and European Union Agency for Cybersecurity to be able to anticipate, manage and coordinate the response to crises.

A feasible actionable tool is represented by connectivity projects, as well as the Three Seas Initiative. Strongly supported by the USA, the Initiative was created in 2016 to facilitate the implementation of political, trade, energy and infrastructure projects in Southern, Eastern and Central Europe, in order to increase cohesion, convergence and security to the states in this area, as a premise for strengthening EU resilience and counterbalancing Russia's and China's influence.

## **Conclusion**

Niche capabilities acquired through diplomatic exercise and crises management are now proving to be an important asset of global political assertion and act as a power factor in regions once difficult to penetrate. The basic condition, however, is for the European Union to go beyond its own systematic defects and identify solutions to increase cohesion and reduce disparities between the old and the new Europe, but also for the continuation of the enlargement process towards the Western and Eastern Balkans, where the best opportunities for soft power are found.

Achieving strategic autonomy by the EU can provide the frame of reference in order to achieve this desideratum; the main effect will be found, in essence, for the benefit of the security of European citizens. Strategic autonomy must, nevertheless, be seen not as a concept, but as a project, to which we attach objectives, a plan of action and a roadmap. It can also be considered an intermediate, important step in achieving guaranteed European sovereignty of a genuine European political force.

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