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European sovereignty, strategic autonomy, Europe as a power: what reality for the European Union and what future?

France has not held the presidency of the Council of the European Union for thirteen years. It has held it since 1 January 2022 for a period of six months. This provides an opportunity for the French Head of State to give his vision of geopolitical issues. It also provides an opportunity to explain the concepts of European sovereignty, power, autonomy and strategic responsibility. France, with Germany and the support of the institutions, has played an essential - albeit contested - role in promoting a more political Europe over the past five years (Sorbonne speech in 2017). The aim of this article is to assess five years - in terms of where we are from an economic, foreign policy and security point of view and to analyse the steps taken by the European Union to become a full-fledged player on the international scene.

Failures, but also lessons to be taken from no one

A more geopolitical European Union? Who will accept or believe in it? For us Europeans, the challenges are mounting, within our borders where the rule of law is being challenged, on our immediate periphery where the sabre rattling reminds us that history is repeating itself. And further afield - in Syria, Libya, the Sahel, the Middle East, Afghanistan - what have we achieved in the last twenty years, what remains of our negotiations, our interventions, the hundreds of millions invested in peace and security? What is left, if not the people who are fleeing their countries believing in a European dream that has never existed, a dream exploited by smugglers and autocratic regimes, a dream that is turning into a nightmare before they even set foot on the European continent. What has the European Union's foreign and security policy achieved?

This is a real question, but it is not the only one, nor perhaps even the right one. All these crises have multiple causes. What must be assessed here is not simply Europe's failure to bring about or protect democracy within its borders and beyond. It also concerns, beyond Europe, the failure of the great powers in general and of the multilateral system in particular, which have been unable, or unwilling, to support the necessary transitions taking place in Asia, the Maghreb, Africa and the Middle East. We will not go back over the accepted uselessness of the United Nations Security Council. We will, however, dwell on the results achieved by three of its member nations. Those of the United States in Vietnam, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan are well known, while China's results on the Silk Roads are more ambiguous, since Beijing is already encountering obstacles in Central Asia and Africa. Finally, those of Russia, for whom power has become synonymous with the ability to cause harm and to win back its former grandeur. We have no lessons to receive from anyone.

At least, somewhat cynically, it can be said that Moscow remains master of its own destiny. Not all states have this power or desire. In fact, few countries aspire to give themselves the means of their independence and sovereignty. We could summarise this by saying that there are three types of actors on the international scene today: the "followers" (what we could say about Australia and the United Kingdom after the AUKUS affair), the "by-standers" (a large proportion of Asia, the Middle East and Africa, who are waiting to see before taking a position) and the "hedgers" (who make the arbitrations without committing themselves: India, Turkey). In other words, few nations are ready to exercise real leadership in terms of good global governance. This criticism cannot be levelled at the

Europeans, who have tried to implement this unique model of 'soft power', which has had a certain power of attraction (the Brussels effect) and also some results (see the GATT and then the WTO negotiations), but which is now encountering real limits in a world that is more transactional than ever. This ultimately leads us to the following question: after all these diplomatic and military failures, which are not only ours, what do we want for ourselves and why should we strive to become more autonomous, more political, more responsible?

The answer lies in the past. Everything has been done over the past 72 years to ensure that Europe is not geopolitical, from the ECSC to the EEC to EURATOM. Everything has been done to mutualise the major sectors of heavy industry and not to repeat the past mistakes of collusion between politicians and industrial magnates which provided the basis for revenge and the Second World War. In the end, seventy-two years later, it has to be agreed that this mutualisation has not worked out so badly. In this multipolar world of ours, which has changed profoundly since the pandemic, a new course must now be set if we are to continue to exist. This course is that of political responsibility. A course almost the opposite of the one taken since the Treaties of Rome, where economic and military dependence on the United States has been synonymous with prosperity and stability. What is needed is a new Marshall Plan, this time a political one. Our own Marshall Plan. A cultural revolution to be achieved without relinquishing our identity. Only 62 years after its creation, the European Union must learn to combine "soft" and "hard" power, not so much for the sake of a common vision of so many different cultures, but rather to equip itself with a coherent arsenal that protects these differences. This is what strategic autonomy is all about, it is both a backbone and an immune system against external attacks.

This immune system is based on a Europe of power that has to be consolidated, a strategic culture that has to be developed and a network of alliances and partnerships that have to be redefined.

I - EUROPE OF POWER: CONSOLIDATING ONGOING WORK

The concept of European power is not new. It is exercised on a daily basis. When Alain Peyrefitte asked General de Gaulle in 1962 "*what is the purpose of Europe?*" the latter replied "*not to be dominated by the Americans or the Russians*". He added, "*Europe must be an Archimedean lever for France*". Jacques Chirac spoke of it being a "*power multiplier*". Other terms have emerged more recently - European sovereignty, strategic autonomy, strategic sovereignty - all expressing the same idea: we must act collectively whenever possible but autonomously when necessary. The semantic debate continues to rage. For supporters of NATO or ultra-liberal economics, strategic autonomy is an anathema because it implies disengagement from the Americans. For those in favour of more institutional support and a targeted industrial policy, strategic autonomy means the ability to resist and push back. But this conceptual debate is in some ways outmoded because European power is already a reality... in some areas.

The European Union is already an economic and normative power (competition law, REACH regulation on chemical products, RGPD, etc.), a commercial power (the Union has signed more than 50 trade agreements compared to 18 for Japan and 14 for the United States), a development aid power (the Union and the Member States account for more than half of the world's ODA), and an aeronautical and space power (Ariane, Airbus, Galileo/Copernicus). The problem lies on the military side. To date, the European Union has not mastered the instruments of "*hard power*", its security and defence policy is primarily a peacekeeping tool, and its operations are modest in size compared to those of NATO or even the UN. All this is not the result of chance but of our history. The idea of power, whether economic or military, remains subsidiary. Legally and politically, this power is limited and relative. European law is confined to the competences of the European Union and strategic dependence on the United States is in the Union's genes.

Yet something is happening. A new European dynamic is emerging and strong lines of action are appearing. Here are three of them:

- The emergence in Europe - among the Member States and the institutions - of a "geopolitical" awareness in view of an increasingly competitive world. This means taking a stand in the face of a double movement: the rise of China and the withdrawal of the United States. The Afghan and AUKUS issues remind us that there is no longer an unbreakable alliance and that American bad manners are not limited to the Trump administration. We must now "take our destiny into our own hands" as former German Chancellor Angela Merkel reminded us. The transatlantic link remains strong for the vast majority of Member States, but doubts have arisen as to the solidity of US guarantees;
- The COVID crisis has not yet run its course. It has revealed the urgent need to protect a number of critical sectors and to support the economy. The €750 billion recovery fund is historic and, together with the Multiannual Budgetary Framework (MFF) of more than €1,000 billion, offers a real opportunity to restore Europe's economies and facilitate the twin transitions of climate and digital. In the words of former German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz, now Chancellor, this recovery plan is not yet a fiscal union, but it is a decisive step in that direction;
- Finally, the Europe of power is above all that of the Franco-German couple, described by Jacques Delors as "the tree of life". But these are two opposing views of power: essentially military for the French, economic and legal for the Germans. Of course, there are elements of convergence between Berlin and Paris for a policy of dialogue and firmness towards Russia or Iran or for a balanced approach with Beijing (in opposition to what the United States is demanding). But it is much more difficult to establish a common strategic approach on the Sahel, Libya, Syria, Turkey or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet encouraging signals for

a more politically sovereign Europe have been given by the new German government. "We want to increase Europe's strategic sovereignty," says the three-party programme of the SPD, FDP and Green coalition. "Above all this means restoring its own ability to act in a global context and being less dependent and vulnerable in important strategic areas." At a time when France is to hold the six-month presidency of the Council of the European Union, Franco-German convergence on sovereignty and strategic autonomy should help to move forward, even with a smaller group of states if necessary (Article 44 TEU).

In short, all the political fundamentals are there - awareness on the part of all Member States, an unprecedented budget, the return of Franco-German leadership - to give new momentum to a more political Europe. But there is still a long way to go. More sovereignty, more autonomy and more power require a critical examination of the current instruments and of those that are likely to provide new answers.

II – THE LONG EUROPEAN ROAD: FROM POLITICAL INNOCENCE TO STRATEGIC CULTURE

In the economic as in the military fields, the "soft" approach long practised by the Union is no longer adequate to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

In the economic sphere, much has been said about the merits of the "Brussels effect", i.e. the application of European regulations as a global reference standard, without any constraints, simply as a virtuous effect. However, this 'Brussels effect' is in danger of becoming a distant memory of a European normative power that no longer exists. The level playing field established under the Single Market is distorted by the lack of reciprocity granted by third countries which are increasing market access restrictions and disguising state aid. Above all, we in Europe do not have the codes to master the digitalisation of the economy, a technology dominated by the United States and China, a technology that is gradually becoming the "standard of standards". If it does not respond, the European

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Union will no longer be the normative reference for the 21st century.

On the military side, the numerous European initiatives developed over the past 72 years, and in particular the failure of the European Defence Community (EDC), a project to create a European army with supranational institutions in 1954 because of France, have not led to anything other than peacekeeping interventions or training missions, mainly in Africa, whereas the European Union had envisaged operations across the whole spectrum of crises (low and high intensity). The idea of a rapid reaction force has nevertheless been validated and concretised under the term "battlegroups". But these multinational joint forces have never been activated. As for armaments, no major programme has ever been developed under the aegis of the European Union.

However, despite the political innocence of its history, a strategic culture is gradually being established within the European institutions. A set of measures, which we will call the *toolbox*, is replacing ad hoc and uncoordinated responses, both in the economic and military fields.

In the Economic Area.

- The COVID crisis has revealed our vulnerabilities both in terms of our critical infrastructure (economic and financial) and our sources of supply. In response, a whole regulatory arsenal was adopted between 2019 and 2021 or is being negotiated: control of direct investments, competition law reforms, revision of trade policy, new industrial strategies for key sectors to reduce our dependence (semiconductors, hydrogen, batteries, quantum computing, artificial intelligence), anti-coercion regulation;
- The anti-coercion regulation deserves a special mention. This proposal, which will be examined under the French Presidency, will usefully strengthen the European Union's toolbox against the major powers which no longer hesitate to abuse their economic weight to threaten our

interests and sovereignty (cf. China/Lithuania on Taiwan, the United States on so-called GAFAM taxes, Russia/Netherlands on the crash of flight MH17). This is a strong signal from the European Union, which is clearly using its main weapon, trade, to defend its political, economic and financial interests. Of course, a certain number of questions remain and will be the subject of debate between Member States: what will the role of the States be in implementing these coercive measures taken by the Commission; how can it be guaranteed that it is indeed a matter of preserving the rules of law and the defence of European interests as a whole and not of introducing protectionist measures for some? How can these measures be applied in practice and who will implement them? The difficulties of this new regulation could come as much from the risks of escalation with third countries as from intra-European divergences between countries favouring a hard-line liberalism and those for whom a targeted industrial policy is not taboo in terms of protecting their 'European champions';

- But European champions are a problem. For many, the defence of European champions is synonymous with support for large companies, mainly French and German. Looking at the recent initiatives developed by the Commission as part of its industrial ecosystems (systems aiming to mobilise all the players in a given sector), it is worth noting the predominance of Berlin and Paris in the leadership of most of the projects that are crucial to the dual digital and climate transition (semiconductors, hydrogen, batteries, cloud, health). This is a sensitive point to be taken into account and perhaps a pledge to be made by the new German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, and the French Presidency, who wish to make the revival of the economy one of their priorities.
- If there is one area in which the Franco-German couple can make history after 72 years of procrastination, it is that of European defence and security. As on in the economic area, many recent initiatives are worth mentioning

- permanent structured cooperation, ([PESCO](#)), [European Defence Fund](#), [European Peace Facility](#), Coordinated Annual Review on Defence ([CARD](#)), EU-NATO cooperation, or the French-led [European Intervention Initiative](#) (EII) - because they contribute to strengthening Europe's strategic autonomy. But nothing can be taken for granted;
- Like other political measures taken in the past, these initiatives may remain dead letters. At this stage, they are still the beginnings of an incentive for Member States to be more innovative (European Defence Fund), to better coordinate national planning (CARD), to provide military support to third countries or regional organisations (Peace Facility) or to cooperate in limited numbers on armaments programmes (PESCO, EU/NATO). The intention is commendable and has created a new dynamic. However, the real problems lie elsewhere, such as in the real determination of the Member States to make good their capability shortfalls in critical strategic areas (transport, reconnaissance, intelligence, space, maritime), which recent efforts have only partially addressed. This is why, in addition to these European initiatives which still lack coordination and coherence, the Germans and French have decided to go further. Together, they have taken the measure of the strategic challenges that threaten the stability and security of Europe. A White Paper on Defence is being prepared: the [Strategic Compass](#).
- Initiated under the [Germany Presidency](#) in 2020, the Strategic Compass is due to be adopted under [French Presidency](#) in March 2022. This is a first in the history of the European Union because apart from the 2016 Comprehensive Strategy, which was only a general CFSP document, there is no Defence White Paper (DWSP) yet. Four strong pillars have been identified in the document: threat assessment, resilience, capabilities and partnerships. This year is therefore a unique opportunity to bring the three defence agendas together; the European Union with the adoption of the Compass; by NATO with the adoption of the [Strategic Concept](#); by the US with the adoption of the [National Strategic Security](#) and to reflect on a more flexible and integrated operational toolbox between the actors involved. One example that immediately comes to mind is the multiple maritime operations in the Horn of Africa that are being conducted by several commands (NATO, EU, US, ad-hoc) that would benefit from greater mutual coordination to better monitor the region;
- A frank discussion must be held, particularly on the issues that divide the members of NATO and the European Union: collective defence, deterrence, non-duplication of capabilities and operations, and the complementarity of organisations. The stakes are high for the transatlantic relationship in search of a new security architecture. At the heart of this issue is the positioning vis-à-vis Russia - a divisive country within NATO as well as the European Union - and vis-à-vis China, regarding which disagreements are profound. While the United States sees Beijing as a systemic rival and an established military power (there is no shortage of issues, from Taiwan to the China Sea and trade confrontation), the European Union wants to maintain a more balanced approach with a view to obtaining Chinese support on issues such as climate change, the Iranian nuclear programme and WTO reform.) The situation is complicated by the fact that trust between Europeans and Americans has melted away since the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Australian submarine affair. Only the new Franco-German team is likely to find the necessary balance with our American ally (notably on the new European rapid action force) while maintaining a certain degree of independence in our capacity to act. Europe will need this capacity for action, whether it is to protect its immediate neighbourhood or to turn towards the Indo-Pacific, the new world centre of gravity.

It is indeed with our partners that the real keystone of our strategic autonomy and sovereignty lies. Everything remains to be done to move from a development logic to a partnership logic.

III - REDEFINING OUR PARTNERSHIPS: A PREREQUISITE FOR EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Investments, values and confidence: three keys to a new partnership

There will be no sovereignty for Europe without a stabilised neighbourhood. In a context of high tension with Russia and China, to the East and South of Europe, the European Union must rethink its regional policy and support and promote security and prosperity at its borders and beyond. This is what the [new neighbourhood, development and international cooperation instrument](#) which entered into force on 1 January 2021 is all about. The objective is not only to unify the strategic financing of the European Union's external action but also to make it more coherent and transparent with a particular focus on migration and climate issues. To achieve this, a double pitfall must be avoided: too much "focus" on immigration and border control, but above all, the rationale of development aid, which has not shown the results expected of it, must be overcome by a rationale of investment and public-private partnership. It is on this very clear line of investment and the increased role of the private sector that the Europe-Africa summit will be held on 17 and 18 February.

There can be no sovereignty for Europe without the creation, beyond the neighbourhood, of an arc of countries that share and defend the same values. Strategic autonomy is not synonymous with independence or autarky but rather with interdependence that is chosen rather than suffered. Here, Europe benefits from a considerable asset: world trade of the highest order. The European Union's total trade with third countries amounts to €4,000 billion, making it the world's leading trading power ahead of China and the United States. The European institutions are currently negotiating with a number of countries to create this value chain: Mexico, Chile, MERCOSUR, Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, Australia,

New Zealand, etc. The [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) presented on 16 September 2021 is in line with this logic.

Finally, there will be no sovereignty if the European Union does not remain at arm's length from the great powers. Of course, the United States remains Europe's main strategic ally because we share essential values, but this privileged relationship must not mean alignment or loss of free will. This will be the challenge of the network of alliances and partnerships being built, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. And the similarity of European and American strategies for this Asian area heralds inevitable economic and security conflicts (artificial intelligence, cyber security, digital or maritime security). Similarly, while we share few common values with Russia and China, we may nevertheless have converging interests (energy, climate, multilateralism). It will therefore be a question, as the High Representative emphasised, of practising a responsible but balanced policy that will prevent the European Union from being taken to task by the major powers. The current pressure exerted by the United States on Europe with regard to China should lead us to reflect on our room for manoeuvre.

With regard to these alliances and partnerships that are now multiplying, one question comes to mind: how can we prevent this ambition for greater sovereignty and strategic autonomy from becoming too dispersed between neighbourhood policies, African strategy, Indo-Pacific strategy and permanent rebalancing between great powers?

Several avenues are proposed, which are already being studied:

- Europe must set up a regional network in which the defence of its interests and values is central. This does not mean being present everywhere, with the risk of being spread too thinly, as has too often been the case up to now in the Commission's programmes, but rather selecting the countries, continents and programmes that contribute to strengthening peace, stability and prosperity not only in the region but in Europe. This is a cultural revolution for the Commission. This mapping of the world according to the defence of our interests and values takes the form of connectivity strategies, i.e. the setting up

of concrete initiatives between the region concerned and the European Union, such as transport links and energy or digital networks. This should be seen as a European response to the Chinese Silk Roads. The European Initiative "[Global Gateway](#)" will involve up to €300 billion between 2021 and 2027;

- For this connectivity between like-minded countries to be successful, current partnerships need to be more inclusive, based not only on economics but also on security and defence. The AUKUS agreement between the UK, US and Australia shows us the way. The European Union must create its own regional economic and military security architectures;
- The COVID crisis has taught us that within these connectivity networks, political priorities will have to be established, notably to address our vulnerabilities in critical sectors - digital, artificial intelligence, energy, space, health, maritime security - and that diversification strategies will have to be introduced to secure our sources of supply;
- Finally, the European Union must rebuild the foundations of trust with the great powers, Russia, the United States and China, because it will remain, in many respects and for some time to come, dependent on their energy, security and technology supplies. Above all, each of these powers is an extraordinary lever for defending European interests.

However, this trust no longer exists and the growing tension between China and the United States places Europe in the uncomfortable position of intermediary, at

the risk of not being able to position itself. It is essential not only to implement initiatives and measures to restore trust with the Americans since the AUKUS affair but also not to neglect the positive dynamics with Russia and China. It is through this maturity in the balance of relations with the major powers that Europe will build its political credibility. It has already done so for 15 years with the Iranian nuclear issue, in which the [E3](#) or the three European states not only play an intermediary role on behalf of Europe, but also provide real leadership that is recognised by the United States, China, Russia, Iran and the international bodies (IAEA, UN). The European Union will have to renew the experience of this trust in the months to come by asking the Russians and Americans not to talk alone about security architecture in Europe. The experience of the Iranian nuclear issue is proof that the European Union can provide a voice at the interface between the military and the economy that is accepted and recognised by all, based on a model that is halfway between "hard" and "soft power", making it an autonomous, open, sovereign and united international player.

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