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Europe as a power: now or never

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One year already, one year of misfortune for the Ukrainian people, one year of blind violence, of sirens' blasts, of terror, of exile for some, even of deportation, of grief for many families. One year of systematic destruction of Ukraine's industry, its infrastructure, its energy production centres, part of its agricultural resources, of its economy. One year of oppression in the occupied territories, torture, war crimes, indoctrination, Russification. However, this appraisal is not exhaustive, it cannot take into account the destructuring of Ukrainian society, the reality and the extent of the sacrifices of a young generation of Ukrainians who are paying with their lives for their visceral attachment to their country and its values. But it must be stressed and repeated, for the Ukrainian people and their army it has been a year of struggle, of fierce, often heroic resistance, of resilience, of will to defend a free, democratic Ukraine and to restore its sovereignty.

It is more than legitimate for Ukraine, in the vanguard of free Europe, to aspire to join the European Union as soon as possible. A Union which, even without the United Kingdom, remains attractive to many peoples in search of freedom, progress and prosperity. However, a question arises: is the European Union, which originated in the ruins of two world wars and which was able to bring together hereditary enemies from both sides of the Rhine, this community of nations which, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, was able to take in the majority of the states that had emerged from the Warsaw Pact, and even, for some, from the Soviet Union itself, is this original and unique construction ready to take its future into its own hands, to defend its common values, and to assume its responsibilities in the face of history?

Are we Europeans up to the challenge posed by this war on European soil? Are we ready to believe in ourselves and in our younger generations? Are we ready to look our future in the eye with pride? Can we now sidestep this nagging question, which is disturbing because of its implications and the level of ambition it implies, because of the historical reluctance of some and the suspicions of others: do we want to give Europe a chance to make its voice heard, to count, to carry weight, to propose an original way forward in the new geopolitical equation of this century?

Failure to answer these existential questions, to avoid them or to put them off indefinitely, would be a mistake. To paraphrase Albert Camus, as far as the future of the European Union is concerned, "to misrepresent its ambition as a world power would be to add to its misfortunes". "Do not be afraid", these words attributed to Jesus of Nazareth and taken up by the Polish-born Pope John Paul II in 1978, are now being screamed at us by Ukrainians over the noise of Vladimir Putin's boots and bombs. These words are being whispered in our ears by our younger generations: do not be afraid to face up to, to dare, to undertake, to innovate, to invent a new ambitious Europe, proud, open to the world and ready to defend its values and its interests.

The successive crises we are now experiencing, whether they affect health, energy, economics or environment, the prospects of a new Cold War imposed by the bellicose attitude of Putin's Russia or, above all, the clash of the American and Chinese titans, of which we can only see the first hints at this stage, this is the harsh reality of our time.

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Do we need to find other compelling reasons to act without delay and to imagine the paths to a new freedom for the European Union and, even if it offends sensitive souls, to a certain strategic autonomy?

At the risk of repeating ourselves, daring to bet on autonomy in the areas we consider strategic now and, above all, in the future, does not mean building a "fortress Europe", it does not mean breaking the precious link we have forged with our allies within the Atlantic Alliance since 1949, nor does it mean refraining from launching ambitious, forward-looking projects with partner countries, quite the contrary, it is indeed autonomy that will give the European Union the freedom of choice.

To define these critical, vital areas that call for this level of independence or, at least, assumed dependence, we need to imagine the future with an open mind regarding the major challenges brought about by political changes, new technologies, new uses and, innovation at large. For example, few experts had predicted that the United States would achieve energy self-sufficiency so quickly by exploiting so-called "unconventional" hydrocarbons, essentially shale gas and oil.

Moreover, energy is now a central concern for the Member States, but also for the European Commission. It is clear that the road to autonomy in this area is long, paved with pitfalls and fraught with the mistakes of the past. But success is possible if we can find the path back to competence, coherence and reason.

For France, but also for other European states, nuclear power has helped us write great pages of history; it must now, after years of procrastination, guide our future. Others have not made this choice, and they must assume this by developing decarbonised renewable energy sources. In any case, it will be up to all the Member States to find the right balance that will allow Europe to assume its responsibilities towards the precious ecosystem of our planet, which is also the expression of a responsible power.

Defence is obviously key to any ambition for strategic autonomy, and the leaders of the Fourth Republic, and

then General de Gaulle, anticipated this perfectly by developing a nuclear deterrent based at the time on three components. Within a decade, France succeeded in this achievement leaving an indelible mark on our contemporary history. Our predecessors thus showed that the ambition of strategic autonomy is not an illusion for those who have the will, who give themselves the means, for those who believe in the power of human genius put at the service of great projects. Recovering this pioneering spirit is the key to our future.

Of course, we can legitimately object that the European Union is not a nuclear power, indeed some Member States are even signatories to the [Treaty on the prohibition of Nuclear Arms](#)[1]. Within the European Union, after the - regrettable - departure of the United Kingdom, France is now the only remaining nuclear power and permanent member of the UN Security Council.

However, it should be noted that the French President, head of the armed forces, has repeatedly opened the door to Member States wishing to engage in joint strategic reflection because, in his words: "*today even more than yesterday, France's vital interests have a European dimension*". This important point should be seen in the light of the attitude of the European countries participating in NATO's airborne nuclear component[2]. To this end, they provide the Alliance with a number of [fighter planes, so-called "Dual Capable" that can carry the American nuclear bomb B61-12](#) (that has been recently modernised). In this context, they accept the principle of a double key, which is based on the fact that the Americans retain permanent responsibility for the weapons stored in Europe and that, in the event of an agreement by the North Atlantic Council on the potential use of this nuclear component, these bombs would only be mounted on the carrier aircraft after an express decision by the American President. One can conclude that the "nuclear fact" is not a taboo for these EU member states, not even for Germany...!

Need we remind you here that the attachment to NATO (and to the great American ally) of many European Union states[3] is systematically advanced to criticize the very idea of any strategic autonomy for the Union.

[1] Austria, Ireland, Malta

[2] Germany, Belgium, Italy, Netherlands

[3] Of NATO's current 30 members, 21 are members of the European Union. If Sweden and Finland were to join, this number would rise to 23 out of 32, a large majority.

And yet, since the creation of the Alliance in 1949, the same American ally has demanded that Europeans assume their full share of responsibility for their defence. This obligation is clearly written into Article 3 of the Washington Treaty, which founded the Atlantic Alliance.

Donald Trump's presidency casted a shadow over this strategic dependence for many Allies, in particular by creating doubt about the systematic involvement of the United States in the application of Article 5 of the Alliance's collective defence in the event of an armed attack on one of its members. It is clear that this attitude must be put into perspective with the transactional nature of Donald Trump's foreign policy, which constantly considered the Allies as partners practically like any others, in short: *"if you want to be defended, well, pay now... and buy American...!"*.

To be honest, his predecessors and his successor do not really say anything different, albeit with more diplomacy. With less than two years to go before a new American election, the question arises very acutely: what would Donald Trump have done in the face of Russian aggression against Ukraine and, consequently, in any case, what would the Europeans have done or, more crudely, would we have abandoned the Ukrainian people to their sad fate? This is how the European Union's strategic equation is framed, and it will be even more so in the future as the Americans turn their eyes and their military capabilities towards their great rival, not to say adversary, China.

Returning to the reality of the Ukrainian conflict, it would be a mistake to underestimate the support the European Union has given to Ukraine, which is expressed in many areas, from sanctions that are directly affecting the lives of Europeans, [to the measures of political, economic and humanitarian support but also in terms of military equipment](#). The example of the German-made heavy Leopard tanks is the most emblematic, even if they have not yet been put into action by the Ukrainian forces.

Thus, the general public has discovered that Germany, which is considered by many to be a pacifist country,

is developing first-rate military capabilities and is exporting them widely, which means that a sizeable "pool" can be built up to provide Ukraine with capabilities that it sorely needs. We might also mention the various ground-air defence systems provided by European states or the now famous French Caesar guns that are particularly prized by Ukrainian artillerymen.

However, these rather flattering examples cannot mask the difficulties and shortcomings that European states face in sustaining these efforts over time. The post-Cold War "peace dividend" is still impacting this high-intensity conflict and still weighs heavily on the European strategic equation. For example, are European defence industries, where they exist, sufficiently solicited and supported? The example of the artillery ammunitions deficit is probably the most striking. In fact, it is the lack of depth and sustainability of European armies that is glaring.

But nothing is lost, as the famous aviator, philosopher and poet Antoine de Saint-Exupéry used to say: *"In life there are no solutions, there are forces at work, they must be created and the solutions follow"* and in this case we could add *"and bring them into synergy"*. This should also be the motto of the European Union in its quest for a strategic dimension because these forces exist. But how do we get them moving and working together?

Economic power is inseparable from military power. The announcement by the German authorities that they would be [investing extra 100 billion € \(over 5 years\) in defence](#) is emblematic for a country that was once reluctant to consider the 2% GDP target agreed within NATO as indispensable. The efforts made by France under the [Loi de programmation militaire \(Military Programming Bill\)](#) (2019-2025) and those planned for the next (2024-2030) are appreciable. However, constrained by the level of national debt, they are likely to be insufficient. Of course, even with a great deal of will, the efforts of European countries in this area could not match or even approach the colossal American budget of more than \$800 billion, but it would have little to envy those of the other major world powers.

On this point, it is also worth highlighting the proactive attitude of the European Commission, which has finally taken up defence issues: The [European Defence Fund](#), Permanent Structured Cooperation Projects or the [European Peace Facility](#) which made it possible to provide support to Ukraine (to a total of 3.6 billion on 1 February 2023) are encouraging examples.

However, these efforts in the service of European defence will be in vain if they do not respond to a common ambition and strategy. In this regard, the [Strategic Compass](#) adopted in March 2022 provides a fairly comprehensive and relevant overview of the risks and threats that the European Union must be prepared to face. However, it does not constitute a strategy as such, let alone a military one.

Such a strategy could be deployed on "geographical" axes, in the Mediterranean in particular, and on a so-called "multi-domain and multi-milieu" approach capable of including the new fields of confrontation (exo-atmospheric space, cyberspace, information space, cognitive space, etc.), but also the evolving nature of threats and their hybridity.

To give this strategy its full force, it should be combined with an ambition, priorities and, let us say, a preference for the European defence industry, extending it as far as possible to countries that have little or no capability in this area and are therefore not very sensitive today to the strategic dimension of this activity. Seen in this

way, the European defence industry would become a genuine tool for power, growth and resilience. This must, of course, be matched by a profound change in investors' attitudes towards defence requirements. In Europe - with a few rare exceptions - investment funds are, to say the least, reluctant to invest in the defence industry under the guise of pseudo-ethical reservations that hardly stand up to the conflictual realities of the contemporary world.

Let there be no doubt about it, Europe has the means to set in motion and synergise the forces that will enable it to count among the world powers of the 21st century. It can act for peace and promote its values, defend its interests, and influence the balance in an uncertain world. The forces that need to be set in motion are called youth, faith in a common future, courage, will, lucidity, confidence, education, knowledge, competence, research and innovation. This is the price that an ambitious European Union will have to pay if it is to take its place and assume the status of a real power in a new century that leaves little room for the weak and the indecisive.

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