

TIME FOR A MORE 'GAULLIST' EUROPE?

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EDITORIAL



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When I look back at our past, I feel proud about what the European Union (EU) has achieved; we have transformed relations between our countries and created a new model of cooperation and integration. When I look ahead, I feel apprehensive; we face an increasingly turbulent global landscape. Eric Cline explains in *The Survival of Civilisations* that today's world is reminiscent of periods of immense upheaval in history, such as the transition of the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, when the Hittite, Mycenaean and Minoan civilisations collapsed, and new powers emerged. For Europe to remain relevant, it must become both more autonomous in its capacity to act and more united in its resolve to protect its values. In one word, we need a dose of 'Gaullism' applied to the European level.[1] This editorial examines the EU's key challenges and outlines a pathway for a resilient future.

The first challenge is geopolitical. After the Second World War, Europe enjoyed the relative safety of a stable, bipolar world order, protected by the American nuclear umbrella. It had the luxury to reinvent itself. When the Soviet Union collapsed, many believed that liberal democracy had triumphed for good, and that the world would move towards the 'end of history' under the wise leadership of the United States (US). It was, of course, an illusion. Today, the world order is far from the Western-dominated sphere we once knew. Instead, we live in a multipolar system marked by shifting alliances, power-based politics, a weakening of multilateralism and an aggressive recalibration of economic and military influence. It has become a lonely place for Europe, with an assertive China, a hostile Russia, and a 'Global South,' increasingly resistant to what it views as

Western preaching. In the immediate neighbourhood, the UK struggles to redefine its relationship with the EU, and Turkey remains a difficult partner. To top it all, the US has become more unpredictable, and its once rock-solid commitment to European defence has shown signs of wavering.

For the EU, this reality is more than an external challenge; it is an assault on the very principles that define it: multilateralism, rule of law, and cooperation. If Europe is to navigate this complex environment successfully, it must reconcile its ideals with a pragmatic geopolitical stance that allows for robust, unified action. While the EU should champion multilateralism whenever possible, it must also be prepared to stand firm when faced with *Realpolitik*.

Against this geopolitical backdrop, Europe faces **a slew of policy-related challenges**. The ambitious European Green Deal, which is critical for addressing climate change, faces a controversial debate over who should bear the cost. Energy security, especially following recent conflicts, has become precarious. Europe is distanced by the US and China in the digital area, and its competitiveness lags in the face of rapid advancements from abroad. Migration remains a divisive topic and threatens the Schengen model of open borders between EU countries. Europe needs to bolster its defence in view of the shifting U.S. focus towards Asia and build a much stronger European defence industry. Finally, the geopolitical decision to offer accession to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia will reshape the EU itself, raising new questions of governance, financial sustainability, and identity.[2] The financial needs related to these policies will be massive.

[1] It bears repeating here that while de Gaulle wanted a more independent France he always stood by the United States when major security issues were at stake.

[2] The recent referendum in Moldova on accession to the EU ended with a wafer-thin majority of the "yes" vote. In Georgia, the presently ruling pro-Russia party won the parliamentary elections after what observers qualify as a rigged election. Both developments do not promise an easy path ahead.

Compounding these issues is a **fractured political environment**. Polarisation within EU Member States has intensified, fuelled in part by the proliferation of social media, disinformation, and hybrid warfare. Trust in liberal democracy is eroding, and with it, the ability to build consensus across borders. The rise of populist and extremist parties has further fragmented the political landscape. The ongoing breakdown of dialogue and increase in societal atomisation leave little room for compromise, threatening the democratic principles that underpin the EU.

As daunting as these challenges are, they are not insurmountable if we apply Gramsci's '**optimism of the will.**' We can draw on **lessons from recent crises** to build resilience and increase autonomy. Since 2008, the EU has proven its capacity to adapt, be it in the Global Financial Crisis, the 2015 Refugee Crisis, Brexit, COVID-19, and the war in Ukraine; each crisis has led to more integration, within the existing treaty framework. But, as Herman Van Rompuy explained in our [EuropeChats discussion](#), *"It has done so with its back against the wall, a knife to its throat, and the abyss in front."* It is time for a more voluntarist and structured approach centred around the **objective of strategic autonomy**. The latter is a relative concept, not an absolute one; we do not strive for autarky or protectionism, we look for an increased capacity to act, more resilience, and the avoidance of excessive dependencies.

To start with, **Europeans need a new mindset**. They must see the world as it is, not as they dream it should be. They must find the right balance between defending their interests and their values. And they must think about the EU's place on the global chessboard. This raises primarily the issue of

our relationship with the US. Are we content to be junior partner, or do we want to be a stronger and a more autonomous player? Over the past years, Europe has very much aligned with Washington on relations with China and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Is that really in our interest? On Ukraine we have stood together. But what if Trump wins the elections this coming Tuesday? We have also seen that across the world our common stance has been perceived as an attempt by the West to regain its dominance. The 'Global South' does not accept the idea that it must choose between the West and the emerging China-Russia axis. More generally, even a Harris win will not guarantee a smooth ride in future transatlantic relations. China will remain the first concern of Washington, and it will be "America first," as we have seen with Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act.

The second requirement is to find a method to **review all of the EU's policies** and draw operational conclusions on how to address shortcomings, without losing the ability to leverage our strengths.[3] We have talked about the former, but the EU has major assets, too. Its market is attractive, the Chinese need it, the Americans respect our regulatory power, the Israelis want to remain part of the Joint Research programmes, and countries around the world look to Europe for inspiration when rethinking their regional alliances. In trade, we have adapted to the dwindling power of the World Trade Organisation by adopting a range of autonomous measures to defend ourselves against unfair competition and negotiated Free Trade Agreements with important partners. Hopefully, the EU will soon conclude the vital deal with the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) and convince European citizens that the benefits outweigh the risks

[3] The Letta and Draghi reports provide a good basis for such an exercise, as will no doubt the Niinistö report on security and defence that has just been released.

by far. In the digital area, the recent enactment of the Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act signals Europe's intent to regulate tech giants and safeguard its digital sovereignty. However, it must go further by fostering innovation within Europe itself. A comprehensive approach that includes infrastructure, technology, financing, and regulation will be essential to closing the digital gap with the US and China. In defence, the Member States have long resisted creating a true defence industry. Yet, as U.S. attention shifts to Asia, Europe has little choice but to take its security more seriously. This includes continuing to work to reshape the relations with and within NATO.

The EU's unique strength lies in its ability to forge unity out of diversity. Attempting to create a monolithic European superstate would undermine the very flexibility that allows the EU to adapt and thrive. Instead, the EU should pursue the 'federalisation' of policies where appropriate, rather than striving for an institutional overhaul that would meet significant resistance. This brings me to the third requirement, that of **better governance**, i.e. the way the EU functions, the links between institutions, but also between the EU and national levels. An upcoming TEPSA [European Council Experts' Debrief](#) will

look at this issue in more detail. We will look at five clusters and plan follow-up work on all of them over the next year: EU bandwidth, EU resilience, EU financing, EU global influence, and EU profile and communication.

In facing today's global challenges, Europe stands at a crossroads. We can cling to outdated models, hoping for stability in an increasingly unstable world, or we can take bold steps to adapt to the new reality. With the right mindset and determination, the EU can become a force of resilience and an example of adaptability. By strengthening strategic autonomy, embracing diversity, and making smarter use of federalised policies, Europe can ensure that it remains a vital, independent player on the world stage. The EU is not perfect, and change will not come without challenges. But it has shown repeatedly that it can weather crises and emerge stronger. Europe's future depends on a shared commitment to understanding our place in a multipolar world and on summoning the will to protect what we have built. As Goethe wrote, "What you inherit from your forefathers, earn it to make it yours." Europe's inheritance is its unity, its resilience, and its capacity for growth. Now is the time to earn it, to reinvent it, and to secure the future for generations to come.

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