

LIFE WITH A BULLY: WHAT SHOULD THE EU DO?

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EDITORIAL



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Now that Trump is back in the White House, the need for Europe to be more [‘Gaullist’](#) is greater than ever. Europeans are petrified, waiting anxiously for what the United States (US) President will say or do. If the European Union (EU) does not give itself the capacity to act more autonomously, it risks self-inflicted irrelevance.

It is painful to watch this with respect to the war in Ukraine, whose outcome will determine the future shape of Europe. The arrival of Trump may present an opportunity to open new perspectives for negotiations and a peace agreement. We should seize it and engage with the US administration based on a well-thought-through position and our own ideas, including on the future security architecture in Europe. It is simply not good enough to repeat ad nauseam that the EU will “stay the course.” What does that mean? We risk “staying the course” while the Americans make a deal with the Russians, without the Ukrainians or the Europeans. Both Russians and Americans openly talk about excluding the EU from any voice in the search for a solution. We should say that a deal behind the back of the Ukrainians and without our involvement will not bind the EU, be it in terms of lifting sanctions against Russia or in paying for the consequences. And it is for the EU to decide how it wants to be represented. This should not be left to chance and the whim of individual leaders to try and call the Kremlin without any kind of preparation or agreed line. The President of the European Council is well placed to play a central role in this respect, with the support of the High Representative. At the same time, the European Council can always mandate individual leaders and the President of the Commission to play their part along commonly agreed lines. It bears repeating that, eventually, the EU must talk to Putin. How else can it be a player in the construction of a just and sustainable peace in the interest of Ukraine?

The post-war multilateral order is weakening by the day. With the US actively undermining its own creation (because it no longer has total control over it!), there is no way back to the (recent) past. This presents a special challenge for the EU and its principles. The new world looks more like that of the 19th century. To defend its interests, the EU must become stronger and more autonomous. It must create unity of action out of diversity, which is not an easy task in view of the political developments across the Member States and the rise of more Eurosceptic parties. The adoption of a string of autonomous trade measures over the past few years shows that the EU can act when it has the political will to do so. But defence is a more difficult challenge; unlike for trade, we do not have a common policy. Here we need a long-term effort, starting with increasing our defence expenditure and building a European defence industry. This does not require the participation of all Member States.

Submitting to bullying rarely pays off, because bullies will see this as a sign of weakness. Seeking refuge in the repetition of principles, values, and mantras does not either, because the other side does not care. What is needed is calm rebuttal and a clear presentation of our own core interests and policies along the following lines:

- Being transactional is fine, but there are limits; the EU will continue to defend international law.
- The Monroe doctrine 2.0 on steroids underlying the claim to Greenland furiously resembles Putin’s language about his near-abroad; the EU supports Denmark’s position.
- The American exit from the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organisation is a blow, but we will continue to work with those organisations; Europe has partners across the world who are more than ready to cooperate with it

and to salvage the spirit of international cooperation and rulemaking.

- If the American administration targets its economic and trade interests, the EU will adopt countermeasures to defend itself.
- Blatant interference by representatives of the US administration into the electoral processes of America's closest allies must stop.

Europe does not want, nor can afford, to be "anti-Trump." It is in our interest to salvage as much of the relationship as we can. Europe's security for the time being rests on the alliance with the US and NATO. The Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) imports from America help compensate the loss of Russian gas. The transatlantic economic relationship is a multi-trillion Euro business. In the foreign policy field, a less messianic and more Realpolitik-oriented American administration may well open new perspectives that could be in the interest of Europe, be it on the war in Ukraine or elsewhere. There are positive signals from Washington on a relaunch of the talks on a new nuclear deal with Iran; if they materialise, Europeans should engage. If Trump works towards a just peace in the Middle East, we should lend our assistance, provided the rights of the Palestinians are respected and the two-state solution remains the guiding principle.

Showing more self-confidence can work wonders. The EU still has significant assets. It is a major trade power, a financial power, and a regulatory power. Concerning the latter, it is not for the likes of Musk to dictate how it organises itself with respect to Artificial Intelligence (AI) and social media. The European economic, social, and political model remains attractive and has appeal across the world. But there is a caveat here: countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia do not like being preached to by Europeans or threatened with sanctions if they do not

adopt all our ways of doing things. We are well advised to find more positive ways of promoting the values we rightly care about. It would also help if we were a bit more conscious of the double standards we apply. The relative silence of the EU concerning the treatment of the Palestinians by Israel causes huge damage to our global credibility.

Europeans need a revolution in their heads and thinking. But while this is a necessary condition, it is not sufficient: it must be followed by action. This is true in defence. The Americans are right here; Europe must do more for its own defence. But they will have to accept that the additional European funds will go primarily to a revamped European defence industry that hopefully integrates the UK. It is true in other areas, be it the green deal or the digital transition. All of this will require massive funding. Talks about the next MFF will start this year. This provides an opportunity for a comprehensive debate on the financing of our policies, covering the EU budget, but also the (inevitable!) recourse to more EU borrowing (Eurobonds), and the completion of the Capital Markets Union to provide better opportunities for European savings to be invested in Europe. What is needed now is a roadmap (with timelines); the latest declarations and initiatives of the Commission President on the follow-up to the Letta, Draghi and Niinistö reports go in the right direction. It will be important to ensure the buy-in of the European Council.

The informal European Council in Brussels on 3 February is a perfect opportunity to show confidence and a sense of purpose, not only in setting out new plans for defence, but more generally. This is what European citizens crave most. People understand that in view of our traditional relations with America and the strength and power of the US, we must collaborate with the new President. But we should do so from a position of strength and

self-confidence and with the firm assertion that might is not right. We did not vote for Trump. We respect the choice of the US electorate. We are not obliged to accept being told by the US President how to live,

what to do, and with whom to trade. Our relationship remains essential including for our security. But it will only survive if Europe plays its part and is (and is seen) as a true and respected partner.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or of its Members.

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