THE EUROPEAN QUEST FOR AUTONOMY AT A TIME OF SHIFTING PARADIGMS

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EDITORIAL

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> *"Europeans cannot indefinitely seek their salvation solely under American patronage"*
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> ***Konrad Adenauer, 2 October 1956***

We now live in a new world, defined by power, rivalry, and uncertainty. The paradigms that shaped European integration for decades have collapsed, and with them the illusion that Europe can indefinitely outsource its security, geopolitics, and strategic choices to others. In this new context, European strategic autonomy has become a condition for survival. The key question for Europe is its relationship with the United States (U.S.). This is because we are so intertwined, as European security still depends on NATO, and the U.S. influences all our policies.

From 1945 to 1989, the world was bipolar, with Europe being part of the Western camp, under the U.S. security umbrella. The transatlantic relationship rested on three pillars: first, NATO; then, bilateral relations; lastly, U.S.-European Union (EU) relations. Europe could focus on internal reconstruction and integration rather than worry about geopolitics; it was a win-win arrangement. Yet even at the time, people like Charles de Gaulle warned about the unsustainability of the arrangement and pleaded for greater independence from the U.S. More surprisingly, the German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, in a major speech pronounced on 2 October 1956, stated that "Europe cannot find its salvation and security exclusively under the patronage of the U.S., as it will stunt European energy and is not a sustainable expectation of America." His words, forgotten in the decades of Atlantic certainty, were prescient.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War brought a brief but intoxicating moment of Western triumphalism and hubris, the belief that liberal democracy had achieved a 'definitive victory' and that history itself had 'ended'. It could have been a time for rebalancing the transatlantic relationship, with a stronger EU-U.S. partnership taking precedence over the NATO pillar. But the "hour of Europe" announced by the foreign minister of Luxembourg and chair of the Foreign Affairs Council in 1991, Jacques Poos, never came. Instead, the Yugoslav crisis exposed Europe's strategic impotence and its dependence on American power. During Barack Obama's presidency, the "pivot to Asia" and the repeated calls to Europe to invest more in its own security should have rung bells, but the Europeans did not read the signals well. Donald Trump's first term was a wake-up call, but Europe quickly hit the snooze button when Joe Biden won the next elections. It took two major shocks after 2022 to dispel lingering illusions: Russia's brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Trump's return to power.

Today the world is multipolar, with a return of power politics and the fracturing of multilateralism. The U.S. is busy dismantling the global order it once built and waging a cultural war against the EU. It seems to offer the EU a 'new deal': "You pay for your own defence but continue to buy our weapons, you finance Ukraine but let us have their mineral resources, we define the date for Ukraine joining the EU, you align with our geopolitical priorities, but we give no hard guarantees on Article 5 of the Atlantic Charter. And please abandon the idea of digital autonomy, open trade, and the EU model." This does not look like a fair deal.

Clinging to the hope of a return to the *status quo ante* and waiting for American politics to correct itself cannot be Europe's policy. Nor should flattering President Trump in the mistaken hope of changing his mind. We should stop repeating all the time and publicly that we have no 'trump cards' to put pressure on the Americans. We have them, but we are afraid of playing them. Yet each time the EU yields, like with the shocking Turnberry trade 'deal' (which the Commission holds up as a model and wants to preserve even after the recent judgement of the Supreme Court in Washington on the illegality of the U.S. tariffs!), Trump will up the ante and exploit our weakness. Interestingly, when Europe shows some firmness, be it on Ukraine or Greenland, it has an impact on Washington. Strength commands respect; supplication does not. One word here concerning Ukraine: the EU needs to communicate more honestly about the challenges this raises, including on the delicate issue of enlargement. We risk otherwise losing public support over time and seeing a pushback against the huge financing cost of our support for this country. We should better explain why we do all of this and how we will make it happen without jeopardising the functioning and sustainability of our own union.

The EU must shape its own future. At the centre of this transformation lies the concept of strategic autonomy. It means having the capacity to act when necessary: reducing excessive dependencies, increasing resilience, and defending European interests and values. The issue is not whether autonomy will create new challenges and have a cost. It will. The issue is whether Europe is prepared to accept some pain today to preserve its agency tomorrow. It is about choice, not isolation. It does not mean disengaging from the world nor rejecting alliances. On the contrary, the EU should send out a strong message that it wants to build new alliances with willing partners across the world, including on regulatory cooperation and norms and standards. Our model remains a powerful tool and attractive to countries across the world; it is up to the Europeans to better defend it and thus offer an alternative to power-based politics.

Europeans are worried about the future. They see that the EU struggles to find a coherent narrative, continues to react more than act and often projects weakness. Our leaders could take inspiration from Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's words: "We are no longer just relying on the strength of our values, but also the value of our strength", and announce bold steps in terms of better governance: 'federalising' policies where necessary, developing greater executive capacity. Reinforced cooperation among willing and capable Member States is a powerful tool to overcome blockages, provided the door remains open for others to join when they are ready. It is also important to involve representatives from the EU institutions to ensure the link with the EU.

In terms of method, the European Council should call for a concerted and comprehensive effort to assess Europe's strengths and weaknesses, to leverage the former and fix the latter, and should regularly assess progress at its level. The Draghi and Letta reports provide promising ideas that would help strengthen our autonomy and competitiveness. The EU has over the last years taken major integrationist steps in reaction to the various crises, but what is missing is an inspiring and coherent narrative on why we do this and how.

This is not the place to list a catalogue of measures across all policies. So just a few remarks on key issues:

- The EU needs to address its huge financing needs. That means an ambitious new Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-34. We presently hear tough (restrictive) words from the 'frugal' Member States, but hopefully this is more to position themselves for the negotiations to come than a final line. The same remark applies to the idea of more joint borrowing, building on the experience of the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the recent deal on macro-financial assistance to Ukraine.

It is difficult to see how the EU can do without a new form of fiscal capacity. In fact, the EU needs true euro-bonds, not just guaranteed by the EU budget but with a 'joint and several liability.' Finally, the completion of the Capital Markets Union is overdue if we want to avoid the massive siphoning off to the U.S. of European savings.

- The internal market remains Europe's greatest asset. But there are too many gaps, especially in services and capital markets. Unfortunately, we see naked hypocrisy in the Member States professing to defend the single market but constantly asking for exemptions and adding national requirements via 'gold-plating'. They have not yet woken up to the fact that these little games weaken the EU as a whole and undermine their own economic interests. The leaders should announce a major push and set clear deadlines. The Commission should reverse the recent trend towards ever fewer infringement procedures, which has led to a more dysfunctional market. The debate about better regulation is key. Simplification is a worthy objective, but it should not turn into deregulation. Digital regulation helps secure our way of life. But it is not enough; Europe needs its own players and data ecosystems, it must encourage start-ups and the creation of European platforms. The European Council at the March meeting will discuss these issues. Why not launch a big and publicised call for action on Europe's digital future, calling on institutions, Member States and the private sector to multiply initiatives and coordinate action under this label? We managed to create Airbus, Ariane, Galileo; why should we be incapable of applying similar recipes to the digital challenge?
- The EU is a major trade power. It should not accept the mantra that the World Trade Organisation is dead; it is not yet. Sixty member states, including China (but not the U.S. and India) have adopted a new dispute settlement within the organisation, which works. While always giving a chance to a multilateral solution, the EU cannot be hostage to predatory behaviour by other players. Hence, the importance of the various autonomous measures adopted over the last few years. We should not shrink from using them where needed, including the powerful Anti-Coercion Instrument. Finally, the present policy of multiplying trade agreements with third partners, such as Canada, Mercosur, India, and others, is the right approach and should continue unabated. This is about our economic interests and about geopolitics.
- A profound change is underway in security and defence. Higher spending is necessary and is coming, but the Europeans should start by better using the considerable funds that are already at our disposal. Fragmentation squanders scale. A genuine European defence industrial base, common projects, and a clear preference for European suppliers are imperative. American pressure to "buy American" is neither new nor acceptable. Instruments such as the European Investment Bank and the European Stability Mechanism can support joint defence financing. Redefining NATO with a stronger European pillar remains an objective.

Since 1945, Europe has achieved extraordinary things, often with American support. Peace among historic rivals. Prosperity across the continent. Enlargement that healed divisions. A unique blend of social market economy, rule of law, and supranational governance, the European way. As Luxembourg's Prime Minister Luc Frieden recently suggested, sceptics should come and see what Europe has built.

But we have now entered a new era, a much tougher one. The transatlantic relationship remains important, but we cannot ignore the negative signals coming from Washington. It needs rebalancing. A stronger, more autonomous Europe is not a threat to America; it is the only basis for a sustainable partnership. If Europe fails to assume this responsibility, others will define its future.

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