

The Post-Brexit EU as a Global Actor: Reconsidering Security

Valentin Naumescu¹

Abstract: *The departure of the UK left the EU not only without its second largest economy, but also without one of its two nuclear powers – with a permanent seat in the Security Council – and without an important member state of NATO – a global security provider. For a long time, the EU has tried to brand itself as a global actor from a ‘normative power’ perspective, able to ‘export’ values and norms without having an army of its own. Nonetheless, shortly after the Brexit referendum of 2016, the EU has announced its Global Strategy, while France and Germany launched the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiative in the field of defence, formally adopted by EU in 2017. In the midst of a growing strategic competition for influence, aggravated by the 2020 pandemics of COVID-19, the Great Powers diversify their leverage, resources and instruments. With increasing rifts in its partnership with the US and concerning uncertainties in relation to the UK, against a background characterized by the disintegration of the West as a political concept, having difficult relations with Russia and China, the EU reconsiders the issue of security. This article explores the international context from the perspective of the relations between the global actors, a changing world order and the re-interpretation of the concepts of security and hard power. We shall analyse both the discourses of political leaders on the topic, and the EU decision-making process in the field of security.*

Keywords: *EU, global actor, post-Brexit, security.*

Introduction

It is difficult to assess the impact of Brexit on the EU for the time being. Even if it turns out to be considerably lower than the multi-level impact on the United Kingdom, the consequences of the 31 January 2020 official separation will certainly be felt also by the European bloc. Today, it became almost commonplace to assert that the post-Brexit age will be an unpredictable combination of ‘risks and opportunities’ for the EU-27². Obviously, the 2020 pandemics of COVID-19 made this equation even more complex and put significant strain on European solidarity.

With a higher chance of achieving a political agreement between the major member states and of defining a common vision regarding the necessary internal reforms than before Brexit, but with a decreased economic and military might due to the leave of the UK, the “new EU” is preparing to face the challenges of the third decade of the 21st century, hesitantly oscillating between liberal and realist approaches. Thus,

¹ Valentin Naumescu is Associate Professor of International Relations at the Faculty of European Studies of Babeş-Bolyai University and President of the think tank *The Initiative for European Democratic Culture* (IEDC). E-mail: vnaumescu@yahoo.com.

² T. Henökl, *Brexit: Impact, Risks and Opportunities for European Development Policy*, Policy Paper, Bonn, German Development Institute, nr. 8, 2017, 1.

the ‘liberal intergovernmentalism’³ conceptualized by Andrew Moravcsik subsequent to the Treaty of Maastricht, coexists with “earlier’ theories like realism, which have continued to develop in recent years and remain more or less viable as theories of European integration and EU politics”⁴.

The end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe overshadowed for a while, in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the assumptions of realism, boosting the enthusiasm and optimism of the liberal and social constructivism schools instead⁵. The subject of military security had lost most of its steam even though the Copenhagen School and Barry Buzan continued to recognize it as a part of present security, along with other security dimensions⁶: political, economic, societal and environmental. However, following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the defiance of the international law by Russia, also after the enforcement of unilateralism and transactionalism by the Trump administration (2017-2020) as well as a nascent scepticism over the viability and credibility of NATO, realism and the ‘law of force’ seem to have made a comeback in international politics. Without any doubt, the European Union has not given up – despite the difficult situation of today’s global scene – its predominantly liberal approach, however, it began reflecting to the possibility of becoming a hard, strategically autonomous power, able to defend itself and to compete even in a realist manner with the other global actors. “The European Strategic Autonomy”⁷ (ESA), mostly promoted by French President Emmanuel Macron is, however, regarded with much precaution by supporters of the traditional Atlanticist option, in Central and Eastern European pro-American countries, in particular, who wish to maintain the old strategic concept of the Western World, in its binomial transatlantic form.

The question whether the EU is a global power or not has divided International Relations experts and policy makers for several decades. With arguments for and against the recognition of a global influencer status, the economic and political bloc of Western-European democracies has always benefited, since its very inception, by the security guarantees of NATO and by the military protective umbrella provided by the United States (US). This protection has been assured by the American military giant based on the 1947 Truman Doctrine, meant to contain communism imposed by Soviets and “to assist the cultural modernity of free nations”⁸. Following the rifts in the transatlantic relations and Brexit, the question regarding the power of the EU has become even more complicated. We cannot completely exclude the interpretation according to which, after Brexit, both the EU and the UK will have considerably

³ A. Moravcsik, ‘Preferences and Power in the European-Community - A Liberal Intergovernmentalist Approach’ in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 31, No. 4, 1993.

⁴ M. A. Pollack, ‘Realist, Intergovernmentalist and Institutional Approaches’, in Erik Jones, Anand Menon, and Stephen Weatherill (Editors), *The Oxford Handbook of the European Union*, Oxford, 2012, 84.

⁵ T. Risse, “Social Constructivism and European Integration” in Antje Weiner and Thomas Diez, *European Integration Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2nd Edition, 2009.

⁶ B. Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.

⁷ P. Järvenpää, C. Major, S. Sakkov, *European Strategic Autonomy: Operationalising a Buzzword*, Tallinn, International Centre for Defence and Security, October 2019.

⁸ D. Merrill, “The Truman Doctrine: Containing Communism and Modernity”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 36, No. 1, March 2006, 27.

limited their arguments to be recognized as Great Powers, since the split practically generates two weaker entities on all fronts, with considerable internal risks. It should not be forgotten that beyond its economic contribution, the UK was an advocate of European enlargement – for a while, supporting even the integration of Turkey – and it supported the EU's firm position and sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea. In the meantime, the EU amplified the voice of London internationally and protected the interests of the United Kingdom whenever they faced sensitive challenges and internal or international disputes. Such examples are the war against Argentina for the Falkland Islands/Islands Malvinas of 1982 or the discouraging of Scotland's ambitions to rapid European integration during the independence referendum of 2014.

For the past 10-12 years, i.e. after the signing (2007) and entry into force (2009) of the Lisbon Treaty, the majority of the sensitive issues on the global agenda have been more or less related to security. Every time the European bloc has tried to interfere and solve an external crisis, the security topic, and, more specifically, the lack of a military force of its own, have cast doubts on the efficiency of European external action on the international arena, in spite of its perennial aim of 'effective multilateralism'. From the semi-failed Libyan intervention to the lack of an efficient response to the annexation of Crimea, to the Donbas war and the protracted civil war in Syria, or even to the North-Korean threat and the Iranian nuclear dossier, the EU has constantly had difficulties in taking the centre stage and imposing its own political vision. Even if some of these difficulties may be blamed on the internal disagreements between member state, most of the vulnerabilities in the external action have been due the lack of the hard power component, which has caused a decreased relevance and 'weight' of EU's point of view in comparison to the US, Russia or China, sometimes even Turkey. We shall hereinafter analyse the factors determining the capacity of the EU-27 to act as a global actor, with a focus on the security issue in a classical sense and from the hard power point of view, applied in the contemporary political-economic context and according to the conditions characterized by the known conflict frameworks. As a frame of reference, we shall use the theories and concepts defined before 31 January 2020 which tried to explain the profiling of the European bloc as a global influencing actor.

Theoretical approaches

It is hard to establish a starting point for our discussion. Many authors, experts and decision-makers seeking an optimal formula have tried to conceptualize the type of influence and power the European bloc needs to adopt. In two articles published in 1972 and 1973, which incidentally or not coincided with the UK joining the EU, François Duchêne proposed a term which for a long time was enthusiastically embraced by the academic community, Brussels bureaucrats and politicians, but also by the media and public opinion in spite of, or maybe precisely due to its vague meaning: 'Civilian Power Europe (CPE)⁹'. Sensing probably that any detailed description of the term 'civilian power' would have induced controversy and would have risked decreasing the appeal and versatility of the concept, "Duchêne never developed his vision into a detailed and

⁹ F. Duchêne, 'Europe's Role in World Peace', in R. Mayne (ed.) *Europe Tomorrow: Sixteen Europeans Look Ahead*, London, Fontana, 1972.

comprehensive scheme”¹⁰. The only reasonable meaning of the ‘civilian power’ concept could be inferred by contrasting it to the lack of military power and a certain indication that the European power thus defined was based on attitude: “Europe ‘must be a force for the international diffusion of civilian and democratic standards’ and promote values that belong to its ‘inner characteristics’, such as ‘equality, justice and tolerance’ and an ‘interest for the poor abroad.”¹¹ The father of CPE preferred to remain a discreet supporter of the pluralist tradition. The ambiguity, flexibility and imprecision of the term has had a further remarkable consequence: CPE could be used as an argument both by supporters of the idea that the European bloc had found its own proprietary and specific path to becoming an international actor, and by supporters of the opposed idea, that it would be impossible for the EU to have a decisive global impact in the international relations system.

Naturally, the interpretations of the liberal and realist schools had quickly aligned behind both sides, according to their traditional views. CPE only reinforced their respective beliefs. For instance, Jan Orbie believes that “the CPE idea challenged the ‘realist’ or ‘Gaullist’ notion of a Europe puissance. [...] Duchêne’s work reflects the general emergence of pluralist IR accounts in the context of increasing economic interdependence in the 1970s.”¹²

In the same year of 1973, Johan Galtung also maintained the conceptualisation of a significant external role of the European Community, this time from the viewpoint of structuralism, as a “European capitalist superpower.”¹³ Duchêne and Galtung are considered the pioneers of the theorisation of the international influence of the European power in the 1970s. For the following three decades, these were the main approaches and concepts related to the international actor role of the European bloc. The Maastricht Treaty, signed in 1992, would consolidate the political dimension of European integration and would eventually give birth to the European Union following its entering into force in 1993.

In 2002, Ian Manners introduced the notion of ‘Normative Power Europe (NPE)’ as “a power over opinion”¹⁴, meaning that Brussels had an increased capacity to influence decision-making processes concerning public policies and regulations, based on European values and norms. NPE can be seen as an improvement over CPE, one step ahead on the path of the suggested authority, but also of concept accuracy. Brussels, at that time, was at the height of its radiant appeal and power – no less than 25 countries from Central and Eastern Europe and Western Balkans were aspiring, with various degrees of chances, to a future integration at the beginning of the years 2000s. Undoubtedly, the normative power of the EU has been effective especially in this aspect, in its relations with the post-communist countries which became candidates for

¹⁰ J. Zielonka, *Explaining Euro-Paralysis. Why Europe is Unable to Act in International Politics*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998, 226.

¹¹ F. Duchêne, ‘The European Community and the Uncertainties of Interdependence’, in M. Kohnstamm and W. Hager (eds.) *A Nation Writ Large? Foreign-Policy Problems before the European Community*, London, Macmillan, 1973, 20.

¹² J. Orbie, “Civilian Power Europe: Review of the Original and Current Debates”, *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 41, No. 1, 2006, 124.

¹³ J. Galtung, *The European Community: A Superpower in the Making*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1973.

¹⁴ I. Manners, ‘Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40:2, 2002, 239.

EU accession in the first decade of the 21st century and had to incorporate, within a few years, the *Acquis Communautaire* in their national legislation and practical governance, in order to become members of the Union.

However, beyond its influence over the associate and candidate states of Central and Eastern Europe and Western Balkans, NPE also became a questionable concept. Even within the post-communist region, after the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargements including 13 countries in total, the influence of the EU eventually began to fade. From the Republic of Moldova to Serbia, the normative power of the EU weakens as the Russian influence increases. In the eyes of the citizens of the left-out post-communist countries, the hopes of joining the European bloc gradually vanish and the reforms and criteria imposed by Brussels seem more and more untenable. It thus seems somewhat natural that the frustrations accumulated in the region, against a background of poverty, increasing living costs and corruption of self-proclaimed 'pro-European' governments, have 'sold' people the illusion that Russia might be able to help them more and faster than the EU.

Over time, there have been several strategies, political approaches, action plans, but also concepts and theories related to the European Union's means to act globally. Thus, is the EU a global power or not? The controversy has not been only political in nature, but also academic, with different authors offering different responses.

A first attempt to profile the EU as an international actor was the publication of the European Security Strategy in 2003, during Javier Solana's mandate as High Representative. Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler consider that the aim of the document presented during the disagreements of member and candidate states regarding the American intervention in Iraq, which gave a blow to the transatlantic relationship, was "to provide an overarching framework for the Union's role as a global actor"¹⁵.

Analysing the conception proposed by the European Security Strategy in comparison with the unilateralism of the US National Security Strategy, based on the pre-emptive principle, Gerrard Quille notes "a multilateral approach to security challenges, embodied in international law and the UN Charter."¹⁶ Basically, this document reasserts the strategic bases of the European Union's liberal internationalism, mentioned by Andrew Moravcsik in 2003.

In 2016, shortly after the Brexit referendum, in a time period that the former European Commission President, Jean Claude Juncker, described as 'an existential crisis of the EU', the High Representative for Foreign Policy and Security, Federica Mogherini, published a new vision for the EU, dubbed optimistically "Shared vision, Common Action: A stronger Europe"¹⁷, more commonly known as the Global Strategy of the European Union (EUGS). This document replaced the 2003 strategy, setting objectives in line with an overt ambition towards a more profound political integration

¹⁵ C. Bretherton and J. Vogler, *The European Union as a Global Actor*, Second Edition, New York, Routledge, 2006, 5.

¹⁶ G. Quille, „The European Security Strategy: A Framework for EU Security Interests?“, *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 11, No. 3, 2004, 422.

¹⁷ European Commission, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy*, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf, 2016.

of the member states (“more Europe”), including at the level of the foreign policy of the EU-27. From a certain perspective, the publication of the Global Strategy and announcing the need for an institutional and unionwide policy reforms, even in the context of the Brexit crisis, seemed to suggest “the last chance for the EU”¹⁸.

How and to what extent can the European Union act externally? Generally speaking, people tend to consider the external leverage of Brussels limited and not very powerful, but, if we take a closer look, we will see that they are neither few nor insignificant. It has been noted that some of the most efficient international instruments Brussels has at its disposal are political-economic measures, with a normative component, such as European imposed conditions for accessing EU funding, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and within this, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, the political Association Agreements (AAs) and the free trade agreements, such as DCFTA¹⁹ (access to the Single Market), the European External Action Service, PESCO in the field of Defence, adopted in compliance with Articles 42(6) and 46 of the Lisbon Treaty, official development assistance (ODA), crisis management (to a lesser extent, crises requiring military intervention), visa issuing, humanitarian action, intervention for environment protection and fight against any forms of discrimination, monitoring reports on sensitive matters, such as the rule of law, the fight against corruption, defending human rights and liberties, governance transparency and freedom of the press, education and research mobility stimulation programmes such as Erasmus etc. The EU uses these instruments and policies both in multilateral and bilateral frameworks, facilitating a considerable influence of the Union in its relations with sovereign states, and even with international fora and organisations, including from its positions of G20 member or G7 and United Nations observer²⁰.

A long list of bilateral and inter-regional EU agreements shows the attractiveness of the Single Market, but also the Union’s capacity to negotiate with states and regional organisations from all over the world: Caribbean Forum of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (CARIFORUM) (2008), South Korea (2010), Central American countries (2012), Colombia, Ecuador and Peru (2014), Canada (2016), the Southern African Development Community (2016), Japan (2017), Singapore (2018) and Vietnam (2019). As for major failures, we shall only mention TTIP²¹ talks, frozen in 2016 at the initiative of American President Donald Trump, after multiple negotiation rounds between the US and the EU, optimistically initiated in 2013.

Sebastian Santander and Antonio Vlassis, although acknowledging the validity of the entire battery of instruments mentioned above, believe that the external action of the EU is at the same time limited “chiefly by three major political factors: the rise of new powers, the United States’ (US) neo-mercantilist policies, and political divisions within the EU.”²² Even though the two authors do not directly mention the

¹⁸ V. Naumescu, “Last Chance: the Reform of the European Union in the Post-Brexit Era”, in Valentin Naumescu (Ed.), *The New European Union and Its Global Strategy: From Brexit to PESCO*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020, viii.

¹⁹ Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement.

²⁰ H. Ojanen, *The EU’s Power in Inter-Organisational Relations*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

²¹ Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

²² S. Santander and A. Vlassis, “EU in Global Affairs: Constrained Ambition in an Unpredictable World?”, *European Affairs Foreign Review*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2020, 6. (5-22.)

exit of the UK as a weakening factor of the EU, the deteriorated relationship with the US belongs to the same negative political context, induced by the growing national populisms manifest in Western democracies. The US and the UK are not the only two countries affected by populism. The EU has experienced various versions of populism, nationalism and protectionism, with spectacular results in the elections of Italy, Austria, Hungary, Poland, The Czech Republic, Slovakia, but also, to a certain extent, in France, Germany, The Netherlands and some Nordic countries. In February 2020, the topic of “Westlessness” discussed at the Munich Security Conference suggested the decline of the relevance of the Western ethos within the global order but also in the Western world itself, in the sense that “a multitude of security challenges seem to have become inseparable from what some describe as the decay of the Western project.”²³

The concept of resilience has had an interesting theoretical contribution in the debate over the EU’s capacity to act globally. A series of authors have started to share their opinions about the resilience-building and consolidation process after 2016. When the British decided to leave the Union through a referendum, there was a fear that the separation would create a major shock for the European bloc, impossible to contain. However, shortly after the Brexit referendum, the European Commission published the Global Strategy, trying to reinvigorate the Union and its external ambitions. The discussion is also relevant for the EU’s vicinities. Florence Gaub and Nicu Popescu, for instance, described the necessity of building resilience in the Eastern Neighbourhood in a volume published a year after the adoption of the Global Strategy: “The internal fragilities of the EU’s Eastern neighbours are aggravated by the foreign policy context. The region is a top priority for Russia’s policy of reasserting its great power status – not just through diplomatic or economic means, but also through military and security pressures. Whereas Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia have been the target of Russian diplomatic and economic pressure for over a decade, and have learned to withstand those challenges, they are much less able to tackle direct security and military threats.”²⁴

Lastly, a final significant attempt to theorize the international power of the EU from a liberal perspective, but not free from controversy and dispute, was the ‘Ethical Power Europe’ (EPE). This is how Lisbeth Aggestam explains the concept: “EPE is a conceptual shift in the EU’s role and aspirations from ‘what it is’ to ‘what it does’: from simply representing a ‘power of attraction’ and a positive role model to proactively working to change the world in the direction of its vision of the ‘global common good’. In the words of the European Security Strategy, the EU should be more ‘capable’ and ‘responsible’ and take on new tasks in the areas of crisis management, peacekeeping, state-building, and reconstructing failing states”²⁵. The objective of becoming an ethical power is however strongly disputed by realists. Adrian Hyde-Price sees in this utopian way of understanding the EU’s mission a certain path towards becoming a ‘tragic actor’, “where the pursuit of a normative or political agenda is feasible, the ethical dimension of the EU’s foreign and security policy should be limited to a modest set of

²³ Munich Security Conference, *Munich Security Report 2020: Westlessness*, <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/munich-security-report-2020/>, accessed April 2020.

²⁴ F. Gaub and N. Popescu, (Eds.), *After the EU Global Strategy – Building Resilience*, Paris, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2017, 8.

²⁵ L. Aggestam, “Introduction: Ethical Power Europe?”, *International Affairs*, vol. 84, no 1, January 2008, 1.

three principles of state-craft rooted in the Weberian ‘ethic of ultimate ends’, namely: prudence, scepticism and reciprocity.”²⁶ In other words, what the realist approach expects from the EU is not to propose a reshaping of the world, but ‘only’ to be more realistic and constantly aware of the challenges brought about by shifts in the global order, also, not to operate with certain truths and naiveties, and, most importantly, to always ask for reciprocity in its bilateral, regional or multilateral relations. And these relations should be developed exclusively having the EU’s interests in mind. We have to admit that the theoretical visions proposed by the aforementioned authors, each with their own arguments, are fundamentally different and essentially divergent, which translates into a difficult choice that the decision-makers from Brussels and capitals of the member states have to face.

EU-27 and the political re-evaluation of the security topic

Beyond the clash of conceptual and theoretical approaches of the past 15-20 years, the post-Brexit EU crosses a crucial time period regarding the strategy, decisions and policies it will have to adopt in the following years, including in the security chapter. The COVID-19 pandemics of 2020 raised even more concerns of a changing and unsafe global order. No-one doubts the vocation and the potential of the European Union as a chief actor in international trade (economic and commercial super-power) and environment protection. Things become fuzzier once the conversation shifts towards other analytical ranges, such as the topic of hard power.

Confident, like most Britons, that in order to be relevant on a global scale “Europe should be a superpower, not a superstate”, Timothy Garton Ash maintains that “the key to European power projection isn’t institutional reform; it’s a shift in attitude and a willingness to cooperate. [...] What it does require, however, is a shared strategic analysis of the threat, convergent understandings of national interests and a lot of political will.”²⁷ According to the author, the European power resulted from this convergent political will might also include London, even after the separation from the European Union. Essentially, what Garton Ash proposes is that a core of strong European states, preferably Germany, France and the United Kingdom (the format used for negotiating the nuclear agreement with Iran, in 2015) in conjunction with a number of relevant states, depending on the topic (for instance, Poland and the Baltic States for topics related to the Northern region of the Eastern Flank, or Italy and Spain for Mediterranean topics), develop an efficient and coordinated policy, with inputs from the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Nonetheless, it is hard to believe that, freshly out of the EU and caught in the middle of a difficult negotiation process with Brussels over a potential EU-UK Agreement beyond 31 December 2020, London will be able to integrate strategically and politically in a form of common action with the EU. This proposed vision is also biased by a slight British superiority complex in relation with small and medium EU countries, whereby it envisages London

²⁶ A. Hyde-Price, “A ‘tragic actor’? A Realist Perspective on ‘Ethical Power Europe’”, *International Affairs*, vol. 84, no 1, January 2008, 29.

²⁷ T. Garton Ash, „Europe (and yes, that includes Britain) can still be a superpower”, *The Guardian*, March 2nd, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2020/mar/02/europe-britain-superpower-european#maincontent>, accessed March 2020.

sharing decision-making power with Berlin and Paris and joining the EU coordination political processes from the outside, through privileged agreements with the bigger states of the EU-27. It fails to acknowledge, however, that the European Union has clear decision-making mechanisms which involve the interests of all 27 member states and their citizens.

Speaking of the European Union's vocation of becoming/remaining a relevant global actor after the separation from the United Kingdom, the most vocal supporter of an increasing strategic autonomy in relation with the United States is French President Emmanuel Macron. A whole series of declarations over the past 2-3 years, of various tones and intensities, have highlighted the wish of the French leader to detach the EU from the post-War US domination and to confer the Union a more concrete relevance in the field of defence, which was noted down on paper in December 2017, under the Permanent Structured Cooperation mechanism umbrella, with a total of 47 projects approved by the EU Council. However, the declaration which provoked the most disturbance in the Euro-Atlantic relation was that relating to the 'brain death of NATO', despite the eventual explanations and details he provided. Without directly stating the lack of trust in President Trump and the policies of the Washington administration, the Paris leader invoked a series of strategic uncertainties accumulated over the past several years as reasons for his scepticism regarding NATO: "The questions I have asked are open questions, that we haven't solved yet. [...] Peace in Europe, the post-INF (Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty) situation, the relationship with Russia, the Turkey issue, who's the enemy? So I say: as long as these questions are not resolved, let's not negotiate about cost-sharing and burden-sharing, or this or the other."²⁸

In fact, despite the fact that his initial declaration has not been met with enthusiasm by the majority of NATO member states, even triggering the disapproval of Chancellor Angela Merkel, Macron insisted, on the very eve of the London NATO Summit of 4 December 2019, stating that he did not regret and would not change his declaration. Nonetheless, he provided more nuanced explanations, saying that "European defence was not an alternative to NATO but a pillar within the alliance."²⁹

The security topic makes a comeback in the political discourse of European leaders and in the focus of European institutions, both as an EU defence policy and as a foreign policy of the European bloc. Both dimensions are presently relevant. Internally, with background of an increasing scepticism towards America (to avoid the harsher term "anti-Americanism") in Western Europe, the validity and credibility of NATO are put to the test, as we have seen. Externally, with the aim of approaching, as a global actor, sensitive international files with a hard security component – e.g. the Middle East issues (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Yemen), Eastern European crises (Ukraine, Georgia, Republic of Moldova), the Western Balkans tragedies (the older cases of the Yugoslavian wars of the 1990s) or African cases of failed states (Libya, Mali) etc., the EU nowadays considers the topic of intervention instruments, more seriously than

²⁸ E. Macron apud Michel Rose, "France's Macron: I'm not sorry I called NATO brain dead", *Reuters*, November 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-nato-braindead/frances-macron-im-not-sorry-i-called-nato-brain-dead-idUSKBN1Y21JE>, accessed March 2020.

²⁹ E. Macron apud Reuters, "European defence is a pillar within NATO - France's Macron", *Reuters*, December 4, 2019, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-nato-summit-france-macron/european-defence-is-a-pillar-within-nato-frances-macron-idUKKBN1Y821N>, accessed March 2020.

ever. On both levels, the issue of a 'European Army' re-emerges periodically.

If we take into consideration the failed European Defence Community (EDC) project, launched by France through the socialist Prime-Minister René Plevén's Plan of 1950, followed up in the 1952 Paris Agreement, signed by the six founding states of European integration³⁰, later 'killed' also by France through the refusal of the National Assembly (with an already different political majority) to ratify the Agreement, in August 1954, we can see that the idea of a European army is not, in fact, new. It seems to be a recurrent expression, sometimes more utopian, other times more articulated, of an old wishful thinking, which has never disappeared, but has never succeeded to make progress either in the EU integration process. When it rejected EDC, under the influence of Gaullism, France explained that it was not desirable to rearm Germany. When he decided to pull out French troops from the integrated NATO headquarters, in 1966, General de Gaulle reiterated that he wanted to recover the full sovereignty of France. This was the first expression of a nascent anti-Americanism in post-War France. When he rejected the claim of the UK to join the European Community, in 1963 and 1967, de Gaulle justified his veto by asserting that the British economy and society were incompatible with the pan-European principles and that London might eventually try to sabotage the European Project from within. In 1996, French Prime-Minister Alain Juppé brought new arguments in favour of a European Army, only this time, the British vetoes were coming from the inside of the European Union. In all the aforementioned four cases, the influence of a "Gaullist" tradition as a fundamental characteristic of the Catholic, conservative French political thought prevailed. Even though it might appear as surprising for a centrist liberal president, who began his political career in the Socialist Party, it is still a Neo-Gaullist influence that appears to be at the core of Macron's vision on the 'sovereignty of Europe' and the European Strategic Autonomy (ESA). We cannot exclude the interpretation according to which, ever since the 1950s, France has continued to muster the hope of once re-becoming a leading power, at least at European if not global level, and of instrumentalising this political ideal through a multinational military integration in which it could be in a leading position, which is not, and most probably never will be, the case with NATO.

Although President Macron remains by far the main supporter of an institutionalised European defence system, German Chancellor Merkel, usually moderate and cautious in expressing critical views against NATO and the US, has also supported the project in principle, asserting with vague optimism that, on the mid- and long-term "we have to look at the vision of one day creating a real, true European army"³¹. The debate has become even more complicated, however, when President Macron added a rivalry connotation to the relations of the EU and the global Great Powers, including the US, which seemed like a discursive disruption in the transatlantic alliance tradition: "We have to protect ourselves with respect to China, Russia and even the United States of America. We need a Europe which defends itself better alone, without just depending on the United States, in a more sovereign

³⁰ France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg.

³¹ A. Merkel apud Ulrike Esther Franke, "The 'European army', a tale of wilful misunderstanding", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 3rd December, 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_european_army_a_tale_of_wilful_misunderstanding, accessed March 2020.

manner”³². It is not clear what President Macron actually meant when he said that a European Army should protect/defend itself with respect to the US.

Angela Merkel was not the only significant West-European leader who looked cautious in dismissing NATO, beyond the acknowledgement of the general principle of the EU’s autonomy. The Dutch Prime-Minister Mark Rutte employed diplomatic, but rather unequivocal language when he stated that “the idea of a European army is going way too far for the Netherlands”³³.

On the Eastern flank of NATO, the majority of post-communist countries are even more cautious when it comes to a European Army and the strategic autonomy of the EU. Poland, Romania and the Baltic states have a strong pro-American and Russo-sceptic, or even traditionally Russophobic stance, as Andrei Tsygankov argues³⁴. This attitude is owed to a long and traumatising historical experience in their relationship with the Russian Empire, with the Soviet Union, and even with the Russian Federation, to their peripheral geopolitical status – full of dangers – but also to the realistic understanding of a non-negotiable position on the map. Following the integration of these countries in NATO in 2004 and 2007, the demand of Central European governments for more American military presence has led to the setting up of several US bases on the strategic corridor between the Baltic and the Black Sea, also known as *Intermarium*³⁵. Some of the bases which are worth special attention are the highly criticized – by Russia – missile defence system in Deveselu/Romania, inaugurated in 2016, and eventually integrated in NATO’s defence system, but also the project of a large American military base in Poland. For this vast military facility, Warsaw would be willing to pay two billion dollars, while Polish President Andrzej Duda referred to it in a 2019 press conference as *Fort Trump*³⁶. In the same vein, Bogdan Aurescu, former Foreign Policy Aide to the Romanian President and currently the Foreign Minister of Romania, declared back in 2017, when PESCO was adopted that “we shall never see a European Army taking the place of NATO. PESCO can only intensify the cooperation between the EU and NATO”³⁷. It is crystal clear that these emblematic Central European countries refuse to consider the detachment (strategic autonomy) from the USA and NATO. Essentially, this controversy is not new. For instance, right after the 1998 surprising Franco-British agreement on defence and security at Saint Malo, the American State Secretary Madeleine Albright raised a series of concerns

³² E. Macron apud Rebecca Morin, “Trump calls Macron’s comments on building a European army to defend against U.S. ‘insulting’”, *Politico*, November 9, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/11/09/trump-macron-european-army-paris-981759>, accessed March 2020.

³³ M. Rutte apud RTE, “European army proposal goes ‘too far’ - Dutch PM”, *RTE*, 16 November 2018, <https://www.rte.ie/news/europe/2018/11/16/1011481-eu-army/>, accessed March 2020.

³⁴ A. P. Tsygankov, *Russophobia – Anti-Russian Lobby and American Foreign Policy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

³⁵ M. J. Chodakiewicz, *Intermarium: The Land Between the Black and Baltic Seas*, New York: Transaction Publishers, 2016.

³⁶ J. Jacobs, J. Sink, N. Whadhams, M. Strzelecki, “Poland and US Closing In on Deal to Build Fort Trump”, *Bloomberg*, 16 April 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-16/pires-and-u-s-said-to-close-in-on-deal-to-build-fort-trump>, accessed March 2020.

³⁷ B. Aurescu apud Cătălina Mănoiu, “Aurescu, about PESCO: We Will Never See an European Army to Replace NATO”, *Mediafax*, November 3, 2017, <http://www.mediafax.ro/politic/aurescu-despre-pesco-nu-vom-vedea-o-armata-europeana-care-sa-ia-locul-nato-16806063>, accessed December, 2017.

known as the “three Ds: decoupling, discriminating and duplicating”³⁸, in the sense that the EU should not create a “new NATO”, duplicating the existing one, decoupling from the Transatlantic alliance and discriminating other European allies who are not EU member states.

Until the hypothetical emergence of a European Army, rather unlikely on the short and mid-term, it should be highlighted that even the adoption of the Permanent Structured Cooperation in the field of Defence, in December 2017, a much softer objective, was marked with divergent declarations and positions. The fact that eventually 25 of the 27 member states joined PESCO may seem, at a first look, an encouraging accomplishment in the perspective of creating a Defence Union. At a closer look, we can understand that a decision-making process based on unanimity may become, for the very reason of the high number of participant states, a serious risk for blockages in critical situations. Not all member states have the same degree of attachment to PESCO and to the common fundamental strategic option, as we have already noted. But then, how is it that so many EU member states have joined PESCO? Political logic may indicate, as observed above, “two possible explanations for this massive affiliation. The first reason is related to the idea of the beginning of the EU reform and the formation of a ‘hard core’, so that nobody knows what comes next and does not take the risk to stay out of the process. The second possible explanation refers to the strategy of some Eurosceptic countries such as Poland to be ‘in’ in order to keep control on further developments within the European Union, reserving their right to veto any future measure of European military integration.”³⁹ If we consider matters from this perspective, the adoption of PESCO in the field of Defence may offer as many reasons for optimism as reasons for caution related to the long-term efficiency and reliability of the project.

Conclusions

In a world constantly changing, with a global order dominated by a paradigm of influence competition chased by the Great Powers, the EU-27 reassesses the security topic. Without it, the European bloc has difficulties in imposing its will and vision on the international scene. In the past ten years, the Union has failed to deliver in several major global files, in the Middle East, Africa and its Eastern proximity, due to its incapacity of becoming a credible provider of hard security. This reassessment exercise, at the same time political, strategic and intellectual does not seem simple at all for Europeans. The addition of a hard power component to the existing consecrated and relatively accepted dimensions (soft power, civil power, normative power, ethical power etc.) divides member states, at least at a detail level, if not at an essential level. The comeback of realist approaches to Brussels, even if only in the guise of reflections, and not of results, following several decades marked by optimistic liberalism and social constructivism, but in a context of a crisis of trust on the dimension of transatlantic relations, is a sign that the dynamics of the global order forces the European Union to

³⁸ M. H. A. Larivé, *Debating European Security and Defense Policy: Understanding the Complexity*, London and New York, Routledge, 2016, 79.

³⁹ V. Naumescu, “Administrative and Political Perspectives of the EU’s Reform: Focus on Permanent Structured Cooperation”, *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, Special Issue 2018, 69.

make an adaptation effort for which it is not sufficiently prepared.

The French-German core, with France having the biggest military industry in the EU, wants to build a European strategic autonomy, promoted under the more appealing label of 'European sovereignty'. The financial motivation of Paris, related to the procurement of European (more precisely French) military equipment with the EU, cannot be excluded. PESCO is therefore more likely a first step, a testing field, than a military integration per se. Probably the most appealing instrument created by Brussels in this area is the European Defence Fund (EDF), used for funding multi-state projects approved within PESCO, based on applications from the 25 participant states in various association formats. As expected, France is involved in most projects financed through the EDF.

A second circle of Western European countries, represented chiefly by The Netherlands, offer the same political support to PESCO as the countries in the main core, but, as we have already shown, are more cautious when it comes to adjusting military and strategic relations with the US, and do not show the same level of enthusiasm towards a European Army. It is likely that this second group of states will monitor the evolution of transatlantic relations very carefully and will be prepared to make a choice in one direction or the other, according to pragmatic arguments and to other arrangements with France and Germany, within the borders of the EU, or with the US, beyond the borders of the EU.

Lastly, a third circle of states comprise the majority of Central European post-communist countries on the Eastern Flank of NATO, which do not even consider the strategic European autonomy as an option and continue to develop consolidated strategic partnerships with the US, based on non-negotiable geostrategic reasons. Poland, Romania and the Baltic States essentially put their bet on the transatlantic relationship, on the security guarantees offered by the North Atlantic Alliance and on the military might of America when they conceive their security paradigm. Owing to the Russo-sceptic cultural-political tradition of these countries, all attempts by President Macron to discuss the detachment from the US and a 'EU-Russia partnership' will be met with a justified mistrust.

For the new EU-27, without the post-1973 constant internal opposition of the UK, the objective of becoming a fully-fledged global actor will be hard to reach. It will not be impossible, but very difficult to achieve. This is not because there is a lack of political consensus in the 27 capitals regarding this general objective, but because the measures, transformations and concrete consequences of this redefinition would entail political and strategic 'costs' that some member states may not be ready to pay, either because they do not want to, or because they simply cannot afford. The decision-making mechanism of PESCO, based on unanimity will not facilitate the substantial leap towards this new European military policy and integration. Whether for France and Germany the priorities concern the level of strategic ambition of the EU and the will to remove the political domination of the US in Europe, for Central European countries, at the Eastern periphery of the EU, the most crucial aspect will always be the security guarantees which the US and NATO can offer. Because of this insurmountable structural cleavage, the EU will experience, for a long time from now on, a gap between the political will of unity, formally expressed by European leaders and the actual

capacity to adhere to the idea of ‘strategic European autonomy’, and to act globally by means of a hypothetical European Army.

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