

European Strategic Autonomy: a Necessary Debate to strengthen the Transatlantic Alliance

Thibault Muzergues

The long-awaited electoral victory of President-elect Joe Biden has certainly been welcomed in (almost all) European capitals with a sigh of relief, as the governing style of President Trump and what was (often wrongly) assumed to be his unpredictability sat uneasily with the rounder, more diplomatic behaviors European leaders are accustomed to in their meetings in Brussels – may that be for EU or NATO summits.

But look beyond the congratulations and the immediate reactions in Europe's capitals, and it seems that the news of the Democrat's victory has done nothing to change the strategic minds of national elites. After the results of November 3, the French are still convinced that one cannot count for long on American support to keep Europe safe, hence the need for "strategic autonomy", the Germans are more convinced than ever that the Trump presidency was only an "anomaly", and that the next four years will see a return to normal (whatever that normal may mean), and the Poles continue to see their alliance with America, which they hope will remain a bipartisan issue, as the only trustable guarantor of their security from the East. In many ways, the past US election cycle has all but reinforced the points of view national capitals had expressed for the past four years, and it is refreshing to read Hajnalka Vincze's analysis, as it does not fit into one or the other's strategic vision. But while I agree with her on the necessity of a reality check, which for Europeans means building capacities for a European pillar within the Transatlantic Alliance, I do not see this as an even minimal departure from maintaining and even strengthening Europe's alliance with the United States, in which the latter will, like it or not, remain by far the senior partner. Indeed, the extension of the *pax americana* is an absolute pre-condition to building a *pax europea*, and the time is actually ripe for this transition to happen in an orderly manner – if Europeans prove themselves capable enough of setting themselves objectives and keeping up with them.

Reality Check

I would start with the views I share with Hajnalka Vincze: the need for Europeans to start taking matters in their own hands. There has been nothing more frustrating, over the past few weeks, than to have to listen to self-congratulatory messages from Brussels or Berlin claiming that the parenthesis of the Trump administration had been closed, and that things could now get back to a fantasized status quo ante, in which everything in the Transatlantic relationship was working well. One has to be clear here: this view is simply self-delusional: first, because there was no such thing as an ideal Transatlantic relationship before 2016: Europeans' divisions over the Iraq War, the Franco-German reaction to the 2008 financial crisis (in which Paris and Berlin wrongly took the assumption that their "Rhenan" economic

model had been vindicated by the failure “anglo-saxon” model¹... before it turned out that Europe would actually suffer more in the long-term because its banking model could not restructure more quickly²), spats between Central Europe and America after the Obama administration unilaterally pulled out of the missile defense project in Czechia and Poland, and between Germany and America over the revelations that the NSA had been spying on German citizens, including the chancellors, etc. All was not well before Donald Trump came to power, and if the 45th President of the United States adopted a tone that was exceptionally tough and, at times rude, against his allies, he voiced a frustration that had been similar in nature on both sides of the aisle in the US foreign affairs community, may it be over Europeans’ tendency to free-ride on American power to pursue its own interests (President Obama’s regrets over supporting the Anglo-French intervention in Libya in 2011 comes to mind³), or its incapacity to join and act decisively in its neighborhood – former Assistant Secretary of State Victoria’s Nuland’s famous outburst against the EU in the midst of the Ukraine crisis in 2014⁴ is also reminiscent of US frustration at Europe’s indecisiveness in the Balkans in the late 1990s – all the more so because it shows how little progress Europe has made in taking matters in their own hands.

Second, even if one accepts the delusion of an “ideal”, pre-2016 Arcadia of the Transatlantic relation, the other reality is that much has changed since then – or actually, that the trajectories we had seen at work since 2008 have been accelerating in the second part of the 2010s. Chief among them is the relative marginalization of Europe. For sure, our continent is no longer at the center of the world ever since it passed on its global leadership position to the United States between 1914 and 1945 (a process, here again, that had been in the making for many decades before the First World War), but the post-Eurocrisis world (and even more the post-Coronavirus world) is consecrating a new reality, difficult to accept for most Europeans: the economic and geopolitical heart of the World is now in the Pacific (and tomorrow the Indo-Pacific) zone, and Europe has become a periphery – albeit still a rich one in a planet whose politics is increasingly defined by the two superpowers of the early 21st Century: China and the United States.

Europeans seem to be having the biggest difficulties in understanding this situation, and the fact that they still act as if they were the only potential partner – or, indeed, the only partner that could count – for the United States is not only wrong, but also baffling for Americans who are now (rightly) focusing most of their attention to the Pacific and East Asia, where real business is made, and (importantly) where they risk seeing their primacy at sea are now being questioned by the rise of China, with all the consequences it may have on freedom of navigation in the World.

It is precisely Europe’s difficulty to adapt to this new world where she is no longer the center of attention that is providing so many misunderstandings and, let’s face it, shared frustrations in the Transatlantic World. May it be from Paris, Warsaw or Berlin, the relative

¹ See Michel Albert, *Capitalisme contre capitalisme*, Paris: Seuil, 1991

² Adam Tooze, *Crashed : How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*, Londres : Penguin Random House

³ See Benjamin Haddad, *Le paradis perdu : L’Amérique de Trump et la fin des illusions européennes*, Paris : Grasset, 2019, p.187

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26079957>

marginalization of Europe in the affairs of the World has not – or not enough – been integrated into elites’ strategic thinking, and this runs the risk of miscalculating other actors’ hand and intentions, starting with that of the United States, which has been a guarantor of last resort for peace since 1945 in Western Europe, and since 1991-1999 in Central Europe.

Autonomy vs. Dependence, a false debate

What is the United States strategy towards Europe in this changing world, where power, stakes and now also economic growth is moving away from what Paul Valéry already called in the 1920s a “small peninsula at the tip of the cast Eurasian continent”⁵? In the early 2010s, the first instincts of the Obama administration was to pull out, as much as possible, from the area, declaring victory in Europe as the continent seemed to approach a unity envisaged by George H. W. Bush in his “Europe Whole and Free” speech in Mainz in 1989, and leaving as much autonomy to the Europeans, while America would be “leading from behind” in Europe and its neighborhood as it would be pivoting towards Asia. As it turned out, things did not exactly go according to plan: Europe’s over-reliance on America in the Middle East meant that France and Britain projected military adventures in Eastern Mediterranean region that were too big for them to swallow on their own, and for different reasons both Syria and Libya became factors of instability not only for the MENA region, but also for Europe, as refugees started to amass on Europe’s borders, creating problems at sea and – importantly – inland in Europe. On the other hand, Europe’s divisiveness and indecisiveness during the Ukraine crisis in 2013-2014, all too reminiscent of its own uselessness in the Balkan crises of the late 1990s, and Russian influence offensive in Europe in the second part of the 2010s convinced Americans to get back into the region, as the myth of the “mission accomplished” in Europe became more and more doubtful. Recently, the progress made by China in several countries on the continent has further convinced American diplomats that, although Europe is not as important as it used to be in the global geopolitical chessboard, it is way too important to be left on its own to drift on its own (as it clearly lacks leadership) to unknown destinations.

Whether we like it or not, the reality is that America is actually not “pulling out” of Europe, even though its relationship with Europe is changing and needs to change – something that European elites still have difficulties integrating. Having extended the *pax americana* over most of the continent, which is as good for Europeans as it is for American business, the last thing Washington wants is to cause instability, but the reality is that China’s headways in specific countries in the region (and local elites willingness to play the Beijing playbook) may well turn it into a new theatre of conflict between the two superpowers of the Twenty-First Century. This would not be a re-run of the Cold War though: Europe would no longer be the grand prize, and the gameplay would no longer resemble a grand chessboard with territories clearly marked by the heritage of armies advances in 1945, but rather a patchwork of states more or less aligned with Beijing or Washington, with some fluidity provided by the presence of Paris or Berlin in different regions. This is the unfortunate reality that awaits us if the Americans were to really “pull out” from the region, or if the European Union’s “dependence” on America was to be put into question. Freedom and

⁵ Paul Valéry, *La Crise de l’Esprit*, in *Variété* (tome I), Paris : Pléiade, 1924, p.988

autonomy are beautiful things, but they do come at a price, and the reality is that Europeans have seldom made headways in this regard over the past 20 years in developing a coherent strategic agenda for themselves and their environment, let alone the capacities to pursue these elusive strategic objectives.

The time is ripe to have it both ways

Having made that point clear, the question of strategic autonomy needs to be asked in another way: not so much as “how do we get rid of Uncle Sam to pursue our own (but so far elusive) world agenda”, but rather “how do we build a security doctrine and a capacity to secure our environment on our own if need be”. If Europeans start to take their defense seriously and build a force that can grow within the framework of NATO, then Europe will have the best of both worlds: it will be able to protect itself without relying on its historically should circumstances forbid the United States to intervene when Europe’s vital interests are at play, and it would keep America on-board the Transatlantic relationship, as in any case the EU will remain for the foreseeable future (and probably beyond) a junior partner in the NATO framework.

The fact is that building an autonomous doctrine, strategy and defense capability takes time, and the guarantees of the *pax americana* gives us a short window of opportunity to start building a common defense and security environment under the umbrella of NATO. The time is ripe for this: with China’s rise becoming the main global problem for the United States, and with President Trump out of the White House, any faithful attempt by Europeans to do more to share the burden of European security will be taken positively in Washington: it is now pretty clear that the European Union will not, at least for the foreseeable future, be able to sustain even comparison with the United States, and so a united, Atlantic-looking Europe would be an asset for any US administration in its confrontation with the Chinese Communist Party.

For the United States to accept this move towards strategic autonomy, Europeans need to play the game of the Atlantic Alliance and see its autonomy not as a way to “free itself” from an overlord, but rather as a way to reinforce the alliance’s capacity. Above all, this means pushing back *with Washington against* Beijing and Moscow’s influence efforts, which are both working, although in different ways, to divide Europeans. By focusing on this community of interest, trust between Washington and Brussels can build-up, thereby giving new spaces for Europeans to maneuver within an Atlantic-oriented framework. Brussels will therefore not escape alignment choices: just like in the Cold War the idea that Western Europe could find its own way “between” the two superpowers proved to be preposterous, the European Union today will not be able to escape the choice between the two cultures and systems of government that is defining the early 21st Century seek to strengthen ties with the protector that has guaranteed more than 30 years of *pax americana* on the continent, rather than face the possibility of dividing it between pro-American and pro-Chinese client states. Asking for more responsibilities in that partnership will not be seen negatively by Washington, and as the US administration have a much higher-stake game at play in East Asia, such autonomy may very well be seen with a sigh of relief, provided that

Europeans can offer guarantees that such a move would be made not as a means to move away from America, but on the contrary as a way to strengthen the existing alliance.

This is not to say that acting in good faith with regards to the Transatlantic Alliance will be sufficient to ensure a smooth transition towards strategic autonomy. There will of course be difficulties, misunderstandings and, yes, conflict between both sides of the Atlantic, especially if a European defense industry comes to compete too successfully with the US military-industrial complex. Indeed, as important article 5 (an attack against one is an attack against all) may be for the Europeans, the unwritten “article F-35”, which binds together allies by having many of them commit to buy American defense products is an important part of the security package offered by NATO. The more a European defense industry will come into being, the more tensions over the ordering of tanks, drones and planes will be likely to develop. But here again, these tensions should be manageable provided that Europeans get their political house in order: investment amounts will always be larger if European defense is taken as one budget, rather than 27 small budgets. Confrontations will be inevitable, but should remain manageable from the moment a stable and predictable framework is provided. Here again, a clearer alignment of Europe in the confrontation between America and China will greatly help to streamline the relationship, and would of course make sense, as both sides of the Atlantic share not only more values, organizational culture and systems of government than Europe and Communist China do, but also as Chinese anti-competitive is equally hurting European economies.

Looking East or West: a choice to make for Central Europe

Strategic autonomy can therefore work better if thought fully within the framework of NATO, even if tensions will inevitably arise. The question is whether Europe can provide a united security doctrine, which is currently far from being the case: while countries in Southern Europe look more towards the Mediterranean as a source of strategic instability (and indeed, for some countries like Greece and Cyprus, the main security issue is currently clearly identified as being Turkey, a NATO member), countries in the Baltic area continue to look almost exclusively towards the East to define strategic threats. What should be a question of priorities is unfortunately increasingly seen as a zero-sum game, with Southern and Eastern challenges taken as mutually exclusive.

Within this framework, and within that of a much-needed re-thinking of the goals of NATO, some countries in Central Europe are developing continentalist approaches that do not necessarily fit within the Atlantic framework. The first of them is to look towards Russia as a sort of valuable interlocutor to challenge parts of the status quo that are not to one country's benefit. This game is dangerous, because it sets the cat among the pigeons – a cat that had previously been expelled from the square. Another tendency that has become more mainstream in other countries is to de-couple European and Transatlantic affiliation, [as I wrote this summer in an article on the Polish election](#). Such a de-coupling may be tempting, in the sense that it gives a Central European country more flexibility to act unilaterally in its Eastern neighborhood, but by so doing it also weakens the capacities not only of Europe, but the Transatlantic community at large to mobilize vast resources and act more decisively in the long-term.

For Europeans, the Transatlantic project has always been about looking West with a view to make the East more stable, more prosperous, and more secure. Just as US engagement in Central Europe is crucial to the security of the region, so is its integration in a greater pan-European and transatlantic framework. At a time when democracy is increasingly challenged and global insecurity reaches new heights, the West can ill afford to fall into artificial divisions if it is to secure its future.