Article

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Time to use to European power again

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Abstract

The decline of Russia and rise of China have shifted the security focus of the US towards China, leaving a security vacuum in Europe's neighbourhood that the EU has so far been unwilling to fill. The vacuum has been exploited by hostile external powers, and nationalist anti-Europeans within, threatening the survival of the EU itself. A stronger European security role, anchored in a unified strategic culture, could turn the EU into a producer of regional security, and provide a new conservative narrative for European integration. While this will eventually need a treaty change, the centre–right should not wait until then to relegitimise the use of European power in Europe's own neighbourhood.

Introduction

The multiple crises in Europe's external relations stem from our failure to adapt to the decline of Russia and rise of China. As the focus of the US shifts to Asia, Europe's neighbourhood is being left to its own devices. Russia and Turkey exploit, while fragile states in the Middle East and North Africa generate problems that result from, Europe's failure to fill the security vacuum.

This failure is deepening tensions within the Union, and strengthening anti-European nationalist movements that seek to break up the EU. Hostile powers, terrorist groups and organised crime, operating in a symbiotic relationship with anti-European nationalists, have rushed to press their advantage. Italy's League (Lega), which sought Russian cash to fund its campaigns (Nardelli 2019) while heightening tensions over migration, is a

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case in point. It, and other nationalist parties, find a receptive constituency of voters underserved by the EU's current agenda and powers.

The nationalist right thrives by selling protection from the consequences of decline while reinforcing that decline by encouraging fragmentation and discord.[1] The left finds itself remote from these voters because it increasingly defines itself through the social and cultural values of urban educated liberalism. The coincidence of these two effects is putting European integration itself at risk as nationalists position themselves against a cultural–leftist 'Brussels'. Though a caricature, their charge is not entirely spurious: of the 539 current pro-European Members of the European Parliament, only 187 (or 35%) come from the European People's Party (EPP), whereas 137 of the 324 right-of-centre MEPs (42%) belong to nationalist parties.[2] Centre–right pro-Europeanism is suffering because its arguments are increasingly limited to economic efficiency. It is our responsibility to rekindle a centre–right pro-Europeanism that can appeal to hearts and minds as well as wallets.

It would be a mistake, however, to copy David Cameron's tactic of jumping into the nationalist culture war. As he found out, that ends up giving legitimacy to the very arguments you hope to take the sting out of, and credibility to the hardliners who brought them to public attention. It is better, instead, to stake out new territory, and better still if that territory can deal with some of the insecurity on which the nationalist movements thrive.

In this article, I argue that that territory should be bringing security and order to our own neighbourhood. When it acts together, the EU is by far the largest power in the area, and ought to be able to set the rules of the game in its own region. Rather than having to scramble responses to crises manufactured by medium-sized former empires, or absorb the consequences of state failure, we should put ourselves in a position to establish peace and security in our region by integrating our defence policy, foreign policy and strategic cultures in the same way we have integrated our trade and environmental policies. Making Europeans comfortable with using power externally again, and the institution-building this entails, will give a new impetus to European integration on the centre–right.

Alone in a bad neighbourhood

As in a neighbourhood where crime rises after cuts to police funding, America's shift in focus to Asia has degraded the security environment on the EU's borders. Some of the changes have been obvious and alarming, including the announcement of troop withdrawals from Syria and, in a different environment, Germany. These changes have made it clear to America's allies that they are on their own. Other changes are less noticeable, but no less insidious. The US State Department has been allowed to rot as career officials have left the US foreign service and few serious Republican political appointees have been willing to take their place (Burns 2019). Their work cajoling and pressuring countries to resolve their differences behind the scenes has been left undone. It is unlikely that tensions between Greece and Turkey would have been allowed to rise so high under a

normal US administration. Nevertheless, even a normal US administration would have had priorities different to the Europe- and Middle East–focused ones of the 1990s and 2000s, as an assertive China is increasing the challenge it poses to US interests and democratic allies in Asia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is the prime beneficiary of this American withdrawal. Russia has invaded Ukraine, annexed Crimea, poisons its opponents on European soil, conducts cyber-attacks against EU member states and secretly bankrolls anti-European political parties (*Financial Times* 2019). It props up Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's murderous regime. It has taken advantage of the social media companies' greed to resume the disinformation campaigns it perfected during the Cold War. Despite having an economy similar in size to that of Spain or the Nordic countries, it manages to paralyse European decision-making. The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project from Russia to Germany has *still* not been cancelled.

The successor state of another former European empire is also learning how to exploit the power vacuum. Turkey is now engaged in brinkmanship with an EU member state, with the EU unable to effectively protect its member; only the COVID-19 outbreak stopped Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan from destabilising European politics further by encouraging refugees from Syria's civil war to make their way to the EU. The continued weakness of North African states, stirred by both Russia and Turkey, has opened up another migration route across the Mediterranean from East Africa (which those Russian-backed anti-European political parties exploit in their own domestic politics).

The effects are poisoning European politics. Had European states strengthened their democratic defences when the US stepped back, Russian subversion and corruption of Western political elites could have been limited. Had the Syrian civil war not been allowed to fester, and Assad not been permitted to carry out crimes against humanity against his own people, there would not have been so many Syrian refugees to accommodate. And had the operation to protect Libyans from their former leader Muammar Gaddafi, which was led by European powers, been followed up with stabilisation and reconstruction, its civil war could have been averted.

In the 1990s and 2000s the US still had the will to eventually save Europe from its own lethargy in the Balkans, but by the 2010s, the Obama administration, tired of war in the Middle East and freed from dependence on its energy, stayed away. It did so even though Samantha Power, a trenchant advocate of interventionism, served as UN ambassador,[3] and Susan Rice, a convert to it, served as national security adviser. European policy was caught short, because it could not develop either the political will or the material capability to mount the necessary missions of its own. The blow-back from European shirking has been exploited by both Islamic State and Russia-assisted national populists, including Donald Trump.

If Trump's hostility to the EU is highly unusual in American circles, the belief that it is time Europe looked after its own backyard is more widespread (and, indeed, correct).

Unable to directly challenge US interests since the 1990s, Russia had been downgraded in US thinking to a third- or fourth-tier threat, below Islamist terrorism, China and, arguably, even drug-fuelled organised crime in the Americas. Putin's mistake in 2014 was to have thought that the downgrading process had gone even further; his resultant overreach in Ukraine temporarily shook the US from its complacency. Nonetheless, the long-term focus of US policy has shifted to Asia, with China the country plausibly able to fit the role of 'peer competitor' described in the US's main strategic planning instrument, the Quadrennial Defence Review. Meanwhile, the George W. Bush administration's plans to transform and democratise the Middle East did not survive failure in Iraq, with the Obama administration giving Arab democrats a fine speech in Egypt but little practical support. Obama fell victim to the overreaction that all foreign intervention (and not just bungled military operations) in support of democracy is likely to backfire. He often seemed to console himself with Martin Luther King's remark that the 'arc of History bends towards justice' (Gold 2016), forgetting that as US president he was in a position to give it a hefty shove. He restricted activity in the Middle East to 'hard' counterterrorism, at the expense of longer-term engagement, the promotion of fundamental rights and the reform of the market economy underpinned by the security guarantees needed for progress and the stabilisation of the region.

If US threat perception now focuses on China, the EU's problem is one of 'threat non-perception'. This illusion is based on the hope that the framework of international institutions and the pressure from financial markets will provide strong-enough incentives to keep autocratic leaders within the bounds of the rules-based international order. It is based on the old mistake of thinking that just because it would make sense for everyone to uphold the rules, it therefore makes sense for nobody to violate them. If it should have been clear that this hope was misplaced at the time of Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, the repeated cut-offs of gas to Ukraine or Erdoğan's brutal suppression of the Gezi Park protests in 2013, it should now be beyond doubt that the rules of the international order do not enforce themselves. After eight years of the Obama administration's cowardice in their defence, and now four years of Trump directly attacking them, the rules have withered, leaving Europe vulnerable to threats. The division of labour in providing European security between 'Martian' Americans and 'Venusian' Europeans that Robert Kagan described has collapsed, not because Europeans have become even more pacific than expected, but because Mars has left the field (Kagan 2002).

Escalation dominance

Mars's absence has eroded the credibility of the deterrence provided by European states and NATO in the European neighbourhood. While a full-scale conventional attack like that carried out by Russia in Georgia is highly unlikely at present, not least due to NATO's rotational forward presence in the Baltic states and Poland, we have lost the ability to deter sub-conventional 'hybrid' assaults on security in Europe. Russia's political manipulation has divided the EU and is capable of paralysing the internal politics of its member states on issues crucial to Moscow, as Cyprus's delay in imposing sanctions on Belarus demonstrates. This buys time for hybrid operations, such as those in Crimea, to establish

'facts on the ground' that reverse the equation of deterrence. Instead of being able to deter a Russian incursion, we find ourselves deterred from reversing Russian actions.

If to the east the vacuum is filled by Moscow, to the south it is filled by a variety of actors who prosper from the absence of anyone capable of enforcing international order. That the crisis between Greece and Turkey, both NATO members, has also drawn in France, Egypt, Libya and the United Arab Emirates testifies to how degraded the international security architecture in the Mediterranean has become. In Libya there has not even been a need for foreign powers to divide the EU: member states have managed to pursue incompatible policies on their own!

The cause of weakness is the same, the absence of a process whereby the alignment of national policies is first negotiated, and this alignment then executed. Unlike in the Brexit negotiations, where Britain was unable to divide EU member states because the policymaking process was centralised, in foreign and security policy adversaries foment and exploit differences so that they do not have to face the combined clout of a united EU. This gives them a crucial freedom: to escalate crises, confident that the full strength of the EU will not be brought to bear against the threat they pose. During the Cold War this was called 'escalation dominance': 'a condition in which a combatant has the ability to escalate a conflict in ways that will be disadvantageous or costly to the adversary while the adversary cannot do the same in return, either because it has no escalation options or because the available options would not improve the adversary's situation' (Morgan et al. 2008, 15).

Each of the EU's international crises is the result of these other smaller actors having escalation dominance over the EU: they can always do something to make the conflict worse, while the EU seeks to de-escalate because counter-measures are too painful or, given the EU's internal divisions and lack of means to resolve them, impossible. European Commission President Von der Leyen's call for greater qualified majority voting in foreign affairs is absolutely correct, but the fact that she has to ask for it to be used really just restates the problem she is faced with. In fact, foreign policy divisions occur partly *because* the supra national institutions of the EU do not operate in foreign and security policy. Under the EU's current treaties, the processes by which the Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy are decided give too much weight to individual member states and not enough to central policy formation. Of course, this will remain the case as long as new treaties that would confer greater security and defence powers on the EU itself are not negotiated. Yet though new treaties may be a long while coming, they are not the only obstacle. Despite their inherently international purpose, foreign and security policy debates remain stubbornly national. Though progress has been made on procurement, integration is needed across a range of areas, from military doctrine, defence industrial strategy and the use of covert intelligence to strategic culture. This is a political as much as a practical task. It is not just about possessing the means to act, but also about having the legitimacy to use these means and develop them in the first place. The EU is trying to build the practical elements through initiatives such as its Strategic Compass (Council of the European Union 2020). This is

welcome, but needs to be reinforced politically, too. Developing this political element is something that political groups and parties, in particular on the centre–right, need to lead themselves.

Strategic enforcement culture

Europe's new strategic culture needs to begin with the realisation that outside the EU, the international order needs to be backed up by considerable military force, and should continue by recognising that, far from this being beyond our means, the EU possesses the wherewithal to develop the necessary capability. Even in purely military terms, this is considerable, with the EU's defence spending of $230 billion in 2018 on a par with that of China (World Bank n.d.). Over time, Permanent Structured Cooperation and other initiatives, including the European Defence Fund, will work to streamline procurement and stimulate research and technological progress. But a change in mindset is also needed. The EU has been able to become one of three global powers, with 450 million people and $20 trillion in annual GDP, because it free-rides on a rules-based international order created by the US that allows it to dominate in trade and regulation (Bradford 2020).[4]

Inside the EU, we have created a sphere where relationships between countries and their people are governed by peaceful politics and law. This has been so successful that our publics too often shy away from the need to protect it by means including military force, not from 'challenges' or 'issues' that arise through collective processes, but from threats posed by states, terrorist groups and individual leaders who take advantage of our desire to wish them away. International relations scholars frequently cite Immanuel Kant's *Toward Perpetual Peace* as philosophical inspiration for the EU, but in doing so they overlook his warning in the *Doctrine of Right* that relationships of justice can only be stable in what he called a 'rightful condition'—that is, a condition in which disputes are not settled by force (Kant 1795/1996b; 1795/1996a)).

Our strategic culture has to recognise that outside the EU's borders, the use of force is not only necessary, but is even increasingly normal. I do not want to suggest that the EU develops a strategic culture identical to that of the pre-Trump US, which too often conflated the rules-based international order with itself. But if the American failure, particularly in Iraq, was not to understand that military intervention is not self-legitimating, the European failure is to think that the rightful condition is self-enforcing.

After testing the alternatives to destruction, we in Europe have come to understand the importance of tempering power through political and legal institutions that hammer out compromises for the common good. During the Cold War we relied on the US to supply the security under which the European experiment could prosper. As it withdraws further towards Asia, we will need to replace it with security made in Europe, and be willing to exercise power to restore deterrence against escalation and to secure the establishment and extension of European peace.

It should become the centre–right's new mission in Europe to rebuild the legitimacy of European power, and to persuade our own publics internally, and our neighbourhood externally, in the cause of peace and fundamental rights. This will enable the EU to address much of the insecurity that the nationalists exploit, while, I believe, also forming the basis for a broad coalition stretching from solid conservatives all the way to the centre–left, thereby returning political balance to the European project. In the medium term this will require a treaty change, but we can start setting the agenda now, in the Conference on the Future of Europe, in national political debates and also in the European Parliament. Perhaps as a very first step, the EPP could lead an effort in the Subcommittee on Security and Defence to develop an EU defence doctrine, to provide a public counterpart to the classified efforts of the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, in the same way that national defence white papers establish the parameters of policy. If possible, it should seek to outflank the Strategic Compass initiative and so give it space to be bolder. The last four years have seen considerable improvements to the technical element of defence cooperation, but there is also political work to be done to legitimise Europe as a defence and security actor in the minds of Europeans and to strengthen the EU's appeal to conservatives across the continent.

Now that former US Vice-President Joe Biden has won the presidential election we will not enter what Fareed Zakaria has provocatively called a 'post-American world' (Zakaria 2008), but we need to accept the reality of an increasingly post-American Europe. The security vacuum that accompanies this shift in focus to China has already been exploited by Europe's external enemies to obtain escalation dominance over a divided and strategically naive EU. The insecurity this promotes fuels the nationalist enemy within, further weakening and dividing the EU. To stop this vicious circle, the EU needs to start using its power to produce security in its own neighbourhood, and the centre–right should take on the mission of giving this the legitimacy it deserves.

Notes

1. The nationalist right appeals to different groups in different societies: to the nostalgic older population in the UK; the younger, more economically excluded in France and Italy; to both groups in Poland (divided between Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) and Confederation Liberty and Independence (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość) respectively); and to wealthy social conservatives in Spain. The unifying feature is the type of appeal, rather than the social group targeted.
2. Figures are from European Parliament (2019). I have categorised members of Identity and Democracy and the European Conservatives and Reformists as nationalist, and Identity and Democracy, European Conservatives and Reformists, and the EPP as right-of-centre. The EPP, Renew, the Greens, the Socialists and Democrats, and the European United Left/European Free Alliance are identified as pro-European.
3. This is a cabinet post in the US.
4. Where its power has given rise to the phrase 'the Brussels effect', the title of a book by Anu Bradford (2020).

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