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European security (dis)order

The standard narrative that every crisis leads to further EU integration is flawed. What does that mean for its path towards geopolitical sovereignty?

Fortunately, nobody dared to speak of 'Europe's hour has come' again when war broke out in Ukraine. A few decades earlier, Luxembourg's then foreign minister Jacques Poos had used these words when the conflict in the former Yugoslavia began. In the meantime, it has become painfully clear that he couldn't have been further from the truth. Now, EU High Representative Josep Borrell speaks of 'Europe's darkest hour' instead, although he still hopes for a 'belated borth of a geopolitical EU' – based on the rare unity of European states and the United States, and the tough sanctions jointly imposed on Russia.

Borrell here channels the fundamental confidence of many staunch pro-Europeans who assume that EU development tends to move like a pendulum: every crisis represents a setback for the EU to which it responds with further progress towards integration.

For example, Europe's paralysis in Yugoslavia gave rise to the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and later the Common Security and Defence Policy. The euro crisis gave rise to a range of instruments, including the European Stability Mechanism and the European Fiscal Compact. The migration crisis in summer 2015 gave rise to emergency aid for the affected countries, the upgrading of Frontex, and the controversial agreement with border countries or countries of origin – which allowed the EU to effectively outsourced migration, enabling it to avoid further internal conflicts. The pandemic gave rise to the ambitious financial recovery package NextGenEU, which is also intended to assist the EU's transition towards a climate-friendly economy.

The EU even managed to find a response to the challenge of right-wing populist and autocratic governments within the EU, such as Hungary and Poland. From now on, EU funding will be partly conditional on meeting rule-of-law standards. Following this logic, the unanimous adoption of the EU's new Strategic Compass in March 2022 and the deployment of funds from the European Peace Facility for arms

shipments to Ukraine represents the beginning of a truly 'geopolitical EU'.

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What this account is lacking, however, are the fractures and divisions within the EU – often between groups of states – that left their marks after each crisis, and that continue to put rocks in its way. These integration steps are more like individual layers of sediment, piled on top of one another. But each layer has weak points or even cavities, rendering the whole constructs unstable. The goals of the EU's strategic sovereignty, as Germany's recent coalition agreement puts it, or even the more far-reaching strategic autonomy, as re-elected French president Emmanuel Macron has called it, stand on feet of clay.

European security policy

Three examples may serve as an illustration of what this means concretely. First, from the outset, the development of European security and defence policy has been fundamentally flawed. There is a split between strongly transatlanticist countries, such as Poland and the United Kingdom, and those advocating for an autonomous EU security policy. But autonomy always meant marginalisation because, in essence, EU security policy was designed to operate within a functioning liberal international order, undertaking some modest stabilisation missions.

The split between the two camps led to endless debates on the division of labour between the EU and NATO. Although this gave rise to a plethora of compromises, in fact no progress was made. The EU plunged itself into developing instruments such as the EU Battle Groups. But although they were sold as a major step forwards, they have never been deployed.

Russia's war of aggression offers an opportunity to close the transatlantic divide. It has revitalised NATO and highlighted the irreplaceability of US deterrence capabilities for European security. At the same time, the Biden administration is encouraging Europe to play a stronger role in its own security, as the United States focusses more on China. Reinforcing European security policy could benefit both the EU and a European pillar in NATO. However, it must be adapted to the new security (dis)order in Europe and not simply continue down the same old path. If this opportunity is missed, however, and in 2024 a clone of Donald Trump or even the man himself returns to power, Europe could find

itself exposed.

European economic policy

Second, the euro crisis undermined trust in European solidarity and left substantial rifts between Europe's south and north. The purely economic focus – pushed primarily by then German finance minister Schäuble – fostered two developments that have called Europe's strategic sovereignty into question.

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On one hand, there is Europe's strategic blindness. For the sake of 'balancing the books' Greece, for example, was forced to sell off the family silver, it didn't matter to whom. As a result, Europe's fifth largest port, Piraeus, now belongs to a state-owned Chinese firm and the port of Thessaloniki to an oligarch of Russian origin, with alleged contacts with the Donbas separatists. Competitors or even adversaries were thus invited, at the expense of European partners, to acquire European strategic assets. This has enabled them to undermine European unity. By applying pressure to states that depend on their investments, they can exert influence over decisions of the European Council.

This historical experience – in combination with concerns about a rigid interpretation of the Stability and Growth Pact at some point in the future – is the second deep trauma of the euro crisis. Because as long as a common economic policy cannot be fully implemented, and EU investments are activated only at times of crisis, European cohesion will remain fragile. The next step must therefore be to redevelop the eurozone into an economically and financially integrated entity.

European migration policy

Third, the migration crisis, and above all the rejection of a joint solution by Central and Eastern European member states has also left substantial rifts. This, together with the increasingly illiberal transmutation of the state in Hungary and Poland, has reinforced the impression that these governments are not interested in active participation in the task of European integration, but only in European loot: in other words, the EU's financial resources.

In the case of Poland, this impression weighs much more heavily. It prevents the country from playing a leading role in the EU – as it is conceived in the idea of the Weimar Triangle and the linking up of the Franco-German motor with Central Europe. Moreover, the Polish government's occasional anti-German rhetoric and its attempt to cosy up to former US president Trump fosters the impression that the powers-that-be in Warsaw are not interested in strengthening the EU.

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Now, Poland's call for solidarity in coping with the refugee flows from Ukraine raise the possibility of healing the rift, at least with Warsaw. After all, the common front between Poland and Hungary is crumbling at the moment, chiefly because of Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán's closeness to the Putin regime. But this will succeed only if the dismantling of the judicial system is put right and Poland fully signs up to and implements the EU's rule-of-law standards. Besides, the Biden administration's strong ideological impetus for an alliance of democracies against autocracies could be another incentive for Warsaw.

A window of opportunity

This rather incomplete sketch of a fragmented and fractured EU makes it clear why there were doubts about a tough sanctions package against Russia before the war broke out. But it also highlights that the EU now faces an enormous challenge. It has to cope with the current crisis and draw the right conclusions from it, while also bridging existing divides in order to stabilise its own ability to formulate policy. That also entails tough confrontations, which cannot be swept under the carpet with superficial compromises.

At its core needs to be an honest discussion about graduated forms of integration; after all, this is what the eurozone already is. Macron's re-election and the new German government, which is still finding its feet, offer – alongside the pressure of the current crisis – a window of opportunity. That really would mark the birth of a geopolitically sovereign EU.



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