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Time for European sovereignty

The war in Ukraine has solidified the US as the bedrock of collective security. But Europe must learn to stand on its own two feet

The term 'European sovereignty', as coined by Emmanuel Macron in his 2017 Sorbonne speech, has often been misunderstood. It could best be translated as 'Europe's ability to act'. This raises the question of how Europe can assert itself in a multi-polar world – against China and Russia, but also against the US. Not only France but also the European Union already asked this question in 2016 in its *Global strategy for the foreign and security policy of the European Union*. In June 2017, Macron's closest partner in Europe, German ex-Chancellor Angela Merkel, revealed the real background to Macron's demand: the 'America First' policy of then-US President Donald Trump. 'The times when we could completely rely on others are long gone,' Merkel said at the time.

It was therefore only logical that the concept of European sovereignty found its way into the German federal government's coalition agreement at the end of 2021. Merkel's successor, Olaf Scholz, explicitly supported the French concept again in his keynote speech on European policy in August 2022 in Prague. Even if greeted with scepticism, especially by the Central and Eastern European states, and with many questions in regards to its implementation remaining open, the concept was in the process of establishing itself as a guiding principle in European discourse.

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With the war in Ukraine and the transition to a confrontational security order, hopes for European sovereignty appear to have been dashed. As early as 2021, the *Actualisation stratégique,* carried out by the French Ministry of Defence, had warned of a 'strategic downgrading of France and Europe'. Now, according to many analysts, Russia's attack on Ukraine has revealed that Europe cannot survive on its own. Without the support of the United States, the Russian flag would already be flying in Kyiv. The next conquest would then

only be a matter of time. Militarily, there is little objection to this thesis. However, to draw the conclusion from this that 'the US has taken the fate of Europe back into its own hands' and that the agenda for an independent European Union should therefore be abandoned, is too short-sighted and even dangerous.

'America first'

The war in Ukraine is having an anaesthetic effect on many Europeans. It is feeding the illusion that the US commitment will last. But the US *National Security Strategy,* published on 12 October 2022, spoke a clear language: according to US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, China is and remains the 'most comprehensive and serious challenge to US national security'. In this context, the 'pan to Europe' will only be a short intermezzo. As the strategic rivalry between the US and China intensifies, Europeans will be expected to do more for their own security. Closely related to this is the realisation that the United States could become embroiled in several distant conflicts in the future – possibly simultaneously.

Furthermore, the United States will, in the coming years, be busy consolidating its democracy at home. Ultimately, this could also limit America's ability to act. Already in the context of the midterm elections, numerous Republicans had called for a cut in aid to Ukraine and scored points with many voters. Such tones could have even greater resonance in the future.

Other aspects urge us to regard the striving for European sovereignty, which many have declared dead, as an urgent necessity: the dreaded 'red wave' did not materialise in the midterm elections, but the outcome of the 2024 presidential election remains completely open. On the Republican side, there are plenty of candidates who are more radical than Donald Trump and could pose an even greater threat should they win the White House.

But Joe Biden, too, is pursuing 'America first' in foreign policy. Macron was forced to experience this first hand when the US announced in September 2021 that it had sealed a new security policy alliance (AUKUS) together with Australia and Great Britain. France, which two years earlier had struck a € 56 bn deal with Australia to supply submarines, felt duped and recalled its ambassador from Washington — a unique event in the history of bilateral relations and the beginning of an 'ice age' that, while temporary, ultimately left deep scars.

The EU as a security policy actor

The thesis that the dream of European sovereignty has deen dashed is based on a misunderstanding. The European Union does not claim to autonomously guarantee collective security in Europe or the defence of its countries and alliances. Rather, NATO and the EU are complementary. There has long been a transatlantic consensus on this – also in France. In its new security policy strategy, the *Revue Nationale Stratégique,* the French Ministry of Defence confirms this in several places. Given the Russian war on Ukraine, it is clear that NATO is the bedrock of collective security and that the US provides most of that security.

But how can Europe demonstrate its ability to act? NATO protects Alliance territory, but will not be the only contributor to building a new European order after the war in Ukraine. This task will consist not only of finding the right way to deal with Russia, but above all of securing a future for Ukraine in this order. The European Union has already started to do this. Above all, European economic sanctions have weakened Russia and are in this way taking on a strategic dimension. Russian Central Bank President Elvira Nabiullina recently confirmed this in front of the members of the Duma, calling the sanctions 'very powerful'. Finally, by reducing its dependence on Russian energy, the EU will not only further weaken Russia, but strengthen itself.

In the words of the old Ostpolitik of the 1970s, the 'key' would no longer lie in Moscow but in Ukraine.

For Ukraine, the EU is providing direct military support for the first time in its history. It is financing the delivery of weapons and will initially train around 15 000 Ukrainian soldiers. This makes the EU a security policy actor. The prospect of Ukraine joining the EU is also a strategic decision, as it has been several times in the history of European integration, for example in the case of Greece, Spain, Portugal or the Central and Eastern European countries. It is also a prerequisite for a successful reconstruction of Ukraine, which is already beginning during the war. Finally, Ukraine will also take a central place in the European Political Community (EPC) that France is proposing. This is not a substitute for EU membership but can become a security policy instrument in which strategically important partners such as Turkey or Great Britain can also be involved.

Ukraine is exercising its right to self-defence, enshrined in the United Nations Charter. Above all, however, it is not only defending European values in its own country, but also European security. Europe's credibility depends not only on committing to this, but also on entering into a comprehensive security partnership with Ukraine, as is already very specifically described in the *Kyiv Security Compact*. Then Europe would also have demonstrated its ability to act.

So, in the words of the old *Ostpolitik* of the 1970s, the 'key' would no longer lie in Moscow but in Ukraine. A new European *Ostpolitik* could be summed up in this formula. It requires the leadership of those states that have repeatedly taken the initiative in the history of European integration, that is Germany and France. Their differences, which have now arisen, must not allow us to forget that both states have learned from the reaction to the war in Ukraine. President Macron demonstrates this in his new security strategy. On 27 February 2022, Chancellor Scholz announced a 'new epoch of history' – three days after the outbreak of war. It will now be the task of the national security strategy announced for the beginning of next year to define the contents of European sovereignty together with France.



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