

Europe's "Just Do It" Moment

by Nathalie Tocci

It may strike as odd coming from this author, but this is no time for grand strategy. As the European Union enters a new cycle, it's overarching priority in the world should be action.

The last five years have been formative as far as European foreign policy goes. They have set the foundations for a European defence union. Whereas the EU acronym soup of recent defence initiatives may appear obscure to outside observers, for a Union that has historically struggled to inch forward in this field, they are huge. Furthermore, the outgoing Commission and High Representative have triggered a fundamental change in the way the EU works in the world. While institutional silos still exist, joined-up foreign policy making and an integrated approach to conflicts are now part of the European foreign policy lexicon, and to an extent practice too.

The last years have also seen the EU's adaptation to a world that looks

profoundly different from how we had imagined it in the post-Cold War period. We have learned to pursue patient, pragmatic and principled resilience-building within and in our surrounding regions. And we now know that rules-based multilateralism and regional cooperation, far from being a natural destination, must be fought for tooth and nail. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of the Iran nuclear deal. Fighting for multilateralism is essential, indeed existential, for a Union founded on these very principles.

Guiding the EU's action in the last five years have been a set of documents. The 2016 EU Global Strategy came thirteen years after the European Security Strategy. As the outgoing HRVP took office in 2014, it was high time the EU updated its strategic compass. The Global Strategy was followed by a set of regional and thematic sub-strategies, implementation plans, compacts and action plans. These were documents

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developed during and in response to times of deep unpredictable flux. As Federica Mogherini put it recently, it was a strategy for unstrategic times. Precisely because of this, the work has stood the test of time so far. All member states and EU institutions concur on this today.

What the EU now needs is not more paper. The next five years should be Europe's "just do it" moment in the world. Defence, Western Balkans and multilateralism stand out as priority action areas.

On security and defence, funding, coherence and action should be guiding lights. Having established the appropriate legal and institutional frameworks, in the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework the EU must put its money where its mouth is. This means ensuring the European Defence Fund amounts to the proposed 13 billion euro, the military mobility envelope for dual use infrastructure 6.5 billion and that the foreign policy budget as a whole is increased by one third notwithstanding Brexit.

Coherence is also key. The mechanisms that have been established are all important in their own right. But they make sense only if coordinated and work towards the same overarching goal. In this regard, a further operationalisation of the EU's level of ambition is necessary. Finally, and most importantly, is the need for concrete action.

Rather than adding to the already long list of PESCO or EU-NATO projects, what is important now is to deliver

upon them with visible results. Security and defence have a credit line vis-à-vis the European public that no other policy area has. The vast majority of Europeans want to see "more Europe" in security and defence. There is no such consensus in areas like the economy or migration. But this credit won't last forever. Both on capabilities and operations, the EU needs to show that it is walking its strategic talk.

The Balkans also qualify for the EU's "just do it" moment. After over a decade in which the EU assumed that slowly but surely the Western Balkans were proceeding along the path of democratisation, modernisation and Europeanisation, the EU woke up to the reality that it cannot take the region for granted. Not only can progress on reforms be reversed and conflicts reignite, but other external powers, notably Russia and China, are not watching passively from the side-line.

Last year a historic breakthrough was reached between Greece and North Macedonia. Former Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, who alongside his Macedonian counterpart Zoran Zaev, demonstrated laudable statesmanship and courage, is absolutely right in exhorting the Union to be brave on the Balkans, opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. Failing the Balkans now means failing ourselves. We have been there before in the 1990s. Doing so again would be as tragic as unforgivable.

Finally, the EU must act multilaterally both internally and internationally. From Ukraine to Venezuela, from Iran

to the Sahel, many are the crises the EU is called on to respond. The HRVP cannot be at all places at all times, but the Union can – and should – count not only on common institutions but also on its member states to carry out its foreign policy. Internally, this means galvanising both EU institutions and member states, ensuring the latter act not simply in their name but also in that of the Union.

Contact groups, when varied in composition and linked to the EU institutional framework, have proved their value. The E3/EU on Iran or the Contact Group on Venezuela stand out in this respect. As France and Germany seek to reinvest in the ailing Minsk process, investing the whole Union in cooperation with the OSCE in the endeavour would help European foreign policy and above all peace in Ukraine.

Externally, the last five years have seen considerable investment in the EU's international relationships, from the resetting of a partnership with rather than a policy for Africa, to a deepening partnership with Latin America and Canada, from the unprecedented uptick in the formerly troubled EU–NATO relationship to the comprehensive strengthening of ties with East Asia, Japan above all. This groundwork has served the purpose of enabling the EU to stand up for multilateralism, forging different multilateral coalitions to tackle the manifold crisis and challenges ahead of us, and to do so retaining the United Nations at the core of this work.

European autonomy in the world means no more and no less than

our ability to live by our domestic, European and international laws. As Europeans, doing so requires standing united: separately we are simply too small to count in the world. Doing so in a European way means partnering with others, beginning with the United States whenever possible. Autarky and protectionism are simply anathema to the EU's DNA.

Becoming autonomous is a goal that should guide us not only over the next five years, but for decades to come. Growing up will require sustained and significant funds, determination and resilience. We will face difficulties, from our adversaries and at times from our friends too. But if we want to avoid getting trapped between Trump, Xi and Putin, address the challenges of climate and digitalisation, and generally protect and promote our interests at home and abroad, there is no other way.

The course has been set. Now it's time to just do it.

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