

Between God and the Sugar Dates: Lessons for a “Geopolitical” EU from the US–Iran Crisis

by Tommaso Emiliani



The killing of top Iranian General Qasem Soleimani by a US drone strike on 3 January 2020, followed by the Iranian retaliation on US military bases in Iraq, left many Europeans wondering how – if at all – the European Union can foster de-escalation in the Middle East.

The EU is presently stuck between a deepening strategic rift with its US ally and its inability to advance its independent interests and policies vis-à-vis Iran. It is now clear that Europe cannot protect its relations with Washington while also salvaging the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

(JCPOA), or Iranian nuclear deal. Borrowing from an old Persian proverb, Europe cannot have both God and the sugar dates.

The Trump administration has ignored repeated EU requests to preserve Washington’s commitment to the nuclear deal. After the US’s withdrawal in May 2018, the lack of concrete responses by the EU has been interpreted in Washington as an implicit blank check on its “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran. The EU’s occasional demonstrations of dissatisfaction with US policies have since been met with sharp rebukes by

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the White House.¹

The erosion of trust in the EU has produced two consequences for Iran. Domestically, it has strengthened the hard-line faction, as shown by the landslide victory of conservative “principalists” in Iran’s parliamentary elections held last February. On the international level, it has pushed Iran to look east for support.²

While it may well be too late to save the Iran nuclear deal, the EU can still draw useful lessons from the crisis, particularly when it comes to its ambition to enhance its strategic autonomy in the political, military and financial domains and strengthen its role and credibility as a “global actor” on the world stage.

Traditional geopolitical actors tend to benefit from highly centralised control over foreign policy. Given the EU’s internal divisions and complex decision-making processes, such centralised control is lacking, thus weakening the Union’s external (and internal) propulsion.

The EU’s first geopolitical priority, should be to reinforce internal synergies. It is positive news that

the new European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, has showed resolute determination to address such issues. Discussion on the deployment of “Teams Europe”, composed of representatives of the European Commission, the European External Action Service and member states in EU Delegations, to increase policy convergence in foreign policy decisions is welcomed. While still in its infancy, such efforts must be strengthened as Europe internalises the lessons from the ongoing US–Iran crisis and the Union’s inability to balance between both.

A real political leap, however, would only happen with the passage from unanimity to qualified majority voting in Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) decisions. Such a necessity extends well beyond the present Iran crisis, and is an indispensable step for Europe to begin obviating those internal divisions that have handicapped its external propulsion and work towards enhancing its strategic autonomy.

Second, Europe has proven unable to shield its trade with Iran from the US’s secondary sanctions due to Washington’s effective financial threats and coercion.³ While the EU has recently activated its first transaction with Iran via the Instrument for Trade Exchanges (INSTEX),⁴ providing Iran

¹ Julian Borger, “Pompeo: European Response to Suleimani Killing ‘Not Helpful Enough’”, in *The Guardian*, 4 January 2020, <https://gu.com/p/d37gf>.

² See Viktor Shakhmatov, “EAEU and Regional Cooperation in Eurasia”, in *Valdai Club Expert Opinions*, 11 November 2019, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/eaeu-and-regional-cooperation-in-eurasia>; and Tom Clifford, “China, the Commerce-First Middle Eastern Power”, in *The Globalist*, 10 January 2020, <https://www.theglobalist.com/?p=64779>.

³ Anna Sauerbrey, “The Failure of Europe’s Feeble Muscle Flexing”, in *The New York Times*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/10/opinion/europe-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

⁴ German Federal Foreign Office, *INSTEX Successfully Concludes First Transaction*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/2329744>.



with medical equipment to battle the COVID-19 pandemic, this action must be followed by more concerted and long-term efforts.

The EU’s strengths have long rested more on the power of the single market than a united foreign policy. It is Europe’s economic and trade instruments that can allow the EU to become a geopolitical actor. The European Commission’s exclusive competences in trade allow for coherent strategizing, while its gatekeeping power on a 450 million people market can provide the EU with the necessary leverage to influence the behaviour of other actors.⁵

This is only possible if the EU provides itself with the instruments to strengthen its resilience to economic coercion or the weaponsation of one state’s dominance over the globalised financial system. The new Commission has listed the completion of the Capital and Banking unions as key priorities for its mandate, with special attention to strengthening the euro’s internationalisation.⁶

Furthermore, the EU is starting to realise that in a world where multilateralism is under strain, it can no longer afford to be structurally dependent on other powers, not even its allies. The new EU

Industrial Strategy explicitly mentions the need to protect critical assets such as physical and digital infrastructures, specific goods and industrial products from potential disruptions in international supply chains.⁷

More effort is needed to incorporate the economic and industrial dimensions into the EU’s external action, for example through a reference to economic sovereignty in the assessment review of Europe’s Global Strategy due in 2021. Linked to this is also the so-called “Strategic Compass”, which aims to increase coordination and synergies in the EU’s CSDP policy.⁸

Ultimately, part of Europe’s inability to follow through on its avowed JCPOA strategy depends on the fragility of the coalition supporting the deal in the face of US pressure. If the EU is to stand its ground against a superpower, it is essential that Europe’s sometimes abstract commitment to multilateralism finds practical application.

On the one hand, the EU should strengthen coordination with the other signatories of the JCPOA, China and Russia, seeking to engage in creative diplomatic means to provide Iran with trade and sanctions relief in exchange for its gradual return to full compliance with the JCPOA.

⁵ Stefan Lehne, “How the EU Can Survive in a Geopolitical Age”, in *Carnegie Articles*, 25 February 2020, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/publications/81132>.

⁶ Nicola Bilotta and Alissa Siara, “From Strategic Autonomy to the Internationalization of the Euro: Europe’s Challenges and the Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|17 (April 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11467>.

⁷ European Commission, *A New Industrial Strategy for Europe* (COM/2020/102), 10 March 2020, p. 1, 4, 8, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0102>.

⁸ European External Action Service (EEAS), “Strengthening EU Security and Defence”, in *EEAS Factsheets*, March 2020, <https://europa.eu/!pW87Mk>.

On the other, the EU should seek to engage key actors previously excluded from the nuclear negotiations, starting from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states which have so far supported the US's maximum pressure campaign. The EU needs a strategic outlook on GCC states and the prospects of a US–Iran confrontation, namely the security spill-overs a war would inevitably produce as well as a potential disruption of energy flows through the Strait of Hormuz.

The informal contacts between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iran, established in the aftermath of the 2019 attacks on Saudi and UAE oil facilities and resumed after Soleimani's killing,⁹ demonstrate that GCC states are somewhat uneasy about the unpredictability of US policy under Trump and the prospects of a military escalation. In this context, the EU should make use of its pragmatic relations with both GCC actors and Iran to act as the international guarantor of free circulation through the Strait of Hormuz.

The EU should thus enhance its political support to the French-led maritime monitoring mission (EMASOH) launched to protect maritime circulation in January,¹⁰

⁹ Kamran Yousaf, “Qureshi Relays Message of ‘Restraint’ to Tehran and Riyadh”, in *The Express Tribune*, 13 January 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/?p=2136316>.

¹⁰ France Diplomatie, *European Maritime Awareness in the SoH (EMASOH): Political Statement by the Governments of Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal*, 20 January 2020, [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/europe/news/article/european-](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/europe/news/article/european-maritime-awareness-in-the-soh-emasoh-political-statement-by-the)

notably by securing the involvement of Germany, which has been reluctant to engage ships so far.¹¹ Headquartered in Abu Dhabi, the naval mission is seen negatively by Tehran, but if managed correctly, the EU can work to effectively balance its relations with both Iran and the GCC by demonstrating its commitments to both.

The mission's strategic significance lies in Europe's efforts to be perceived as trusted actor by both GCC states and Iran. To this extent, the EU should highlight the difference between EMASOH and the US International Military Security Construct, which identifies Teheran as the “demonstrated threat”,¹² while also making clear to Washington that EMASOH will help reduce the cost of US Navy's patrolling of Hormuz.

EMASOH may also serve the larger purpose of providing a security dimension to EU's engagement in the Gulf that was missing in the JCPOA. A EU's involvement would necessarily have to address the structural shortcomings of the other security proposals currently on the table: Russia's Gulf Security Concept and Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavour are

[maritime-awareness-in-the-soh-emasoh-political-statement-by-the.](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/europe/news/article/european-maritime-awareness-in-the-soh-emasoh-political-statement-by-the)

¹¹ Sebastian Sprenger, “Germany Wants Another Crack at a EU Mission in the Strait of Hormuz”, in *Defense News*, 15 February 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/smr/munich-security-conference/2020/02/15/germany-wants-another-crack-at-a-eu-mission-in-the-strait-of-hormuz>.

¹² US Central Command, *New Commander Opens IMSC Command Center*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/2011371>.



inacceptable to the US as they threaten the status of the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain. Conversely, the US-sponsored Middle East Strategic Alliance (or “Arab NATO”) is built around a bloc and containment approach that is incompatible with regional realities.

The success of an EU initiative would therefore ultimately depend on whether regional actors with very different interests receive the necessary guarantees. To this extent, synergies with powers with specific stakes in a multilateral approach to Gulf security should be explored. China, whose military base in Djibouti guarantees operational readiness, and India, whose heavy reliance on energy trade through the Strait of Hormuz enhances strategic compatibility, should both be involved in coordinated action with EMASOH. Other actors, such as Japan, may also be engaged.

The current COVID-19 pandemic can provide an opportunity to test the EU’s regional inclusive approach in view of more ambitious systemic initiatives. The recent activation of INSTEX is encouraging in this regard, but more needs to follow.

An EU leading international efforts to provide humanitarian relief to Iran is important on two levels. On the one hand, it would partially restore credibility by beginning to provide tangible proof of the EU’s commitment to support Tehran in this most difficult of crises, thereby also potentially breathing new air into future efforts to engage in constructive talks and negotiations with Iran. This could allow Iran to more effectively balance its

relations with EU states and Russia and China, increasing its manoeuvrability, while also enhancing the possibility that these three actors find new incentives to better coordinate policies vis-à-vis Tehran.

On the other, it could provide an opportunity to build common grounds with GCC states increasingly threatened by the regional spread of the contagion from Iran. Evidence from the past confirms that health diplomacy bears some potential to pave the way for more structured talks among actors with tense relations.¹³

Europe has been side-lined in the first global test of its geopolitical ambitions in the Persian Gulf. As a geopolitical actor with global ambitions, the EU faces a steep learning curve – particularly material, but also strategic – to fill the gap with other players.

The new von der Leyen Commission needs to start from the basics, by enhancing internal unity and cohesion; promoting integration of policy areas strategic to EU’s external influence; and establishing new partnerships capable of serving EU interests and hedge against retrenching US commitments.

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¹³ Domenico Valenza, “The Irresistible Rise of Health Diplomacy: Why Narratives Matter in the Time of COVID-19”, in *UNU-CRIS Blog: Connecting Ideas*, 30 March 2020, <http://cris.unu.edu/node/11700>.

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