

Going Transatlantic: The EU's Lean Walk Towards Strategic Relevance

by Nicoletta Pirozzi

The concept of a geopolitical Europe – recently reaffirmed by Ursula von der Leyen as part of her political agenda for the presidency of the European Commission – assumes that the European Union needs to improve its foreign and security policy in order to become a more meaningful actor in the global context. For years, a corollary of this assumption has been the need for Europe to gain strategic autonomy, finally emerging from a long-standing dependency on its transatlantic ally, the United States.

The Trump administration, with his transactional and despondent approach to the transatlantic bond, has offered the EU the opportunity to test its resolve and develop its autonomy at the strategic and tactical level. And in fact, since 2016, EU institutions have produced important strategic documents delineating the EU's new role in the world, starting with the EU Global Strategy, the Implementation Plan on Security and Defence and most

recently the Strategic Compass.

Nevertheless, it became evident that the path to autonomy still requires a more resolute convergence on strategic priorities among EU member states, allowing the Union to develop a more efficient common foreign policy, and the political will to develop adequate capabilities for the EU's foreign projection. Both of the above have been in short supply, demonstrating that the United States are still an indispensable partner for ensuring not only the EU's global impact, but also its own internal cohesion.

As a commentary on the efficiency of European foreign policy it suffices to say that, without the United States exercising its leverage, the EU's neighbourhood has become the hunting ground of regional powers with diverging interests, often openly in contrast with European ones.

Nicoletta Pirozzi is Head of IAI Programme "EU politics and institutions" and Institutional Relations Manager at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

From the ongoing instability in Libya to the rising tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, from the unrest in Belarus and the unfrozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, the EU has been sidelined in its own backyard by actors such as Russia, Turkey and the Gulf countries.

The instruments designed by the European Union, such as the Neighbourhood Policy, proved unable to guarantee the resilience of states and societies in a situation of growing instability and power politics triggered by external interference.

Internally, the EU has been shaken by China with its aggressive policy of divide et impera, first and foremost through the economic leverage of the Belt and Road initiative, further reinforced by its Coronavirus-related diplomacy which has led some member states, first and foremost Italy, to give an impression of leaning towards a "systemic rival" more than towards their European fellows.

On military capabilities, the past four years have clearly shown that the EU is still hesitant in engaging in a seriously ambitious process of further integration in the field of defence. This has been exemplified, for example, by the format of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PeSCo).

This project was originally designed to create a core group of willing and able countries "whose military capabilities fulfil higher criteria and which have made more binding commitments to

one another in this area",¹ but ended up with an inclusive group of 25 out of 27 member states, some of which are reluctant to rely on an integrated EU defence.

Another example is the ongoing negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework, that drastically reduced the allocation to the European Defence Fund, the first ever to be financed by the European Commission, from 13 to 7 billion euro, and to the flagship military mobility project from 6 to 1.5 billion.

Against this backdrop, the transatlantic alliance is still essential for Europe. The US provides a much needed crutch in defence matters, a reassuring umbrella in the neighbourhood and a rallying point vis-à-vis China.

With the incumbent US administration led by Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, this will once again be possible. The US will return to be a "trusted partner", abandoning its "reluctant ally" attitude we have become accustomed to over recent years.

However, if some EU and US priorities will naturally converge – as a consequence of Biden's commitment, for example, to re-enter the Iranian nuclear deal, the re-engagement in the climate package of the Paris Agreement and support for an orderly Brexit – other priorities will require negotiations.

¹ Article 42.6, *Treaty on European Union*, OJ C 115, 9 May 2008, p. 39, http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2008/art_42/oj.

The EU has learned that the previous autopilot mode that had defined transatlantic relations is no longer adequate or sustainable, and it needs to be ready to steer the partnership on issues that are crucial for its strategic agenda and to mobilise all means at its disposal to increase its ability to influence US policy and perceptions.

This is the case especially when it comes to the EU's neighbourhood, where it will still fall to the EU to take the lead and design a strategically autonomous agenda that could be implemented with the backing of the US, which will in turn help to rebalance the transatlantic relationship with on a more equal plane.

But how can the EU achieve this goal?

First of all, the EU should demonstrate its seriousness and commitment to promote democratic institutions and good governance as the most effective antidotes against instability and insecurity.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of power politics have fed the false myth that autocratic regimes are better equipped to maintain order and protect national interests. A revamped alliance among democracies is in the interests of both the EU and the US and could help to relaunch the transatlantic bond, but in order to succeed the EU should abandon the ambiguity of its narrative and promote a resolute approach to support democratic processes both within and outside its borders.

The adoption of a rule of law conditionality mechanism linked to the next multiannual budget and a staunch support to the Belarusian democratic movement offer two good starting points.

Second, it is important to substantiate transatlantic relations with initiatives that go beyond institutions in Washington and main European capitals, so as to be able to reconnect US and European societies. Despite historical ties and cultural commonalities, current demographic trends are increasing the distance between the US and Europe.

The US population is projected to grow faster and age slower than European populations, and also to become more and more culturally diversified. Moreover, the fastest growing regions in the US are those in the South and West, physically the furthest away from Europe. Therefore, it is of outmost importance to fuel new partnerships at transatlantic levels among local institutions, educational institutions, political forces and civil society organisations, with a view to exchange best practices, create new initiatives and consolidate linkages between our societies.

This would have a greater impact if it is done in the fields that are most promising for innovative sustainable development, such as technology, climate, and energy, culture and the arts, social entrepreneurship.

Third, the EU urgently needs to find and exploit whatever leverage it has to make sure the US takes its concerns

seriously, building on the international role of the euro and its common market, and mobilising its diplomatic network in the US and worldwide.

It has long been prepared to do this on trade issues, as witnessed by the EU's decision to impose tariffs on about 4 billion US dollar worth of US goods as a retaliation linked to a World Trade Organisation dispute over illegal subsidies for Boeing and Airbus,² but that approach now needs to be extended to other policy areas, not least to foreign policy.

Last but not least, the EU should work together with the US in main multilateral fora, such as the UN and G20, to fight battles that are of pivotal importance for both, combining their respective diplomatic reaches and advancing shared priorities in a common framework of rules and institutions.

These battles should focus on landmark initiatives that can set a standard and underline the distinctive posture of liberal democracies in global affairs: development cooperation, the fight against climate change, the fight against terrorism, the protection of human rights and gender issues.

The transatlantic relationship has experienced a dramatic setback in the past few years, but the EU should now re-engage the US in a "lean walk", a partnership convenient for both sides. From the Union's point of view, this

effort would be geared towards the restoration of its relevance in world affairs, and it would buy precious time for Europe to make progress on its way to strategic autonomy, while avoiding international decline.

10 November 2020

² European Commission, *Boeing WTO Case: EU Puts in Place Countermeasures Against U.S. Exports*, 9 November 2019, <https://europa.eu/!vC48mx>.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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