

The EU's Search for "Effective" Strategic Autonomy in the Neighbourhood

by Maria Giulia Amadio Viceré and Matteo Bonomi

COVID-19 amplifies weaknesses while exacerbating latent illnesses in infected human beings. As we enter the second year of the pandemic, one may argue that much of the same has happened to EU foreign policy towards its neighbourhood.

Ever since the launch of the enlargement process and the European neighbourhood policy, the EU based its foreign policy on the political use of economic interdependence. While capable of harmonizing rules and boosting trade flows, such an approach has proven insufficient to foster the socio-economic development of Europe's neighbourhood, hindering its democratization prospects. The devastating consequences of COVID-19 outbreak have exacerbated this reality, further highlighting the shortcomings of EU policy in the neighbourhood.

During the Trump administration, calls for a stronger EU role in the international arena have been

widespread among scholars and pundits. In an unprecedented move, even the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen stressed the need to make the EU more geopolitically relevant on the world stage.

Some now hint that since the 45th President of the US has left the White House, Washington will resume its traditional role of security provider in Europe's surroundings.¹ Others see the new US administration as a window of opportunity for the EU to strengthen its stance in the neighbourhood.²

¹ Alexandra Brzozowski, "Biden or Trump? What the US Election Could Mean for Europe's Foreign Policy", in *Euractiv*, 2 November 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1526447>.

² Riccardo Alcaro and Nathalie Tocci, "The European Union in a COVID World", in *IAI Papers*, No. 20|34 (November 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12364>; Karel Lannoo, "The Biden Presidency Is a Last Call for Europe", in *CEPS In Brief*, 1 December 2020, <https://www.ceps.eu/?p=31440>.

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The extent to which current EU policy frameworks are fit for achieving this goal remains an open question, however. Upon its establishment in 2004, the EU neighbourhood policy was conceived as an alternative to traditional geopolitical means. It was based on the long experience of EU enlargement. Its underlying logic was that a progressive economic integration of partner countries would have created a space for shared stability and prosperity, based on EU values.³ In a nutshell, democratisation through conditionality grounded on socio-economic issues laid at the centre of the EU's approach to its neighbourhood.⁴

Yet, without the prospect of accession, this policy framework has not proven very effective in Europe's southern and eastern neighbourhoods. In addition, with the eurozone crisis, such a model of external integration turned into an obstacle for a swift transformation of the regions covered by both the enlargement and neighbourhood policy frameworks. In fact, the strong economic ties between the EU and its surroundings acted as transmission belts for negative spillovers of the EU sovereign debt crisis, creating fertile ground for the destabilisation that occurred immediately afterwards.⁵

³ Treaty on the European Union (TEU), Art. 8.

⁴ Maria Giulia Amadio Viceré and Sergio Fabbrini, "Assessing the High Representative's Role in Egypt during the Arab Spring", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (September 2017), p. 64-82.

⁵ Matteo Bonomi and Dušan Reljić, "The EU and the Western Balkans: So Near and Yet So Far", in *SWP Comments*, No. 53/2017 (December 2017), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/the-eu-and-the-western-balkans-so-near-and-yet-so-far>.

In the years that followed, the EU faced several challenges stemming from these areas, among which the complex unfolding of the political transition in the Arab world and Russia's disruption of the post-Soviet space through the annexation of Crimea. Yet it took Donald Trump's controversial approach to international politics, and the UK's decision to leave the EU, for Brussels to launch the "strategic autonomy" debate in the context of the 2016 EU Global Strategy.

That debate has been the main driver behind the more integrated efforts among EU member states and institutions in the security and defence field, epitomised by the establishment of the Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund. However, it is very likely that the EU will not become militarily autonomous in the near future, given member states' reluctance towards capacity building in the security sector.⁶

The strategic autonomy debate, obviously, has not been limited to such sector. In this regard, most recently, EU representatives expressed the need to achieve an "open",⁷ and hence effective strategic autonomy. In the words of HR/VP Josep Borrell, the latter is not limited to security and defence.⁸ On

⁶ Jolyon Howorth, "For a True European Defence Union", in *Martens Centre Future of Europe series*, December 2017, <https://www.martenscentre.eu/?p=2141>.

⁷ Sabine Weyand, *EU Open Strategic Autonomy and the Transatlantic Trade Relationship*, opening remarks at the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, 15 September 2020, <https://europa.eu/!gx49jN>.

⁸ Josep Borrell, "Why European Strategic Autonomy Matters", in *A Window on the*

the contrary, as the President of the European Council Charles Michel put it, the EU should rely on the strength of its economic and social model in its pursuit of autonomy and external influence. Ultimately, by doing so, Brussels would reach its objectives, namely: "peace and prosperity".⁹

Nonetheless, in practice, there is a tangible risk that the EU will not achieve this degree of effectiveness in time to avoid a further destabilisation of its neighbourhood. In recent years, the EU approach has been centred on state resilience at the expense of broader societal resilience.¹⁰ The EU focused on firmly securing both its southern and eastern borders, and stabilising its surroundings. Meanwhile, countries in the southern Mediterranean and eastern Europe, alongside the Western Balkans, suffered from economic hardship, social tensions and unsettled conflicts.

It is against the backdrop of these weaknesses – and indeed latent illnesses –, that the COVID-19 crisis exploded in early 2020. The pandemic is not only having devastating implications across EU member states, but also on Europe's eastern and southern neighbours.¹¹

World (blog), 3 December 2020, <https://europa.eu/!Xc63jg>.

⁹ Charles Michel, *Strategic Autonomy for Europe - The Aim of Our Generation*, speech to the Bruegel think tank, 28 September 2020, <https://europa.eu/!WX44hD>.

¹⁰ Maria Giulia Amadio Viceré and Andrea Frontini, "Paths to Resilience: Examining EU and NATO Responses to the Tunisian and Egyptian Political Transitions", in Eugenio Cusumano and Stefan Hofmaier (eds), *Projecting Resilience Across the Mediterranean*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 247-268.

¹¹ World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*,

Despite the current debate about the need for the EU to reach an effective strategic autonomy, its approach towards the neighbourhood remains a quagmire in which both Brussels and the countries involved seem to be stuck.

The prospects for EU responses to the spread of COVID-19 outside its borders are certainly less bright than the initiatives launched so far by the EU internally. The pandemic's outbreak came on top of multiple crises which, coupled with the spread of nationalism and populism across Europe, led to widespread inward-looking tendencies in the EU. Amidst fear and despair, the first responses by EU member states to the deadly virus have been highly uncoordinated. Yet, as this initial lack of solidarity seemed to irreparably shake the EU's foundations, Next Generation EU – the largest stimulus package ever financed through the EU budget – was launched to boost Europe's recovery in July 2020.

At first sight, it seems that the EU tried to counter the devastating socio-economic effects of the health emergency in its neighbourhood. In April 2020, through the Team Europe Package, the European Commission alongside EU member states launched a series of measures aimed at supporting most vulnerable developing countries.¹² Yet, the Team Europe Package mainly proposed the use of pre-existing funds.¹³

January 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/global-economic-prospects>.

¹² European Commission, *Communication on the Global EU Response to COVID-19* (JOIN/2020/11), 8 April 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0011>.

¹³ European Commission, *Q&A: Global EU*

Added to this, the recent Multiannual Financial Framework (2021–2027) prioritises the EU's internal recovery plans over "Heading 6 - Neighbourhood and the World". In fact, not only does the new multi-annual budget fail to adapt to the post-pandemic reality in the neighbourhood, but it also cuts the 2018 Commission's proposal for expenses related to instruments of external action. Although the Commission initially proposed to allocate 118 billion euro to these instruments, member states eventually reduced this amount to 98 billion.¹⁴

Against this backdrop, the EU would need to reshape the premises on which its foreign policy towards the neighbourhood is based. In the context of the Strategy's implementation, the EU mostly focused on avoiding the risk of state failure rather than societal resilience. The result has been a general lack of socio-economic development of these areas. Indeed, such development should be considered as a necessary but not sufficient condition for an all-encompassing democratization process.

Still, the current conditions make such a reshape far more urgent for at least two reasons. First, it is very likely that history will repeat itself. As happened with the Great Recession in 2008–09, the pandemic's consequences will probably catalyse the structural

Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic, 8 April 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_606.

¹⁴ Anita Käppeli and Mikaela Gavas, "The EU's New Budget: Europe's Recovery at the Expense of Its Long-Term Ambitions", in *CGD Policy Blogs*, 27 July 2020, <https://www.cgdev.org/node/3128997>.

weaknesses of Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and the Middle East and Northern Africa. With Europe's surroundings plunging into a deep, unprecedented socio-economic crisis, the EU is likely to suffer from a series of negative spillovers that could derive from a further impoverishment of these areas. Among others, such spillovers may entail criminality, terrorism, migration, diminished demand for goods, and the increased influence of external powers at the EU's borders.

Second, since Washington's gaze is progressively – and inexorably – shifting towards the Pacific, the EU, in order to be a strategically autonomous actor, will necessarily have to take care of its neighbourhood by itself. Yet, this will not mean throwing out the baby with the bathwater. On the contrary, it would entail making the most out of the EU's unique set of instruments and its economic strength, alongside its keenness to act within multilateral settings rather than unilaterally.

Besides potentially profitable endeavours, which of course are relevant, trade and market related policies in third countries are, first and foremost, powerful foreign policy instruments – perhaps the most powerful ones in the case of the EU. Nonetheless, employing trade and market-related policies as geopolitical tools necessarily entails devising some form of solidarity.

The current socio-economic conditions of Europe's neighbourhood clearly demonstrate how the liberal assumption according to which trade policy can automatically lead

to win-win solutions is no longer sustainable. When costs stemming from trade relations are asymmetrical among parties, as in the case of the EU's disproportionate benefits at the expenses of these countries, corrective and redistributive mechanisms are necessary for boosting socio-economic growth, and thus societal resilience.

A technocratic and a-political vision of the markets dismantled these countries' national barriers through de-regulation processes, depriving protection for economic sectors and social groups – who did not have the social capital to adapt to such changes.¹⁵ To rebalance its relations with its neighbours, the EU needs to devise an approach centred on their economic development and to invest on their social and human capital.¹⁶

In the past, the EU has not devised effective policies to replace the progressive US disengagement from the European neighbourhood. It is plausible that President Biden will change Washington's interactions with third parties in international politics, as well as the principles and values underpinning such interactions. Still, believing that Biden's ascent to power can solve the inconsistencies and inefficiencies that mar EU foreign

policy would be utopian.

To be a truly strategic and autonomous actor, besides integrating its security and defence sector, the EU should first and foremost make sure that its neighbours are resilient. This will necessarily imply not only an increase of the funds allocated to EU foreign policy instruments, but also a revision of the EU's usage of the economic interdependence with these countries.

As stated in the EU Global Strategy, the internal dimension of EU security is inherently intertwined with the external one. Devoting money and efforts to sustain the neighbourhood's fight against the pandemic should therefore not be understood as a mere act of solidarity, devised from an actor that aspires to be a normative – if not ethical – power in the international arena. On the contrary, it is a direct investment in Europe's security itself.

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¹⁵ Sergio Fabbrini, "Ascesa e declino del decennio nazionalista. Il fallimento delle ideologie calde e l'importanza del liberalismo seppur tiepido", in *LUISS Open Society*, 21 January 2021, <https://open.luiss.it/?p=12547>.

¹⁶ Matteo Bonomi, Ardian Hackaj and Dušan Reljić, "Avoiding the Trap of Another Paper Exercise: Why the Western Balkans Need a Human Development-centred EU Enlargement Model", in *IAI Papers*, No. 20|04 (January 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11257>.

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