

# On European Power

by Nathalie Tocci

## ABSTRACT

Much is being said about European power these days. From the new European Commission President von der Leyen and new High Representative Borrell to French President Macron, the idea that Europe must exert power on the global scene is gaining traction. The political intuition behind these statements is absolutely correct. The 21st century rationale for the European project is a profoundly global one. However, to turn it into a practical reality, it's worth delving into the detail of European power, what it meant, how it has transformed, and what should be done to exercise it in future.

*European Union | CFSP | Transatlantic relations | EU enlargement*

**keywords**

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### Introduction

Much is being said about European power these days.

The new High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission Josep Borrell has stressed the need for the European Union to “learn to use the language of power”.<sup>1</sup> President Ursula von der Leyen has defined hers as a “geopolitical Commission”, a concept heavily centred on the notion of power and its relationship with geographic space.<sup>2</sup> Far more dramatically, French President Emmanuel Macron has declared that the Union will disappear altogether unless it understands itself as a global power.<sup>3</sup>

Hyperbole aside, what lies behind this rhetoric? What does or could European power mean, and how should a geopolitical Commission understand its mission?

To begin with, the political intuition behind these statements and slogans is absolutely correct. The 21st century rationale for the European project – and therefore of the European Commission as one of its leading forces – is a profoundly global one.<sup>4</sup> The EU exists not only to secure peace on the continent and enhance European prosperity through the benefits of the single market. It is necessary if Europeans are to rise to the major global challenges of our age. In the 21st century, size and weight will matter more than ever. And Europeans can achieve that critical

<sup>1</sup> European Parliament, *Hearing with High Representative/Vice President-designate Josep Borrell*, 7 October 2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190926IPR62260>.

<sup>2</sup> Lili Bayer, “Meet von der Leyen’s ‘Geopolitical Commission’”, in *Politico*, 4 December 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/meet-ursula-von-der-leyen-geopolitical-commission>.

<sup>3</sup> *Economist*, “Emmanuel Macron in His Own Words (English)”, in *The Economist*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-in-his-own-words-english>.

<sup>4</sup> Nathalie Tocci, “Navigating Complexity: The EU’s Rationale in the 21st Century”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 19|06 (January 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9938>.

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mass only by standing together. To capture all this, geopolitics, with its distinct retro feel, was an unfortunate term to use. In a world whose major challenges are in the transnational domains of technology, climate and demography, geopolitics does not capture analytically the quest at stake. Politically, however, President von der Leyen gets it. Elevating climate and digital as the main priorities of her mandate clearly indicates that her “geopolitical” Commission actually aims to be a global one.<sup>5</sup>

This is not to say that the traditional attributes of power have no role to play. In his *cri de coeur* for European power, President Macron called upon Europeans to get their act together on defence, not least to avoid being run over by the escalating Sino-American rivalry. In his first letter to EU Ministers of foreign affairs and defence, High Representative Borrell called for a qualitative and quantitative leap forward on security and defence in view of the comeback of great power politics.<sup>6</sup> Practically, the new Commission will feature an entire directorate general focused on defence – DG Defence Industry and Space, under the responsibility of Commissioner for the Internal Market Thierry Breton –, a first in the history of the European project.

The political intuition is there, but to turn it into a practical reality, it’s worth delving into the detail of European power, what it meant, how it has transformed, and what should be done to exercise it in future.

### 1. Unpacking European power in a changing global environment

Traditionally, the EU has exercised power in two distinct ways.<sup>7</sup> The first is conditionality. While it never disposed of military means to coerce a third party to do what it would not have otherwise done, the Union (operating under the broad umbrella of American military might) profusely made use of positive and negative conditionality policies to generate third state compliance. The conditionality embedded in the enlargement process or the use of sanctions are, in this respect, two sides of the same power coin.

The second, conceptually distinct, but not unrelated avenue for the exercise of European power is the EU’s ability to induce third parties to voluntarily change their behaviour because this is viewed, plainly, as the right or normal thing to do. Having the ability to discursively shape the understanding of what is right or normal

<sup>5</sup> Ursula von der Leyen, *A Union That Strives for More. My Agenda for Europe. Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2019-2024*, 16 July 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024_en).

<sup>6</sup> Jacopo Barigazzi, “Borrell Urges EU to Be Foreign Policy ‘Player, Not the Playground’”, in *Politico*, 9 December 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/on-foreign-policy-josep-borrell-urges-eu-to-be-a-player-not-the-playground-balkans>.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 2 in Nathalie Tocci, *The EU and Conflict Resolution. Promoting Peace in the Backyard*, London/New York, Routledge, 2007.

without forcing such change upon others, is, in a Foucauldian understanding of reality, the most profound way in which power unfolds. From the diffusion of human rights and democratic norms to the shaping of trade and digital privacy rules and standards, we have known what European power means for some time.

Yet something is fast changing. As the world exits the so-called international liberal order and moves into a more normatively contested (dis)order,<sup>8</sup> the two avenues through which the EU has exercised power until now may not disappear, but will be fundamentally reshaped.

Europeans are now grappling with the implications of a changing role of the United States in the world. The US remains a key global player, and will remain so for the decades to come. Its military might, economic dynamism and social make-up all point in this direction. Yet the US will not be alone on the global chessboard and will have to redirect its finite resources to the major strategic challenges it faces. As already clear for all to see, these lie neither in Europe, nor in the Middle East, but rather in Asia. This does not mean that the US will fully retrench from Europe or from the Middle East. In fact, in the last years US military presence in Europe, through the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), has increased by 5,000 to approximately 68,000 troops. The much-trumpeted withdrawal of US military presence from the Middle East has resulted more in a shifting around rather than a retreat of American forces in the region: there are still over 60,000 US troops stationed in the Middle East – and is sending additional ones to Saudi Arabia. However, presence does not automatically translate in power. Military presence notwithstanding, the US has progressively lost the ability to call the shots in the Middle East. Others, notably Russia alongside regional players (most notably Israel and Turkey), play now a bigger role than in the past, at times bigger than the US itself.

The perceptible reduction of US willingness and ability to be the global hegemon in those regions that have traditionally been at the heart of European foreign policy – the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the Middle East – implies a radical change of the political opportunity structure in which the EU operates. Contrary to appearances, the EU is not weaker today than it was ten, twenty or thirty years ago. With the gradual build-up of its foreign policy apparatus, including on security and defence, if anything the opposite is true. What has changed for the worse is the international context of EU foreign policy, which is now considerably more challenging than it has ever been since the end of the Cold War. Whereas the EU's exercise of soft power through policies of conditionality and socialisation achieved discernible impact also, albeit not only, because they were pursued within a US-led international liberal order, as that order is fast disappearing, those same policies, pursued in the same way, can no longer achieve the same results.

<sup>8</sup> Nathalie Tocci, "The Demise of the International Liberal Order and the Future of the European Project", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 18|63 (November 2018), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9708>.

Let us take three examples. In the Western Balkans, the Union remains the most powerful external player. All notwithstanding, the enlargement process continues to have real traction in the six Western Balkan candidate countries and the perspective of opening accession talks was the major external incentive that North Macedonia had to reach an agreement on its name dispute with Greece in 2018. However, the EU no longer operates in a broader context in which the United States is the dominant global player in the Balkans. The international environment that witnessed the US-brokered Dayton accords and the NATO intervention in Kosovo has changed dramatically. In its stead, alongside a reduced US role is a growing influence of Russia and China, the foreign policy priorities of which certainly do not feature democratisation or Europeanisation. Compounded with domestic dynamics in the region, this partly explains why the Western Balkans have seen serious democratic backtracking in recent years.<sup>9</sup> In short, EU policy in the Balkans remains influential, but it operates in an environment which is far more normatively contested than it once was. This makes European own-goals, such as the refusal to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in October 2019, all the more despairing.

In Turkey too, the EU has seen its influence shrink over the years. As the enlargement policy lost steam, EU policies of conditionality and socialisation started falling on deaf ears in Ankara. Aghast with Turkey's de-democratisation, Europeans debated whether to suspend the accession process after the 2017 constitutional referendum in Turkey or whether to impose an arms embargo in light of the Turkish intervention in north-eastern Syria in 2019. Far from discussing membership, the European debate on Turkey today revolves around sanctions. So far neither has the accession process been suspended nor have punitive measures been imposed. Parking the Turkey question altogether, the EU has simply latched on to the transactional 2015 migration deal. Most of the reasons for the sorry state of EU-Turkey relations lie within the Union and the Turkish government. However, here too, the international context has added fuel to the fire. As US-Turkey ties have soured and Ankara has fallen onto Moscow's lap, the broader environment in which the EU-Turkey relationship unfolds has not made life easier for the EU and Turkish democrats. This is not to say that the EU should bend over to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, but it does mean that only standing firm on principle while waiting for Ankara's capitulation is unlikely to deliver change. In this very different context, the EU should carefully reassess what constitutes a cost and what a benefit in its policies towards Turkey, making the due distinctions between the Turkish president and the country as a whole when devising a dynamic rules-based association centred around a modernised customs union.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Judy Dempsey, "The Balkans' Rocky Path to Democracy", in *Strategic Europe*, 20 April 2015, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=59830>.

<sup>10</sup> Beken Saatçioğlu et al., "The Future of EU-Turkey Relations: A Dynamic Association Framework amidst Conflictual Cooperation", in *FEUTURE Synthesis Papers*, March 2019, <http://www.feuture.uni-koeln.de/en/publications/feuture-synthesis-paper>.



In Syria, European weakness has been exposed even more vividly by dwindling US influence. Europeans, notably the EU, have not played a direct military role in Syria. The EU has sanctioned the Syrian government, supported refugees, provided significant sums of humanitarian aid, and backed Syrian civil society. This is not fundamentally different from the policies the Union has pursued in most armed conflicts near and far. However, when such actions took place in crises where the US and its local allies prevailed militarily, the EU's impact was incommensurately higher. Put bluntly, the Union's impact during the stabilisation and peacebuilding phases of conflicts in the Balkans, Afghanistan or even Iraq, has been far greater than in Syria where, ephemeral as President Bashar al-Assad, Russia and Iran's military victory may look like, Damascus' opponents have clearly lost. With over 80 percent of the Syrian population now living in regime-held areas, the scope for European influence is highly constrained. Exercising the little potential power Europeans have in Syria means making hard choices. As one European diplomat put it during a closed discussion: "why would we want to reconstruct schools in which Assad's curricula is taught?". The normative conundrum is real. Faced with it, the EU must choose. It can consciously abdicate the exercise of any power, maintaining sanctions and categorically refusing to engage in reconstruction, hoping that sooner or later the unsustainability of the Assad regime will surface. While certainly possible, the EU might have to wait for an awfully long time for this to happen. Alternatively, the Union can take the messier route, choosing to dirty its hands. It can engage in case-by-case humanitarian-plus activities in areas such as digital education, mine clearance or housing, in a manner that distinguishes as much as possible the regime from the population and escapes the jaws of corruption, but cognisant that interaction with the meso-level of the administration is inevitable.

## 2. European power in the 21st century

The cases above are not aimed at highlighting European weakness, but rather the fact that European power now operates in a very different international environment. The last five years do point to the fact that the EU is still able to deliver real change, notwithstanding an increasingly complex environment. Trade and data protection are two obvious examples. The Union has reached free trade agreements with Canada, Japan, the four-strong Mercosur (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay), Vietnam and Singapore in a global environment in which nationalism, closure and protectionism are on the rise. It has succeeded in making the General Data Protection Regulation a dominant global standard, notwithstanding the growing conflictuality within the digital sphere, notably between the US and China.

The exercise of European power in the 21st century will continue to revolve around the EU's ability to be a rule-maker and rule-shaper. As an entity held together by common rules and norms, these will continue to remain front and centre of European power in the world. The Union will be less likely to set or shape rules

through direct or coercive policies of conditionality. It will also have a harder time in diffusing its liberal norms in an increasingly non-liberal world. But provided that Europeans stand united, innovate, and assume responsibility, the EU can continue to exercise power and do so on a global scale.

Unity is the first key. Only by standing together can Europeans negotiate with China, stand up to Russia, rebuild bridges across the Atlantic, govern migration, contrast climate change and jump onto the train of artificial intelligence and biotechnology, while ensuring digital safety. Separately, Europeans will simply be small fat chicken in a jungle: as small rich states standing apart they will not fare well in an increasingly transactional and leaderless world. Fostering unity will take hard work. It means winning over central and east European Member States to the Commission's Green New Deal for Europe.<sup>11</sup> It means fostering unity on the quest for European defence, by working towards a common (not a single) strategic culture, providing real financial incentives for defence cooperation, and concomitantly working on an ever stronger relationship between the EU and NATO. It means persuading Member States not to fall prey to the bilateral sirens from China, because it is only by establishing and implementing common investment screening procedures, and common rules governing cooperation on aviation, infrastructure, data protection, environment and energy that all Member States can fully maximise the benefits of their national cooperation with China.

Innovation is also essential. So far, the EU has punched above its weight in the digital sphere. It has been a rule-shaper even if the major tech companies are not European. The EU has proved to be an effective regulator both because rule-making is part of its DNA and because the Union still boasts a 500 million people market. However, the EU's demographic weight in the world is fast declining and consumers alone are unlikely to do the trick in future. If Europeans are to play a role in shaping the rules that will govern artificial intelligence, biotechnology or quantum computing, the Union has to get its act together on the innovation side too. This means investing in European champions that may indeed acquire dominant positions within the EU market, but which are the only way to prevent unfair practices within Europe, while enabling the Union to play a role in the global governance of the digital sphere in the decades to come.

Last but not least is responsibility. Exerting European power in the 21st century means assuming greater responsibility on the global scene, including when such responsibility comes with a price tag to be paid by us. This means paying up on defence, not because the US President bullies Europeans in doing so, but because we cannot assume that others will look after our security indefinitely. In this respect, downgrading commitments on the European Defence Fund, Military Mobility and the European Peace Facility from the proposals originally put forward by the European Commission in the context of the Multiannual Financial

<sup>11</sup> Mark Leonard, "The Makings of a 'Geopolitical' European Commission", in *Project Syndicate*, 28 November 2019, <https://prosyn.org/ziL5GSA>.

Framework, would be a terrible message of European irresponsibility. Plainly put, it would signal that Europeans just don't put their money where their mouth is.

Responsibility does not stop with defence, but concerns economics too. This entails assuming the costs of European economic sovereignty, even if it means paying the short-term price of transatlantic friction. Europe's inability to stand firm and practically deliver on its commitments under the Iran nuclear deal under the Damocles sword of US "secondary" sanctions – that is, sanctions with extra-territorial effect – should lead Europeans to pause. We should reflect not only on the consequences this is having for Middle East security, nonproliferation and multilateral diplomacy, but on how Europeans would react were the US to drag the Union into a growing confrontation with China.

Economic responsibility is about the protection of the EU's own norms, rules and laws, but it is also necessary to shape a more sustainable world. In this field, the US has established its Development Finance Corporation, while China has championed the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank. The EU cannot stay put, losing its proud primacy in the development field. Moving fast on the High-level Group of Wise Persons' recommendation to establish a European Climate and Sustainable Development Bank, ideally merging the European Investment Bank's external component with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, is essential.<sup>12</sup>

### Conclusion

The EU today is faced with unique challenges, but also with unprecedented opportunities. The way the Union has exercised power externally over the last two decades is no longer available, at least not in the same way, as the world around us is changing systemically. This ought to shake Europeans out of their comfort zone, into realising that a global EU is not simply nice to have, but essential if Europeans are to proudly stand by their way of life in the years to come. This bestows upon the EU a new and exquisitely global *raison d'être*, one that poses a unique danger if the Union fails to rise to the challenge, but which also holds the promise to re-energise the European project. The new EU political leadership appears to get it. Beginning with the finalisation of the Multi-Annual Financial Framework, its task now is to persuade the small fat chicken in the EU they cannot afford to miss this chance.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Wieser (ed.), *Europe in the World. The Future of the European Financial Architecture for Development*, Brussels, Council of the EU, October 2019, [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/40967/efad-report\\_final.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/40967/efad-report_final.pdf).



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