

From Strategic Autonomy to a Non-Aligned Europe

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Collective identity built on a world view that no longer exists is vulnerable. Europe, despite its historical complexity and affluence, faces a post-Western turn in world dominance. Defence and energy plans, especially those brokered with authoritarian regimes, compromise the EU's plans for strategic autonomy. Could non-alignment be the way forward out of the EU's frequent political stalemates?

What is Europe?

For a European there is something almost intellectually and politically offensive about this question. Every map of the world found in European classrooms, newspaper offices, and ministries shows the same thing: the planet with Europe at its centre. In the eyes of Europeans – even when they malign it, even when they reject its current political form – Europe is something wonderfully unique. It is the continent of the Enlightenment, the civilisation that, over the centuries, birthed and nurtured democracy, liberty, equality, the sciences, humanism, modern values, and more.

Europe is the continent that united the globe through great discoveries, pioneering scientists, criminal colonisation, frenzied consumption of resources, global trade, and world wars. It is from Europe that white Christians sailed off to conquer lands that were only new to themselves. It is Europe that gave us modern ways of organising society into nation-states that jealously defend their borders, cultures, and sovereignty. Europe also wrote the rules that govern international relations between these entities. It is the old continent that, over the course of two centuries, dominated, organised, developed, and reshaped the world in its image.

But that was before.

Europe is no longer central. However, as long as the West remained on top, Europeans could delude themselves that they were major world players. Sheltering under the American nuclear umbrella, they could live their Kantian dream of perpetual peace and shared prosperity in their Community building “an ever closer union of peoples”. Europe's wealth, historical complexity, and economic power could keep guaranteeing it a role on the world stage, despite the US's dominant position as leader of the so-called “free” world. But that too was yesterday.

A post-western world

After a decade of existential doubts and successive crises, the pandemic and the consequent realisation of vital strategic dependencies on global supply chains have further shaken the European Union's certainties. Since Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the tectonic shifts that slowly emerged as the Cold War ended have rapidly accelerated. In Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as in the Arab-Muslim world, deeply rooted cultural and political movements, the emergence of new economic powers, and the persistent and increasingly aggressive undermining of the existing global order by revisionist powers have forced Europe to confront a new reality: a post-Western world. At the United Nations General

Assembly on 23 September 2023, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called it a “new world order”.

A collection of “emerging” powers is advancing an alternative vision for global power relations.

A collection of “emerging” powers is advancing an alternative vision for global power relations. China’s stated plan is to become the world’s greatest power by 2049, when it celebrates the centenary of the founding of the People’s Republic. Russian President Vladimir Putin states that he will no longer tolerate the junior role previously reserved for his nation. Breaking with the post-Cold War order, BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – have gradually evolved from informal strategic cooperation, aimed at strengthening their collective influence, to more or less concerted actions that challenge Western domination head on. These include, for example, destabilisation operations in regions historically overseen by Western powers such as the Sahel, where France has been on the receiving end of a formidable war of influence waged by Russia and its Wagner group proxies.

With 31.5 per cent of global GDP, BRICS nations carry more economic clout in 2023 than the G7 – a trend that will likely continue to accelerate in years to come as their economies grow. In 2015, BRICS nations set up the New Development Bank, an alternative to the World Bank and Western financial institutions, which finances infrastructure and development projects in member states and other emerging economies. Favouring transactions in local currencies, it aims to “dedollarise” the world economy.

The “strategic autonomy in decline” paradox

With their calls for a “multipolar” world, BRICS nations are underlining how much, in their view, the multilateralism of previous decades was simply a hypocritical veil that poorly masked the domination of a single pole. The difficulties encountered by a pro-Ukraine West in rallying countries beyond the usual suspects to their cause is not evidence of a new bipolarisation – as US strategists, still animated by comforting Cold War reflexes, would have us believe – between democracies and autocracies. Rather, it marks a genuine position of non-alignment: prime examples being India and Brazil, who go to great pains to remain equidistant between Washington and Beijing.

As a result, everywhere from the world economy to far-off theatres of operation, the collective and individual influence of Europe and EU member states is waning. The EU’s erratic position on the explosion of the horrific and ferocious Middle Eastern violence instigated on the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, when Hamas massacred Israeli civilians and Israel bombarded Gaza in response, is indicative of its marginalisation. The shambles surrounding the mooted unilateral suspension of European aid to Palestine, together with the EU Commission president’s untimely display of unconditional support for the Israeli government, show how the EU may well be a payer, but it certainly is not a player in the region.

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Even in relation to close neighbours, like Serbia, where soft power, aid programmes, and enlargement plans should guarantee a dominant influence, the EU is paying the price for its bureaucratic delays and

political timidity while facing direct strategic competition from Beijing and Moscow, and sometimes also from oil-rich Gulf states and neo-Ottoman Turkey.

However, this general decline presents a paradox. It comes at the very moment when the EU is repeatedly declaring its intention to develop strategic autonomy by finally breaking away from its complacent naivety towards partners turned rivals. But all the institutional literature on the Indo-Pacific, the relationship with China, and ties with Africa rather reveals that the shape and substance of this strategic autonomy remain incredibly vague. Other than some mixed success in ending certain economic and energy interdependencies, it is hard to tell where the EU intends to develop its autonomy – and quite what it means by this.

Compromised defence and energy relations

Instead, what we seem to be witnessing is a further cleaving of European nations to the American sphere of influence. Sweden and Finland, facing the threat of Russia, have decided to place their trust in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty rather than in Article 42(7) of the Treaty of the European Union, the EU's mutual defence clause. While the EU's energy security may have been wrested from the hands of Gazprom and the Kremlin, it is now heavily dependent on American liquified natural gas producers. Or it binds the EU to states with questionable foreign policy and human rights records. These include Qatar, which finances several terror groups, and Azerbaijan, which launch a campaign to conquer and ethnically cleanse Nagorno-Karabakh of Armenians. The EU's energy deal compromised its ability to act against Azerbaijani violence, laying bare the inconsistency of its values-based foreign policy. Taking advantage of the new tune coming out of Brussels, Berlin, and Paris, the US is trying to persuade European allies to emulate its policy of decoupling from China with some success: the Netherlands had no choice but to adopt the American policy of restricting exports of semiconductors and strategic components to China.

Strategic uncertainty, which has grown significantly in recent years, remains largely unabated for Europeans. Relief at the change of administration in Washington in January 2021 proved short-lived. The Biden administration is certainly more polite than that of Donald Trump, whose return is now a serious possibility, but it defends American interests – whether economic, industrial, or military – with the same brutal realism. Biden's Inflation Reduction Act triggered some panicked reactions in the EU's ranks.

Diplomatic theatrics and hidden agendas within a complicated transatlantic relationship make it harder for the EU and its member states to hold their own in a world afflicted by more conflict and tensions than ever. The West's debacle in Afghanistan brings this home. As does Australia's sudden termination of its submarine deal with France in favour of the US and UK AUKUS alliance, reminiscent of Cold War containment policies. War in Ukraine and conflict in the Middle East have successfully dragged a reluctant yet dominant US into theatres of operation; Europe, in both instances, has been brutally confronted by the limits of its traditional foreign policy tools, namely aid and international law.

In this volatile and threatening new strategic environment, which, insultingly for its partners, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy clumsily described as a "jungle" full of beasts, Europe is still struggling to find its way – and its voice. Having once bet on economic interdependencies to maintain peace in the world, the EU is now doing all it can to extract itself from these amidst general semantic confusion between "autonomy" and "self-sufficiency". The energy transition at the core of the Green Deal and European energy policies aims to resolve the contradiction between values and interests, necessary for reducing the EU's dependence on fossil fuel imports. But

even in this area, dilemmas remain because most of the rare earth metals essential for green technologies are imported, mainly from China. Despite efforts to diversify the supply of resources by opening new mining operations and increasing recycling, interdependence is here to stay.

Language of power

Since Putin's gruesome invasion of Ukraine, the EU has abandoned its inherent irenicism and its idealist-constructivist approach to international relations. Instead, it is attempting to reacquaint itself with the language of power but without really knowing how. This return to a realist vision of international relations runs up against the structural flaw in European integration: a hybrid political project can only act in external affairs if all of its components are aligned – a body whose limbs have a mind of their own behaves inconsistently after all. EU citizens, even highly placed, remain shaped by their own national political and strategic cultures. Ursula von der Leyen's reaction to the tragedy of 7 October 2023, less the position of the president of the European Commission than it was that of a German politician and former defence minister, is a case in point.

The language of power is the preserve of autonomous actors. Unlike unified sovereign states who can develop, display, and augment attributes of power in defence of their interests, the EU must constantly ensure that there is agreement on what its common interests are and how to pursue them. It is therefore no coincidence that the Union puts so much emphasis on the moral aspect of its foreign policy – values are more abstract than interests. They enable agreement on principles that mask divergences in the perception of threats or conflicting interests.

Rethinking non-alignment

So the question arises once more, this time in existential terms: what is Europe's future? What does Europe want to be? Robin to America's Batman: a small, ageing part of the "collective West", doomed to decline and to follow Washington's lead on every global issue? Or a minor appendage to the great Eurasian continent where Moscow and Beijing are now the centres of power? Does the alternative to this "strategic NATOnomy" aligned with American leadership and its values, as advocated by Atlanticists, mean cosying up to authoritarian regimes and the infamous "Eurasian civilisation" coined by Kremlin ideologue Aleksandr Dugin and promoted by the radical right in Europe?

A depressing choice, if any.

Moments of international crisis and the strategic uncertainty surrounding them must prompt Europeans to rethink their place in the world. It is time to bring original and modern substance to a concept that emerged once out of the anticolonial and bipolar backdrop of the Cold War: non-alignment. Too often mistaken for the fearful neutrality of minor powers or the cynical opportunism of those emerging, this European form of non-alignment could be rooted in the continent's particular experience, allowing original and effective action in the world.

The first of these European experiences is historical wisdom. Like a big Taoist wheel with opposing poles, Europe is built on conflicting values. United and divided, humanist and slaver, rational and romantic, universalist and colonialist, virile and virginal: Europe is a civilisation of opposites, and the EU is built on a past both rejected and exalted. The EU's capacity to embrace the tension between human choices, to balance out conflicting perspectives and interests, and to seek constructive exits out of confrontations is fundamental.

Europe knows how to allow diversity and contradiction to coexist within its vision of the world. It knows

that there is always more than one side to every situation, that dogmatic values are just as dangerous as the cynicism of purely material interests. Europeans know that multiple perspectives shine a more just, truthful light on the world. It is in this awareness of the need for balance that a non-alignment policy can be rooted, free from the suspicion of double standards that still poisons European positions and undermines its action.

The second is the value it places on the long term. Still young compared to nations that are often hundreds, even thousands, of years old, the EU is the manifestation of a deep and long-held aspiration for convergence, unity, and peace. Bound together by shared history and sacrifice, the nations of Europe agreed to embark on a process of reconciliation. Turning Clausewitz's aphorism on its head, Europe has made policy and law the continuation of war with other means. It turns its enemies into competitors, then partners. The peoples of Europe have resolved to try and trust one another – something that requires permanent vigilance and constant work. This experience of reconciliation is one of the most valuable lessons on peace that Europe can offer the world – as long as it does not forget the long path it took to get there and expect its partners to make the same centuries-in-the-making progress in a single five-year funding programme.

The third and final key historical experience is that of power. There is another way to think about the reason for forging a politically integrated Europe that is not just about scaling up our modern states. The EU's destiny is not to build a European super-nation to rival the American empire or Chinese power. Nor is it just about raising the voices of small and middle-sized states swamped by the enormity of globalisation. European non-alignment would also be anchored in its original way of thinking about and practising power.

Power through integration and action

If we are to understand non-alignment and power, we must return to the purpose of European integration: to spread democracy beyond the historic borders of the nation-state, to develop a transnational democracy on a continental scale. Containing a multiplicity and complexity of power relations, Europe understands the importance of non-institutional stakeholders, the crucial vitality of civil society, the value of connections and democratic experience. Engagement with non-state entities and decentralised, often subnational authorities enables the EU to circumvent the obstacles of international politics and work closely with the people of Europe, regardless of the monopoly enjoyed by their representatives.

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Taoist, patient, and decentralised, the EU can give a European meaning to the concept of non-alignment provided it agrees to assert such a definition and shoulder its burden. Fundamentally, this threefold experience is already part and parcel of the EU's day-to-day actions. The challenge now is to make it a tool for power substituting the traditional displays of brute force, and demonstrating the strength of the vulnerable and the power of non-violence. As Europe no longer dominates the world, it must rethink the way that it acts within it. It is a mighty challenge given the extent to which American military strength permeates the EU's defence and the strategic culture of certain member states. But what about a French nuclear umbrella extended to Europe, for example?

Sooner or later, there will have to be a decoupling from the US in areas other than trade. In light of the failure of sanctions imposed on Russia, which has rather accelerated global fragmentation, the EU might have considered a simpler approach. It could have combined military, practical, and financial support to Ukraine with a genuine distance from the US, alongside more global negotiations to try and drive a wedge between Russia and some of its supporters.

In the same way that non-alignment is not neutrality, non-violence does not mean submission to force. The great challenge for the EU would be to strengthen its arsenal of non-alignment – for example, with a peaceful and democratically controlled military capacity. A European army would likely only be conceivable if it were a peacekeeping force for upholding international law, wearing not blue but starry blue helmets. True non-violence does not protect against hostility and attack. We must be willing to risk lives to enable the vulnerable to prevail.

On this path of transformation, the major danger for Europeans lies in their atavistic material and moral comforts, in their ageing societies, and in the delusion that they remain at the centre of the map. In a permanently post-Western world, Europe must reinvent itself. It has the material and spiritual means to do so. But will it have the political will and intelligence? This is the existential question that this tragic century poses.



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