BRUSSELS SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE
CENTRE FOR SECURITY, DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGY

CSDS POLICY BRIEF • 1/2021

EU Security Policy After COVID: Walking the Talk or Losing Credibility

By Michael Reiterer | 24 February 2021

The **CSDS Policy Brief** series offers a platform for critical analysis, information and public interaction. It provides policy-oriented and interdisciplinary contributions in a concise manner, and addresses fundamental issues related to security and diplomacy. Particular attention is paid to CSDS' core areas of expertise: transatlantic relations, EU foreign policy, and security in East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. By reflecting on current global challenges, CSDS policy briefs will rely on CSDS' in-house expertise as well as contributions from external academics and practitioners with recognised expertise on the different subject matters.

At the beginning of 2021 the EU confronts multifaceted foreign, security, and defence policy challenges. While the beginning of Joe Biden's term as president offers glimmers of hope of a cooperative relationship with the United States, tomorrow's challenges are enormous. The global COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world. Its effects on security policy as well as economic and social policy will be deeply felt.

This brief looks at how the pandemic influences an international system that was already transforming because of the shifting power balance between the US and China. The EU needs to meet these challenges in developing solutions, to seize the opportunity to lead. This will involve using economic leverage to pursue geopolitical objectives, facing up to China through a revamped Asia policy, and fully using the toolbox of a comprehensive security policy in an interest-based approach, thereby increasing its resilience. The EU must get it right. It must walk the talk and lead rather than follow.

The pandemic as a catalyst and future challenge

The pandemic delivered an important message to EU decision-makers: When millions are sick and hundreds of thousands are dying, the public demands leadership. The pandemic requires global action, which is the EU's purview. At the same time the pandemic threatens the health and life of citizens; therefore it is a primordial security issue for governments to handle, regardless of institutional niceties about whether competence lies in Brussels or national capitals. The EU must have a role if it is to avoid disaster in public diplomacy terms.

As the pandemic has demonstrated, human security requires a functioning public health system that can care for the sick and provide for measures such as mass vaccination. Human security also requires that individuals have an income through a functioning economy. States have had to take emergency measures to mitigate the severe economic recession caused by COVID-19. Short-term political vision might lead to quick-fix policy that risks petrifying outdated economic structures instead of 'building back better' through sustainable investment into a green, digital, circular carbon-free economy.

If the EU succeeds in its overall response to the challenges posed by the pandemic, it will be rewarded with increased geopolitical power. Mastering the present pandemic and being ready to face the next one has to be part of the EU security strategy.

The battle of narratives

As we can expect more of the same or worse in years to come, how should governments protect the public from pandemics such as COVID-19? The Chinese leadership argues that its country's rapid recovery proves the advantages of its system over Western democracies. Within democratic societies, the debate focuses on the need to balance citizens' rights, including the freedom to travel and have privacy and data protection, with public health concerns. Populists and extremists are taking full advantage of the heightened state of public anxiety. Failures in public health, welfare, and education have complicated these debates. The pandemic enhances the overall social impact; globally millions will fall back into poverty. This rising inequality becomes part of security threat scenarios.

In the pandemic, autonomy, de-globalisation, reshoring and near-shoring, nationalism and regionalism, and even localism reminiscent of the ancient city-states have returned and are reshaping the international context.

The EU clearly has a role in the domestic political conversations on how to redesign the world economy and how to ensure the recovery supports the Next Generation recovery and digital transition, not to mention addressing longstanding issues such as fighting climate change and terrorism and managing refugees and migration, all of which could fall to the wayside as governments concentrate on other goals.

Meeting domestic challenges

While EC President von der Leyen heralded 'the moment for Europe' before the pandemic broke, in fact the EU's internal base for external power is weak.

Another limitation on EU power is that the problems caused by prioritising immediate national advantage over the long-term common good affects EU foreign policy. In EU foreign and security policy, there is no equivalent of the competition rules that keep the single market under control. On the contrary, a perceived sense of sovereignty insists on the principle of unanimity in foreign policy, allowing member states to put themselves first to the detriment of the community and offering inroads to foreign powers. For example, China has been able to interfere in domestic affairs through 17+1 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as did the United States in a few member states during the Trump Administration.

The EU's tradition of slowly forging compromise and adhering to consensus weakens its position during the international transition the pandemic has touched off. But the key to a solution is with member states, not the EU itself.

Calls for a geostrategic commission, striving for strategic autonomy, European sovereignty, and the need to learn the language of power show that the problem has been identified, but the strategic response is yet to be found.

If we follow Jean Monnet's advice to 'never waste a good crisis' there is some hope that the future will be brighter than negative economic forecasts suggest.

Comprehensive security needs a new impulse and narrative

The need to deliver solutions and the newfound

understanding of how quickly and radically situations can change because of domestic developments since the COVID-19 crisis require a change of EU policies and in particular security policy, in terms of its goals, toolkit, and conception.

The EU adheres to comprehensive security, covering traditional and non-traditional and, most recently, hybrid security risks. Traditional security was largely outsourced to the US and (to a lesser extent) NATO in the aftermath of World War II. However, European people have prioritised economic and social development (European social model) and relied on European soft power. They have enjoyed the peace dividend and trusted in the continuation of the system in the form of the liberal international order. National defence budgets are used for national pride and employment programs. While this has resulted in EU member states having, as an aggregate, the second largest defence spending worldwide, it has not produced a corresponding influence or security posture.

The EU needs to use its economic leverage to support geopolitical goals. This does not mean weaponizing trade, but rather taking a more strategic approach.

In the post-COVID-19 world, the EU will need a stronger and more effective common foreign and security policy. The EU should 'lead by example' and play a stronger role in security matters. Instruments at its disposal or in the making include the Permanent Structured Cooperation, the Strategic Compass, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) Report and the off-budget European Peace Facility.

Some member states already place importance on defence industry trade with Asia. Integrating such approaches into an overall Asia security strategy could bring dividends in terms of expanding political clout. Dusting off textbooks on arms control might also be a good precautionary measure.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action served as an eye-opener: a plan to prevent Iran from going nuclear that was painstakingly negotiated by the EU. This foreign policy success was threatened and weakened when President Trump withdrew unilaterally. This unpleasant reminder of the need to have the US on board with the EU's security policy fed into the EU´s strategic autonomy debate.

The EU´s challenge of geoeconomics

How can it be that the EU, the largest trading bloc, the largest donor of Official Development Assistance (ODA), the main financier of the UN system and its peacekeeping operations, the banner carrier of soft power and on aggregate the second largest spender on defence, is unable to punch according to its size in the pursuit of its objectives and values?

One explanation is the impact of liberalism, the belief that markets function independently and interdependence reduces the risk of conflicts. It has stymied efforts to leverage economic strength to realise political and security goals. However, standard setting in a multilateral system based on rule of law is a source of empowerment.

The need for an economic policy approach and climate diplomacy

The EU needs to use its economic leverage to support geopolitical goals. This does not mean weaponizing trade, but rather taking a more

strategic approach in which the EU plays to its above-mentioned competitive strengths. This will require strategic planning, ranging from free trade agreements to commercial and financial sanctions leveraging access to the potent EU single market. It will also require contingency planning. The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership are signals in Asia that the geoeconomics competition is on. In economic diplomacy, there is need for contingency planning, the kind of working methods that are seen in military planning.

The effects of climate change on politics, economy, food security, demography, migration, and the petrification of existing disparities among states is a major security risk. A risk for which there is no quick fix. CO2 emission control in the 21st century is equal in importance to arms control in the 20th. Security concepts must factor in the disparities and inequalities that could tear the international system apart if international cooperation and solidarity do not occur.

Facing up to China

China is using its success in taming COVID to attempt redesigning the international order with "Chinese characteristics", i.e. promoting an authoritarian and state (party) centred system. It will be boosted by an economic recovery in 2021 that will provide it with a further basis to challenge the international order. The Chinese Communist Party will not miss this opportunity to highlight this achievement during its 2021 centennial festivities. BRI is designed by China not only as an export promotion program but also as a systemic outreach in advocating its new order.

The return of China as a major political player in international politics requires an adaptation of the system to accommodate a China which is not only economically and technologically strong but which forcefully demands recognition as a major power. The current international system was built when China was weaker than it generally has been in history. The competition of systems, values, and modes of government and governance sets the contours of the international system. Realism teaches us to be ready to take up this challenge with all the tools necessary either to keep an equilibrium or to win the competition. The EU´s new approach to China, which involves (i) cooperation when possible, (ii) competition according to international rules and leveraging power, if necessary, and (iii) acceptance of entering into systemic competition with the means necessary to win, seems likely to achieve these ends.

The EU-China relationship will test the EU's willingness to talk the language of power; this test is better not lost to stay in the game.

Beyond China

The EU's Asia policy should seek to bring alternatives that would offer partners in the Asia-Pacific region an additional strategic option to diversify, hedge, and consequently take a stance against assertive Chinese behaviour and striving for dominance. Thus, the EU needs an integral part of a diversified Asia policy well beyond China.

In its policy paper 'Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia', the EU aims at supporting capacity building of partners to enable them to withstand pressure. This would also signal to partners the will to work towards security and democracy. This is preferable to a policy of cooperation with democracies, which has an exclusive and binary connotation and could lead to the emergence of rival blocs forged along political and economic lines that would lean against a cooperative world order. As a complement, a Eurasian-oriented China needs a transatlantic counterweight.

The 21st century competition will be played out in the Asia-Indo-Pacific theatre. Without a presence there, Europe´s role will remain secondary at best.

Leader or follower?

The new EU leadership has recognised the necessity of an assertive security policy. This can be seen in efforts to adopt a genuinely comprehensive approach to security: more autonomous engagement, capability development, operational readiness, and pushing ahead with a common defence accompanied by increased investment, all go in the right direction. NATO is neither obsolete

nor brain-dead but should be reinvigorated (NATO 2030), complemented by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which works on the EU´s near abroad. Smart power needs to be translated into action quickly; diplomacy needs power as a backbone to be effective. It is time for Europe to become an equal partner in leadership with the US.

Technological leadership will be crucial in the digital economy, mastering emerging disruptive technologies in areas like artificial intelligence, Internet of Things, cloud technology, acquisition and use of large data, 5G, digitalisation, quantum computing, and their applications. These issues are not to be taken lightly. They are horizontal issues permeating tomorrow´s technologies and the resilience of economies, and are therefore directly linked to security; assuring the 'Brussels effect' in standard settings is crucial in these areas.

Avoiding problematic dependencies, even on unsophisticated but essential products like face masks, will need some limited reshoring or supply diversification in essential and existential sectors. Vetting investment in and support for strategically important sectors as well as making more use of reciprocity in market access has to become part of the strategic culture of Europe. Less dependency equals more autonomy to pursue a value- and interest-based security policy. This is the long-term view; in the short term, Asian economies are expected to recover quicker from the pandemic than European countries and member states will expect support in their lagging recovery. The year-end Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with China, aiming at rebalancing the playing field after seven years of negotiations, can be read as a sign of more EU autonomy in designing its China policy while not excluding future cooperation with the US.

The pandemic brought to light that Europe does not play in the premier league of digitalisation. The dangers of cyberattacks are still underestimated and primarily seen in the context of internet fraud, while critical infrastructure, including the heart of democracy – elections – are at risk through disinformation.
The EU must take the lead in building an intellectual and political infrastructure, a security culture, to address the populism, disinformation, and attacks on basic values that now gain traction too easily. Democracy is presented by its shortcomings and not by its main assets: democratic backsliding needs to addressed, especially as restrictive measures taken during the pandemic ignite authoritarian tendencies in some political groups. There is need to strengthen and protect international organisations to withstand the onslaught of authoritarianism undermining fundamental values and human rights.

A grand design to walk the talk

A regularly updated EU Security Doctrine/Report might present a program on learning to use the tools of power. The Strategic Compass, clarifying which threats the EU has to meet by which means, may be a means to get there, but we need the political will to walk the path that has long been known. A 'grand strategy' would require the pooling of resources of the EU and member states to achieve commonly agreed-on goals and protect interests, backed up by the tools necessary to implement them, including power projection capacities. This would supplement the normative power of the EU and its non-traditional security expertise and correct the perception that the liberal international order is in itself a viable security strategy.

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Michael Reiterer pursued his academic career always in parallel to his diplomatic one at the Austrian and then European service. EU foreign policy, EU-Asia relations in particular with Japan and Korea, inter-regionalism, security issues, new forms of diplomacy, and human rights are nowadays the main focus of his research, having previously published extensively on international trade law and relations including WTO, trade and environment and the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM). In September 2020, he retired from the European Diplomatic Service (European External Action Service-EEAS) as Ambassador plenipotentiary and extraordinary of the European Union to the Republic of Korea; previous posts include Ambassador to Switzerland and the Principality of Liechtenstein, Deputy Head of Mission/Minister at the EU Delegation to Japan and more.

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