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Francisco José Dacoba Cerviño

Europe has no takers

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Abstract:

After long decades of progress and well-being under the American umbrella, of mutually beneficial commercial and cultural relations, Europe is now facing a new reality. Spectator of an international order in reconfiguration in which it has not just found its place, and in shock by the crisis unleashed by COVID-19. The future of the European Union as a relevant actor in a world full of uncertainty will depend on how it manages this new reality.

Keywords:

European Union, COVID-19, crisis, strategic autonomy.

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Europa no tiene quien la rapte

Resumen:

Tras largas décadas de progreso y bienestar al amparo del paraguas de protección norteamericano, de mutuas y beneficiosas relaciones comerciales y culturales, Europa se enfrenta ahora a una nueva realidad. Espectadora de un orden internacional en reconfiguración en el que no acaba de encontrar su sitio y convulsionada por la crisis sanitaria desencadenada por la COVID-19, de cómo gestione esta nueva realidad dependerá el futuro de la Unión Europea como actor relevante en un mundo pleno de incertidumbre.

Palabras clave:

Unión Europea, COVID-19, crisis, autonomía estratégica.

Europa was a beautiful princess of Tyre, the historic city on the Phoenician coast. So beautiful that Zeus himself, usually prone to this kind of excess, decided to seduce her. To do so, he adopted the form of a bull, a trick that allowed him to enter the herd owned by King Agenor, the girl's father, and thus be able to approach her without arousing suspicion. Through the carelessness of the young woman, who confidently stroked the animal's testicle, the god of Olympus put her on his back and began to flee to the island of Crete, where he made her his own. The father of the young woman, broken with grief, ceaselessly shouted the name of his daughter, Europa, from the beaches of Tyre, looking desperately to the west. To where they had taken his daughter, to a distant and unknown land that, from saying it so many times, ended up taking the name of the princess: Europe.



A difficult start

In 1945, the European continent looked bleak. The devastating effects of the recently ended Second World War were compounded by those of the not so distant Great War and, of course, the pandemic that struck Europe from 1918 onwards. Many cities were razed to the ground, some of them even destroyed, and the infrastructure was destroyed: industries, factories, hospitals, communications (roads, bridges, port facilities, etc.). Demographically, the tragedy is incalculable. Estimates speak of eight million deaths in the Great War¹; the victims of the pandemic have not been precisely quantified, but are estimated to be around the tens of millions; the Second World War left no less than forty million dead and up to thirty million displaced on the continent², coupled with the drastic decrease in birth rate should.

¹ "More than 8 million people died in the Great War of 1914-1918":
https://elpais.com/elpais/2013/12/23/opinion/1387813667_675098.html

² <https://ocw.unican.es/mod/page/view.php?id=1318>

Once the “hot” war ended, the Cold War, the period of bipolarity between the United States and the Soviet Union, began with no end in sight. On the rubble of Europe, an Iron Curtain³ spread out, splitting the continent in two. The eastern half was subjected to the totalitarian and command economy model of the Soviet system; the western half came under the American protective umbrella.

Despite the lamentable material state it was in, Europe remained the battleground on which the confrontation between the two great powers was settled. President Truman clearly saw the need to anchor “his” continental half to the Western sphere, both for altruistic and commercial reasons and, of course, for obvious geopolitical interest: to prevent at all costs the Soviet expansionist temptations from scanning the horizon above the Wall. The Marshall Plan and the creation of the Atlantic Alliance led to a prosperous marriage, for love, yes, but also for interest, for mutual interest. In the decades that followed, the United States played the leading role in all areas, especially in the field of security. Europe, for its part, has been going through a process of integration that includes ups and downs, but so far has been unquestionably successful. Even the less fortunate half of the continent in terms of the distribution of letters of the treaties that ended the war ended up joining, almost in their entirety, the European Union and NATO.

Europe is coming of age

The ruins of that time were transformed, over time, into progress and the most generous state of well-being in the world. The turn of the century promised decades of wine and roses for Europe. In 2003, the then EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (*Mr CFSP*), Spain’s Javier Solana, presented the *European Security Strategy*, a song to multilateralism not exempt from optimism, which is largely understandable, although perhaps excessive: “Europe has never been so prosperous, so safe, so free. The violence of the first half of the 20th century has given way to a period of peace and stability unprecedented in European history⁴.”

³ Churchill claimed: “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent.” <http://www.historiasiglo20.org/GLOS/telonacero.htm>

⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30808/qc7809568esc.pdf>

A little over a decade later, in 2016, the then High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, presented a new strategy to replace that of 2003. In the short space of time between the two documents, a great deal had happened, both in the world and on the old continent, a handful of good reasons for drawing up this new global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy. Terrorism with Salafist roots has repeatedly struck on European soil and has led to regions that are geographically close to it collapsing, which has forced the Union to intervene, mainly in the sub-Saharan African strip. Since 2008 we have been surprised by the economic and financial crisis from which we have not yet completely emerged. December 2010 saw the start of an Arab Spring that has sown instability in the southern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The new, very assertive Russian attitude, announced by President Putin in Munich in 2007, materialised in Georgia, in Ukraine, in Syria, and in Libya. Turkey, for its part, has unleashed more than just suspicions within NATO and in its relations with the European Union; the management of the large migrant population within that country, both in 2015 and at present, is proof of this.

In the face of such an avalanche of decisive events, the need to change, at least in part, the triumphalist tone of the 2003 Strategy became more than evident. The new version naturally insists on multilateralism, but introduces less appealing terms: "For Europe, non-coercive power (*soft*) and coercive power (*hard*) go hand in hand⁵." Both in this document and in repeated statements by qualified representatives of the European institutions, the need for the Union to become a strategic player, to be given strategic autonomy, has been stressed⁶. And yet, at the time of writing, other significant events had yet to take place, such as the arrival of Donald Trump as president of the United States or Brexit, to name but a couple.

The discrepancies between the two sides of the Atlantic cannot be attributed exclusively to President Trump. Without going any further, let us recall the breakdown in transatlantic relations, and significantly among the countries of the Union, caused by the US intervention in Iraq in 2003, supported by some European countries and rejected by

⁵ EG of the EU http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_es_.pdf

⁶ "The EU is set to be a key global player. If Von der Leyen intends to build a geopolitical commission... they want to achieve a European strategic autonomy" (December, 2019): https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/12/02/opinion/1575307748_229812.html

others. But there is no doubt that the rift has intensified with the new US administration. Disagreements in the field of security (role of NATO), trade (establishment of mutual tariffs), the governance model (nationalism, *America first!* versus multilateralism), relations with China (opposition to the installation of Chinese 5G technology), the situation in the Middle East (US abandonment of the nuclear agreement with Iran or surprise withdrawal of its troops from Syria) or in relation to global warming (US withdrawal from climate agreements).

Although of a completely different nature, relations with Russia, the inevitable neighbour, are not proving easy for the European Union either. The events of 2014 in Ukraine continue to poison the deal between the two: economic sanctions have been established by the Union, the military deployment of the Alliance in the countries on the eastern flank has been considerably strengthened and various European authorities are accusing Russia of unacceptable attitudes^{7 8}.

China, on the other hand, has been considering Europe as a magnificent market in which to place its enormous production surpluses. In this sense, the western end of Eurasia is the main destination of the various routes along which the great Chinese commercial incentive, the New Silk Road, runs. The Union's permissiveness has allowed the Asian giant to invest heavily in European land, from the control of some of the main Mediterranean ports to the acquisition of technologically advanced companies, such as the German leader in robotics, Kuka⁹. In the absence of a single European voice with which it can be understood, China has carried out a bilateral rapprochement with some European countries, outside Brussels, which has come to be known as the "17+1 Initiative"¹⁰.

⁷ "UK accuses Russia of planning a series of cyber attacks against several countries" (March, 2019) <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-reino-unido-acusa-rusia-planear-serie-ciberataques-contra-varios-paises-20190523023545.html>

⁸ "United Kingdom accuses Russia before the OPCW of poisoning the former Skripal spy" (April, 2018) <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20180418/reino-unido-acusa-rusia-ante-opaq-del-envenamiento-del-exespia-sripal/1716800.shtml>

⁹ "Chinese firm Midea takes over almost 95% of the Kuka robot manufacturer": <https://www.eleconomista.es/empresas-finanzas/noticias/7754335/08/16/La-firma-china-Midea-se-hace-con-casi-el-95-del-fabricante-de-robots-Kuka.html>

¹⁰ PARRA PÉREZ, Águeda. *The Digital Silk Road: the great Chinese globalisation*. IEEE Opinion Paper 38/2020. http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2020/DIEEEO38_2020AGUPAR_sedadigital.pdf

Of course, not all the problems facing the European Union originate beyond its borders, whether in its immediate surroundings or in more distant scenarios. The club of democracies does not need to look outside to find reasons for serious concern. Within the Union, there are worrying divergences of position on external challenges, as well as on the management of internal affairs. Virtually all of the above-mentioned problems lead to conflicting positions among the Member States. “Atlantists” versus “Europeanists”, if this classification is acceptable; supporters of the Chinese 5G and detractors; signatories, some, of the New Silk Road memorandum of understanding, others, not; with conflicting energy interests, such as those shown by the construction of the Nord Stream II gas pipeline; supporters of budgetary discipline or “spending”; those who advocate a reasonable management of migratory pressure on European borders and those who have decided to close theirs... Europe, whether it wants it or not, has become independent and does not seem to be very happy with coming of age.

And here arrived the virus...

In view of the above, it is easy to conclude that the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic reached Europe when the Union was already experiencing difficult times, both due to the challenges posed to it from outside and persistent internal tensions. Thus, although regrettable, we were not too surprised by the initial reactions of the Member States and the Commission itself. Although they will be partly corrected later, protectionist decisions such as the ban on supplying medical equipment to neighbours will remain in people’s memories as further proof of the lack of cohesion and solidarity between countries, as well as the inability of the Brussels authorities to take forceful and effective action. And this is not due to a lack of will but simply because we do not have the necessary skills. Negative message on the effectiveness and usefulness of the Union.

Speculating, at this time, still in the midst of managing the health crisis, about winners and losers is a somewhat daring task. Among the innumerable uncertainties that the post-COVID-19 future presents us with, one certainty seems obvious: the economic crisis will be global and very damaging. Beyond speculations as to its duration and whether it will be overcome as a “V, U or L”, prudence encourages us to conclude that rather than winners and losers there will be only one category, that of losers; to a greater or lesser degree, for more or less time until the definitive recovery, but we will all be losers. Clearly, it will be the most dynamic economies that will first overcome the inevitable recession, China and the United States to name the most significant. Another question, outside this brief work, is that of determining the outcome of the crisis in geopolitical terms; how the international order will be reconfigured or how power relations will evolve, once again, between the two great powers.

In a scenario so lacking in optimism, Europe’s immediate future is not very bright either... unless, as has been repeated so often in the past, the Union is able to make a virtue of necessity and seize this new opportunity for a genuine and thorough refoundation. It won’t be easy. The starting situation, immediate to the arrival of this coronavirus, was already particularly complex as it has been previously pointed out, in many areas: institutional, political, economic, fiscal, energy, environmental, commercial, technological, security, etc.

In the struggle of giants between the United States and China, Europe feels like the turf on which the two elephants are facing each other. Whatever the outcome of this dispute, we Europeans will help to pay for it. The alternative for the Union consists, as Fidel Sendagorta¹¹ suggests, in choosing between facing the challenge of competing with both powers, which is daring, or accepting one’s own weakness. An unstimulating dilemma, of course. Cuddling up with the United States would be the easiest option, somewhat like going home after the failed adventure of emancipation. But the traditional ally is not there for the job, nor is that what the Union wants; let us recall, for example, the repeated calls for progress in strengthening strategic autonomy.

¹¹ “Caught in the middle of the growing rivalry between the US and China, the European Union must decide whether to take on both giants or resign itself to being a mere battleground.” Fidel Sendagorta. Foreign Policy, no. 194, April 2020: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulos/politica-exterior/nuevo-poder-chino-despertar-europeo/>

Looking back at China may seem acceptable at first glance, especially in light of the “diplomacy of solidarity” developed by the Asian colossus by sending medical aid, both material and medical personnel, in the heat of the fight against the pandemic. But the cultural and political differences between Europe and China are enormous, and the assistance provided has proved to be rather mediocre in some cases. Nor does the handling of the health crisis in Wuhan¹², after the first glimmerings of admiration and as the initial data present serious doubts as to its reliability, favour an entente beyond the commercial relations that had already been maintained and that, furthermore, will be the object of reconsideration on the European side in view of the regrettable material deficiencies of health on the continent, which will most probably force many aspects of those commercial relations to be reconsidered. It would not be very wise for Europe, and the West in general, to continue to depend almost entirely on foreign powers for the supply of such critical products.

In view of the above, the European Union seems to have no choice but to deepen its consolidation as a global player, to move forward in strengthening its institutions and to acquire a robust and credible strategic autonomy. Something very easy to say, but very difficult to carry out. Because no one is going to make it easy for the Union in this respect, and because not all the members of the club agree with it very much. But if this is the tails of the coin, the heads, the positive side, stems from the imperative need not to allow Europe to fall into the irrelevance and melancholy of what could have been and was not. Given the evidence that we cannot expect someone to come and pull the wool over our eyes once again, the only option left is to strengthen the Union. In the specific field of security, the already long debate on the future of European defence must be put back on the table. And it must be done in an ambitious way, trying to overcome reticence in financing, suspicions in the industry and differences in the defence culture of the Member States. France is particularly active in this field, in line with many statements by its President¹³.

¹² “Europe is rethinking its position on China due to of its lack of transparency on the virus and its attitude to the crisis” <https://www.economista.es/internacional/noticias/10488441/04/20/Europa-se-replantea-su-posicion-sobre-China-por-su-falta-de-transparencia-ante-el-virus-y-su-actitud-con-la-crisis.html>

¹³ “Macron called for an awakening of Europe, advancing the view that Europe should be an autonomous actor in several key areas of international security”. IISS, Strategic Comment, available at: <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2020/macrons-strategic-vision-for-europe>

Overcoming the reticence we mentioned, in whatever area, is the key to facing the future of this old continent with a certain degree of optimism. The very harsh discussions, even accusations, more or less veiled, that we have witnessed in Brussels as a result of the negotiations to deal with the consequences of the pandemic do not augur well. The former president of the government, Felipe Gonzalez, recently acknowledged this: ...and if anyone in Europe thinks they're superior, they'll pay dearly for it. That is what happened to us in Europe, twice in the 20th century, with terrible consequences¹⁴. The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, whose figure is being strengthened by her management of the pandemic, as was already the case in 2015 with the migration crisis, also joins those who judge the situation as transcendental. In her opinion, the moment we are living through is crucial for the future of the Union, the most crucial in its already long history¹⁵. The answer, the chancellor adds, can only be "more Europe, a stronger Europe and a well-functioning Europe"¹⁶. If there is one opinion that commands the greatest respect and attention, it is that of Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the Union, who broke long years of silence to state recently, in an article in the *Financial Times* on 5 April, that "the European Union will have to forge ahead in this crisis ... or it will die"¹⁷.

It is common for the Pope, in his public speeches, to dwell mostly on considerations of a religious nature, as well as on references to those parts of the world where the situation of people is most worrying or the rights of minorities are not respected. This does not prevent him from also reminding us of the challenges facing the continent in which his episcopal see is located. On this occasion he did so at the *urbi et orbi* blessing last Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020: "Today, the European Union is facing an historic challenge, on which not only its future but that of the whole world will depend"¹⁸.

¹⁴ Available at: <https://ethic.es/entrevistas/felipe-gonzalez/>

¹⁵ Merkel: EU faces "biggest challenge" in its history from coronavirus Available at: <https://www.dw.com/es/merkel-la-ue-enfrenta-el-mayor-desafio-de-su-historia-por-coronavirus/a-53040532>

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Jean Monnet: "The EU must be forged in this crisis or it will die." Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/8f554b7a-74d1-11ea-90ce-5fb6c07a27f2>

¹⁸ Text of the speech available at: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20200412_urbi-et-orbi-pasqua.html

...and now what?

The errant Zeus, surely attracted by other stimuli, ended up returning to his abode on Olympus and left in that new land the scorned Europa and the children that both had engendered. The young mother was suddenly challenged by an uncertain future that she herself had to face, this time without the protection of her distant father or her divine lover. And it didn't go badly at all because the king of Crete, not before the god left the island, married her and made her queen. Mythology is not conclusive regarding the methods used by Europe to, from a worrying situation, carve out such a bright future, but there is no doubt that our heroine was able to turn an existential challenge, a great crisis, into a magnificent opportunity.

*Francisco José Dacoba Cerviño**
ET Brigadier General
Director of the IEEE