

# COVID-19 Reveals Europe's Strategic Loneliness

by **Éric André Martin**

## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 crisis has not only revealed a world that has moved into an age of interdependence and competition, it has also laid bare Europe's strategic loneliness and vulnerability. The pandemic has degraded the perception of the role played by the main world powers, especially the United States and China. The main challenge for Europe will be to review its place in the world and its interactions with the main powers, starting with the United States. Despite an improvement in tone of the transatlantic relationship under a Biden administration, the next US president will have to give priority to domestic issues and look for reliable partners. The European Union has no other option than to present itself as a capable and credible player. Its capacity to assert itself as a pole of stability by defusing tensions in its neighbourhood and improving regional security will be the ultimate test regarding its ambition to become a geopolitical power.

*European Union | Coronavirus | EU external relations | Multilateralism*

**keywords**

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### Introduction

The coronavirus epidemic, which broke out in China in December 2019, was initially considered a local phenomenon under the responsibility of the Chinese authorities, before extending to Europe as of February 2020 and then becoming a pandemic, which means a global phenomenon.

The pandemic has been a global political stress test.<sup>1</sup> It has affected healthcare systems, economies, but also the governance of countries. This pandemic has also illustrated the level of interdependence of globalised economies and the vulnerability of value chains in the event of a major disruption. The crisis was addressed in the first place by national governments using their own resources. There were great differences as regards the management of the pandemic and the success of the strategies that were implemented. In the case of Europe, what was the impact of the crisis on the European Union as regards the role of the member states and the EU institutions? Did it contribute to shifting the traditional dividing lines between member states, towards more solidarity and integration, or to clarifying the debate on the future of the European project?

The COVID-19 pandemic has also been a test of the multilateral system's ability to overcome global challenges through collective action. The very nature of the struggle against a virus should theoretically provide a more favourable ground for cooperation and international solidarity than a crisis targeting a state or a group. The main question is thus: Has the COVID-19 crisis provided an opportunity to calm down international rivalries and look for solidarity, or has it amplified

<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "The Pandemic and Political Order", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 4 (July/August 2020), p. 26-32, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1126047>.

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nationalist trends, which have deepened rifts and further damaged cooperation and multilateralism? In sum, is the European Union's business model fit for a world of power politics?<sup>2</sup>

This paper seeks to answer this question by looking at three aspects. First, the COVID-19 crisis has revealed a less secure and predictable world and has degraded the general perception of the role played by the main world powers, especially the United States and China. Second, when coping with COVID-19, European states have had to look for the right balance between the nation-state level, the European level and international cooperation. In this regard, the European level has been considered as the appropriate one to address the challenges outlined by the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, the main challenge for Europe will be to review its place in the world and its interactions with the main powers, starting with the United States. Despite an improvement in tone of the transatlantic relationship, the next US president will have to give priority to domestic issues and look for reliable partners. The EU has no other option than to present itself as a capable and credible player, and thus to strengthen its resilience and capacity to act autonomously.

### 1. A less secure and predictable world for Europe

Because of its impact on the daily lives of European citizens, the crisis has accelerated the public awareness in Europe that the world has moved beyond the unipolar moment of the post-Cold War period into an age of interdependence and competition.<sup>3</sup>

#### 1.1 Four main features of Europe's post-COVID predicament

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the unravelling of the world order and the strategic isolation of Europe. Through the degradation of the transatlantic relationship and the inward-looking tendency of the United States, Europe has lost its traditional protector and the international world order has lost its guardian. The decision of the US administration to withdraw from the World Health Organisation strikingly illustrated the US disinvestment from the "global commons". The pandemic has accelerated the transformation of the international system into a competition of great powers in which no one power can impose its pre-eminence and no power is willing to cooperate. The German analyst Herfried Münkler considers that the US hegemony will give way to a more anarchic world, dominated by five entities: the United States, China, Russia, Europe and India.<sup>4</sup> The

<sup>2</sup> Stefan Lehne, "How the EU Can Survive in a Geopolitical Age?", in *Carnegie Articles*, 25 February 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/81132>.

<sup>3</sup> Nadia Schadlow, "The End of American Illusion", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 5 (September/October 2020), 35-45, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1126256>.

<sup>4</sup> Herfried Münkler and Marina Münkler, *Abschied vom Abstieg. Eine Agenda für Deutschland*, Berlin, Rowohlt-Berlin, 2019.

US-China rivalry is a dominant expression of this scheme. During the COVID-19 crisis, this feature was translated into a battle of narratives dealing with the origin of the virus and efficiency of the response. In Europe, it was incarnated by the so-called "mask diplomacy" of China, and the way Chinese assistance and donations were displayed according to that country's national and economic interests, as part of a struggle to change the COVID-19 narrative in Europe in Beijing's favour.<sup>5</sup>

*The COVID-19 pandemic has fuelled the perception of a lawless world and of risks related to an unregulated globalisation.* The pandemic has revealed the fragility of a globalised system reliant on a few key suppliers and supply chains based on the "just in time" model.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the constant reduction of suppliers, many companies in Europe now rely on a single supplier for certain parts and systems. The COVID-19 crisis has created production bottlenecks for critical medical supplies, which have hampered the response. China and the province of Hubei illustrate this trend. Over a third of industrial products produced worldwide today come from Chinese factories. According to a study by the management consultancy Dun & Bradstreet, more than 50,000 companies worldwide have a system supplier in the Hubei region. The province generates 4.5 per cent of the Chinese GDP. Certain sectors of European industry are particularly hard hit as they rely on Chinese imports of intermediate products.<sup>7</sup> The scramble for supplies of protective gear to cope with the scale of the pandemic in its early stage was followed by fears over a shortage of critical medicines and key ingredients, and then by the willingness to secure access to a potential vaccine. In the course of the pandemic, powerful states were confronted with the scarcity of resources and then used coercive measures to get the supplies necessary to their population. This happened at the expense of poor and middle-income countries with little clout over manufacturers. Through this "everyone for himself" attitude, globalisation is falling prey to re-nationalisation<sup>8</sup> and what has been called "medical nationalism."<sup>9</sup> According to Global Trade Alert, at least 54 countries in the world have implemented some form of export restriction since the beginning of 2020.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Etienne Soula et al., "Masks Off: Chinese Coronavirus Assistance in Europe", in *GMF Policy Papers*, No. 9 (July 2020), <https://www.gmfus.org/node/14993>.

<sup>6</sup> Josef Joffe, "The Decline of the West: New and Improved", in *The American Interest*, 13 August 2020, <https://wp.me/p4ja0Z-NzO>.

<sup>7</sup> Dun & Bradstreet, *Business Impact of the Coronavirus. Business and Supply Chain Analysis Due to the Coronavirus Outbreak*, 24 February 2020; Bernd Lange, *International Trade After the Corona-Crisis. Business as Usual or Systemic Change?*, 27 April 2020, p. 2, <https://bernd-lange.de/meldungen/positionspapier-handelspolitik-in-zeiten-der-corona-pandemie-zwischen-neustart-und-systemwechsel>.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, "This Is What the Future of Globalization Will Look Like", in *Foreign Policy*, 4 July 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/04/this-is-what-the-future-of-globalization-will-look-like>.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Youde, "How Medical Nationalism Is Undermining the Fight against the Coronavirus Pandemic", in *World Politics Review*, 23 March 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28623>.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Olson, "Post Covid-19: More Regional Trade and Shorter Supply Chains?", in *East Asia Forum*, 6 May 2020, <https://wp.me/poZN0-13E7>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the challenge of geo-economics for Europe. This trend pre-existed the pandemic, as it was a consequence of the US policy of decoupling from the Chinese economy, especially in the field of technology. But the trend has been confirmed and even accelerated by the US administration, which has taken the crisis as a "lesson learned". Sanctions against Huawei have been strengthened as regards access to semiconductors regardless of the impact of such sanctions on third countries, especially in Europe. The forced sale of the video-sharing app TikTok in the United States by its Chinese owner combined with the project of "Clean Network" opens the way to a decoupling also in the digital sphere. On the Chinese side, there have been threats of reprisal against some European countries, especially Germany, in case of a ban on Huawei technology. In this degraded context, Europe will have to manage the dependencies created by globalisation in order to protect its firms from the collateral damage of the growing techno-nationalism<sup>11</sup> in the United States and China.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the enduring challenge of geopolitics. Before the crisis, the new European Commission very much insisted on the need to become more "geopolitical" to address long-running conflicts in the neighbourhood of the European Union: the Balkans, the Middle East, the East Mediterranean. The "world after" will not become more cooperative, as demonstrated by the drilling activities of Turkey in the vicinity of Cyprus as well as the political crises soaring in Belarus and the Caucasus. The progressive US withdrawal from previous commitments in the Mediterranean requires a stronger commitment on the part of the European Union in order to stabilise its periphery and preserve its interests.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.2 Public and elite perceptions of Europe's post-COVID predicament

The variations of public opinion in European member states have been measured and annotated through different studies, providing converging conclusions.<sup>13</sup> An interesting report surveyed public opinion in seven democracies (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Sweden, the United Kingdom) on perceptions of the influence of the United States, China and Russia in the context of the COVID-19

<sup>11</sup> Alex Capri, "Techno-nationalism: The US-China Tech Innovation Race on the Rise", in *Hinrich Foundation Papers*, August 2020, <https://www.hinrichfoundation.com/research/wp/tech/us-china-tech-innovation-race>.

<sup>12</sup> Nicu Popescu, "How the Coronavirus Threatens a Geopolitical Europe", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 30 March 2020, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_how\\_the\\_coronavirus\\_threatens\\_a\\_geopolitical\\_europe](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_the_coronavirus_threatens_a_geopolitical_europe).

<sup>13</sup> See Susi Dennison and Pawel Zerka, "Together in Trauma: Europeans and the World after Covid-19", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, 29 June 2020, [https://ecfr.eu/publication/together\\_in\\_trauma\\_europeans\\_and\\_the\\_world\\_after\\_covid\\_19](https://ecfr.eu/publication/together_in_trauma_europeans_and_the_world_after_covid_19); Victor Delage, *Covid-19. United States, China and Russia: Great Powers Worry Public Opinion*, Paris, Fondation pour l'innovation politique, June 2020, <http://www.fondapol.org/en/?p=37102>; Bertelsmann Foundation, German Marshall Fund of the United States and Institut Montaigne, *Transatlantic Trends 2020. Transatlantic Opinion on Global Challenges before and after COVID-19*, 30 June 2020, <https://www.gmfus.org/node/14970>.

crisis.<sup>14</sup> A first takeaway is that most citizens are concerned about the international attitudes of the United States (70 per cent), China (63 per cent) and Russia (56 per cent).

The United States is considered to be more threatening than China and Russia by the citizens of six out of seven countries. The British are the exception, with more people expressing concern about China (69 per cent) or Russia (67 per cent) than the United States (64 per cent). It is significant to note here, however, that the United States is a source of concern for a large majority of people, including those in the United Kingdom.

As regards China, the judgment of European citizens has been negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Compared to the 2018 figures, public concern regarding China is rising sharply: it increases, on average, from 43 per cent in 2018 to 63 per cent in 2020.

A majority of respondents are worried about China in all European countries covered by the study, except in Italy (48 per cent). There were sharp increases by 34 points in Sweden (from 35 to 69 per cent), 25 points in Germany (from 38 to 63 per cent), 24 points in Austria (from 39 to 63 per cent) and Great Britain (from 45 to 69 per cent) and 19 points in France (from 48 to 67 per cent).

Compared to the United States and China, Russia seems to be considered a less acute source of worry for all respondents (56 per cent in 2020 compared to 64 in 2018), although this average comprises substantial differences according to the country: Russia remains a major source of concern for Swedes (70 per cent), whereas 41 per cent of Italians are concerned.

### *1.3 Europe's feeling of abandonment<sup>15</sup>*

The dominant perception is that the European Union has not lived up to its responsibilities during the crisis (63 per cent in Italy; 61 in France; 52 in Spain). About half of the respondents (47 per cent) even considered that the Union was irrelevant during the crisis. In all countries covered by a study by the European Council on Foreign Relations, larger groups of people reported that their perception of the EU institutions has deteriorated.<sup>16</sup>

In countries like Italy and Spain this health crisis and the lack of European response was very much associated with the lessons drawn from two previous crises: the euro crisis (2010–12) and the refugee crisis of 2015. During the COVID-19 crisis

<sup>14</sup> Victor Delage, *Covid-19. United States, China and Russia: Great Powers Worry Public Opinion*, cit.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Leonard, "Europe's Self-Help Moment", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 29 June 2020, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_europes\\_self\\_help\\_moment](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_europes_self_help_moment).

<sup>16</sup> Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "Europe's Pandemic Politics: How the Virus Has Changed the Public's Worldview", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, 24 June 2020, p. 11-12, [https://ecfr.eu/publication/europes\\_pandemic\\_politics\\_how\\_the\\_virus\\_has\\_changed\\_the\\_publics\\_worldview](https://ecfr.eu/publication/europes_pandemic_politics_how_the_virus_has_changed_the_publics_worldview).

both countries were particularly exposed and they experienced a lack of solidarity from the European Union and other member states as regards the supply of medical equipment and the closing of Union's internal borders. In Italy, the initial stage of the COVID-19 crisis has spurred an unprecedented crisis of confidence towards the European Union: 72 per cent of Italians considered that the EU did not help during the crisis.<sup>17</sup> This perception has to be tempered by the fact that, in the meantime, the EU response has been significant through the adoption of the Recovery Fund as well as the quantitative easing implemented by the ECB.

## 2. The right balance between state, EU and international cooperation

To address these challenges and reduce this sense of vulnerability, there is a dominant perception among Europeans that "More Europe" would be part of the answer, although with substantial differences among member states about the extent and form of this European dimension. Indeed, the proportions may vary according to the way their national state performed during the pandemic.

### 2.1 Nation states remain a powerful bulwark to address challenges

The nation-state has unquestionably been the main level on which the response to the pandemic has been elaborated. *Critical factors have already been identified to understand why some countries have done better than others during the crisis.*<sup>18</sup> These factors are basically (1) state capacity, which includes human resources, such as the number of health workers or emergency responders, the infrastructure, notably the number of beds in intensive care, and the available resources, especially financial resources. Next are (2) a competent state apparatus, providing the required expertise, and (3) effective leadership and traditional political virtues such as character and statesmanship of leading political figures. These virtues generate trust, a key element in the social acceptance of constraining measures and voluntary compliance. In other words, this crisis has put a premium on competent and fair political leaders. By contrast, countries with dysfunctional states, polarised societies or poor leadership have done badly, leaving their economies exposed and vulnerable. The difficulties encountered in managing the pandemic by the authorities of a state could develop in some cases into confrontation on the world stage, for domestic political reasons. SARS-CoV-2 has thus made the international arena an outlet for the difficulties of managing the epidemic at the national level.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Aureliana Sorrento, "Der dritte Dämpfer", in *Internationale Politik*, No. 3 (May/June 2020), p. 30-33, <https://internationalepolitik.de/de/der-dritte-daempfer>.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "The Wages of American Political Decay", in *The American Interest*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (July/August 2020), p. 1-5, <https://wp.me/p4ja0Z-NeG>.

<sup>19</sup> Didier Houssin, "La coopération sanitaire internationale à l'épreuve du Covid-19", in *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (Autumn 2020), p. 33-45, <https://www.ifri.org/fr/node/17719>.

In the light of the COVID-19 experience, two elements are important in this regard: (1) democratic states, like Germany, Taiwan or South Korea, did well in managing the pandemic, so this crisis does not automatically reinforce the authoritarian model; and (2) in Europe, smaller states like Lithuania, Denmark or Finland have been rather successful in the management of the pandemic whereas some of the largest and wealthiest countries, like the United Kingdom, Italy or France were less efficient.<sup>20</sup> Differences in the management of the crisis have brought changes in the standing of European countries especially as regards their perceived influence on the continent.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, available data confirm that there are huge variations in the public's perception of the performance of national governments during the crisis: in France (61 per cent) and Spain (58 per cent) a large majority of respondents are less confident in the government after the crisis, whereas conversely in Denmark a large majority (60 per cent) are now more confident towards the government.<sup>22</sup> In Germany, where the level of confidence towards the capacity of the state to cope with its missions (*Handlungsfähigkeit*) is traditionally rather low, the post-COVID studies have revealed a strong increase in the confidence of citizens, who consider the state as able to cope with its missions: 56 per cent in 2020 compared to 34 in 2019.<sup>23</sup> In countries which have performed well (Denmark, Sweden, Germany), *there is a strengthened perception that the country can and should handle crisis situations alone.*

Furthermore, *the national state constitutes a level of identification as regards the existence of a social and societal model*: it is the right level to improve the resilience of societies and economies to future shocks by addressing questions such as healthcare, education and training, social insurance and unemployment. For most of the European countries, the strengthening of the healthcare systems has become a priority in order to overcome the weaknesses or shortcomings revealed by the COVID-19 crisis.

### *2.2 The EU, an actor by default?*

The paradoxical result of this crisis is that despite the high level of dissatisfaction with the way the European Union and its institutions performed during the crisis, a large majority of people consider that they are more firmly convinced of the need for further EU cooperation than they were before the crisis. On average, 63 per cent of respondents consider that the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the need for

<sup>20</sup> Martin Sandbu, "Strategic Indecisiveness Is Fatal in a Pandemic", in *Financial Times*, 24 September 2020, <https://on.ft.com/3j2HNiO>.

<sup>21</sup> Bertelsmann Foundation, German Marshall Fund of the United States and Institut Montaigne, *Transatlantic Trends 2020*, cit.

<sup>22</sup> Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "Europe's Pandemic Politics", cit., p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Haneke, "Vertrauen in den Staat nimmt deutlich zu", in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 September 2020, <https://www.faz.net/-gpg-a3ggl>.



more EU cooperation.<sup>24</sup> This is the lesson drawn by Clément Beaune, the French Secretary of State for European Affairs: "The expectations of European citizens towards Europe have raised. They do not criticise Europe for being intrusive in their national competencies but essentially for its lack of responsiveness in the face of common challenges."<sup>25</sup>

The European level is implicitly regarded as appropriate to address two challenges outlined by the crisis:

1. The relationship between international openness and the vulnerability generated by multiple dependencies. The states that have based their development on openness should review their approach because they could not survive a protracted period of crisis or the weaponisation of the interdependences<sup>26</sup> created by this openness. The single market appears to be the right level to set rules;
2. The scaling up of the challenges, which can no longer be addressed at the national level even by the biggest European states like Germany: energy transition, value chains, supplies of critical materials, etc. This statement was made by Wolfgang Schäuble, President of the German Bundestag: "No European nation-state will assert itself alone in global competition and no one will be able to cope with the enormous challenges of our time on its own".<sup>27</sup>

But this perception must be nuanced. This awareness does not automatically lead to demands for more integration and new transfers of sovereignty, although the challenges that the European Union and its member states have been facing cut to the heart of states' sovereignty (fiscal policy, defence and security, industrial policy and innovation). It seems to echo what Hubert Védrine meant when calling for "the elites to listen to peoples' demands for identity, sovereignty and security".<sup>28</sup> Altogether, the COVID-19 crisis did not lead to a major shift of perception on the part of political leaders and public opinion in Europe, but was a dire illustration of new realities and vulnerabilities created by the power competition. As Mark Leonard puts it, "Europe is now a community of necessity rather than choice. And voters increasingly see the EU as a tool to strengthen, rather than weaken, national sovereignty."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Susi Dennison and Pawel Zerka, "Together in Trauma", cit.

<sup>25</sup> Clément Beaune, "L'Europe par-delà le Covid-19", in *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (Autumn 2020), p. 1-29, <https://www.ifri.org/fr/node/17697>.

<sup>26</sup> Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion", in *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2019), p. 42-79.

<sup>27</sup> Wolfgang Schäuble, "Aus eigener Stärke", in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 July 2020, <https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/praesidium/reden/2020/20200706-705902>.

<sup>28</sup> Virginie Robert, Jacques Hubert-Rodier and Dominique Seux, "Hubert Védrine: 'Les élites doivent écouter les demandes d'identité, de souveraineté et de sécurité des peuples'", in *Les Echos*, 7 September 2018, <https://www.lesechos.fr/idees-debats/editos-analyses/hubert-vedrine-les-elites-doivent-ecouter-les-demandes-didentite-de-souverainete-et-de-securite-des-peuples-138393>.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Leonard, "Europe's Self-Help Moment", cit.

This debate is ongoing and its result will be determined by the interactions between three main parameters. The first relates to the capacity for Europe to develop a coherent narrative regarding the best way to address the challenges of our time. Some European leaders, notably Emmanuel Macron or Angela Merkel, have called for “greater strategic sovereignty” for the European Union. This shift blurs the traditional relationship between nation-state level and European integration. Indeed, the goal of the European project was considered until recently to move beyond national independence but also beyond sovereignty altogether. The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the conjunction of two contradictory debates, reflecting two countervailing pressures<sup>30</sup>: a top-down pressure, which is pushing Europeans towards more unity, as a necessity for the European Union to assert itself in the current international context; and a bottom-up pressure, which is pushing Europeans towards smaller and more agile units, which have proven their resilience in times of crisis.

The concept of strategic sovereignty should be considered at this stage as an answer to the question of Europe's loss of influence and potential vulnerability in the great powers competition and the greater distance with the United States. The main elements of a new narrative have been elaborated by Josep Borrell and Commissioner Thierry Breton, who have insisted on the necessity for Europe to take its destiny into its own hands.<sup>31</sup> This implies that the EU should reduce dependencies in critical sectors and demonstrate in very concrete terms that it is effective and responsible in time of crisis.<sup>32</sup> This debate should create the conditions for Europe to preserve its capacity to act independently and resist coercion, and for member states to share resources in areas where this would give them better chances to compete.

In the current EU context, the debate is not so much related to further transfers of sovereignty, institutional reform and the elaboration of a new treaty, as to the definition of areas of cooperation as well as appropriate mechanisms. President Macron, in his Sorbonne speech in 2017, presented what he called “the six keys to sovereignty”, closely linked to a European dimension: security and defence, migration and borders, environmental transition, digital transition, food sovereignty, and economic and industrial power.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Hans Kundnani, “Europe's Sovereignty Conundrum”, in *Berlin Policy Journal*, 13 May 2020, <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/?p=12073>.

<sup>31</sup> Thierry Breton, *Speech at Hannover Messe Digital Days*, 15 July 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_20\\_1362](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_1362).

<sup>32</sup> Josep Borrell, *The Coronavirus Pandemic and the New World It Is Creating*, 23 March 2020, <https://europa.eu/!HB33Fw>.

<sup>33</sup> Emmanuel Macron, *A Sovereign, United, Democratic Europe*, Speech at the Initiative for Europe, Paris (La Sorbonne), 26 September 2017, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/europe/news/article/president-macron-s-initiative-for-europe-a-sovereign-united-democratic-europe>.

The second parameter pertains to the consolidation of the main frontlines between member states regarding the trajectory of EU integration. National reflexes remain powerful and let fundamental differences reappear beyond the consensual reactions generated by the COVID-19 crisis. There are different ways to consider the interaction between the state level and European integration, which could be summarised as follows: solidary (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Ireland, Malta), where more integration is needed. This group of countries has been instrumental in the adoption of the Recovery Fund, which constitutes an important step towards more integration; subsidiary (Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, etc.), a minimalist vision where the responsibility of individual states is predominant and where EU actions are complementary to those of the member states, especially those in need; and utilitarian (Austria, Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, etc.) where there is a need to handle problems collectively under strict conditions to ensure the accountability of member states.

The third parameter relates to the lack of consensus on how Europe can best preserve its interests in the context of a return of geopolitics and the unravelling of multilateralism.<sup>34</sup> This is a serious challenge for the European Union, which has developed in an environment combining globalisation and multilateralism. Some European states have become aware of their dependence on China during the health crisis and are now interested in the topics of strategic autonomy and economic sovereignty. Others remain committed to the promotion of multilateralism, especially as regards international trade. Finally, certain member states, while aware of the uncertainties related to the alliance with the United States, give priority to the revitalisation of the transatlantic relationship and look for a more constructive stance by a Biden administration. More generally, when dealing with transnational challenges like COVID-19 or climate change, the key to success will be the capacity to interact with others and exert leadership. In the end, Europe could have to reconcile two opposite trends: take a more assertive stance to protect its interest and play the game of power; or try to protect the existing multilateral system with like-minded states as is already the case through the "alliance for multilateralism". This project is based on the "conviction that the major challenges of our time, by their nature and global scope, cannot be addressed by countries separately but must be tackled jointly – and that such a rules-based multilateral cooperation is also a key guarantee for the sovereign equality of states as epitomized in the United Nations General Assembly".<sup>35</sup>

The question is then whether Europe can assert itself as a pole of stability.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Farrell, "A Most Lonely Union", in *Foreign Policy*, No. 236 (Spring 2020), p. 44-48, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/03/brexit-european-union-deglobalization>.

<sup>35</sup> See the Alliance for Multilateralism website: <https://multilateralism.org>.

### 3. Revisiting Europe's place in the world

If Europe wants to become one of the major world powers of the emerging new world order, three conditions have to be met<sup>36</sup>: (1) being resilient by reducing its vulnerabilities to some forms of dependency generated by globalisation, especially as regards the protection of information; (2) keeping a leading position as regards innovation and technological development; and (3) stabilising its periphery by exporting prosperity and political stability.

#### 3.1 Strengthening "open strategic autonomy" and resilience: The political challenge

The pandemic has revealed Europe's dependencies in certain products, critical materials and value chains. COVID-19 is forcing governments, societies and companies to become resilient, that is, to develop their capacity to cope with extended and unpredictable periods of self-isolation.

The shortages in supply chains during the crisis led to discussions about ways of creating crisis- or shock-resistant value chains. As Commissioner Breton pointed out, the pandemic showed the need to readjust global supply chains and bring the production of "key components" back to Europe:

We just need to reorganize ourselves because we realized that what we believed was working forever, is not. [...] Companies will have to readjust their supply chains, diversify their resources. [...] The crisis has shown the way European companies' supply chains were spread across the globe was in some cases a weakness.<sup>37</sup>

After giving priority to economic efficiency, security of supplies through more regional trade and shorter supply chains is now gaining the upper hand. This debate can be summarised under *the three "Rs"* of resilience, reshoring and repurposing.<sup>38</sup> This concern has been part of the European Union's recovery fund, which includes a requirement for national plans to reinforce the bloc's economic and social resilience. COVID-19 has revealed the developed world's reliance on imports of drugs and especially on the active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) for many drugs. Recent estimates assess Europe's dependency on APIs at between 50 to 80 per cent for so-called small molecule drugs, mainly from India and China.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Majd El-Safadi, "Man spricht lieber über Werte als über Interessen", Gespräch mit Prof. Dr. Herfried Münkler", in *WeltTrends*, No. 166 (August 2020), p. 16-22.

<sup>37</sup> Florian Eder, "POLITICO Brussels Playbook: Thierry Breton's novel ideas...", in *Politico*, 2 September 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/politico-brussels-playbook-thierry-bretons-novel-ideas-travel-in-the-age-of-corona-they-glue-birds-dont-they>.

<sup>38</sup> "Pandemic Puts Countries' Resilience to the Test", in *Financial Times*, 2 August 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/bf349c9e-0345-45df-9f75-37cade28315f>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

In France, politicians have pointed out that highly industrialised countries have weathered the health crisis in far better conditions than others. France has become aware of a certain form of vulnerability resulting from its deindustrialisation. French Prime Minister Jean Castex highlighted this aspect in his first political statement: "The crisis has also highlighted the weaknesses of our economy. A productive apparatus unable to meet our needs in goods and strategic resources. We have reached a level of dependency which is not reasonable, which is not acceptable."<sup>40</sup> In the field of industrial policy and economic competition, the European level remains key: "In many areas, our economic sovereignty must also be built on a European scale. We will work to adapt the rules of European competition in order to promote the emergence of European industrial champions." President Macron is considering reshoring paracetamol within three years and has engaged in a discussion with three producers. Such a move will require public subsidies and the acceptance of private companies to make this move, which cannot be taken for granted. In Germany, this move towards a greater autonomy has been made as regards the production of face masks. The Health Ministry has however been facing huge difficulties in finding German companies willing to start producing masks and bringing the domestic production of face masks up to the country's needs.<sup>41</sup>

### 3.2 Keeping a leading position in innovation and technology: The geo-economical challenge

Growing challenges in the technological field have become an urgent reality for European countries and the EU institutions. They have spurred the adoption of a series of instruments such as the screening mechanism on foreign direct investments in order to protect European companies against predatory and politically motivated foreign acquisitions. The broader challenge for the European Union is to preserve its competitiveness and the integrity of its technological and industrial capital in a context of accelerating technological change and tougher technological competition. This should be linked to a broader reflection pertaining to the economic security of the European Union and a review of many of the current policies on trade,<sup>42</sup> investment, competition, research and technology. In addition, Europe must place itself at the forefront of technological innovation, not only to remain a major industrial and economically dynamic power but also to become a credible strategic actor for its own security.

<sup>40</sup> Assemblée Nationale, *Déclaration de politique générale de M. Jean Castex, Premier ministre*, 15 July 2020, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/275205-jean-castex-15072020-declaration-de-politique-generale>.

<sup>41</sup> Nils Klawitter, "Deutschland scheitert an der Maskenproduktion", in *Der Spiegel*, 19 August 2020; Jörg Blech et al., "Tempers Flare Over German Mask Requirement", in *Spiegel International*, 19 August 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/tempers-flare-over-german-mask-requirement-a-3edea99d-3563-43e6-8401-4671a6671816>.

<sup>42</sup> See European Commission, *A Renewed Trade Policy for a Stronger Europe. Consultation Note*, 16 June 2020, <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/158779.htm>.

In this context, the issue of digital sovereignty has a special place. If national sovereignty in the 20th century was magnified by military hardware, it is increasingly empowered today by civilian software through intellectual property, data and computer code.<sup>43</sup> The German presidency of the European Union has significantly set the goal of strengthening Europe as an innovative centre for a digitally sovereign economy and society. This goal of the German presidency echoes a priority identified by the Commission to identify and invest in the digital technologies that will underpin Europe's sovereignty and its industrial future: "Data, microelectronics and connectivity are the cornerstones of our digital sovereignty."<sup>44</sup> Basically, an entity is digitally sovereign if its digital dependencies are the result of choice and thus can be altered at will. This entails that the entity is free to implement policies and targets within its social, regulatory policy areas.<sup>45</sup>

### 3.3 Stability in the neighbourhood: The geopolitical challenge

Recent tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean illustrate the return of regional disorder as a side effect of the US disengagement from its role as referee of the international order and the ensuing push by Turkey and Russia in the region.<sup>46</sup> In this context, Europe will have to act alone and find appropriate and effective ways to cooperate.

From an EU perspective, the capacity to defuse tensions in its neighbourhood and improve regional security will be the ultimate test regarding its ambition to become a geopolitical power. This ambition is part of the core political message of the Commission presided over by Ursula von der Leyen, and which is not yet within reach. As High Representative Borrell admitted, the "[EU foreign policymaking is] still a work in progress, and will still be a work in progress for a long time because we [Europeans] don't share the same view of the world".<sup>47</sup> The capacity for the European Union to become a more coherent and effective foreign policy actor will be a key challenge in the post-COVID period. The course taken will also depend on the impact of the pandemic regarding the economic situation and the political arbitration on defence spending.

<sup>43</sup> John Thornhill, "Arms Destiny Is Vital for Britain's Future", in *Financial Times*, 30 August 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/dc3ec20b-d877-4da8-acfc-36e3384fcfad>.

<sup>44</sup> Thierry Breton, *Speech at Hannover Messe Digital Days*, cit.

<sup>45</sup> Thieß Petersen and Christian Bluth, *Megatrend-Report #02: Die Corona-Transformation. Wie die Pandemie die Globalisierung bremst und die Digitalisierung beschleunigt*, Gütersloh, Bertelsmann Stiftung, September 2020, <https://doi.org/10.11586/2020054>.

<sup>46</sup> Philip Stephens, "Home Truths in the Eastern Mediterranean", in *Financial Times*, 3 September 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/9ce8847f-6fe8-4208-8a1d-2d6b3425ad42>.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Peel and Ben Hall, "EU's Neighbourhood 'Engulfed in Flames', Warns Foreign Policy Chief", in *Financial Times*, 13 September 2020, <https://app.ft.com/content/aeab4c81-50d3-4aaa-9bf1-e6593b394047>.

This mission could also be taken at least in part through other formats of cooperation. There are already ongoing discussions on a revival of the E3 format and the identification of possible fields of cooperation in this framework.<sup>48</sup> One interesting aspect highlighted is the alternative or complementary character of the E3 (France-Germany-UK) format: "The E3 is likely to have the greatest utility if European foreign and security policy architecture is weak or fragmented. However, it will struggle for relevance if Germany and France see little added value outside the EU framework".<sup>49</sup>

### Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the political, economic and social life in Europe and in the rest of the world. It has acted as a catalyst by accelerating and amplifying existing trends. It has accelerated awareness within public opinion in Europe of new realities generated by the unravelling of the world order and the more assertive power politics led particularly by the United States and China. This episode has seriously eroded the image of these countries in the eyes of the public in Europe.

The result of the US election constitutes an opportunity to improve the transatlantic relationship and stop the unravelling of the world order. The capacity for Europeans to act as allies and partners, willing and able to share risks and costs, constitutes a prerequisite for a substantial improvement in transatlantic relations.<sup>50</sup> In this regard, the search for a more resilient and more autonomous EU is not intended to replace America as a security provider but for Europe to become a security exporter. One main point to measure Europe's capacity to become a geopolitical actor will be its capacity to take over the burden of regional security and stability in its neighbourhood.

The COVID-19 crisis was managed in the first place at the nation-state level, and has put a premium on the competence and leadership skills of the respective governments. Some observers argue that the European Union has lost its way: the pandemic in Europe is not just an economic crisis, but is becoming a political and constitutional crisis as well.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the main need for the Union is to reinvent a common purpose, which could be the capacity to resist and assert itself in the post-COVID world. The risk here would be to play nation and Europe against each other. To this end, some new trends have been outlined by officials in Europe: the

<sup>48</sup> Alice Billon-Galland, Thomas Raines and Richard G. Whitman, "The Future of the E3: Post-Brexit Cooperation Between the UK, France and Germany", in *Chatham House Research Papers*, July 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/23748>.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> Julian Lindley-French, "Does America (Still) Want to Lead the Free World?", in *The Alphen Group*, 5 November 2020, <https://wp.me/paL3XK-6W>.

<sup>51</sup> "The Covid-19 Pandemic Puts Pressure on the EU", in *The Economist*, 14 May 2020.

promotion of a narrative on strategic sovereignty, which needs to be refined, to provide the basis for joint action. The goal is to provide a response to the shortages and vulnerabilities experienced during the crisis and develop appropriate capacities. This should trigger a broader approach on how to deal with coercion and geo-economics.

The question remains whether this trend will gain enough leverage in Europe to develop into a new language of power, strategy and geopolitics.

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