



Young Aspen Leaders

Learning to play in the great powers league

by Blas Moreno



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The EU needs to build strategic autonomy, further integrate economically and politically and stretch its diplomatic and military tools while helping its closest neighbors in the Balkans and Eastern Europe reach their goal of being accepted as Member States. By achieving these hard tasks, the Union will be larger and stronger, more confident of its powers and fit to navigate in a multipolar world.

The European Union is living through a momentous time. The greatest since, at least, the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the past six years, Europe has faced the pandemic, the energy crisis and the historic return of inflation. Before that came Brexit and the migrant drama in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas and the Balkans. Internally, the EU has struggled with the leadership vacuum left by Angela Merkel's renouncement, several breath-holding elections in France, Italy or Sweden and the rise of illiberal politics in Hungary, Poland or Slovenia, among other countries. To the outside, Brussels has had to navigate unpleasant frictions with the Trump Administration in the US and growing tensions with China, Russia, Turkey and other authoritarian states. The last and worst of it all is, of course, Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

These events have tested Europe's capacities to the core. But rather than proving its helplessness, this tough period offers the chance of building a stronger, enlarged and independent Union. Brussels and the twenty-seven Member States

have at last realized that they are ill-prepared for the coming world and have reacted. Debates on integration and enlargement have re-flourished, though still timidly. The European Commission has adopted a much needed “geopolitical” approach. The EU has taken resolute steps in the pursuit of energetic autonomy, launched a common response to the economic stress caused by the pandemic and gained consciousness of the need to become an active player in the world.

Ukraine and the rest of Eastern non-EU countries could well play an important role in this new European architecture. The war has served as a wake up call for Brussels, offering a chance and reaffirming the importance of involving post-Soviet Europe and the Balkans in the EU family. Quite like the fall of the Berlin Wall. Back then, Eastern Bloc countries began to integrate in Europe when Soviet tanks vanished and it was clear that Moscow’s yoke over Eastern Europe was not that powerful. Once the scales fell, Eastern Germans, Polish, Czechs or Hungarians felt free to turn west.

This war may bring the same outcome, albeit at a much higher human cost. It has been years since Russia lost its appeal for Eastern Europeans, and now it starts losing it for Central Asians also: its economy is small, its culture unattractive, its political model repeling. Should Ukrainians win the war, and their recent advances show they stand a good chance, the post-Soviet European republics will realize, once again, that Moscow does not have as much influence over them as it seemed just eight years ago. The emperor in the Kremlin would have no clothes. Weakened, Russia won’t have the means to keep Ukraine, Moldova and maybe even Belarus from breaking away and integrating into Europe.

For these countries to turn west, however, there must be a welcoming Europe on the other side, which cannot yet be taken for granted. The EU faces many challenges in this multipolar world, and it risks becoming irrelevant, internationally dependent and subject to the will of greater actors: fractured Franco-German alliance, disputes with Hungary and other illiberal governments, the so-called enlargement fatigue, falling to achieve strategic autonomy, dealing naively with foreign players or being unprepared to a radical political change in the White House after the 2024 presidential elections in the US. None of these factors would turn the EU insignificant in the short term. But if combined, they could well transform it into a mere association of divided and helpless countries, unable to exert its influence as a global power.

That is why Europe needs to adopt certain changes, both inside and on its global stance. The EU must be ready if and when Ukraine wins the war.

More integration to beat the enlargement fatigue

Can the EU accept new members? Many European governments doubt or plainly reject the idea, and some think the organization has grown too big. Even after Brexit, having twenty-seven members makes it difficult to quickly agree on anything. Besides, although euroscepticism and far right parties have spreaded around all Europe, certain Eastern countries, which were the last to enter the bloc, have given Brussels some of its worst headaches recently. Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland lead the attacks to the rule of law and separation of powers in the EU. Orbán spearheads an alliance of illiberal, far right parties with connections to Putin's Russia that includes Matteo Salvini in Italy or Marine Le Pen in France. Some international rankings don't even consider Hungary a democracy anymore.

Nevertheless, the problems posed by the authoritarian tendencies of some European governments are not the result of the great enlargement since 2004 as much as they are of the lack of sanctioning tools of the organization. Due to the unanimity principle, Hungary and Poland have been able to protect each other from the strongest sanctions proposed by Brussels. This unanimity rule is the same that hinders the EU from taking decisive measures regarding crucial matters such as economy, security or foreign policy.

If the EU wants not only to be ready to accept new members but to properly operate in this demanding international arena, it must do away with the unanimity rule. Senior European figures such as the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Vice President of the Commission, Josep Borrel, are already defending this.

Reforming the decision-making process is not the only thorny debate the EU has opened in recent times. Long-rejectors of economic integration such as Germany or the Netherlands were forced to accept the need of common instruments to placate the effects of the pandemic. That allowed the first emission of EU debt, the establishment of an European recovery fund and the pause of the fiscal rules imposed in the last crisis. Similar approaches have been taken to tackle the health, energetic and climatic

emergencies and the wave of Ukrainian refugees. This common spirit should continue permeating the European integration process in the years to come.

Nevertheless, the EU still needs to address great important challenges. Above all, the Franco-German alliance remains basic for the functioning of the Union. But if they are to lead, both countries should put the interests of the bloc before their own. For instance, Germany's prestige has suffered enormously when it became clear that for decades Berlin has prioritized its commercial interests with Russia, falling into an energetic dependency that left Europe's hands tied behind her back when Putin invaded Ukraine.

Ending the dangerous dependence on Russia and China

The global shakes of the last few years have convinced the EU that it must adopt a more active role in the international arena. The war in Ukraine, the rise of China, Trump's presidency, the pandemic and the commercial and energetic crisis prove that Europe has been naive in its relations with other great powers. We have fallen into a commercial dependency with China, a dangerous addiction to Russian oil and gas and an overreliance on American military protection and technology.

The EU has already started demolishing its energetic vulnerability with Russia in two complementary ways. First, looking for alternative suppliers such as the Gulf monarchies, Azerbaijan, Venezuela or Nigeria. However, most of the world's greatest oil and gas producers are authoritarian regimes like Putin's, and Europe has learned that these alliances don't come without a price. That is why Brussels should give more impulse to the other branch of the plan: accelerating the green transition, which would also alleviate the climate crisis.

While there is no doubt that Europe's energy dependence on Russia is dangerous, there is not such a clear consensus about China. German chancellor Olaf Scholz's controversial trip to Beijing just a few weeks ago is the best example. Scholz was the first Western leader to visit China since the pandemic and to be a guest of Chinese president Xi Jinping after his ratification as the head of the Chinese Communist Party for a third term in October. The trip was widely criticized in Germany and Europe, including by Scholz's coalition partners. And not only for how it represented Berlin's

tacit acceptance of Xi advancing his control over Chinese politics. Above all, it came at a time when the EU is making a deep revision of its commercial dependence with China and its relations with authoritarian countries after the bitter lesson learned with Russia.

China is a world power, and its cooperation will be essential in global matters such as climate change, nuclear proliferation and mediation with Putin's Russia. Beijing's recent indications to Moscow that they oppose the use of any nuclear weapon in Ukraine are a good sign. Furthermore, China is, more than anything, an economic and technology powerhouse with which the EU commerces to great benefit for both sides.

However, China is also the strongest authoritarian regime in the world. Its government is unrespectful of human rights or political liberties, both inside and outside its borders. Its geopolitical ambitions in Asia and elsewhere are creating tensions with European allies such as India, Japan or Australia, and Taiwan may soon be the victim of an invasion echoing the one in Ukraine. Member States' reliance on China for raw materials and key industries such as 5G impede them from adopting firmer stands regarding Beijing's abuses in Xinjiang or Hong Kong, for instance.

The European Commission's new approach to Beijing properly reflects this complex relationship. Brussels has labeled China as "a partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival", an indispensable actor but not one that should be treated with ingenuity. Still, Europe has a long way to go to be free of its dependence on China's commerce, which is harder to substitute than Russian energy. Besides, in the global race for influence Brussels is being left behind in Latin America, Africa, Middle East and Asia-Pacific by Beijing, Moscow and smaller actors such as Turkey or the Gulf monarchies. The EU should reduce its commercial vulnerabilities with China while fighting to remain relevant in the developing world.

Taking "our fate into our own hands" with the United States

If the EU has had a tough time realizing the need for a new relationship with Russia and China, a Trump comeback in the US in 2024 would be traumatizing. The United States is Europe's closest ally: both share cultural and political values, history, economic exchanges and, perhaps first and foremost, NATO. When the Trump

Administration began questioning those bonds, the EU understood it should learn to live on its own. As Angela Merkel, then German chancellor, put it in 2017, “The era in which we could fully rely on others is over (...). We have to take our fate into our own hands”. Those words sound even more clear-eyed today. And while the Biden Administration has reinvigorated the trans-Atlantic relation, another Republican victory in 2024 cannot be ruled out.

For the EU to take its fate into its own hands doesn't mean breaking its bonds with the United States, but however approached this may create tensions with Washington anyway. However, Europe is wrong to externalize key tech sectors like cloud services in American companies, and should reduce its reliance on the US for technologies such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum computing and, above all, defense. The same applies to natural gas and oil, of which the US is stepping up its exports to Europe to respond to the energy crisis, and other essential raw materials and components.

Most importantly, European countries must put more effort into their own security. They should do this by increasing the defense budgets and military integration, both in the frame of NATO and at the EU level, and stretching their diplomatic and military outreach in the European periphery. The war in Ukraine is the best example, but by no means the only conflict and instability spreading in Eastern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, regions that are way closer to Europe than to the US. Brussels and the EU Member States, together, must play a bigger role combating jihadist insurgency in the Sahel, securing a durable peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan, stopping the wars in Yemen or Ethiopia or keeping alive the Iranian nuclear deal, among many other challenges.

A stronger EU with the center of gravity moved to the East

Imagine a victorious Ukraine in 2030. It is a democratic nation, preparing to join the European Union. Reconstruction is almost complete. The economy is growing fast; it is clean and diverse enough to keep corrupt oligarchs at bay. All this is underpinned by stout Ukrainian security. Defence against another invasion does not depend on the

Kremlin's goodwill, but on the sense that renewed Russian aggression would never succeed.

This is the starting paragraph of an article recently published by The Economist titled "Imagining peace in Ukraine". It is a suggestive pitch, even when Russia is still occupying around 18% of the Ukrainian territory and bombing the rest of the country time and again. However, Ukraine won't be capable of growing so prosperous and European-oriented should the EU not stand ready to welcome it in the family.

To achieve it, the EU must consolidate its own house while pushing up candidate countries. The Member States should concentrate on building strategic autonomy by further integrating economically and politically, limiting the unanimity principle, strengthening European industries, diplomacy and defense, and working to reach greater consensus in thorny matters such as migration, a fair green transition and the protection of rule of law. At the same time, Brussels should not forget to keep helping its closest neighbors in the Balkans and Eastern Europe reach their goal of being accepted in the EU.

Reinvigorating the debate on the accession of new Member States will definitely move the center of gravity to the East. This started back in 2004, with the great enlargement, and has consolidated as a result of the war in Ukraine. Though the Franco-German alliance will still be the main axis, they will lose relative power and that would be positive for the bloc. The great losers will probably be the southerners, even though Spain and Portugal are gaining weight in the debate thanks to the energy crisis. The Eastern member countries, on the other side, are positioned to increase their influence. Poland, above all, will play a crucial role if its government is able to turn the page on its attacks on the rule of law and firmly supports its eastern neighbors, as it is now doing with Ukraine.

Given that it manages to fulfill these hard tasks, the European Union of 2030 should not be as afraid to integrate new members as it is now. That would turn it into a multicultural organization: with the entrance of countries such as Ukraine, Serbia, Montenegro or Moldova, the EU would integrate a populous orthodox community, and even an incipient muslim one with Albania or Bosnia. And, most importantly, it would be a larger union and a stronger economic and military bloc. An organization more confident of its powers and fit to navigate in a multipolar world.