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Challenges and constraints facing a "Geopolitical Commission" in the achievement of European sovereignty

Pierre MIREL
Xavier MIREL

"What we do at home will affect our place in the world and shape relationships with our strategic partners and competitors. That is why we must be a Geopolitical Commission". To achieve this, *"the internal and external dimensions of our work should be harmonised (...) to ensure that our external action becomes more strategic and coherent"*. This is the essence of the mission entrusted by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, on 10 September 2019, to Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission.

Each new Commission always shows its commitment to improve the coordination of its external actions. Indeed, the Global Strategy for 2016 asserted its "*ambition to provide the Union with strategic autonomy*", in particular through "*an integrated approach to conflicts and crises*". However, it has to be said that acts have not always followed declarations, even though times have changed and "*Europe seems to be ignored, absent and outdated (...). It is well aware that it risks being the big loser between America, which has lost its universal vocation, and China, which is anxious to promote the rules of a world order in line with its interests*", to quote the analysis made by Pierre Vimont.

"We must therefore work towards the construction of European sovereignty (...) otherwise Europe will disappear with the erasing of this Western moment", to quote French President Emmanuel Macron to the conference of ambassadors on 27 August 2019[1]. Since then, there has been a flurry of analyses regarding the shape a strategy like this should take, combining economic potential and geopolitical vision. Among the challenges being raised, three have a strong geopolitical component: technological, economic and security. These feature amongst the priorities of the Commission and the Council for 2019-2024[2]. The Covid-19 pandemic has further fuelled the contradictions between open markets and security, between interdependence and sovereignty, particularly in the Union's neighbourhood and in the Western Balkans.

[1] Which was also the theme of the Conference on Security in Munich in February 2020: 'Westlessness'.

[2] Respectively "A more ambitious Union" and "A new strategic agenda".

HIGH TECHNOLOGICAL DEPENDENCE

The purchase in 2016 of the German robot manufacturer Kuka by the Chinese company Midea was a hard blow to high-tech Europe. Since then, Chinese investments in Europe in strategic areas have continued. More surprisingly, China has invested in many European countries to create the world's first electricity grid through its Global Energy Interconnection Initiative, in parallel with its New Silk Road. The aim of this network is to limit its own fossil energy consumption to 50% by 2050 and therefore to purchase the remainder externally. China's dominance is impressive in all renewable energy equipment: it is the leading producer and exporter of solar panels, it holds a major position in wind power with 52% of world orders and in batteries with 61%, it holds 69% of the market in terms of the recycling of lithium-ion products and is the leader in rare earths.

Europe is therefore in a very weak position vis-à-vis China on one of the important tracks of the Green Pact promoted by the Commission as a priority of its mandate. Its strategic action plan regarding batteries, initiated by Germany and France, should help to restore the Union's position in this area. It should also serve as a reference for "*building innovative, sustainable and competitive strategic value chains*" in other sectors.

But what will happen tomorrow on the open EU market if batteries imported from China are more competitive than those produced in Europe? Will we have to wait for a long investigation to determine possible prejudice, at the risk of allowing an industry die, as with solar panels? This is an external challenge, therefore, with China, but also an internal one to ensure the sustainability of a nascent industry.

Moreover, Europe is dependent on the major digital operators (GAFAM), whose virtual monopoly in the EU is well known, and which poses a clear risk to the security and use of our digital data. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has further strengthened the weight of these operators, whether in terms of home working, security connections and exchanges or simply social links. The Union's dependence is blatant, while the contribution of the GAFAMs to public welfare through taxation is not at all proportional to their dominant position. And any attempt to tax their activities has encountered not only their obvious objection but above all that of US President Donald Trump. Did he not call Jean-Claude Juncker a "brutal murderer" after the fines imposed by the European Commission on the Internet giants? This poses a major challenge to the transatlantic relationship, which has already been severely disrupted since 2017, while a digital tax would be logical, desirable and fair, as well as painless for consumers.

SUPPORTING PROJECTS OF "COMMON EUROPEAN INTEREST"

The power now lies in new technologies and innovation. Even if the Commission were to obtain the 50% increase in the R&D budget proposed for 2021-2027, Europe's technological dependence would not disappear any time soon. A real change of mind-set is needed in the face of fragmented markets, fragmented research and purely national thinking.

Proposals for massive investment and the use of state aid and public procurement exist to prevent companies from falling prey to foreign predators, which simply increases the Union's dependence. This risk is all the greater since the Covid-19 pandemic has melted the stock market value of many companies.

It is fortunate that a European system for the control of foreign investment came into force on 10 April 2019[3]. Of course, it leaves the investment decision to each Member State. But it nevertheless constitutes an essential common framework for assessing whether such investments risk "*undermining the security, public order and strategic autonomy of the Union*".

The example of batteries shows that a European consensus can be reached on a clear strategy for substantial investment, including public investment, in support of an "*important project of common European interest*" as defined in Article 107(3)(b) of the Treaty[4]. Will this consensus exists in other projects whose external effects would impact China and the United States? Is it too late for Europe to develop its own search engines and network systems?

THE DANGERS OF A TRADE WAR WITH THE USA

The European Union has adopted an ambitious programme to combat global warming, with the notable exception of Poland, which wishes to keep coal in its economy. This difficulty, which is detrimental to the Union's position, comes on top of the United States' withdrawal from the Paris agreement (COP 21). The challenge is then a commercial one: how will EU businesses be able to compete with those from countries applying weaker standards? In the Green Deal, the Commission intends to propose a "*carbon border adjustment for selected sectors*".

Moreover, Washington's withdrawal from the Paris agreement is only one sign among others of the profound change brought about under the impetus of Donald Trump, although the roots of this are certainly older. A change that goes beyond the rhetoric of its President: rejection of multilateralism, very aggressive use of retaliatory trade and tariff measures and hostility to the principles of the European project.

One may therefore wonder whether there is a risk that the US President will retaliate with customs duties, when he declared on 15 July 2018 in Brussels: "*The Union is a disaster for us. It is an enemy with what*

[3] Based on a reflection paper regarding "Harnessing Globalisation" by the Commission, 18 May 2017.

[4] 'Can be considered compatible with the internal market (…) aid designed to promote the execution of a important project of common European interest."

they are doing to us on trade", especially since the European Union recorded a surplus in trade in goods with the United States of €153 billion in 2019, an increase of 10% compared to 2018. And while trade in motor vehicles is clearly to the disadvantage of the US industry with €37.3 billion compared to €5.5 billion in 2018. This underlines an internal problem for the Union, since Germany is the dominant exporter, regularly threatened by President Trump with customs retaliation. Here again, there is a combination of external challenge and internal constraint.

These changes in US foreign policy - which are likely to continue even if Joe Biden wins in November 2020 - come on top of another high-profile geopolitical dispute, the North Stream 2 (NS2) pipeline project. So much so that Washington is threatening sanctions against the companies involved. Here, finding a European consensus is difficult since Poland has taken the lead in a campaign against NS2, its Prime Minister having even declared it to be a "*new hybrid weapon*"[5]. The Council reached an agreement on 12 February 2019 whereby the European Commission will have to decide, in due course, on a request for exemption by Germany from this *a priori* exclusive use by Gazprom.

Will Washington carry out its threat, and at the same time promote the export of its liquid petroleum gas, produced by fracking? The first American LNG carrier unloaded in Poland in June 2017. The result is a double equation for a Geopolitical Commission: its ability to thwart US extraterritorial legislation - already undermined in the nuclear agreement with Iran - while one of the Member States would be delighted if the former were implemented. Again, this is an external challenge and an internal constraint.

THE PANDEMIC IS EXACERBATING THE CONFRONTATION OF TWO MODELS

With the EU's deficit in trade in goods with China totalling €164 billion in 2019, it is China that raises the issue of competitiveness for the European Union, since it is no longer just the world's workshop, as our technological divide shows all too clearly. Moreover, the post-1989 conception of liberal political development, which should have naturally followed its economic growth, was a mere illusion: under the veneer of exacerbated capitalist development, China is in fact implementing a dirigist economic strategy, combining a long-term geopolitical vision and economic interests in a set of rules and financing that distort the open rules of competition and the WTO, of which its president nevertheless claims to be the champion, as in Davos in January 2017.

Given this "systemic rival that promotes alternative models of governance", the Union wants more balanced and reciprocal conditions for trade and investment, particularly regarding subsidies, access to public procurement markets, technology transfers, industrial property and social and environmental standards. Is this wishful thinking? The EU faces a difficult year ahead since China has launched an economic offensive in Central and Eastern Europe, with Greece joining the so-called 17+1 group (12 member states and 5 candidate countries from the Western Balkans) in 2019. China is multiplying strategic purchases and investing in infrastructure there, as well as in Italy and Portugal. This represents an economic commitment with a political return on investment, since Hungary has twice opposed a common European position calling China into question.

Moreover, Beijing has just inflicted a cruel lesson on Europe through the aid provided in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Not that its supply of sanitary equipment is surprising since it provides 80% of the world's production. It is rather its "mask diplomacy" that is shocking. Designed as a global-scale public relations campaign, it is intended to make people forget their failure and to promote their system. It is moreover combined with a campaign of disinformation aimed at discrediting the Union and more generally the Western liberal model. In this respect, it joins Russia - and paradoxically also the United States on certain points - in using the populist and illiberal movements in Europe to aggravate the divisions within the European Union.

More generally, the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the European Union's "morbid dependence" on China and

[5] *During NATO's parliamentary session 27 May 2018.*

India for the supply of medicines, to quote European Commissioner Vera Jourova. Under challenge, the Union's health sovereignty will necessarily demand review and reinvestment. Will we need common rules, derogating from competition law, to ensure sustainability, since again, this is a matter of "common European interest"? Here, it is the internal constraint that will dominate, between Member States that are in favour of a free market and those for which public support will be decisive.

This guarantee of security should not lead to the rejection of the merits of properly tempered trade. Indeed, although the Union is a net importer of personal protective equipment, it remains one of the world leaders in terms of the export of high-tech medical goods, vaccines and other pharmaceutical products, including to China. It is therefore just as much the "*culture of the stock*" as that of the "*flow*", largely relinquished by the State, that the Union might promote, as it did with the 2006 directive on strategic oil stocks.

THE SECURITY RIFT

The rift caused by the withdrawal of the United States from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty on 2 August 2019 comes on top of the end of the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe, albeit without causing much commotion. This break could, however, lead to a new arms race and leave Europe helpless. The Atlantic Alliance is certainly the guarantor of its security, but Donald Trump's attitude, which is ambiguous to say the least, the desire of the United States since Barack Obama to give priority to the Asian hub, as well as the Union's excessive dependence, as much as NATO's expansionism, create a situation that is not conducive to serenity.

A review of recent history clearly shows the opportunities missed after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the USSR and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. George Kennan, former US Ambassador to Moscow, warned in 2000: "*NATO's eastward enlargement may become the most fatal mistake in US policy since the war because there is no justification for it. This decision will harm the development of Russian democracy by restoring the Cold War atmosphere. The Russians will have no choice but to interpret NATO's expansion as a military action*"[6]. We are now there, a long way from the Charter of Paris for a New Europe signed on 21 November 1990.

Just as NATO provided Europe with an effective bulwark during the Cold War, its continued expansion has not always served the cause of peace. Ukraine and Georgia's plans for membership were not pursued at the 2008 Bucharest summit, but NATO maintains constant ambiguity. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on 5 December 2018: "*We have decided to continue to work together to prepare Georgia for NATO membership. We recognise Ukraine's aspirations to join the Alliance*".

The situation is therefore conducive to the emergence of the Union's autonomy within the Atlantic pillar, because "the time when the Union could depend entirely on other for its security is over". This is what Arnaud Danjean, MEP, declared in the European Parliament: "*Are we, Europeans, content to be mere spectators, subsidiaries, and even beggars in international security in the face of unabashed global and regional powers ? Or do we want to be players and provide ourselves with the means?*"

THE EMERGENCE OF A EUROPEAN DEFENCE POLICY

The European Council of June and December 2017 established the emergence of a security and defence policy: Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Industry Programme and the European Defence Fund from the Community budget; what a revolution!

This major step forward nevertheless faces three stumbling blocks. First of all, there is the old suspicion that France is seeking European power, especially after the departure of the British. This is something that the French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, tried to dispel in Prague when he stated that "*European sovereignty is neither the return of the*

[6] *Quoted by Andreï Grachev: 'Un nouvel avant-guerre ? Des hyperpuissances à l'hyperpoker', Alma éd. 2017.*

Holy Empire nor the return of the Brezhnev doctrine Brussels style (but) the possibility for each State to remain independent in a world where the rivalry of powers is evident in all areas".

Secondly, how can we move on to joint investment decisions when the arms industries are in fierce competition with each other? Franco-German examples (battle tanks and the aircraft of the future) are still too rare. Incidentally, the first report on the implementation of the Permanent Structured Cooperation notes that collective purchases only represented 14% of those made overall, in contrast to a goal of 35%.

The third pitfall is the United States' opposition to this European defence policy, which was summed up very well during a visit by the PSC to the State Department: it favours Russia and in fact represents a hidden industrial policy against arms purchases from the United States, whereas it is not true to say that American budgets only favour American companies[7]. Washington is conducting an active campaign against the European Defence Fund, reminiscent of the one launched against the Galileo system in 2007. It is understandable that the dominant supplier to several European States' armies is worried about the emergence of this policy. American arms producers still have a bright future ahead of them!

TOWARDS A "NEW SECURITY STRUCTURE" IN EUROPE?

The Union also faces the weight of the history carried by the new members. Freed from Nazi oppression by the Red Army to fall under that of the Supreme Soviet and its national deputies, they have retained the deep sense that the Cold War was "won" by the United States. Whereas the multiple surrenders by the Europeans since the Munich Agreements in 1938 remain deeply rooted in the collective memory. Therefore, while the Union is certainly a symbol of peace, in their eyes it was NATO that ensured it. Convincing them that the situation calls for a "new architecture of trust and security in Europe"[8] is not easy.

It is true that Russia is not helping people to escape from the past. Its desire to protect its "near abroad", its "hybrid" political system, its rewriting of history, its massive disinformation campaigns and its denial of international law would rather argue that the Union should wait for better days. But can the Union continue to ignore it? Is it not time to consider it as it is and not as we would like it to be?

History has also taught us that humiliating the "defeated" is always harmful. Yet Russia has been like a wounded animal for thirty years: lost territories, a dramatically declining population, an economy that has missed the digital shift, falling energy prices, not to mention China lying in wait, dreaming of becoming the godfather of this weakened ally.

It is therefore in spite of the "Putin system" that the Union should engage in dialogue, without complacency, frank and demanding, since we have so many interests in common: security, terrorism, energy, climate and trade amongst others. Trade should be a shared objective for the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the European Union, through sectoral agreements, facilitated by the adoption of European standards by the EEU in thirty economic sectors.

However, this dialogue cannot be launched without a real breakthrough in the Minsk Donbass Agreement and then in the resolution of the other separatist conflicts. This presupposes that NATO renounce the membership of Georgia and Ukraine, in the framework of a structure still to be invented, for example around the OSCE. Indeed, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has repeatedly stated that it is not so much a country's close relationship with the European Union, including membership for the Western Balkans, that upsets Moscow, but NATO's expansion.

This dialogue would be all the more beneficial to the European Union and Russia as China's great game in Central Asia through its new Silk Road is disrupting the position of both protagonists. Indeed, China wishes to "*reorganise Asia on the basis of a system of political and economic partnerships of which it would be the heart*"[9]. In doing so, it is undermining

[7] Meeting of members of the Union's Political and Security Committee with Michael Murphy, Deputy Assistant Secretary – Bureau of Europe and Eurasian Affairs, Washington, May 2019.

[8] Emmanuel Macron at the Ambassadors' Conference, 27 August 2019.

[9] 'L'initiative Belt and Road, stratégie chinoise du grand jeu?' E. Mottet & F. Lasserre, Diplomatie, January 2018.

Russia's economic influence and also that of the Union. Therefore, preventing Moscow from becoming overly dependent on Beijing should be one of the Union's objectives, which, together with the EEU, would at least provide a market commensurate with mutual expectations.

TOWARDS A NEW BALANCE BETWEEN OPENING AND INTERDEPENDENCE, SOVEREIGNTY AND SECURITY[10]

By shedding a harsh light on the relativity of European sovereignty, the crisis further underlines the external challenges. But also the internal constraints and contradictions, which some external actors will play to annihilate the Union's endeavours to achieve autonomy through their internal alliances and pressure from lobbies. Its decision-making autonomy will be reduced accordingly. Nothing new, one might say. Undoubtedly, except that the world has changed and "Europe must to find the thread of its sovereignty or else it will have to choose between the USA and China", whilst it might even fall victim to the trade war that these two countries have been waging since 2017.

However, behind the health crisis, the climate crisis looms large and on a different scale. Any crisis is conducive to introspection for a new beginning. Many ideas are flourishing. For the French President, three phenomena are linked and require response: increasing inequalities, the return of sovereignty and the climate phenomenon. But the way is long between thought and action in a divided Europe, where Germany - supported by Member States that favour budgetary orthodoxy - clings to its trade and financial balances without a shared geopolitical vision with France. And the decision of the Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe on 5 May 2020 placing limits on the ECB's action and questioning the power of the Court of Justice of the Union is a thunderbolt that calls into question, among other things, the post-Covid-19 plans.

There is therefore a great risk of witnessing an ad hoc response on the part of the Union, caught up in the turmoil of events, with the Commission exhausting itself in its efforts to convince the Council of the merits of new initiatives. With this health crisis, after those of 2008 (financial) and 2015 (migrants) "the Union is clearly entering a key period of its history"[11]. And yet, although the rift with public opinion is great in France, the same goes for expectations.

On the 70th anniversary of Robert Schuman's declaration, shouldn't we be rediscovering his approach by asking ourselves "*what are the steel and coal of the present and the future*"? And although the ECB's monetary instrument is limited, it is still the budgetary instrument by the increase in own resources. This implies considering at last the possible avenues of digital, carbon and financial transaction taxes.

We thus like to dream of a salutary review in which the Union would define strategic areas of "common European interest", with the rules necessary for its sovereignty, integrating their geopolitical dimension. And with an economic sovereignty committee, as proposed by Bruegel.

The pandemic is, in any case, provoking a new mind-set as the Commission prepares a revision of the multi-annual budgetary framework 2021-2027, which should help to correct the single market, including by providing support to key economic sectors, restoring health systems and building resilience. This could take the form of a capital investment fund. As proposed by France to support strategic value chains and avoid hostile acquisitions. The Union would therefore play a shareholder role to exit the crisis.

Without completing the economic integration that is still in the making, without equipping itself with the rules and means to deal with crises to avoid convening European Councils that are incapable of taking decisions and that end up discrediting the Union, the latter will not be able to assert its sovereignty, and neither will the Commission become fully geopolitical. Because, while the Union's strategic destiny is being played out on its periphery, control of it is first and foremost played out at home. Its hard power will gain in credibility when its soft power is strong again. The citizens of Europe are asking for protection and autonomy. They must

[10] *Josep Borrell: 'The post-Coronavirus is already here', European Council on Foreign relations, April 2020.*

[11] *"Schuman Report on Europe, State of the Union 2020", (under the editorship of Pascale Joannin), Editions Marie B, Paris, May 2020* be turned into allies via the totally transparent politicisation of the Council's debates.

The Union will emerge weakened from the Covid-19 pandemic, whereas China is likely to come out as the winner, thereby strengthening the Asian pivot of innovation and growth. Especially since, unlike the Western actors and institutions, it refrains from wanting to play a security role and instead, in a more subtle way, favours investment unrestricted by any conditions regarding the rule of law and democracy. What a godsend for all autocrats looking for another model of governance far from the lessons taught by the Union! This is a risk in its neighbourhood like in the Western Balkans, although these are privileged areas for the geopolitical approach promoted by the Commission.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD, NATURAL ZONE FOR A GEOPOLITICAL COMMISSION

The European Neighbourhood Policy was launched in 2003 to establish stability and prosperity with six countries in the East (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and those on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, from Morocco to Syria. In 2009, the Eastern Partnership targeted their political association and economic integration with the Union. Revised in 2015 to be more flexible, focused and coherent, this neighbourhood policy continues to be the framework for the Union's differentiated relations with association agreements coupled with comprehensive and deep free trade agreements - under discussion with Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia - signed with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in 2013-2014.

This policy has failed to prevent conflicts, which from Ossetia to Donbass and from Syria to Libya have inflamed the Union's neighbourhood. One may even wonder about the influence of the agreement with Ukraine in the Donbass conflict, particularly because Article 7 encourages it towards "*progressive convergence in the foreign and security policy, including the Union's common security and defence policy*". Were Ukraine's history and geopolitics ignored? In any case, Russia will obviously maintain this frozen conflict in the Donbass region, like those in Georgia (Abkhazia) and Moldova (Transdniestria) until it has a guarantee that NATO will not extend its reach there. This makes dialogue with Russia indispensable. A first step would be to explore what kind of agreement could be envisaged between the European Union and the EEU as discussed above.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, on 5 May 2020 the Council adopted a package of financial aid under favourable conditions to help these countries cope with the economic consequences. By this demonstration of solidarity, the Union is underlining the importance it attaches to the Eastern Partnership. These countries are seeking the Council's approval for their 'European perspective', i.e. their possible accession to the Union. It is true that several Member States are openly campaigning for this and that the Union, whilst not opening up this "perspective", has never clarified this ambiguity.

WHICH BORDERS FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION?

Vaclav Havel once explained that half of the tension between the European Union and Russia would disappear on the day when it could be agreed, in peace and quiet, where the former ends and the latter begins! It is certainly not in the nature of the European project to limit its geographical scope. It should, however, be the case. A Geopolitical Commission should push the Union to adopt a language of truth with the countries of the Eastern Partnership: the Union's borders stop where the latter begins.

Difficult as it may be, this clarification would be salutary. It would put an end to the recurrent 'demands' for application is the formal act for membership which only maintain an illusion and generate frustration, while fuelling Eurosceptic discourse in the Union. Association agreements, which target integration into the internal market, would form the core of the relationship. They would be gradually extended to include full participation in the European Economic Area.

Historical, economic and cultural conditions are fundamentally different with the southern shore of the Mediterranean. It would have been preferable to deepen the Euro-Mediterranean partnership - also known as the "Barcelona Process" - launched in 1995 after the Oslo agreements concerning a peace plan between Israel and Palestine in 1993. However, the flexibility introduced by the 2015 revision has enabled it to adapt to the major differences between countries. But the interests and interventions of "neighbours of our neighbours", particularly in the Middle East, often, and sometimes deliberately, hinder relations with the Union.

The Union is helping to stabilise and develop Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. And the exceptional financial aid that the Council has just granted Jordan and Tunisia is the proof of solidarity in the face of the consequences of this pandemic. No doubt it can also facilitate the observance of the ceasefire in Libya through its maritime operation IRINI to enforce the arms embargo. But it does not have the power, nor the internal consensus, to be the arbiter for a lasting solution in the face of the many players, either in Libya or in Syria.

The same applies to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the Union has been totally excluded from a possible solution since the election of Donald Trump. The "peace plan" presented by the US President contravenes international law and has been met with little response. The weight of history and the Holocaust remains - understandably - very strong in Germany and in parts of Europe and further accentuates this form of diplomatic paralysis. This is a difficult problem for a Commission, even one of a geopolitical nature; where the Union nevertheless will have to respond to repeated violations of international law?

THE WESTERN BALKANS, AN EXCLUSIVE REGION FOR A GEOPOLITICAL COMMISSION

On 24 November 2000, at the Zagreb Summit, the Union recognised the "European vocation" of the Western Balkans. Three years later, on 21 June, the Thessaloniki Summit endorsed it as a "European perspective", to which the Union once again gave its "unequivocal support" in the Zagreb declaration on 6 May 2020.

Since then, only Croatia has joined the Union. Accession negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia, which opened in 2012 and 2014 respectively, are at a standstill in the absence of reforms in terms of the rule of law and governance. The negotiation method was modified, on the request of France, as a condition for the launch of talks with Albania and North Macedonia, which were finally approved by the European Council of 26 March 2020.

This methodology emphasises, among other things, chapter clusters, increased political supervision and introduces a reversibility clause in pre-accession assistance in the event of stagnation and, above all, backtracking on the accession criteria and the values of the Union. Will these positive elements be enough to make progress? In fact, whatever the method, only political will can make a difference. On both sides. On the candidate countries' side to undertake real reforms. On the Union's side, to agree to move forward when the conditions are met.

Up to now, most Balkan leaders have placed their short-term interests in staying in power, including through "State capture", ahead of the long-term benefits of their countries' accession; since hard reforms might well cut off the very branch on which they are sitting. This is the "Montenegro paradox", summarised in three figures: 32-3-8; 32 chapters open for negotiation, only 3 closed in 8 years! No negotiation has ever been as slow as this. A strange reversal of the process where the Union is regularly blamed for this slowness while its partners do not provide proof of the reforms, the burden of which, however, lies with them.

In the Western Balkans there has been a worrying decline in democracy. Freedom House's most recent report "Nations in Transit" has recently downgraded Montenegro and Serbia to "hybrid regimes" for their regression in standards of justice, elections and media freedom. It is true that they are in good company with Hungary, a counter-model that some nevertheless look to with envy.

As for reconciliation, it is the great forgotten factor whereas, in recent years, the glorification of war criminals, hate speech and the rewriting of history have flourished. The Balkan leaders should look to the speech delivered by German President F.W. Steinmeier on 8 May last: "It is not remembrance that is a burden – it is non-remembrance that becomes a burden. It is not professing responsibility that is shameful – it is denial that is shameful!"

Such an environment encourages mass emigration, which is impoverishing the Western Balkans but greatly benefiting certain Member States. According to Eurostat, 228,000 inhabitants emigrated in 2018, mainly to Germany and Austria. In particular, there has been a real exodus from the hospital sector.

GEOPOLITICS ABHORS A VACUUM

But then, why maintain this European perspective, which is incongruous in the face of the Union's multiple crises? Geography offers a first answer: the Western Balkans are "embedded" in the Union. It is therefore not so much a question of enlarging the Union with them, as of their "integration" into it. Secondly, history has taught us that faltering economies and disputes between minorities lead to instability and conflict.

Moreover, geopolitics abhors a vacuum. The Union's internal fragilities have reduced its influence over this space that re-emerging powers are trying to fill. While Russia's influence is overestimated, the influence of Turkey and certain Gulf countries is undeniable. China, in particular, is developing its economic presence through transport and energy infrastructure loans and company takeovers. Its "masks diplomacy" in Serbia may have marked a turning point in relations between the two countries.

It is therefore in its own interest that the Union should secure the Western Balkans. There is another reason, at the very heart of the project initiated by Robert Schuman 70 years ago: "*It is with the entry of the Western Balkans that this process will come to an end, which will represent no less the historic unification of the European continent.*" It is this objective that continues to guide them and maintain their stability. And both Albania and Northern Macedonia have shown that they have the courage to launch far-reaching reforms, which the European Council has acknowledged.

However, the Western Balkans' difficulties in reforming and the post-accession excesses of Hungary and Poland might foster two-stage accessions. The first would aim for the integration of the candidates into the internal market, accompanied by the partial benefit of the Structural Funds, the extent of which would depend on their progress regarding the rule of law and economic governance. The second would lead to the adoption of other policies and integration into the Union with full benefit of the Structural Funds. It would also serve as a 'probationary period' to ensure the implementation of commitments, respect for the values subscribed to and bilateral agreements, with any failure to do so being subject to financial penalties. This flexible approach would bring the Western Balkans into the Union and facilitate public support.

It is time, however, to enter into a frank discussion with Turkey in order to put an end to the accession negotiations, since it is clear that Turkey cannot become a member of the Union. A privileged partnership should replace its European perspective. This would greatly reduce criticism of the "enlargement policy" and thus facilitate the accession plans of the Western Balkans.

THE UNION GIVES PRIORITY TO THE ECONOMY

A Geopolitical Commission must therefore commit itself unreservedly to this region in preparation for shared European sovereignty one day. This is what it began to do at the Sofia summit in May 2018 with six priority areas for action, particularly with regard to infrastructure. To date, €880 million in budgetary aid has raised €3.2 billion in loans from the international financial institutions to finance 39 transport and energy projects. This compares favourably with China's loans, which are on totally opaque terms.

However, this is not enough since the region has suffered a severe lack of investment for more than thirty years. It is a vast plan, such as the Marshall Plan, which the Union should have implemented as soon as the latest wars were over. It is fortunate that it has now placed the economy at the heart of its relations along three lines:

- Granting "increased budget aid, in line with tangible progress made, particularly with regard to the rule of law and socio-economic reforms", in accordance with the principle of "more for more". This is what the Union announced in its Zagreb Declaration.
- Focus on the internal market (cluster 2 of the negotiations) as a "key component for prosperity and resilience"; together with the establishment of the regional economic area under the supervision of the Regional Cooperation Centre (RCC, Sarajevo). This is what is planned by the EU in the face of Covid-19.
- Significantly increase assistance to reduce the socio-economic divide in the Western Balkans. A divide that is likely to widen as a result of the predicted European recession and at a time when their economies have a 70% integration rate into the Union. In the Zagreb Declaration, the Union invited the Commission to present "a robust economic and investment plan for the region".

The €3.3 billion Covid-19 plan includes €38 million in emergency aid already allocated for health requirements, €455 million for SMEs in an innovative approach through 70 local banks, €750 million in macro-financial support with the IMF, €1.7 billion in loans at preferential rates and €12.5 million for migrants in transit camps. This is therefore a strong economic re-engagement on the part of the Union, which should strengthen its credibility, notably against powers which are trying to undermine its influence.

KOSOVO-SERBIA AND BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA, GEOPOLITICAL TESTS

A Geopolitical Commission also has a duty to regain the ground lost in the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, no longer against China, but against the United States. Indeed, Ambassador Richard Grenell, the US President's special envoy, tried to obtain an agreement, secretly negotiated with Serbian President A. Vucic and Kosovar President H. Thaci, which would have involved an exchange of territory. In no way did this exchange achieve unanimity in Kosovo. We then saw Richard Grenell and Hacim Thaci organise an operation, which some have called a "coup" that led to the fall of the government on 23 March.

The Kosovar President has openly spoken against the facilitation of dialogue by the Union and against the appointment of Miroslav Lajcak, its special envoy for this dialogue and for bilateral issues in the Balkans. However, this "facilitation" was born of the United Nations resolution 64/298 of 10 September 2010. The dialogue has produced more than thirty technical agreements since 2011, unfortunately partially implemented so far, but in close cooperation with Washington. Richard Grenell's stunt was designed to oust the Union in order to allow the American president to post a diplomatic victory before the campaign for his re-election. This is a serious external challenge for the Union. And a twofold internal challenge since five Member States do not recognise an independent Kosovo and there is no consensus on the terms of an agreement, exchange of territory or not, which, while contravening the inviolability of borders, could call into question other situations, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the 1995 Dayton Agreement ended the war, has a constitution that has established a hyper-decentralised, ethnically based political system that is only sustained by corruption, clientelism and a nationalist and populist rhetoric that flourishes every time there is an election. So much so that in a territory of 3.3 million inhabitants, there are three presidents, 700 deputies, 14 prime ministers and 180 ministers, which absorbs a large share of the scarce budgetary resources. The economic situation and the lack of prospects are such that 173,000 citizens have emigrated in the last 5 years, i.e. almost 6% of the population.

Attempts at reform, whether autonomous or on the initiative of the European Union and the United States, have so far failed. The Bosnia majority party, the SDA, maintains that the country should be unitary, as it reaffirmed at its congress in September 2019, refusing to allow the front line of 1995 to be perpetuated by the existence of the República Srpska. The República Srpska clings to the agreements as a guarantee of its autonomy. And each of the three ethnic groups - Bosniak, Croat and Serb - regularly paralyses the system by invoking its 'vital national interest', provided for in the Constitution, in the face of reforms that it considers detrimental to its 'identity'.

The European Commission has drawn up a roadmap in response to Sarajevo's formal application for membership. The chief negotiator of the Dayton Accords, Richard Holbrooke, was clear: "*Bosnia and Herzegovina is a federal state and must continue to be organised as such. It cannot have a unitary government, otherwise the country would return to war*".

The start of a settlement process could therefore be based on four elements: the country would remain a federal state, the national interest would not be invoked in areas affecting its accession process, Republika Srpska would accept the transfer of competences to the federal level where necessary for that process and the Office of the International High Representative (OHR) would be closed. But any settlement must be agreed by three major parties, the United States, Russia and Turkey, which makes it difficult. The geopolitical dimension is therefore essential in any solution to the paralysis.

Whether it is its technological backwardness, security disruption or disputes in its neighbourhood, the European Commission therefore faces a range of external challenges and internal constraints. In the Western Balkans, its support for their resilience and its engagement in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and in Bosnia and Herzegovina will be the yardstick for measuring whether the Union has fully exploited the geopolitical assets advocated by the Commission to assert itself as effective, credible and sovereign.

Pierre MIREL
Director at the European Commission 2001-2013
(DG Enlargement), Lecturer at Sciences Po-Paris

Xavier MIREL
Former assistant at the European Parliament

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