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Has Europe's hour come?

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« *But the sword of St. Vladimir is not scary.
Everything will pass. Suffering, torment, blood and pestilence.
The sword will disappear, but the stars will remain...* »
Bulgakov. *The White Guard*

"Europe's hour has come", said a Luxembourg minister in 1991 at the beginning of the Yugoslav wars. The context seemed favourable: an initially peripheral crisis, a relative lack of interest on the part of Russia, a green light from the United States which was even encouraging invention by the Western European Union (WEU), the majority of whose activities were taken over by the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), and later by the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). America's 'pet project' at the time was not yet Asia, but rather the management of the decay of the Soviet world, without much interest in the Western Balkans. In response, some Europeans 'held back' and feared an unfavourable division of tasks: 'noble' collective defence missions reserved for NATO and peacekeeping missions, considered 'subordinate', for Europe. Strategic prescience! Four years later, we had witnessed the bombing of civilians, the siege of Sarajevo, broken ceasefires, failed mediations and Srebrenica. We had experienced the humiliations inflicted on a UN force (UNPROFOR) that had a timid mandate and overly restrictive rules of engagement. The British and French were in the field this time round, but not the Germans. [The Dayton Peace Agreement](#), which only France calls "the Dayton-Paris agreement" (a formal concession by Bill Clinton to Jacques Chirac) was largely a Pax Americana. In the American camp, Richard Holbrooke had pulled the strings and decided everything, by ruthlessly relegating the European leaders, including Carl Bildt, Jacques Blot and Pauline Neville-Jones[1].

Europe - like the UN or the OSCE - did not emerge edified from this situation; only NATO had been up to the task, more or less and belatedly, with effective air support campaigns, and then robust peace making and peacekeeping forces (IFOR with 55 000 troops). Europe was humiliated, divided and powerless. It also remained ineffective and absent during the 1998-1999 Kosovo war, marked by NATO air strikes and, again, by

Atlantic Alliance peace making forces (KFOR 50 000 with troops).

It was then that Europe had to try to recover, to learn the lessons of its failures in Yugoslavia and to reach a truly productive, innovative moment between 1999 and 2008, a golden age of buoyancy, not only intellectually but also in terms of forces, missions and structures. This period was marked by innovative texts, the spirit of Saint Malo ([Franco-British Declaration](#) of December 1998, which was the starting point for the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), calling for "autonomous and credible" European Union military capabilities) and culminating in the [European Council of Helsinki](#): in December 1999, it was decided to create a Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) of 50,000 to 60,000 men that would be deployable in 60 days for at least one year, supported by 400 combat aircraft and 100 ships. This RRF could be supplemented by "multinational forces with a primarily European vocation" created in the mid-1990s: European Corps, Euomarfor, Euroforce, etc.

During this period, Europe was militarily global, with [23 European operations and missions](#) across the whole world (including in Aceh, Indonesia). Since 2003, there has been the [first European security strategy](#), a coherent, visionary framework of doctrine initiated by Javier Solana, which already includes the notions of [European autonomy and sovereignty](#).

But this momentum was lost almost simultaneously. The enthusiasm waned and European forces were never used in any conflict, thus confirming the adage "use it or lose it", which also applied to the battlegroups (EUBG) created in 2006, although their level of ambition was much lower and limited to 2 500 men. Lost illusions were regularly repeated in crises where Europe was never on the front line, except after the fact to provide humanitarian aid, pay, rebuild and,

[1] George Packer, Our man: Richard Holbrooke and the end of the American Century, 2019 Cape Ed.

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if necessary, train. This was the case for Afghanistan and Iraq. There was a slight burst of activity in 2008 (invasion of Georgia and mediation by pre-president Nicolas Sarkozy under the French presidency of the Council of the Union) and in 2014 (first invasion of Ukraine, creation of the Normandy format). But these bursts were limited to the diplomatic level and were never effective at the prevention stage, and even less so at the military level.

As for the question of [strategic relations with an already defiant and threatening Russia](#), this has remained under the monopoly of the US-Russian dialogue. Regular French attempts to resurrect a European approach to revitalise decaying arms control agreements were met with dilatory and paradoxical responses from fearful partners. They regretted the US-Russian duopoly in this area, while refusing to make a collective contribution even within NATO. This was the case in 2008 at the OSCE [ministerial meeting in Corfu](#) which although ambitious only led to minimal texts in Astana in 2010: its mid-ministerial declaration remains famous for a formulation often taken up since by Sergei Lavrov, establishing a principle of "indivisible security", a principle useful for propaganda against NATO enlargement and yet belied by Russian actions over the last two decades. Europe confined itself to tasks of 'soft power', to a more or less effective multilateralism and to attempts to 'lead by example', which had little impact on others.

However, economic and health crises, unlike politico-military crises, gave it regular opportunities to act: in 2008, after the financial crisis, and much more recently in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic. As is often the case, Europe only moves forward when spurred on by the severity of the crisis. After some initial delays, the European Union has provided a monetary, financial and budgetary response commensurate with the health crisis. It has adopted a concept of "*open strategic autonomy*" aimed at reducing dependencies in a number of sectors (defence, space, digital, health, energy, rare materials) without autarchy or protectionism. It has stood by the weakest States. It has taken further steps in its economic integration by raising [a significant common debt](#) on the markets. The "pooling of debts" seemed less unattainable than the pooling of nuclear warheads.

Because the "pooling of warheads" was indeed attempted. In 1995, the French Prime Minister, Alain Juppé, considered

"not a shared deterrence, but a concerted deterrence with our main European partners". There was no official reaction to his speech, particularly in Germany, which was the country that he was primarily addressing. Since Brexit, France has been the only nuclear power in the European Union. But it is likely that the silence surrounding nuclear issues will continue for some years to come, despite the increased relevance of deterrence. This would obviously not be the time to unwittingly question the validity of the US nuclear guarantee.

A WAKE UP CALL FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION

Over the past five years, the pace has quickened, as have the warning signs, accompanied by final wake-up calls. Emmanuel Macron's Sorbonne speech in 2017, highlighting "*European sovereignty and strategic autonomy*", is now beginning to find fields of application. [The Trump presidency](#), his doubts about NATO and his Russian friendships spread doubt even among the most ardent Atlanticists. However, once Joe Biden was elected, many of these doubts faded away and many in Europe preferred to live with the comfortable illusion of an absolute and eternal American guarantee. Neither the conditions of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, nor the [AUKUS](#) affair were to really wake up Europeans who, despite French efforts, were doomed to disappear from the strategic landscape.

In this context, Russia's war against Ukraine has at least had the merit of sparking a real awakening in Europe. To begin with the shock has been intellectual. The Russian threat has often been overlooked, relegated, underestimated, at least in Western Europe. The enemy has been China, the "systemic rival". At worst, Russia could only be a marginally disruptive regional power, with a GDP lower than that of the Benelux countries! The warnings, multiple for two decades, have only been interpreted individually, one after the other, without any common thread.

The Europeans have forgotten the conditions under which the master of the Kremlin came to power, when he "*flushed the Chechens down the toilet*" in 1999. They no longer remember his indignant responses in 2004 to the "*colour revolutions*", which were perceived exclusively as plots stirred up by the West. They did not hear his [speech in Munich in 2007](#). They were relieved in 2008 that the French Presidency

of the EU Council managed to convince Vladimir Putin not to "go all the way to Tbilisi to hang Saakashvili". They have forgotten that in 2014 there had already been a [first war in Ukraine](#) leading to the annexation of Crimea and a frozen conflict in the Donbass. In response, they imposed weak and ineffective sanctions. They did not understand that Syria could be a testing ground for the Russian army, as Spain had been for the Nazi forces, nor that the Wagner forces in Libya, the Central African Republic and Mali could become a kind of Condor legion. They failed to perceive the new Russian tactics of stifling freedoms and taking over, in Belarus, as in the South Caucasus and Central Asia (Kazakhstan in January). They minimised the steady, deliberate, ruthless march towards autocracy with opposition leaders killed, poisoned or imprisoned, memory mocked with the closure of [Memorial](#). Each warning shot, noted and written off, was followed by complacency and a return to "business as usual".

Some found extenuating circumstances, in vague oral commitments made thirty years earlier or in convenient and too easily shared feelings of Russian humiliation. Populist political parties across Europe were complacently echoing this, relayed by social networks, troll farms and Moscow-sponsored media. Argumentative apprehensions from Eastern and Northern Europe have also often been perceived as exaggerated, even obsessive, by the West. And then NATO was there and we ourselves contributed to the security of its eastern flank by sending a few air patrols ("[enhanced forward presence](#)" and "tailored forward presence"). The European intellectual awakening was therefore by no means obvious.

And yet it happened. Putin's violence and blunders have squandered these propaganda gains in a few days, changed the narrative and made, at least for the time being, [Europe the winner in the information war](#).

While the Americans publicly warned us in early February of an impending invasion in Russia, we probably still preferred to see the build-up of troops on the border as a classic act of intimidation, to be followed by cyber-attacks and some territorial pledges through hybrid actions, as in 2014. In our defence, we were still conscious of the US manipulations of intelligence that preceded, and which some Europeans felt justified, the war in Iraq. Europeans began to open a surprised eye and an astonished ear on 21 February to

Putin's warlike invocations in his televised address, not of a Soviet and Bolshevik empire, but of the Russian Empire, more probably that of Catherine II (with the Ukraine, the Caucasus, the Baltic countries, even Finland) than of Peter the Great.

At least the Europeans woke up on 24 February to the cannon fire in Ukraine. They were able to respond quickly, firmly and in a united fashion. An unprecedented sanctions regime was adopted, with €500 million released in two days to provide lethal weapons to the Ukrainian forces to defend themselves against Russian aggression through a [European Peace Facility](#), funds for refugees have been released, with Hungary and Poland joining the ranks, Germany changing its relationship to defence, announcing an increase in its annual military spending to over 2% of its GDP and the immediate release of €100 billion to modernise its army. Denmark has announced a referendum on joining the common defence policy and Finland and Sweden are considering moving closer to NATO.

IS EUROPE'S HOUR DRAWING CLOSER?

At the Versailles Summit on 10 and 11 March, this progress was pointed out again and prospects were outlined. It is now a question of making them permanent. "Ukraine is part of our European family" ([Versailles Declaration](#)) but [the European family](#) will still have to overcome frailties, pitfalls and illusions. The debates over arms deliveries, like the U-turns regarding the MiG 29, the questions about no-fly zones, or even on security zones, are only just beginning. The question of Russian hydrocarbons and energy independence will remain sensitive for some time and will require Germany to make more judicious and supportive choices this time than it did when it abandoned nuclear power.

In the shorter term, the military factor will, out of necessity, prevail over diplomatic temptations and constructs. The recalibrated "[strategic compass](#)", which is due to be adopted by the European Council on 24 and 25 March, will be tested against the facts, developments in the military situation on the ground in Ukraine and the contingencies of alliances. This "strategic compass" will also have to address the armaments policies of the various parties. Just as European defence does not mean privileged purchases of French and/or European weapons, the transatlantic relationship reinvigorated by

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the Ukrainian crisis should not mean an obligation to buy American systems, including the F35. Partners such as Finland and Sweden, if they do not join NATO quickly could point to the European solidarity clauses and the [article 42-7](#) of the TEU, which is literally more binding than [article 5](#) of the North Atlantic Treaty.

Putin's nuclear gesticulations and intimidations might target more specifically certain European partners, including the Baltic States (Suwalki Pass between Lithuania and Poland leading to the Kaliningrad enclave[2]) even members of the Alliance. The regular mention of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons since 21 February in the speeches of both Putin and Lavrov, the move to a first stage of nuclear alert, and the attacks on power plants give some idea of the intimidation to come. We are already trying to prevent this rise to extremes, with responsibility, determination and composure (American postponement of an inter-continental ballistic missile test; reminder of the nuclear nature of the Atlantic Alliance by the French Minister of Foreign Affairs).

In this context, the frequent French ambitions concerning European defence and strategic autonomy will have to integrate the heightened concerns of Central and Eastern Europe, the existing American situation and the modalities of exercising the nuclear guarantee on our continent, perhaps in order to achieve a better balance between a "Europe of defence" and a true "European pillar of NATO", which has never been attempted. There is, in the eyes of some European and French purists, an absolute antagonism between ESDP and the NATO concept of the European Security and Defence Initiative (ESDI). Given the visceral and event-driven attachment of many of our partners to NATO on the one

hand, and the significant advances in European defence and the prospects for a rebalancing of American priorities on the other, it is high time to reconcile these two approaches by giving content to the "European pillar".

Would it be wrong for Europeans to be able to express themselves collectively in the Alliance, as they successfully did for a long time in the OSCE, in the days when this organisation was alive and kicking? Would it be abnormal for the place of Europeans to be better reflected in the Alliance's bodies and procedures, and in the major NATO commands (an EU Deputy SACEUR in European rotation, even more than SACT[3])?

Under these conditions, "strategic autonomy" would undoubtedly be much more easily accepted and encouraged by all European partners in the field of defence. And the other equally imperative areas of energy, industrial and technological independence will provide additional opportunities for Europeans to achieve genuine and credible "strategic autonomy", with all the renewed means and experience of the European Union.

In the wake of the Versailles Summit, and by supporting a solution to the war in Ukraine, "*the sword could disappear and the stars remain*"; a European decade could then take shape.

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[2] [Lithuania, a vulnerable NATO link, readies for Putin](#), *New York Times*, 15 March 2022.

[3] Gérard Araud, [Passeport Diplomatique](#) p 106, « *La France obtint en 2009 SACT à Norfolk, un commandement non opérationnel dont le seul avantage était d'offrir un poste à un officier général cinq étoiles* ». (In 2009, France obtained SACT in Norfolk, a non-operational command whose only advantage was to offer a post to a five-star general officer)