

EXPERT PAPER

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EUROPE'S STRATEGIC (IN)ABILITY TO ACT

Fault lines in the European Union, divisive tendencies in the Member States and a growing Euro distance among the population

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THE PROBLEM

There are a number of good reasons why the overwhelming majority of Europeans had and still have a clear preference for a rule-based, value-based and standards-driven world order. This order is characterised by a high degree of economic interdependence, in which, when it functions, contentious issues are settled by international arbitration tribunals, whose decisions are accepted by those affected, and global problems and challenges are increasingly dealt with by international organisations headed by the United Nations. Among the many reasons for Europeans' preference for such an order, three motives stand out in particular:

First of all, there is the idea of the definitive end of great wars, the destructive violence which Europeans experienced in a special way in the first half of the 20th century and under the threat of which they lived in the form of mutual nuclear hostage-taking by West and East in the four decades that followed.

There is also the idea that through the globalization of the economy and the juridification of international politics, a political approach to the abstract concept of humanity will be possible, with the aim of making humanity in its entirety the subject of history instead of nation states and empires, in order to be able to deal with the questions that concern all people equally.

And finally, there is the motive that through the perspective of such an order or political action in the mode of "as if" - as if such an order already existed - there is the possibility of being able to conceal one's own political weakness and to appear as a strong voice in the chorus of the big actors, even if one is hardly ever in a position to speak with one voice.

To put it bluntly: the Europeans are so fond of the fiction of the common will, or at least the will of humanity to survive, not least because they themselves are not in a position to articulate their own common will, let alone bring it to bear. They made a virtue out of necessity and hide their weakness in *realpolitik* behind drafts and objectives enriched by normative terminology.

In the following, the focus will not be on this normative conceptuality and the "horizon of expectation" (Koselleck) it creates, but on the weakness behind it; not on the construction of ambitious projects on the basis of the universalization capability of motives and goals, but quite the opposite, on "philosophizing with a hammer", as Nietzsche called it when he described himself as one who beats the idols of thought with a hammer in order to find out whether they are hollow. The enthusiasm with which the concept of *soft power*, coined by Joseph Nye, has been pounced upon in Europe is, if one asks about the hammer, above all an expression of the fact that one does not have any *hard power* worth mentioning or at least does not have the willingness to use it if necessary, but at the same time does not want to admit to oneself that one is quite defenseless against anyone who threatens with *hard power*.

This became abundantly clear in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, and it is also evident today in the reaction to Russia's undisguised threats against Ukraine and, in connection with this, against the EU-Europeans. Instead, the constellations are briefly reversed and the person threatening to use *hard power* is confronted with the remark that he is only using hard power because he has no *soft power*, which is believed to put him to shame. But what if the person in question does not allow himself to be shamed by this, but simply continues? Like Vladimir Putin, for example, in his dealings with Ukraine. Or China's Xi Jinping, when he responds to European admonitions to respect human and civil rights by putting economic exchange on hold, as he did most recently with Lithuania. Or Donald Trump during his time as US president, when he summarily called into question American security guarantees for Europe if Europeans did not follow in the wake of US policy.

The Europeans' weakness of political will and their lack of strategic capacity to act can be seen in the pictures of international conferences: Either they are not present at all, as recently at the talks between Russia and the USA on the status of Ukraine in terms of alliance policy, or they appear as half a dozen, as at the meetings of the G7 or G20, where the heads of state and government of the large EU member states are represented alongside the EU leadership and claim a place for themselves in the official photographs - as if the appearance in large numbers could compensate for the complete absence in other formats. In the end, both absence and overrepresentation amount to the same thing: the Europeans are not a subject on the international stage, but largely accessories, and if any Europeans can appear as political subjects at all, it is the larger nation states, not because

of their *soft power*, of course, but because of their economic power, their position in the world financial system or because they have nuclear weapons and a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Donald Trump's rude behaviour, Vladimir Putin's aggressive and blackmailing actions and Xi Jinping's increasingly punitive reactions to European indications and expectations have recently led Europeans to take a critical inventory of their power-political capabilities. The extremely disappointing outcome of this has been exacerbated by the fact that, on the basis of recent experience, the horizon of expectations of a rule-based world order founded on values and driven by norms has had to be rolled back, at least to some extent, so that the view of one's own weakness could no longer be camouflaged.

The realization plays a role here that Trump, Putin and Xi are not random exceptions that will disappear after a while to make room for other players in a global order of rules and values, but that they are representatives of a structural development that is about imposing wills and spheres of influence and in which one only plays a role if one has one's own strategic capacity to act. If one does not, one is out of the game or is not taken seriously as a player. *A quantité négligeable.*

For some time now, there has been talk of a strategic autonomy and security policy independence that Europeans should strive for, and the politicians of some member states assure us with great zeal that they are working on developing this. But is strategic capacity to act at all possible in view of the political constellations in the European Union, especially its internal division? Or is it not already too late for such a change of course, because a gap in capabilities in artificial intelligence has opened up that can no longer be closed? Or are the corresponding statements only declarations of intent that lack the will to be consistent and will vanish into thin air after some time?

THE CRACKS WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION

When the member states of the then European Community decided in the 1990s to embark on both a spatial enlargement and a structural deepening of the Community, they vastly underestimated the problems associated with simultaneous enlargement and deepening in the exuberance of feelings, first the disappearance of the dictatorships in southern Europe and then the end of the division of Europe.

The economic and fiscal divergences within the enlarged Community soon became apparent, especially since the introduction of a common currency, the euro, made the different economic mentality and the different potentials of the southern and northern member states abundantly clear. Over time, these divergences grew into a political antagonism. Whereas the states of the European South previously had the possibility of reacting to different inflation rates and national debts by devaluing their currencies and thus closing the gaps that had arisen, this possibility now disappeared and a conflict flared up over the communitarisation of national debts and the monetary policy of the European Central Bank.

As a result of the international financial crisis of 2006, this dispute developed into a sharp political conflict, accompanied by intense emotionalism. Even if it has been possible in the meantime to put an end to the open hostilities, the structural rift is still there, and one can understand the North-South antagonism related to fiscal problems as a predetermined breaking point of the Union.

For some time now, this North-South divide has been complemented by a West-East divide, which has grown out of very different ideas about the rule of law, the separation of powers and political culture and is currently more politically explosive than the North-South divide. This is the second breaking point within the European Union.

It should be noted, however, that this second fault line is much more dependent on the respective political majorities in the Central Eastern European countries and their governments than the structural fiscal problems between the North (which in this case includes the East) and the South of the Union, so that many things can change in upcoming

elections, at least as far as the contentious issues of the rule of law and freedom of press are concerned, and less so, presumably, as far as the disagreement over Brussels' rights to intervene in the affairs of the individual states is concerned. The cohesion of the Višegrad group (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) is considerably less than that of the over-indebted member states of the European South.

In the long run, the European Union will hardly be able to avoid dealing with these two cracks or predetermined breaking points - and this can end with the exit of member states from the Eurozone or the Union, so that the Brexit would be followed by further exits, but it can also lead to a patching up of the cracks and fractures by placing other problems and challenges, which are more strongly geared to the cohesion of the member states, at the centre of European politics.

A suitable candidate for this could be the development of the EU's strategic capacity to act, from which all member states would ultimately benefit. At the very least, no member state should suffer structural disadvantages, as was the case after the introduction of the euro for the southern Europeans and as a result of the restriction of sovereignty through the overregulation policy of the Brussels headquarters - at least in the perception of some Central European governments.

These problem areas have not disappeared with a focussing of the EU agenda on the Union's strategic capacity to act, and it cannot be ruled out that when national competences are ceded for the purpose of bundling the hard power that certainly exists in Europe, this must be coupled with a return of other competences to the member states that have been transferred to Brussels, but these are decisions about priorities that can be taken without calling the continued existence of the EU into question.

Such doubts about the continued existence of the Union are, however, justified by a failure to deal with the cracks and predetermined breaking points and a continuing deficit in the strategic capacity to act - in the first case in view of the continuing tendencies towards erosion within the Union, in the latter as a result of the EU's inability, to position itself independently in the face of Russian military aggression, Chinese attempts at economic blackmail and US shrugging of shoulders in maintaining security assurances, and to bring its own interests and values into play.

Helplessness in the face of challenges from outside will inevitably reinforce the existing erosion tendencies of the EU and sooner or later lead to the fact that the forces of cohesion counteracting them will no longer be sufficient for the continued existence of the Union. In this respect, the development and expansion of the strategic capacity to act is not so much *another problem* for the EU but can become *the solution to some other problems*.

Nevertheless, it would be advisable not to approach the project of strategic capacity to act in such a way that a win-win constellation for all EU member states is assumed from the outset, as was carelessly done with the introduction of the euro, but rather to explore in preparatory simulation games where possible disadvantages and losses for the EU members lie and whether these affect certain countries more than others. If this is the case, compensation and compensatory mechanisms must be sought from the outset.

For the EU, the development of a strategic capacity to act should not be seen as just another field of competence among many others but can only succeed if it is conceived as a fundamental revision of the political structure of the community. Whereas up to now the EU's political structure has been essentially focused inwardly, while the ability to assert itself outwardly has been treated as a secondary task to be dealt with by the transatlantic alliance of NATO, the direction of development must now be reversed in order to focus on the Europeans' ability to assert themselves vis-à-vis other powers, especially Russia and China.

In addition to the development of our own military capabilities, which for the time being must be built up in close cooperation with those of the USA - i.e. within NATO - but which must be designed in such a way that the Europeans are in a position to assert their interests and values in the long term, it will also be a question of the political hardening of the Union against the influence of other major actors.

The EU will certainly not become a power impenetrable to external influence, as the ideal of the classical nation-state demands, but mergers of some member states with another major actor, as represented by the 17 + 1 format - a cooperation of Central Eastern and Southern European states with China, which was a novelty for the EU and led to some of these states blocking a common EU policy on China - will then no longer be possible. So it may well be that the transformation of the EU from a transfer community to a security

community will lead to a smaller Union with fewer members. This structural change will not call into question the financial transfers, but they will not only be conditioned with regard to the observance of common rules and values (as the treaties already do), but also with regard to a united political capacity to act externally.

POLITICAL DIVISIVE TENDENCIES WITHIN THE MEMBER STATES AND THE PROBLEM OF A DEMOSCOPICALLY GROWN DISTANCE TOWARDS THE EU IN SOME MEMBER STATES

For decades after the founding of the EEC, the European project was not a subject of political controversy in the member states and therefore did not play a role in election campaigns in the member states. The demoscopically measured approval of the economic integration of (Western) Europe was so great that it was not attractive for any relevant party in the political spectrum to question the process of European integration or even to take a stance against it. This has changed with the introduction of the euro, the debate on the communitarisation of national debts and the dispute over the distribution of migrants and refugees among the individual member states.

For almost two decades, the awareness of national autonomy has grown considerably in the consciousness of the European population, so that the question of what one thinks of the EU and its policies has become a topic in the election campaigns of almost all member states. Since then, Brussels has been looking with great concern at the election results and the share of the vote that went to Eurosceptics and opponents of Europe. The election results in the large EU countries, Germany, France and Italy, as well as Spain and Poland, are particularly important for the ability of the Brussels institutions to act. In France in particular, the election of a president with a negative attitude towards the EU would lead to a profound shake-up of the Union, not least because of his long term in office and his extensive powers. A Eurosceptic government in Rome, on the other hand, would be less threatening because of the notoriously short term of office of Italian governments, and the formation of a Eurosceptic government in Germany is not to be expected for the time being.

Another cause for concern when looking at the political stability of the EU is the fact that one can no longer rely on the old rule according to which net recipient states have a consistently positive basic attitude towards the EU, so that one can really only expect Euroscepticism and Euro-distance in net contributor states. Especially in the Central-Eastern,

but also in some Southern European member states, this rule is suspended. Of course, the question arises as to whether, with a clearly pronounced security policy component, the political added value of the European Union would be so great that the distancing efforts in some South and Central Eastern European countries would lose significance. It can be assumed, however, that a policy of notorious opposition, blockade or even the threat of withdrawal would be much more of a "playing with fire" for those involved than is the case now, when some governments assume that if European transfers were to cease and China were to leave the European market, it would immediately be available as a replacement within the framework of its Silk Road Initiative. While this is likely to prove an illusion with a bitter end if any EU state were to try it, it has not stopped some EU states from engaging in greater financial dependence on China.

Building a European strategic capacity to act would change not only the pieces but also the rules of the game, and this is likely to have an impact on the policies of the governments in question and, more importantly in the longer term, on citizens' attitudes towards the European Union. The European Union would then no longer appear to be a power that restricts the sovereignty of nation states (and would act less as such), but rather as the protector and guardian of a free choice of lifestyle and a political order based on participation in the face of external restrictions. In this respect, too, the EU's strategic capacity to act is more of a solution to existing problems than an additional problem.

In designing the project to establish the Union's strategic capacity to act, it must of course be borne in mind from the outset that its effects on the member states will vary. Some of them, presumably the Baltic states and Poland, will attach great importance to the fact that the project does not amount to a relativization of US security guarantees, because they see these as the only reliable guarantee against Russian attempts at blackmail or aggression. But with the development of a strategic autonomy of the Europeans, the weights will gradually shift:

The countries on the edges of the EU will become the main beneficiaries of this development, because they will not be left unprotected in the not exactly improbable case of further American disengagement in Europe. This applies not only to protection against Russia, but also to the protection of the EU's south-eastern flank against an increasingly unpredictable Turkey. Although Turkey is still a member of NATO, it has long since

ceased to behave as such and is pursuing a neo-Ottoman policy with the aim of becoming the dominant regional power at the intersection of three continents. Whether this will change with Erdoğan's political departure remains to be seen. For the time being, at least, Turkey represents a trouble spot on the European periphery that threatens Greece in particular and against which a Europe capable of action could offer effective protection.

The transfer of security from the centre to the peripheries of Europe is balanced by a considerable gain in influence of the large states in the European centre, insofar as they have a much greater weight at the global level in the European alliance than if they acted as individuals. If Europe were able to act strategically, it could act as a *global player* and exert influence on the shaping of the world order that has been in the making for some time, or actually take the place in this world order that falls to it in terms of its economic power, but which has remained unoccupied due to its inability to act strategically. This would be an added value that would pay off for all EU member states.

Probably the biggest problem on the way to Europe's strategic capacity to act is the political agreement on the possession of nuclear weapons and on the supreme command over them. After Brexit, there is only one nuclear power left within the EU, France, but this should be a relief rather than a hindrance on the path to European nuclear weaponization. It is clear that without its own nuclear weapons and corresponding delivery systems, Europe and the EU cannot have any strategic autonomy, let alone the ability to act, especially since European territory will soon be threatened not only by Russian but also by Iranian nuclear weapons.

Moreover, it can be assumed that as a result of hegemonic competition in the Middle East, other nuclear powers will follow. On the other hand, there is growing uncertainty about the reliability of the US nuclear shield: The more the USA concentrates on the Pacific region, the more questionable it will be whether it will engage in a spiral of escalation to protect the Europeans. In order not to be blackmailed, Europe will not be able to avoid a credible nuclear deterrent under European command. On the way there, however, some European states will have to say goodbye to cherished commitments.

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Prof. Dr. Herfried Münkler is a former Professor for Political Science (Political Theory) at the Humboldt University in Berlin and a member of the Academy of Sciences of Brandenburg. Most of his books are considered standard works, such as „Die neuen Kriege“ (2002) or „Die Deutsche und ihre Mythen“ (2009), which was awarded the Prize of the widely acclaimed Leipziger Buchmesse. Prof. Münkler is a regular commentator on global affairs in the German-language media and a renowned expert of history, political ideas, state-building and the theory of war.