

STRENGTHENING NATO'S EUROPEAN PILLAR

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The US downturn, a major trend

The re-election of Donald Trump has reopened the question of NATO's future, since he has never concealed his desire to repatriate American armed forces, his lack of interest in European security, his desire to reach an agreement with Russia and the priority he gives to strategic competition with China.

It would be a mistake to think that this vision is specific to the new occupant of the White House, since it is so much in line with a major trend in the world's strategic development: tensions are rising everywhere, conflict is back, and the United States - like Europe for that matter - is on the defensive and needs to define its priorities. For Washington, it will be the Middle East to some extent and China to a large extent. With Europe now on the margins of the global strategic game, it is becoming secondary. Europeans are therefore faced with a dilemma: either they assume responsibility for their own security, or they continue to rely on their protector, who risks increasing the political and economic price of its support, while retaining the option of withdrawing if circumstances dictate.

This situation takes Europe completely by surprise. The European Union was built on the rejection of the balance of power, the overcoming of nationalism and detachment from religion. Now these three concepts are coming back with a vengeance in a pendulum swing that, after two centuries of Europeanisation of the world, is rejecting the model, the institutions and the players that have prevailed since the Industrial Revolution, and equating the West's economic, technological and intellectual leadership with a form of colonialism.

Europe is therefore being challenged, politically, culturally, economically and militarily. It is being challenged first and foremost by Russia, which wants to take advantage of this strategic upheaval to assume leadership of the European continent. Supported by his Eurasian allies, particularly China, Vladimir Putin is focusing his military efforts on Ukraine and has his eye on the Baltic states, but is also acting in a more subtle way to shape his neighbourhood (Georgia,

Armenia, Romania, Moldavia, Hungary, Slovakia and Serbia) as well as Western European opinion. Europe is also challenged by its southern neighbours, who are disappointed and frustrated by the gap in economic and social development, and whose resentment is based, around the Mediterranean, on a growing cultural rejection of European values, federated by a conquering Islam. Russia is cleverly exploiting this South-North tension to use it as an indirect front against its adversary. as an indirect front against its adversary.

European countries are in for a rude awakening. For half a century, they have blindly disarmed, convinced of the advent of perpetual peace and the benefits of soft trade. Banking on a structural easing of tensions and on the American umbrella to manage residual violence, they have reduced the size of their armies, weakened their defence industry and, above all, insidiously allowed the spirit of defence and the moral forces without which nothing is possible to disintegrate. At the same time, know-how and technologies have been disseminated around the world for economic purposes, making our adversaries more powerful today. On our continent, only France and Great Britain have reserved an embryo of industry and military capabilities from which reconstruction is possible.

This considerable weakening has been masked by the pooling of the few remaining resources. This has been the ambition of the European Union since the Saint-Malo summit in 1998, with real successes but on a small scale and always lagging behind the increase in conflict around us. The EU has conducted eighteen military operations since the first stabilisation operation in Northern Macedonia in 2003, most of them training or support missions of limited scope, the most significant in terms of risk probably being the most recent, Operation Aspidès, tasked with helping to secure maritime traffic in the Red Sea in the face of attacks by the Yemeni Houthi militia. Significantly, many European navies have cancelled their participation because the risk was considered excessive. In the field of defence, European initiatives are numerous but all too often cosmetic. The mutual defence clause included in the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, despite its strong commitment to solidarity, does not reassure anyone.

Developing Europe's capacity for action

For its part, NATO remains a particularly credible military organisation even though the majority of its members are also members of the EU (23 out of 32). The paradox is only

apparent: beyond the standardisation that enables the interoperability of military forces, which is essential if allied armies are to operate together, its real added value lies in the presence of the United States. Its unrivalled military, economic and political capabilities lend credibility to the Alliance and give it a privileged place in the leadership and direction of the Organisation. This exceptional position was granted to the United States as early as 1949, when NATO was created as the successor to the Western Union, which consisted solely of Europeans and was considered too weak. The growing aggressiveness of the Soviet Union had made it necessary for the great ally across the Atlantic to participate, bringing with it a deterrent operational credibility. The end of the Cold War made this positioning less essential and the Europeans, urged on by the French, wanted a rebalancing in their favour, the famous 'European pillar of NATO' that the Americans have always been reluctant to develop in order to retain a say over their allies.

The sudden change in our strategic environment is creating a very uncomfortable situation for Europeans. They are facing a growing threat from Russian aggression in the east and more diffuse tensions in the south, at a time when interest in the continent is waning in Washington, which is concentrating on China and Asia. The Europeans do not yet have the means to ensure their own defence and want the United States to continue protecting them, so they are in a position to demand in return increased purchases of American equipment and alignment with their political positions. Joe Biden has successfully exercised this form of blackmail (almost two-thirds of European arms purchases are now American), and Donald Trump has already announced that he is going to step it up. The resulting siphoning off of

The resulting siphoning off of European budgets is preventing the development of an autonomous European defence capability, making our continent even more dependent on its great ally and even more vulnerable in the event of its withdrawal.

A European capacity for action can therefore only be built within NATO, progressively, at the cost of an effort by each of the States according to its political ambition and its industrial and military capabilities.

France, which still has both, could play an important role if it agreed to sacrifice part of its well-being to its defence. For the record, French defence budgets, which were between 3% and 6% of GDP during the Cold War, have been below 3% since the mid-1970s and below 2% since the mid-1990s, while the US equivalents have never fallen below 3% during the period (except

1999-2001). Such a financial effort is essential, but it would be futile if it were not accompanied by a collective reflection on the reasons for defending ourselves.

collective reflection on the reasons for defending ourselves, which require us, as nations and as a European community, to answer the following questions: Who are we? Who are the others? How vulnerable are we? What must be defended? At what cost?

In a structurally hardening world where violence and war are closing in on us, it seems clear that Europeans must be able to ensure their security and deter aggression. American protection is extremely effective and irreplaceable today, but in the face of the Chinese imperative, its time is running out. It is therefore urgent that Europeans realise the danger that lies ahead, make the necessary financial and psychological efforts and gradually take over from their protector. The challenge is first and foremost intellectual: we must become aware of the reality of the threats surrounding us, of the unexpected vulnerability of our societies, our values and our populations, and of the need for a collective effort to survive as a community. History is back and civilisations are mortal.