



American assertiveness. UN irrelevance. Europe's moment?

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Summary

- The United Nations missed its opportunity to shine with the Covid-19 outbreak and was ignored over the recent Afghanistan crisis.
- Collective-action incapacity also happens to lie at the core of EU foreign policy weakness in the face of major recent geopolitical developments, such as Afghanistan and the AUKUS agreement.
- The emerging Cold War global atmospherics suggests an adverse environment for the EU to add substance to its oft-stated objective of strategic autonomy. However, intensifying great power polarization raises the need for a more assertive global Europe capable of effectively defending and sustaining a rules-based global multilateral system.
- The EU's existence in the world as a trade and regulatory (super)power is best served by a well-functioning rules-based multilateral system, of which the EU is currently the most credible and ardent defender.
- In the escalating rivalry of the US with China there is no doubt where the European Union's allegiance lies. Europe has been a steady pillar of the Euro-Atlantic alliance.
- A trade power and a global leader in combating extreme poverty and climate change, the European Union sees it in its best strategic interest to keep China engaged in the collective provision of global public goods ensuring sustainable development worldwide and preventively addressing the causes of massive migration waves.
- The EU should grasp the emerging opportunity and assert its own approach, aimed at a dual objective: first, to apply its moderating influence on the escalating Sino-American confrontation; and second, to breathe new energy into a visibly ageing global multilateral system and its frustrated ability to provide global public goods.
- Meeting this objective rests on two conditions: first, the EU should avoid introverted and short-sighted reactions to the Afghanistan and AUKUS challenges. Second, the EU should take bolder steps to enhance its own capacity to contribute to the public good of international security.

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The ongoing UN General Assembly of 21-27 September has been unfolding against a rather unpropitious backdrop. The United Nations missed its opportunity to shine with the COVID-19 outbreak (how closer could you get to a global health emergency?). Mired in confrontation and mutual recriminations between a denialist White House still under Trump and a Chinese government reluctant to assume responsibility for the virus outbreak, the UN and WHO failed to grasp the moment. After four years of the UN being systematically undermined by the Trump administration, Biden's election signaled a return to sanity and the multilateralist order the UN stands for, with an American President committed to the importance of global institutions, to restoring US funding for and trust in the WHO, to returning to the Paris climate agreement; a President who was keen to underline the US's commitment to its post-war transatlantic alliances. The euphoria was short-lived, however: the Afghanistan debacle showcased a version of US unilateralism that flew in the face of Biden's soothing rhetoric. Allies were not warned, let alone consulted, and needless to say the UN was completely ignored. A humanitarian crisis of global proportions, especially one which unleashed security challenges for all the parties involved (including China and Russia, temporary *Schadenfreude* aside), should have been a prime new opportunity for the UN to offer its services. Alas, once again, it did not happen, with an emergency session of the UN Security Council on Afghanistan producing scant, if any, tangible outcomes.

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To be fair, the blame for the UN's chronic emaciation does not lie with the UN itself, but rather with a Security Council that is structurally incapable of engendering a convergence of opposing sides in the face of major crises. **When intergovernmental organizations are trapped in paralyzing inertia, it is not due to a lack of organizational ambition; rather, it is because their main constituent member-states have deprived them of that ambition.** No efforts, however valiant, on the part of the UN Secretary General and a well-meaning administration can overcome the collective unwillingness of their principals to allow the UN anything resembling substantial political clout.

Collective-action incapacity also resulting from unanimity-based decision-making happens to be at the core of European foreign policy weakness in the face of recent major geopolitical developments. **Just as the EU was kept in the dark over Afghanistan in August, so was it caught on the back foot once again come September when it learned that a trilateral military agreement had been sealed in the Indo-Pacific between Australia, the UK and the US.** The AUKUS agreement seeks to counterbalance China's assertiveness in the region and gears up the transition to Cold War confrontation. Certainly, this is how the majority of Europeans view it. A recent [ECFR opinion poll](#) found that nearly two thirds of Europeans (63%) believe a new Cold War is underway between China and the United States.

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The continuing marginalization of the UN is indicative of a long-standing crisis of multilateralism. In this context, **the emerging Cold War global atmospherics suggest an environment inimical to the EU adding substance to its oft-stated objective of strategic autonomy.** The history of European integration shows that efforts to deepen foreign policy cooperation among EU member-states tended to flourish in periods of Cold War détente between the US and Soviet Union, and to be frustrated during periods of escalation. At the current global juncture, however, **it is precisely this intensification of Great Power polarization that creates the need for a more assertive global Europe capable of effectively defending and sustaining a rules-based global multilateral system.** Multilateralism is Europe's secular religion, after all, and the European Union constitutes a regional multilateral order in its own right. In fact, the EU's very existence in the world as a trade and regulatory (super)power is predicated upon, and best served by, a well-functioning rules-based multilateral system. **In many respects, the EU is**

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currently the most credible and ardent defender of multilateralism, as evidenced by the Treaties and those policy documents that articulate the EU's security doctrine. **For the European Union, rules-based multilateralism has an intrinsic value and is inextricably intertwined with what Europe is, how it views itself, and how it engages with the rest of the world.** A threat to the global multilateral system represents a threat to the European Union.

In the escalating rivalry between the US and China, there is no doubt where the European Union's allegiance lies. **Europe remained a pillar of the Euro-Atlantic alliance, even when Trump was voicing doubts about the commitment of the US on the other side of the Atlantic.** The European Union shares the views of the Biden administration on China: As a systemic rival, an economic competitor, and an illiberal regime inimical to the liberal democratic values and institutions the West stands for. But the EU additionally emphasizes China's role as a necessary partner in matters such as the climate and the functioning of global institutions; a partner that should be actively engaged, rather than simply confronted and contained.

As a trade power and a global leader in combating extreme poverty and climate change, the European Union considers it to be in its own best strategic interest to keep China engaged in the collective provision of global public goods; this is the best way to ensure sustainable development worldwide, and preventively address the causes of massive waves of migration, which tend to wash up on European shores. This means sustaining working channels of communication and rules-based cooperation with China, and avoiding a Cold War politico-military escalation that could easily spin out of control. President Biden's hailing of the UN's mission of multilateralism [from the floor of the UN General Assembly](#), his invocation of American civic leadership (rather than military power), and the need to replace “relentless war” with “relentless diplomacy” were all meant as assurances that the era of aggressive “America First” isolationism was over. They also represent the kind of constructive US approach that allows Europe to add greater value to its transatlantic alliance and its role in the world.

Building on this benign concurrence of its multilateralist ideology and pragmatic economic and political collective interests, the European Union should grasp the emerging opportunity and assert its own approach with a view to attaining a dual objective: first, exerting its moderating influence on the escalating Sino-American confrontation; and second, breathing new life into a visibly ageing global multilateral system and its frustrated ability to provide global public goods. In this respect, **the current conditions create a niche for European foreign policy**, which should mobilize the EU's diplomatic and political machinery.

Meeting this objective rests on two conditions: **first, the EU should avoid introverted and short-sighted reactions to the Afghanistan and AUKUS challenges.** Setting justified bitterness aside, the European partners should focus on the broader picture and avoid missing the forest of the changing global security environment for the trees of arms contracts. The first signs of France's rapprochement with the US after its initial embarrassment is a very welcome development in that direction. France is emphatically calling for a more assertive global Europe and is the member-state *par excellence* when it comes to providing the necessary impetus in that direction. A long-term falling out between France and the US would undermine any potential for the EU to realize its mediating role, and could lead to EU foreign policy drifting in the wrong direction, further [disrupting transatlantic ties](#).

Second, the EU should take bolder steps to enhance its own capacity to contribute to

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the public good of international security. This entails both a more efficient decision-making system and an investment in collective military capabilities. The former should address institutional bottlenecks that delay, and occasionally annul, the EU's ability to respond in a timely fashion to international security crises. Unanimity comes at a cost, and that cost increases exponentially in crisis situations.

Investment in collective military capabilities points to enhanced defence cooperation in Europe. Macron's repeated calls for a European Army since at least 2018 have met with no substantial follow-up. It was frustration with the lack of progress within the EU structures that led the French President to set in motion the European Intervention Initiative (EI2), an operations-oriented framework aimed at facilitating the emergence of a European strategic culture. This autonomous initiative involves a nucleus of 13 European countries, including Norway and the United Kingdom outside the EU, which have expressed their political willingness to shoulder a commitment to military operations. Together with the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects, these multilateral frameworks of cooperation are indicative of the multiplicity of medium-range initiatives in the field of security and defence cooperation among EU member-states. At the bilateral level, the 2019 Franco-German Aachen Treaty included several references, and a mutual commitment, to strengthening Europe's military autonomy and collaboration, bearing in mind the two countries' obligations in NATO. But Macron's powerful calls, in his 2017 Sorbonne speech and his intervention at the 2020 Munich Security Conference, have not managed to alleviate Germany's long-standing reservations. And despite the narrative of complementarity and non-duplication, the multitude of schemes and partnership formats suggests that European defence cooperation remains incomplete. **The obvious challenge thus remains of melding all these schemes into a single, coherent and weighty scheme of European defence cooperation.**

On both intra-EU fronts—namely security decision-making and military capabilities development—there has been little in the way of substantial development. But international events have provided one opportunity after another to appreciate why an assertive global Europe is as elusive as it is necessary. **Sino-American confrontation and faltering multilateralism are creating an environment in which the EU can make its voice heard as a global actor with a very specific role: preventing a new Cold War escalation, and bolstering the global multilateral order.** Can Europe seize the opportunity?