

‘Strategic autonomy for Europe - the aim of our generation’ - speech by President Charles Michel to the Bruegel think tank

It is a pleasure and a privilege to speak to you today under the aegis of the Bruegel Institute. Your contributions to the debate on Europe do not go unnoticed; they have an impact.

European strategic autonomy. Or sovereignty? Or power? We all know that concepts and words can take on different connotations depending on the context. Today I'd like to concentrate on the substance behind the words. But first of all, I'd like to avoid laying myself open to a common accusation by saying: autonomy is not protectionism. Quite the opposite! Allow me to try and explain why.

You will recall that Paul-Henri Spaak said, 'There are only two types of country in Europe: small countries... and countries which are small, but don't yet know that they are.' This inspires me to say: Europe is a major player, but doesn't yet know that it is.

The last three decades, as we have continued to build the European Union, have brought the creation of the single market, the Schengen area, the euro, the great enlargement... And finally, the Treaty of Lisbon, which consolidated our institutional framework.

Each of these stages has strengthened the European Union and its autonomy. These developments have given us a huge market, and an area of freedoms which has become the world's largest trading bloc.

And they have given rise to the widely-acknowledged 'Brussels effect' so well described in Anu Bradford's book. 'Brussels effect' is not the bureaucracy of which we are so often accused. Rather, it is the ability to spread rules and standards across the globe, which earns admiration beyond the boundaries of the EU. Just as Molière's Monsieur Jourdain speaks in prose without realising it, Europe has become a world power without realising it.

Our climate diplomacy is a prime example. We are at the vanguard of the fight against climate change. In 2018, a few pioneering countries committed themselves to carbon neutrality by 2050. After that came the struggle to win people over, the mobilisation of civil society and of young people for the climate. And in December 2019, with the support of Ursula von der Leyen's Green Deal, the 27 member states made the 2050 commitment for the entire European Union. Then we firmly conveyed this message to China, including at our recent summit with Xi Jinping. His announcement at the UN last week of China's 2060 commitment crowns a real diplomatic success. And, of course, we must remain vigilant as to its implementation.

So why is it more important now than ever for us to choose strategic autonomy for Europe?

Because the globalised world has changed radically since the end of the Cold War. And because an arc of instability has emerged around us.

To the east, the natural and harmless extension of the European democratic space has been brutally halted by Russia in Ukraine. Russia saw it as a major geopolitical threat. That cost Ukraine part of its territory and brought a war in the east that is constantly destabilising the country. Although the context is different, the events in Belarus again highlight the challenge at Europe's eastern borders.

In the Eastern Mediterranean we face tensions and unpredictable developments. Libya and Syria are centres of insecurity and instability. Greek and Cypriot sovereignty are put under pressure. Our relationship with Turkey is being severely tested. This is why the next European summit will be dedicated to adopting a strategic European position in relation to the region. I have proposed holding a multilateral conference on the Eastern Mediterranean to address issues including maritime boundaries, energy, security and migration.

To the south, Africa. In Europe and among Europe's leaders, I can feel how much the perception of Africa is changing. Africa's energy and vitality open up the prospect of an unprecedented alliance. It is up to us, the leaders of Africa and Europe, to make it happen.

To the west, Brexit. In the wake of the referendum, the European Union was shaken by the result. It was a choice in favour of national sovereignty that felt like a failure in the construction of Europe.

Where do things stand today? The United Kingdom has had to come to terms with our quiet strength. The truth of the matter is that the British are faced with a dilemma. What type of society do they want? Would they rather maintain high standards (in health and food safety, the environment, etc.)? Or do they want to lower their standards, exposing their farmers and businesses to unfair, cut-throat competition from other parts of the world? The answer to that question will determine what level of access we can grant to our internal market.

When it comes to our alliance with the United States, beyond our values and historical ties, we cannot ignore an increasing number of geopolitical choices that run contrary to Europe's interests. Weakening multilateralism. Withdrawing from the Paris Agreements. Pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal. Flirting with protectionism... These are not mere details. We are, and we wish to remain, a steadfast and loyal ally of the United States. We hope that it's mutual.

Lastly, China, where our approach is one of engagement. China is an indispensable player when it comes to meeting global challenges such as climate change and COVID-19. But on trade and the economy, we are in the process of rebalancing our relationship: we want more of a level playing field, more reciprocity. On the issue of human rights, we will not look the other way, and we are prepared to promote our values.

If Europe faces complex challenges, that is not because it is weak, despite what some might claim. It is because Europe ranks among the world's foremost strategic powers.

At times when Europe has appeared too weak, or indeed too soft, it was not necessarily because others were stronger. Often, it was because we underestimated just how much influence we had.

Europe has this unfortunate habit of self-flagellation, even when taking robust action. But the reality is that our heated debates and apparent confrontations are part and parcel of our decision-making. That is something to be proud of. We are not North Korea. We are a group of democracies, with public debate guaranteeing the legitimacy of our decisions.

Proof of this ability to overcome differences and set a course came in response to COVID-19, when the EU seized upon the 'momentum' created by the pandemic. The 1.800 billion euro mobilised in July is the fuel that will power our strategy for resilience and for environmental and digital transformation. That decision will go down as a key moment in history.

We are capable of rising to the challenges we face in Europe. Now it is our duty to use that capability in our external relations.

Why, how and when?

Our strategic autonomy must pursue three objectives. One: stability. Two: disseminating our standards. And three: promoting our values.

Stability first and foremost means physical security. It also means environmental security: air quality, access to drinking water, protection of biodiversity, respect for the planet and for the human species...

It also means economic and social security. That calls for a favourable environment for investment and trade, both within our market and with the rest of the world. Upholding fair market conditions and reciprocity with our trading partners is one of our priorities. We advocate free and open economies, and we are opposed to protectionism. But access to our large market cannot be given away for free. The lower your compliance with standards, the more restricted your access. Whether you're leaving our Union, or building closer ties with it.

Economic security also means securing our supply of critical resources: medical products, rare earth elements... And also microprocessors, which are so essential for our digital sovereignty – this is another key aspect of our strategic autonomy, which is vital for our digital transformation.

Stability also means managing our migration policies in an orderly and lawful way, with respect for human dignity. We will have a lot of work to do on this issue.

Our second objective is to safeguard our capacity to set standards. That capacity is a key factor contributing to Europe's current power. Our standards on the use of chemical substances ensure that toys produced around the world are safe. Our General Data Protection Regulation set the global standard for the protection of privacy online. Likewise, our definition of hate speech, and pressure from us to eradicate it, are what pushed the big platforms to start ridding the internet of that scourge.

We also see the degree to which climate is a new strategic front where Europe can win the battle of standards. By pioneering environmental technologies and setting the relevant standards, we will achieve two goals: taking the lead in that field, and helping to win the fight against global warming.

This actually illustrates my third objective. The strength of our economic and social model lies in the fact that it is founded, in a way which is unique, on the bedrock of our values. It gives us great legitimacy and makes us hugely attractive in the eyes of many partners around the world.

We must draw further strength from that foundation, so that we can forge a more peaceful, a more humane and a fairer world. Leading the fight against global warming, upholding fair rules on trade, fighting for fairer taxation... All this is in our interest, and in the universal interest.

We have solid instruments at our disposal. We must make more use of them and we must make better use of them.

First, we have financial resources. The recent decision on the recovery package is key in this regard. Then there are the European competences. Used wisely, they can have a major impact. Trade agreements, development aid, economic governance, financial market supervision, an industrial strategy, a digital agenda, a space strategy... And of course the euro, which needs to have its international role developed. Policies on sanctions and visas are a sovereign instrument which we can also mobilise.

Let's be honest. There is room for improvement in terms of coordinating and harmonising these instruments for our international strategy. Our High Representative is a super-Minister for Foreign Affairs. That is the letter and the spirit of Lisbon. He is fully committed to the role. His experience and his skill are assets. It is my hope that as Vice-President of the European Commission and President of the Foreign Affairs Council, he will have all the political space needed to further our shared interests.

And his is not an easy task, since in foreign policy unanimity is required. This issue of unanimity is, as everyone knows, regularly discussed. And my opinion on it is nuanced. It is true that requiring unanimity slows down and sometimes even prevents decision-making. But this requirement pushes us to work unremittingly to unite the Member States. And this European unity is also our strength. Unanimity promotes a lasting commitment by the 27 countries to the strategies which have been developed together. So I wonder: would abandoning unanimity really be such a good idea? Are there not other, more relevant reforms which would allow us to move more quickly on the international stage without losing the added value of our unanimity?

My modest experience is as follows. Very often, in recent months, I have found that what seemed to be significant divergences between Member States were quickly worn away through substantive discussion. This was the case with China. Political preparations have in just a few months allowed us to define a common position that is now being put forward by all. It will be the same on the Eastern Mediterranean and on Belarus. I am confident that here, too, we will express common positions which will draw their strength from our unity. The major decisions taken on the budget and the recovery fund are further illustrations of this certainty: political confrontation and the exchange of substantive arguments are an indispensable part of the process of democratic debate. This is what gives decisions their legitimacy.

Trust and personal respect also play a key role, which is why I encourage interaction – in various formats, sometimes informal – as much as I can. Unity does not develop spontaneously. It takes work, tenacity and constant, unwavering commitment.

Defence is not an EU competence like any other. I am aware of the various national sensitivities. I believe that deepening common defence is necessary, and is not an ideological obsession but a matter of common sense. This project must be carried out within NATO. This is the purpose of the strategic partnership between the EU and NATO. Permanent structured cooperation and the European Defence Fund, for which we have just earmarked EUR 7 billion, are fully in line with this ambition. And I applaud Jean-Claude Juncker and Federica Mogherini, whose strategic leadership in this area has not yet been fully appreciated.

The European Union is inherently a positive, open and tolerant force. We know that free and fair trade contributes to societies' development. Our caring and humanistic values inspire our project of transformation. Climate neutrality and digital sovereignty are opening up new spaces for human intelligence, innovation and democratic debate. Our objectives are ambitious and demanding: peace and prosperity. And this is exactly why we must make better use of all aspects of our power, be more consistent in the use of our tools. True to our values, realistic, less naive... A power working for a world that is more respectful, more ethical, and more just. Sovereignty, independence, empowerment... Whichever word you use, it's the substance that counts. Less dependence, more influence. Effective strategic autonomy is the credo that brings us together to define our destiny, and to have a positive impact on the world. Thank you.

Press office - General Secretariat of the Council

Rue de la Loi 175 - B-1048 BRUSSELS - Tel.: +32 (0)2 281 6319

press@consilium.europa.eu - www.consilium.europa.eu/press