



## Has the Hour of European Sovereignty Come?

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On 12 September 2018, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, delivered his final State of the Union speech (a custom that dates back to 2010) in front of a half empty chamber of MEPs, but with old-school charm and wit. It was basically his farewell address ahead of the appointment of a new Commission after next year's European Parliament elections, which may see a rise in status for right-wing extremism across the board. Through this unofficial barometer of the EU's state of affairs and spirit, this year he promised that *"we will keep working to render this imperfect Union that little bit more perfect with each passing day"* by planting **"the seeds of a more sovereign Europe"**, the leitmotif of his address.

In 2016, President Juncker's speech had a darker tone, talking about a gloomy, if partial, "existential crisis" to be dealt with in the wake of *Brexit* and the menacing tides of migrants coming to Europe's shores, fuelling populism and **a resurgence of identity politics that was undermining European solidarity** – that year's leitmotif. In many ways, 2015 was Europe's *annus horribilis*, marked by a tendency for many disillusioned citizens to feel disenfranchised and to lose their last shred of belief in, or hope for, an integrated and multicultural Europe where political globalization would keep up with economic globalization. It also went on to show that democracy can be corrupted and made oppressive through manipulation and disinformation. In 2017, Jean-Claude Juncker seemed more cheerful and optimistic about the future of the Union, stressing that *"the wind is back in Europe's sails"*, but warning that the *"window of opportunity will not stay open forever"*.

What exactly did the eighth instalment of the speech augur?

For starters, Juncker focused on **the economic recovery of Europe, 10 years after the crisis** that erupted on Wall Street with dire consequences all over the world, the European Union included. "Never have so many men and women – 239 million

people – been in work in Europe”, the President of the European Commission said, adding that *12 million new jobs were created since 2014* and that **Europe’s economy has grown for 21 consecutive quarters**. Also, he congratulated the Greeks for finally exiting their international bail-out programme, hailed the results of the so-called “**Juncker Fund**” (for strategic investments) and welcomed *the new “zero tariffs” deal agreed with American President Donald Trump in July*, when he managed to achieve more for transatlantic trade than French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel combined. A three-pointer for supranationalism in the face of intergovernmentalism, but the match is definitely not over yet.

**Despite setbacks, the European project, which brought 70 years of unprecedented peace to a war-torn continent, has been a success. The emergence of a unified European community, as a system of differentiated integration, has to be one of the most revolutionary and consequential events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.** The resulting *sui generis* polity born in the Dutch city of Maastricht remains to the day a hybrid, constitutionally placed between a state and an international organization, operating through ministerial meetings and supported by a common bureaucracy and diplomatic network. But, *as it stands, the EU still struggles to resolve its variable geometry and its internal tensions in the quest for the values and norms on which it was founded and by which it is guided* towards its common set of ambitious goals, due to be reconfirmed at the **Summit of Sibiu** on the Future of Europe, scheduled on 9 May 2019, during the first Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

“**The world needs a strong and united Europe**”, outlined Juncker, who coined in his speech the term “*Weltpolitikfähigkeit*” – the capacity to play a role, as a Union, in shaping global affairs – and pleaded in favour of Europe becoming “a more sovereign actor in international affairs” by (more frequently) speaking with a single voice. As such, the President of the EC was echoing the **Europe United** concept put forth by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas in August. According to Maas, the main goal of the EU’s foreign policy is to build a strong Europe, “capable to act with sovereignty where nation-states alone cannot muster the level of power a united Europe can”.

And, frankly put, *nothing underscores more the relevance and timeliness of a unified Europe than the ongoing deterioration of the transatlantic relation, in particular, and of the liberal world order, in general*, in the age of the Republican President Donald Trump. POTUS 45 is the first American president who does not believe that the preservation of the European Union should be a strategic objective of US foreign policy and who weighed **the utility of the North Atlantic Alliance in purely transactional terms**. Nevertheless, Trump’s foreign policy regarding the Old Continent may be just a continuation of a longer trend, which began when the Cold War ended, lacking the usual diplomatic curtesy of former administrations. **Back in 2016**, Trump’s predecessor, the Democrat Barack Obama, seemed to resent the idea of America being

condemned to remain the world's indispensable nation *à la longue* and complained about the Europeans as being “free riders” in the US-European relationship, in the context of post-conflict reconstruction efforts in Libya.

All that comes as a confirmation that **the impetus of the age is national identity and national interest rather than shared norms and values** – some countries that had seemed to be successful liberal democracies during the last decades have slid backward toward repression and authoritarianism, including EU's own Hungary and Poland. As **Walter Lippman warned almost a century ago**, the basic problem of democracy derives from a “breakdown of the means of public knowledge” and the lack of “contact with objective information”. Europeans have a habit of looking only to the US as the root of all their, and the world's, political and economic turmoil, while ignoring their own internal divisions and double standards, which ultimately undermine the normative power of the EU. Acknowledging this unsettling reality, Juncker suggested that politics may be getting even harder: “*I would like us to reject unhealthy nationalism and embrace enlightened patriotism*”, he urged, given that Europe's migration crisis is far from over, in light of fears that Eurosceptic and xenophobic national politics will mark the upcoming European Parliament elections.

On the social dimension, Jean-Claude Juncker, for whom Europe remains “the love of his life”, stressed the importance of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** and of not ignoring the legitimate concerns of workers and small businesses. Also, he echoed the idea that **Member States will fully deliver on their citizens' needs and expectations only if Europe will be able to breathe with ‘two lungs’** – the Old Europe (West) and the New Europe (East). It was yet another appeal to cohesion and unity, an implication that shared sovereignty cannot properly function without genuine and enduring solidarity, with the latter being dependent on a sustained effort of winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of European citizens, “who deserve better than uncertainty and confused objectives.”

In hoping to see a more independent and bolder Europe on the international scene, **Jean-Claude Juncker mentioned the prospect of European defence and supported the idea of a move to qualified majority voting on certain foreign policy topics prone to lack of consensus**. Ensuring that he does not intend to militarize the EU, the EC President promised to “*work day and night during the next months to see the European Defence Fund and Permanent Structured Cooperation in Defence become fully operational*”. Through the Permanent Structured Cooperation, launched at the end of 2017, 25 Member States decided to pool their defence efforts and increase their effectiveness in addressing common security challenges and advancing towards further integrating and strengthening defence cooperation within the EU framework.

The quest for European strategic autonomy became necessary in order to avoid the growing spectre of geopolitical irrelevance, as *peace dividends* are becoming a thing of the past. Arguably, the **principled pragmatism** (central to the **EU Global Strategy** of 2016) is set to replace the principled ambiguity (of the first European Security

Strategy of 2003) more out of necessity rather than ambition, against the background of a shifting world order. As a side note, it is well worth mentioning that after *Brexit* unfolds, 80% of NATO country defence spending will come from non-EU members, even though primary purpose of NATO was and remains the defence of EU countries.

And it was the collective defence umbrella provided since 1949 by NATO that, among other elements, allowed Europeans to invest in their economies rather than in their militaries. The **Western European Union** of 1954 (terminated by the states party after the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force) was a bold, yet arguably premature European attempt at an intergovernmental defence alliance (with a mutual defence clause), but it constantly remained in the shadow of NATO. Strategic autonomy should, however, focus on more than defence and security. When taken as a bloc, the European Union is one of the world's largest economies, accounting for **22 percent** of world GDP. Yet a still struggling euro, which hasn't gained the full confidence of big investors, represents a much smaller share of global currency reserves and international trade when compared to the all-mighty dollar. As a result, Juncker promised that, before the end of the year, his Commission will present initiatives to strengthen the international role of the single European currency: "***the euro must become the face and the instrument of a new, more sovereign Europe***".

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