



# # BAKS Working Papers

---

## Europe's Emergency - Now!

by Armin Staigis

**The coronavirus pandemic is putting the European Union to an unprecedented test. As of now, it is impossible to foresee its full extent. At the same time, the crises and conflicts in Europe's vicinity are still ongoing, while the global balance of power is shifting. The EU will only be able to withstand this critical situation as a global actor by strengthening "European sovereignty" with a clear strategic orientation while striving to maintain the transatlantic bridge.**

After the 2020 Munich Security Conference, the President of the Federal Academy for Security Policy put forward a paper entitled "Europe in an Emergency". He couldn't know yet that it would only be a few weeks before Europe, the European Union, was faced with an emergency. A worldwide pandemic, caused by the rapid spread of the coronavirus, has now also reached the countries on the European continent, where it is putting the population, societies, and the effectiveness and sustainability of liberal democratic states and states confederations to a test like we haven't encountered since World War II.

What do pandemics and epidemics have to do with security policy? In political science and in political practice, they have been considered among other threats and risks as "cross-border risk factors", listed along with the effects of climate change, demographic developments, urbanisation and uncontrolled migration. However, neither academics and think tanks nor politicians and their administrations have adequately addressed pandemics and epidemics, let alone fully grasped their implications. With both the effects we can already recognize and those we can still only anticipate, the current coronavirus pandemic will have very far-reaching consequences for transatlantic, European and German security policy in future. This is especially applicable if we pursue the comprehensive concept of security that is relevant today and acknowledge that internal and external security can no longer be separated.

On that note, let us start with two thoughts. Mutual trust and reliability, as well as solidarity and assistance, within societies, between states and in alliances, are the basis, even the very "lifeblood", of politics and therefore also of security policy. Some of these political basic substances have been lost in this crisis and had been even before it, both in transatlantic relations and within the EU itself. The reversion to national and often nationalistic attitudes has obviously come to dominate our thinking, with a return to the selfish principles of "Me first" and, more recently, "Everyone saves themselves". The socio-political consequences of this development have probably been underestimated. The second thought refers to the foreseeable economic and social effects of a "shutdown" if it has to remain in effect for a longer period of time for medical reasons. This could lead to the most severe global economic crisis humans have ever experienced. History has taught us that the associated economic up-heavals can result in a destructive political potential with far-reaching consequences for peace and internal and external security.

## European politics – a critical review and outlook

What is the perceived image of the European Union at the time of this pandemic crisis? In public perception, the EU is not adequately prepared for a situation like this, and this view is probably not very far from the actual circumstances. Political decision-makers neither acted rapidly nor coordinated. The national states are primarily focussing on themselves, and closing their borders to neighbouring states without prior consultation. This does not stop the virus from spreading. Initially, there was a complete failure to concentrate on the most severe infection clusters with targeted containment and mutual support, particularly across borders. The first laborious steps in this direction are now being taken. The public perceives that China is providing faster, more helpful support in Europe than the EU and its members are assisting themselves. This impression is disastrous when a pandemic of this kind would be just the opportunity for proving that the EU is capable of taking coordinated action in solidarity on the basis of commonly agreed standards and protective measures.

This pandemic should finally give Europeans a wake-up call, because they will only be able to cope with the effects collectively. This will require an unsparing analysis of EU policy in the past decades, far beyond this crisis. It might be helpful to look back 25 years. „Reflections on European politics“ (*Überlegungen zur europäischen Politik*), a document by the CDU/CSU Parliamentary Group in the German Bundestag from 1 September 1994 (!) better known as the *Schäuble-Lamers Paper*, lists the following major causes for the situation of the EU at that time:

- “[...] increasing differentiation of interests based on different levels of social and economic development which threaten to overshadow the fundamental consensus of interests;
- different perceptions within a Union, extending from the North Cape to Gibraltar, on the prioritisation of internal tasks, and even more of external tasks (e.g. Maghreb-Eastern Europe);
- a deep economic structural change, with its mass unemployment that cannot be resolved in short term, which threatens the already overloaded social welfare systems and the stability of societies. This crisis is one aspect of the comprehensive crisis of civilisation in Western societies;
- increase in ‘regressive nationalism’ in (almost) all member states, resulting from deep-seated anxiety – caused by the problematic results of the civilisation process and by external threats such as migration. The fears will lead to, if not to solutions, at least to protection by returning to the nation and the national state; [...]”.

When studying these lines, we inevitably ask ourselves what has changed, 25 years later. The answer is little to nothing, some of the causes mentioned have even been aggravated. “Fighting causes”, an interesting term from a different political context, has obviously not happened or not led to the intended results. Of course, the situation of the EU has changed in these 25 years. The Union was able to adopt a new treaty in a lengthy and difficult process. Their cohesion has been and is still being put to difficult tests – “9/11” terrorism, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the financial and debt crises, the migrant crisis, Brexit, and now the coronavirus pandemic. Some of these tests were mastered impressively, but the unresolved and the foreseeable crises and conflicts could now be subsumed in the biggest challenge.

Furthermore, the global environment has continued to develop rapidly in recent years. With a view to the crises and conflicts in its immediate vicinity, global power shifts, and the economic, technological and ecological developments, the EU is facing the clear cognition that it must become a global power political actor, a political entity, if it wants to protect and ultimately also defend its common values and interests. The EU is in a difficult, even threatening geopolitical situation. It is surrounded by the arc of crises in the south and east, from Africa with Libya and the Sahel, to the Middle East with Syria, Iraq, Iran, Yemen and the unresolved Israel-Palestine issue, up to the European continent with the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the situation of the Baltic states, and the not pacified Balkans. In summary, the EU is faced with a large number of conflicts that are either led or supported by unpredictable autocratic states which use force. This is causing continued uncont-

rolled migration to Europe. As of yet, there is still no EU migration policy. Overall, external and internal peace are threatened. In a global context, the United States, Europe's most important ally to date, is eroding as a liberal regulatory power. In some regions of the world such as Africa and the Middle East, the US is marginalising itself. While America is increasingly absent as a shaping and balancing actor, China is appearing on the global scene. With its economic power, it is pushing onto the European continent, becoming not only a trading partner but also a political rival. The EU has yet to find a common political and strategic response to China.

In addition, the EU will of course be greatly affected by the meta-developments such as the advanced globalisation of the world economy and the resulting dependencies, by the rapid digitalisation of living and working environments, by climate change and by demographic developments within the Union itself and its neighbourhood. These complex challenges are by no means new, since science has long been pointing them out. Now it is high time to find answers and implement them into concrete measures, while preserving European values and interests. These actions have already and will have relevance in future to internal and external security. In addition, there is an internal crisis in the EU by questioning liberal democracy as the fundamental model. In some countries, this crisis is also combined with a "flirtation with autocratic temptations". These developments are accompanied and reinforced with a recourse to the national, even the nationalistic. Perhaps this internal crisis is more dangerous than all the external crises and conflicts. The new President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen has expressed what is now most important for Europe in this sense as follows: "If we are united on the inside, nobody will divide us from the outside".

In concluding this situational assessment, a final thought about the rules-based international order and the recognition of international law, both areas of which the EU has been strongly committed to preserving and developing: International law is being violated, and countries are withdrawing from treaties and agreements, which leads to a lack of predictability and a loss of trust and reliability. These developments are toxic to diplomacy and, thus, for any peaceful conflict resolution. The EU must fight against this with all its power.

### **The EU must find the ability to act in emergencies! Now!**

What must the EU and its member states do now in the case of this major pandemic crisis and its unforeseeable impacts? How can they gain relevance to peace, security, and even to reconstruction and prosperity in Europe through cohesion, solidarity and trust among their citizens? Here are three suggestions: Firstly, in this complex, rough and insecure world, the European Union must not become the pawn of hungry rising powers – China and India – or of self-related revanchists – Russia and also Turkey – or of egocentrics going off course – the United States. The Union must finally develop into an actor on a global scale, "truly take [...its] fate into [...its] own hands" (Angela Merkel), become "able to act credibly on the global stage" (Jean-Claude Juncker) and "learn the language of power" (Ursula von der Leyen).

In this context, Europe will not be able to assert itself as a group of nation states that laboriously pulls together on each and every issue. Too often, it fails even to do this, as the coronavirus pandemic makes painfully clear. In the future, only an integrated and interconnected Europe can stand up for its values and represent its interests. For this reason, since his 2017 Sorbonne speech, French President Emmanuel Macron hasn't tired of calling for the development of "European sovereignty" in order to be able to contribute to the rewriting of the rules for the newly emerging world order and to find and enforce solutions in crises and conflicts. Even in the 1950s, German Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer already spoke of gaining European sovereignty by giving up national sovereignty. This is therefore not a new insight. Shaping this sovereignty requires a strategic orientation of the EU as the prerequisite for the European ability to act. This necessitates a targeted strategic dialogue that will lead to a common understanding of risks and threats, as well as an agreement on suitable forms of prevention and response, within the framework of a comprehensive concept of security. Ultimately, the question to be answered is how Europe will protect itself, and if necessary defend itself in future. The answers to this question form the basis for effective crisis prevention and conflict management and even European defence, including nuclear deterrence.

Secondly, in times of nationalistic recourse and failure to recognise the lessons of history, it will not be easy to take these paths successfully. Therefore, some EU member states will have to move forward in a process open to all and set the course. Already in 1994, Wolfgang Schäuble and Karl Lamers outlined the necessity of this kind of core Europe, a Europe of different speeds, in the aforementioned paper. This has become EU law and anchored in the Treaty of Lisbon, meaning that it can be put into practice. However, there is a lack of political will. Germany and France bear the primary responsibility in this regard, along with any other EU states that are willing to proceed. Germany also bears a special responsibility in holding the EU Council presidency in the second half of 2020, as we should not waste any more time now. In this context, a note about the United Kingdom: even after Brexit, the UK will continue to share the same values and a large number of interests with the EU. The security and defence of the EU and the UK will remain inextricably linked. For this reason, it will be important to find ways of working together on foreign and security policy and to establish functional networks and institutions – one key issue regarding this: building a European Security Council.

Thirdly, those who advocate independent European security and defence are almost automatically accused of wanting to tear down the transatlantic bridge, or to call the North Atlantic Alliance into question or even want to abolish NATO. That cannot and must not become European policy. But already in the 1990s, former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski warned the Europeans: “Europe can no longer adhere to a security policy that makes it effectively a US protectorate”. In other words: the basics are currently being withdrawn from the European business model, consisting of its own economic advancement with the United States’ security guarantee. The current US administration has made this very clear from the beginning. The pandemic crisis has already made it alarmingly clear how far an “America first” policy can go. That should make Europeans think. Nobody can predict what will follow this US policy after the elections in November 2020. Regardless, on both sides of the Atlantic it cannot and will not be accepted any more that 340 million Americans are bearing the brunt of security for 500 million Europeans. The “outsourcing” of European security to Washington must be stopped.

In practice, this means more European cooperation and integration, which ultimately also includes the development and expansion of European civil and military capacities and capabilities in the sense of comprehensive and networked security. It will take time and money, but if you don’t start, you won’t get there. If this had already been achieved, there would be no discussion as to whether the Europeans are even capable of building a safe zone in Northern Syria or ensuring observance of a peace agreement in Libya. It is and will remain in Europe’s own best interest to make every effort to ensure that the transatlantic bridge does not crumble or even collapse through European action. Perhaps Washington will also stop its “demolition work” on this bridge soon. After all, in this conflict-ridden period, we must do our best to maintain NATO, and to strengthen it again, with two sound pillars. We need more Europe, not less America.

### **The EU must develop “formative power” in this crisis**

There is an opportunity in every crisis, also for the EU. There is the opportunity to put an end to national egotisms and a policy of not getting involved, in the deceptive hope that someone else will fix it. Whether and how the Europeans will be able to tackle the pandemic crisis will remain unclear until we know how the virus has actually changed our lives. At the same time, the EU will have to face the other ongoing challenges. In this context, the deciding factor is not confrontational power, but formative power. To this end, Europeans will especially have to maintain and cultivate the ability of self-criticism and self-correction, in contrast to authoritarian systems and, unfortunately, currently also in contrast to Washington. That should be the opportunity for the EU to take advantage of.

*Brigadier General (ret.) Armin Staigis is the Chairman of the Association of Friends of the Federal Academy for Security Policy, and was Vice President of BAKS from 2013 to 2015. The author expresses his personal views.*