

Middle Powers Realities in the EU amid Great Power Ambitions

A way forward amid the Covid-19 crises



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The interconnected crises generated by the Covid-19 pandemic have captured most of our attention and energy. We have seen through this pandemic different responses and strategies that states adopted, and how they turned out, at least in the short term. Some countries became success stories, whilst others provided lessons to the international community of what not to do. Most countries, however, tried to adapt. They might not have known from the beginning what the right strategy is, so they tried to make their way through by assessing responses and learning along the way. Countries have different territories, economies, systems, capacities, cultures and levels of preparedness. It is difficult to tailor the perfect response, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Regardless of the response and situation of every country, what is clear is that for any government, the crises which were triggered by the novel coronavirus, both health- and economic-wise, have necessitated lots of time, effort, nerves and careful analysis.

At the European Union level, as well as for Member States' governments, the attention is now concentrated on the vaccine rollout and vaccination campaigns. Vaccines are now the (best) hope of bringing an end to this pandemic. When a high percentage of a country's population has received the jabs, collective immunity is reached, and life could come back to (maybe not the "old normal", but at least to) physical interactions and a better functioning of the economy.

However, while officials are busy figuring out ways to increase the vaccination rates (the EU is lagging behind others such as the US and the UK, and has been caught into disputes with pharmaceutical companies such

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as AstraZeneca) life does not stop, and nor does global power competition. In fact, to what we knew so far as being expressions of the rivalry between great powers, such as trade wars, new forms have been added, such as increased competition regarding recovery: who recovers first, who vaccinates its population first, who can stop social distancing measures and open up economies and societies. This time is not about putting a man on the moon like during the Cold War, but the overall goal is equally important.

Because of this, a common dilemma appears. Before the pandemic, everybody had an agenda, and this agenda had to change to accommodate the challenges brought about by Covid-19. The following question arises. How much should be kept from the original plans and should completely new plans be tailored for the threats of the new era we live in? From this perspective, the European Union crafted a very solid plan. It adapted previous intentions, to focus on digital and green economy, and pushed for a recovery plan, with the largest stimulus package ever, but based on digital and green recovery, with the intention of building a more resilient Europe. After a rocky start, the EU got involved in the funding of the vaccine and secured equal access to it for all Member States – a test of EU unity and decisiveness.

Alongside Europe's recovery plan, the EU has been increasingly talking about the concept of strategic autonomy, or strategic sovereignty. Discussions around this topic started since 2016, but geopolitical realities, coupled with the Covid-19 pandemic, proved to be a fertile ground to push forward the idea. Although the concept is still not universally defined and understood by the Member States, it essentially captures the bloc's desire for cooperation and coordination with partners whenever possible, but to have the power and capacities to operate independently whenever necessary.

Although the election of Joe Biden might have led to the EU and some Member States sigh with relief, this is very unlikely to stop the EU in its pursuit to achieve strategic autonomy, as it is also unlikely for the US and China not to continue their strategic competition. The changing global context, the rise of China, weakened multilateralism, protracted conflicts in Europe's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood, the relation with Turkey, Brexit, disinformation operations, climate change, and the Covid-19 pandemic are all reasons that contributed to this desire of increasing the EU's own capabilities, of not wanting to be a pawn caught in the crossfire of great power competition and of wishing more room for manoeuvre - the ability to pursue its own destiny.

The EU is considered by many a great power, and some authors and experts even go as far as calling it a superpower. Indeed, the EU is the biggest and richest multinational single market in the world, and it surely has great power ambitions – the slogan “Global Europe” transmits exactly this message. However, it is in practice a club of middle powers (such as Germany and France), and aspiring middle powers (such as Poland and Romania), working together to make a great alliance.

My argument here is that contrary to the expectations, we do not need to be perceived as a great power or a superpower. The EU can portray itself exactly as it is at its core, an alliance of middle powers with great ambitions, and I think this could bring many benefits and would help the EU thrive during the Covid-19 crisis and beyond. Let me explain why.

Middle power diplomacy is usually characterised by creating a network of countries, pursuing multilateralism rather than unilateralism. It means showing good international citizenship, framing yourself as a trustworthy and reliable partner, who wants to solve regional and global issues through international fora and based on principled approaches. Middle powers can and must follow their own objectives, which should be made clear. However, it means achieving them by partnering up. Another concept which was coined recently is *neo-middle power diplomacy*, which includes alongside the usual norm-based policies that middle powers follow, a more proactive approach, with lobbying, rule-making and setting standards.

In a world with increased geopolitical rivalry, middle powers diplomacy might be the best solution to ensure peaceful power transitions and relations. Having a network of partners means less dependency, and coalitions of such like-minded countries can stabilise the international system.

Acting like a middle power is not only about diplomacy, but it is an attitude as well. It is about humbleness. In his book *Has the West Lost It?*, Kishore Mahbubani talks about the Western hubris, and how this not only led to actions which might have been to the detriment of others, but to the West itself, because it has not been able to see the obvious bigger trends in the world. Acting with humility (and empathy, I would add) wins more partners, and being aware of the fact that the world does not revolve around you makes it possible to actually better observe the world and strategize better.

Indeed, having the superpower title can have benefits. But it also brings responsibilities and expectations. You need to allocate more resources, time and money, to pay attention and respond to whatever happens in the entire world, because you have a place at the table and not answering is also a message you transmit. On the contrary, having a middle power status means you can concentrate more on what concerns you and what you think is worth being involved in. This does not mean you do not have regional or international responsibilities and expectations to meet, but they are lower and much more flexible.

I believe that the EU would have a lot to win if it would not embrace the great power status, but that of a great alliance which consists of middle powers (and aspiring middle powers) and act as such. To make it clear, this does not mean not having great ambitions. The Global Europe project, the recovery package and pursuing strategic autonomy are achievable and admirable plans on which the EU should move forward. It is the manner in which these goals are pursued that I am talking about.

Moreover, in order to be a great alliance, the EU should work more on internal consolidation. Divisions within the European Union can oftentimes prevent effective common action, especially because of the unanimity rule in foreign policy, but not only. There is a great debate on whether implementing a system of qualified majority voting would fix this problem or not. However, beyond procedural aspects, what is clear is that the EU should address these issues more, so that Member States manage to voice their opinion, but ultimately put their differences aside and work collectively. If the EU wants to achieve strategic autonomy, fostering a collective interest and strategic culture has to be the main long-term goal.

If and when the EU manages to be so well consolidated that the Member States have a common opinion on aspects such as foreign policy and defence, becoming essentially a “superstate”, then it could think about embracing the great power or superpower status. Until then, it should continue pursuing great ambitions with a middle power diplomacy and mentality.