



The COVID-19 pandemic, which has rocked the world, could prove to be one of those major upheavals capable of changing the face of the planet. Time alone will tell. At the very least, the pandemic raises issues with regard to the principles of solidarity, human dignity, freedom, democracy, rule of law and peace that are the founding values of the European Union.

The measures suggested here are designed to attenuate the impact of economic recession, while at the same time optimising defence and security capacities without encroaching on individual Member State's sovereignty.

Today's crisis arguably marks the end of an era on three fronts: the end of the West's monopoly over world history; the end of post-war American dominance and the end of rampant globalisation. There are lessons to be learned, for it is often in the face of adversity that Europeans manage to dig deep and find the political courage and determination to move forward as a body. COVID-19 is therefore a chance for the EU to gather the strengths it needs to earn the recognition and respect required of a leading player on the world stage.

In an increasingly threatening environment, Europe's first responsibility will be to keep its citizens safe in every regard and defend their interests at home and abroad.

COVID-19 has put enormous pressure on European solidarity, with Member States initially adopting an "every man for himself" approach. But by 28 January, the European Commission reacted by triggering its crisis response mechanisms. It wasted no time in collecting public and private funds to pay for research into new vaccines and methods to diagnose and treat pandemic victims. It established common stocks of medical equipment and helped repatriate many of the Europeans stranded abroad. Solidarity among the nations finally emerged with the decision to allow patients to be transferred across borders to hospitals with available beds.

The European Union must now embark on proactive steps in the interests of economic recovery, not via a new Marshall Plan where support would come from outside but by dipping into its own resources. Efforts are already in hand to find ways of compensating for what is bound to be a dramatic slump in the EU's GDP, which is predicted by the European Commission to fall by 7.4% in 2020. Naturally, health and employment will have to be given top priority. In addition to the essential changes in behaviour patterns, it will also be vital to rise to the challenge of saving the planet, which will place even greater demands on our national purse-strings.

The EU is likely to find itself even more isolated and, doubtless, more vulnerable in the new world order, whence the urgent need for its members to provide it with the wherewithal to be a respected player in the international arena and create the environment of trust and solidarity it has so far failed to achieve. While strategic autonomy may be a matter of survival for health, industry, power, the economy and diplomacy, the EU's main responsibility will be to work with Member States to ensure the safety and security of its citizens.

Public health security will be one of the first items on the agenda. Policies will need to be developed at national and European level, backed by dedicated industrial resources and technologies.

Public health issues should form part of an overall assessment of the prevailing risks and threats. While biothreats, as embodied by COVID-19, have for decades represented a major potential danger, no real steps were ever taken to prepare for this eventuality. The crisis we are facing today shows just how vulnerable we really are. Some countries have even taken advantage of the situation to test our ability to protect ourselves, ramping up their cyberattacks and feeding us a steady diet of disinformation in a bid to weaken European cohesion and destabilise international organisations and treaties. It is an ideal opportunity for terrorist groups such as ISIL, in whose eyes the pandemic as an act of divine retribution, to strike a new blow. There is a growing feeling of instability and uncertainty. Nowhere is safe, except perhaps orbiting space stations, and even then, there are no guarantees!

The situation is alarming and Europe desperately needs to decide on a course of action. A new defence and security policy framework needs to be established to cover the whole of European territory, for many of the ominously looming crises are bound to have a direct impact on our nations. Putting it in other words, the European Union now has the chance to demonstrate that defence and security go hand-in-hand and that the resilience of its Member States is one of its key objectives.

While we have no wish to usurp the defence responsibilities of Member States, we strongly believe that it is time Europeans woke up to the fact that they share a common destiny and the importance of pulling together as a community. There is surely no denying that the European Union should play a greater role in advance strategic planning, sharing information, response coordination and general resurgence. But such an approach will require more shared resources and, in particular, the creation of a climate of trust where Member States will be able to pool the results of their risk analyses and agree on how the EU should respond with their support. To this end, Brussels should finally be equipped with the strategic level capacity it needs to plan ahead for and manage multi-sector emergencies, whilst maintaining its own superstructure and distinct military chain of command.

To counter the effects of the imminent economic crisis, Member States should jointly agree on incentives in the defence and security sector. Contrary to the approach adopted in 2008, this new wave of defence investment will need to be carefully planned with national trade-offs coordinated at European level and by applying a rationale based on sharing and complementarity.

The incentives proposed, some of which are already being set in train by the European Commission, will take three forms: the European Defence Fund, a general recovery fund and a dedicated industrial recovery plan. The principle of the European Defence Fund has already been accepted by Member States. It should now be provided with the financial resources conducive to European cooperation and to sharpening the European defence industry's competitive edge and innovation capacities. Europe's defence autonomy is at stake. The amount to be allocated to this fund is scheduled to be voted shortly as part of the EU's overall multiannual budget for 2021-2027. The recovery plan mentioned by the Commission has the potential to release substantial resources in the interests of solidarity to support those EU countries the hardest hit and reboot the European economy, in general, and the defence sector economy, in particular.

Last but not least, there is an urgent need for an industrial recovery plan specific to the defence and security sector within the EU to be added to the mixture. This plan would come into two stages, the first being steps to ensure the survival of companies in this sector and, the second, the release of funds specifically for the purchase of strategic equipment. Some of this equipment could be directly procured by the European Union itself, with priority going to terrestrial and space situational awareness systems, along similar lines to the Galileo programme in 2007, strategic transport resources, planes or logistics-support ships, and even sanitation facilities.

The current health emergency is bound to have far-reaching implications. More than ever, the EU will need to be self-reliant. If it is to rise to the occasion and assume its responsibilities as regards the future of the human race, it will have to tap into its own inherent resources. In an increasingly violent environment, its first obligation will be to ensure the safety and security of its citizens, defending their interests and values across the continent and throughout the world.

*Written on behalf of EuroDéfense-France by Patrick Bellouard, Nathalie de Kaniv, Maurice de Langlois, Patrick de Rousiers, Jacques Favin- Levêque, Patrice Mompeysson, Jean-Paul Palomeros, Jean-Paul Perruche, Philippe Roger, Cyrille Schott.*

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