The World HandCOV'd: Europe will emerge stronger from the pandemic

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Key takeaways

- The COVID-19 pandemic marks a decisive moment for the EU.
- The liberal international order is in a state of crisis and in times when the United States pulls out of international institutions it is up to the EU to defend a rules-based multilateralism.
- COVID-19 has uncovered vulnerabilities, including inside the EU. Yet, the EU's economic measures show that European institutions are not the inflexible bureaucratic behemoths some would consider them to be.
- For Europe, the transatlantic alliance remains indispensable despite all turbulences; but it *"ought to work on the vision of one day establishing a proper European army"* to complement NATO.

"In an interconnected world, none of us is safe until all of us are safe."

António Guterres, UN Secretary General

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown – once again – that international coordination is indispensable. Multilateralism has come, however, under immense pressure and when cooperation was needed the most unilateral measures set the tone. The liberal international order is in a state of crisis and in times when the United States pulls out of international institutions it is up to the EU to defend a rules-based multilateralism.

Reactions to the pandemic

The first reflexes of EU Member States to the crisis, however, did not mirror their commitment to a united Europe based on shared values of mutual assistance. The image of an EU unable to act seemed to dominate the headlines and the unpredictable

situation had the potential to become the hour of populists. However, those who hoped for Europe to fall to pieces were disappointed.

It is important to note that the EU has limited competences in the sphere of public health. The main responsibilities lie in the hands of Member States. Nevertheless, EU instruments such as the Civil Protection Mechanism, rescEU, the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (as well as the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus) and other European responses such as cooperation on digital health tools in the eHealth Network aiming at cross border interoperability of tracing and warning apps which follow European data protection standards have proven that the EU is taking visible actions in the management of the crisis. The proposed EUR 9.4 billion EU4Health Programme for the 2021-2027 period is another example of the EU's strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, the EU's financial and economic measures show that the European institutions are not the inflexible bureaucratic behemoths some would consider them to be. In particular, the European Commission's proposal to establish the EUR 750 billion instrument *"Next Generation EU"* to support Member States' recovery is a strong argument counteracting anti-European forces that consider the EU superfluous. Together with the various efforts of the Member States, the initiatives demonstrate the willingness of Europe to overcome this crisis.

COVID-19 has uncovered vulnerabilities in international politics, including inside the EU. The planned Conference on the Future of Europe, an open debate process, is a useful framework for discussing the lessons to be learned from the pandemic. To involve citizens in the discussion of the future of multilateralism and the role of the EU in the world could provide additional ideas which could enrich the debate.

In a world filled with tension, it is essential to promote dialogue, cooperation and mutual trust both inside and outside the EU. In 2020, Germany bears special responsibilities to promote these principles, as a member of the UN Security Council, holder of the presidency of the Council of the EU and Chairman of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

It has become clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating pre-existing trends such as *"targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns"*.

> The authoritarian notion that a *"strong hand"* is required in order to combat the virus and to counteract its socio-economic consequences of the crisis is erroneous.

Shifts in public perception could, however, take place based on who will be the first to create a vaccine for COVID-19. The *"infodemic"*, as the European Commission Vice-President Věra Jourová described the crisis, could therefore take a new twist.

EU's strategic interests

For Europe, the transatlantic alliance remains indispensable despite all turbulences. Therefore, the NATO reflection process (NATO 2030), a German proposal launched in spring 2020 in light of disinformation, comes at an opportune moment to enhance NATO's political dimension. In consideration of the challenges facing Europe, Chancellor Merkel underlined in her speech on 13 November 2018 to the European Parliament that Europe *"ought to work on the vision of one day establishing a proper European army"* to complement NATO.

The recent letter from the German, French, Italian and Spanish Ministers of Defence to their EU colleagues and the High Representative/Vice-President of the European Commission Josep Borrell contains concrete proposals for *"upcoming steps leading to a stronger European defence"* such as strengthening PESCO and improving the coherence of EU tools. The vision of the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen is a Europe that is *"more strategic, more assertive and more united in its approach to external relations"*.

The Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries are of strategic importance in the Eastern dimension. Therefore, it is crucial that the EU reaffirmed *"its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans"* and identified five long-term, post-2020 priorities concerning the Eastern Partnership.

Russia continues to consider the post-Soviet space its sphere of influence. The illegal annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine illustrate – once more – that Russia is capable of unpredictable actions. The once *"strategic partnership"* turned into one of antagonism and mistrust. Nevertheless, the five guiding principles (2016) agreed on remain an important orientation for Member States. Europe's **long-term** strategic interest is, however, to have close relations with Russia that are based on the spirit of the OSCE.

China is the EU's second largest trading partner (after the U.S.), however also a competitor in terms of values and governance. The corresponding differences are visible for instance concerning the discussion on the future of Hong Kong. The EU-China Summit scheduled for September 2020 in Leipzig, Germany, but now postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic is a chance for the EU to present itself more united and to

define the relationship in more detail. Here it should be added that Portugal, which will assume the presidency of the Council of the EU in January 2021, will concentrate, inter alia, on EU-India relations.

> COVID-19 overshadows other questions that remain important and exposes shortcomings in international cooperation on issues such as arms control, nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, to name but a few.

Furthermore, hate speech – online and offline – continues to poison our societies. The attacks in Pittsburgh, Christchurch and Halle (Saale) have shown that racial and religious hatred is not limited to certain countries.

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic marks a decisive moment for the EU. The tragic loss of more than 470.000 lives is a constant reminder that health care is a task that concerns national states as well as the international community as a whole. Therefore, more and not less multilateralism is needed in order to address this crisis and to be able to act in the next one.

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