



IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19:

TROUBLED WATERS AHEAD FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION

Mats Engman

The European response to the Covid-19 outbreak has been described as disjointed and insufficient. Blame has been placed upon the EU and its false portrayal of European solidarity in times of crisis. Some European nations have gone as far to openly criticize the EU for not anticipating the outbreak and implementing countermeasures, and instead praised China for its assistance during this great time of need. However, many of the voices now lamenting the response from Europe are the same that have voted against EU proposals to better coordinate national healthcare systems as such measures would infringe upon the sovereign right to control matters of domestic importance. Clarity and fact-based analysis are sorely needed during times of crisis because in their stead arise sentiments of fear, blame and nationalism.

The Fragmenting of Multilateralism

The status of multilateral institutions and multilateral cooperation has been much discussed lately. This is not least due to a sharp change in traditional U.S. foreign and security policy, characterized by the “America First strategy”. This has, among other developments, seen American allies being forced to accept unilateral decisions on alliance relations, burden-sharing issues being driven by a very one-sided economic view on common security (just pay more and/or buy more U.S. weapons), and multilateral institutions (e.g. the World Trade Organization) being partially paralyzed by U.S. decisions. Such actions have played into the hands of

China, Russia, Turkey, among others, as they imply a revival of classic and nationalistic driven power-politics.

For organizations like the European Union this position is already challenging its role both internally and internationally, particularly in its pursuit of a Common Security and Defense Policy. Countries like the U.S., China and Russia clearly prefer to work directly with individual countries rather than through multilateral frameworks, which is a significant challenge for the EU.¹

The current Covid-19 pandemic is adding increased challenges to an already problematic existing



situation for Brussels, with the fallout of Brexit and struggles over the long-term EU budget being two key concerns. Major powers like Russia and China are exploiting the situation by adding fuel to the fire.

The former Head of the European Council, Donald Tusk, took to Twitter on March 13, 2020, stating: “China and Russia have started an information war with the West. The main arguments: ‘the virus has come from the USA’ and ‘the EU is doing nothing’, are spread also by the so-called useful idiots. In the time of a real plague let us be immune to the virus of a lie.”² Mr. Tusk, in his Twitter remarks centers on one of the key aspects of the current climate of political division. China and Russia are deliberately using a multitude of information operations to spread lies, sow uncertainty, and mislead the general public, including politicians and organizations, with the overarching objective of gaining influence. The digital world has enabled them to seize upon an opportunity to achieve “decisive influence from range”.

Russia and China have, for various reasons, capitalized on the Covid-19 pandemic to further political divisions in Europe.

Formally within the EU, public health is a national responsibility. However, a perception of close cooperation and coordination, solidarity during a crisis and a principle that the better off states should support those in greater need, does exist. There is also the expectation that the EU should be able to mitigate some of the worst economic consequences of a health-crisis.

Political Challenges and Consequences for the EU

The first and probably most critical issues that arise from this crisis are political. Politics are primarily

about confidence, credibility and being able to deliver what people believe is most essential. This is now being challenged. The EU is already split on various issues like the amount of control given to Brussels, integration, immigration, the north-south divide and its relations to Russia and China to differing degrees. The former axis of Berlin and Paris, for decades the driving force of European integration, is currently looking inward. The reality post-Brexit balance is coming closer to hand and the traditionally strong transatlantic partnership is waning.

Capturing the Narrative

So far, the EU response to the Covid-19 outbreak has been far from forward leaning, well-coordinated or heavy on of solidarity. Russia and China have, for various reasons, capitalized on the Covid-19 pandemic to further political divisions in Europe, using primarily disinformation campaigns but also, to an extent, concrete physical measures. The Global Times presented an article accusing Sweden of “capitulating” to the Covid-19 virus and arguing for the EU to condemn Sweden.³ As Sweden has chosen a different and more relaxed approach to combat the Covid-19 pandemic than most other EU countries, it was an easy division to exploit and which gained traction on social media.

In March, there were several articles appearing in respected Western media channels highlighting the extensive assistance packages in healthcare equipment provided by China to Italy and other states in Europe.⁴ Such articles typically pointed to the lack of a cohesive European response and that the desperately needed medical equipment was being provided by a nation taking the pandemic seriously. However, this surface level analysis played into the hands of the Chinese government, which has been trying to capture the global narrative and promote a picture of Beijing handling the pandemic effectively to the point where they are providing aid to other countries.

Aid has been much needed in Europe but in facilitating its provision China has been subtly



exercising its soft power, with some willing enablers on the European side assisting in this message. Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, who helped sign Italy up to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), publicly praised Beijing's donations, stating; "We are not alone".⁵ Perhaps implying that the country had been so until that point. Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic lauded China's delivery of aid and contrasted it against the "fairy tale" of European solidarity.⁶

In certain sections of European society this sense of abandonment (accelerated by the psychological impact of quarantine measures) is very real. The message that the U.S., Europe, and more generally the West have failed to take the crisis seriously has resonated with many, and China, either directly or indirectly, has been able to cast itself as a foil to this dissatisfaction.

The success of this propaganda coup by Beijing has encouraged Moscow to follow suit. In March Russia also sent medical equipment, including ventilators, into the virus epicenter of Bergamo in northern Italy. Military trucks transporting the equipment were well documented and alongside the Russian flag their aid packages were stamped with the tongue in cheek phrase; "from Russia with love".⁷ Italy was quick to demonstrate its gratitude for the assistance, though analysts within the EU and NATO see this move less as selfless assistance and more as a strategy to assert Russian power and influence.⁸

Donations from China and Russia prompted EU High Representative Josep Borrell to comment that; "There is a global battle of narratives going on in which timing is a crucial factor". China is currently pushing a message that, unlike the U.S., it is a responsible and reliable partner. This battle of narratives has also seen attempts to discredit the European Project and even question the original point of origin of the virus.

Various Kremlin affiliated websites are also pushing alternative theories to the Covid-19 pandemic and

trying to re-direct attention away from sensitive issues in their own country, such as the MH-17 investigation. However, such media stories amount to what are clearly part of a disinformation campaign. Beijing is also spreading a narrative that casts China as a reliable partner in a time of great need, in contrast to the U.S., which early in the crisis closed its border to Europe.

As more well-known and credible institutions like major media companies and religious institutions also question government advice and recommendations in the Covid-19 pandemic, this contributes to a confidence crisis for traditional politics.

State of Control

Certain countries (e.g. Hungary) have ushered in far-reaching and draconian measures, jeopardizing some of the core democratic values of the EU. An apparent risk is that such power centralizing measures will remain in place even after the pandemic is over. The EU Commission's response has been far from strong and speak to a Union that accepts "member-nations" that distance themselves from the EU's core values. Even in Sweden, a country with deeply entrenched legislative and bureaucratic powers, there was a call for a transfer of power from the parliament to the government, a suggestion that was decried for being too far-reaching when first presented⁹

Many European nations were ill-prepared to deal with a Covid-19 type of pandemic/crisis, even though there has been much talk about "wider security

challenges” in various EU strategy documents, public rhetoric, as well as in national policy documents. If the respective national health institutions, with or without European support, are all to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the current crisis, a discussion on national preparedness may follow. For countries like Sweden, where the health-sector’s “over-capacity” ceiling is comparatively low and there are almost no national stores of critical medical equipment, politicians risk being accused of negligence.

As the Covid-19 crisis continues we also see signs of a better coordinated and more dedicated EU response.

There is a real risk that the current political establishment in Europe could be challenged by opportunistic and nationalistic leaders. A trend already visible in parts of Europe, illustrated by Matteo Salvini, a right wing politician from Italy who posted on twitter in relation to the Covid-19 crisis; “We have to re-examine Europe (the EU) and Italy’s role in it. It has not come to our aid at all.”¹⁰

This more divided world where political leaders and institutions are being challenged is also mirrored and reinforced in private social media debates, which are becoming more radical, polarized and are allowing conspiracy theories to grow. As more well-known and credible institutions like major media companies and religious institutions also question government advice and recommendations in the Covid-19 pandemic, this contributes to a “confidence crisis for traditional politics”. Such a development presents itself as a dangerous and tough challenge for the EU.

If the current crisis is short of displaying real political solidarity in Europe, it is not completely void of good examples. Germany has assisted Italy

in several ways and especially many very innovative and proactive responses by business, civil society and several volunteer organizations are raising with the challenge, showing both solidarity and coordinated efforts. As the Covid-19 crisis continues we also see signs of a better coordinated and more dedicated EU response. But one fact remains, the EU was slow to respond as stated by Ursula von der Leyen when she apologized to Italy for the late response to support Italy.¹¹

Economic Challenges and Consequences for the EU

In the wake of the Covid-19 crisis we will most likely see a dramatic downturn in economic activity and declining GDP, possibly even a recession, in many European countries. Countries are affected differently, and most in Europe are more or less well positioned to deal with the financial consequences. Some countries, like Italy and France already have very high levels of foreign debt making it more difficult to stimulate the economy through large capital influx while others like Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands have lower levels of foreign debt.

Solidarity in the Face of Mass Recession?

However, for all European nations, economic stimulus will be necessary to avoid bankruptcy and mass unemployment. The European Central Bank can and will have to play a significant role in coordinating these efforts. The European Stability Mechanism, introduced in the wake of the financial crisis, is another instrument to be used. Although it seems as though the EU is currently divided on the application of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) as well as the use of e.g. “Corona-bonds”.¹² The bonds are being promoted by, among others, Spain and Italy to generate new capital, however, others such as Germany, the Netherlands and Finland are hesitant.

An argument arises that countries that have pursued

a stringent economic policy over time should not have to shoulder the responsibility for those nations who have taken a more relaxed economic policy. The extent of “economic solidarity” in times of crisis or fully accepting EU financial rules and regulations is being tested. This debate has already played into the hands of more nationalistic sentiments. The former Italian (nationalistic) coalition government was to a degree borne out of a rejection of strict economic regulations imposed by the EU.

The true meaning of solidarity and coordinated action among the EU member states are and will be further tested. If the discussion of the next EU long-term budget and the lack of solidarity and a coordinated EU response to the Covid-19 crisis so far is any illustration, this act of solidarity will be a hard sale.

A likely outcome of the current crisis is more investment in national civil resilience preparedness in for instance, critical infrastructure, national depots of strategic goods, as well as more national control over critical businesses. All of which will cost significant financial investments.

Security Challenges and Consequences for the EU

In the Global Security Strategy adopted by the European Union in 2016, the then High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini mentioned in her introduction statement; “And wherever I travel, our partners expect the European Union to play a major role, including as a global security provider. We will deliver on our citizens’ needs and make our partnerships work only if we act together, united. This is exactly the aim of the Global Strategy for European Foreign and Security Policy”.¹³ The strategy also reinforces that internal and external security are intertwined.

However, what has unfolded up to now, is far from these ambitious objectives. If the EU is not

able to “act as one” internally as well as externally, the credibility of the EU as a security provider is tarnished and maybe even questioned.

The transatlantic relationship, key to European security, is already under some strain, due to changes in U.S. foreign and security policy.

The Transatlantic Alliance

NATO, as a military security organization, has managed to make use of its general “operational crisis management capability” by providing military support (e.g. personnel, logistics support and field hospitals) without much of the political debate, that has hampered the EU.¹⁴

The Alliance is already coordinating and supporting national efforts against the pandemic with logistical, transport and medical help. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg tweeted; “I am grateful for the further offers of assistance, which NATO Allies made today and for the substantial support that Allies have already provided,” citing the airlift of medical supplies, provision of medical personnel and the use of innovative technologies.¹⁵ Mr. Stoltenberg stressed that NATO’s main task remained the protection of NATO’s almost one billion people, and that NATO’s ability to conduct operations had not been undermined.

The transatlantic relationship, key to European security, is already under some strain, due to changes in U.S. foreign and security policy. It is now further negatively affected by Covid-19. As an illustration, the U.S. was accused of “confiscating” 200,000 facemasks ordered from a U.S. producer as they were in transit through Bangkok re-directing the shipment to the United States.¹⁶ The masks were to



be delivered to the local government of Berlin. A local government minister called it “an act of modern piracy”. By invoking the “Defense Productions Act” from the era of the Korean War, President Trump gave himself the legal right to demand U.S. companies produce for the domestic market.

The differences in perspective and relationship that the U.S. has towards China compared to several European countries is becoming more and more difficult to reconcile. President Trump has openly raised concern and criticism on countries not blocking Huawei in the developments on national 5G technology infrastructure.¹⁷ Several European countries are also benefitting from Chinese investments, making these countries less critical to China. (To find out more on Chinese investments, please read ISDP’s paper “Emerging Giant Shaking Up the EU¹⁸”). The push Beijing is making to be perceived as a more willing and prepared partner to assist in the fight against Covid-19 compared to the U.S. may tilt the balance for many countries to take a China friendly view in other areas. The White House is also currently stepping up its criticism of China’s handling of the Covid-19 crisis to combat some of these perceptions.

Conclusion

The EU is under pressure from a more nationalistic U.S. and a more assertive China. The Covid-19 crisis has laid bare nationalistic tendencies within Europe and is putting strain on the Union’s credibility and internal solidarity. In the aftermath of the crisis, the credibility of some European politicians not being able to protect their own citizens may also be called into question. It has also further reinforced an already weakening transatlantic link, where the U.S. is pursuing a very different and more nationalistic foreign policy agenda than previous U.S. administrations.

Added together this may give rise to more opportunistic and nationalistic political leaders in

Europe and fuel centrifugal forces on the continent.

To combat some of these tendencies it will be important for political leaders in Europe to be more transparent, to explain and motivate various choices, be less short-term focused and follow agreed political principles. A strategic objective for the EU should be to focus on developing a coordinated and comprehensive response to the current health, economic and political challenge including common efforts to develop a safe vaccine. Such a response would not be helped by falling in line with those criticizing China. Learning from countries who have successfully handled the outbreak, including for instance Taiwan, should be part of such an effort. ■

Author - Major General (ret.) Mats Engman, is a Distinguished Military Fellow at ISDP. His expertise lies in security policy, military strategy and crisis management, and his work has a particular focus on developments in East Asia, and the Korean Peninsula.

The opinions expressed in this Issue Brief do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.

© The Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2020.
This Issue Brief can be freely reproduced provided that ISDP is informed.

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the inter-relationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute’s primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe’s neighborhood.

www.isdp.eu

Endnotes

1. Henry Farrell, "A Most Lonely Union", *Foreign Policy*, 03 April 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/03/brexit-european-union-deglobalization/>
2. Donald Tusk, @donaldtuskepp, Twitter, 13.03.20, <https://twitter.com/donaldtuskepp/status/1238441894537048065>
3. "Sweden keeps schools open, restricts COVID-19 testing to sick and elderly", *The Global Times*, 13.03.20, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1182550.shtml>
4. See for example: Elisabeth Braw, "The EU Is Abandoning Italy in Its Hour of Need", *Foreign Policy*, 14.03.20, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/14/coronavirus-eu-abandoning-italy-china-aid/>
5. "Is China winning the coronavirus response narrative in the EU?", *Atlantic Council*, 25.03.20, <https://www.atlantic-council.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/is-china-winning-the-coronavirus-response-narrative-in-the-eu/>
6. "Serbian President Labels European Solidarity 'Fairy Tale', Says Only China Can Assist in Coronavirus Response", *National Review*, 16.03.20, <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/coronavirus-outbreak-serbian-president-aleksandar-vucic-labels-european-solidarity-fairy-tale-says-only-china-can-assist-in-coronavirus-response/>
7. Crispian Balmer, "'From Russia with love' mission to Italy hit by press row", *Reuters*, 03.04.20, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-italy-russia/from-russia-with-love-mission-to-italy-hit-by-press-row-idUSKBN21L30L>
8. Robin Emmott, Andrew Osborn, "Russian aid to Italy leaves EU exposed", *Reuters*, 26.03.20, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-russia-eu/russian-aid-to-italy-leaves-eu-exposed-idUSKBN21D28K>
9. "Swedish government 'wants more powers to fight coronavirus pandemic'", *the Local*, 04.04.20, <https://www.thelocal.se/20200404/swedish-government-wants-more-powers-to-fight-the-coronavirus-pandemic>
10. Katya Adler, "Coronavirus outbreak eats into EU unity", *BBC News*, 03.04.20, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52135816>
11. John Henley, "EU offers 'heartfelt apology' to Italy over coronavirus response", *the Guardian*, 16.04.20, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/16/eu-offers-heartfelt-apology-italy-coronavirus-response-herd-immunity>
12. Lewis Sanders, "ESM, Coronabonds or 'Marshall Plan.' How the EU could manage the Coronavirus fallout" *Deutsche Welle*, 07.04.20, <https://www.dw.com/en/esm-coronabonds-or-marshall-plan-how-the-eu-could-manage-the-coronavirus-fallout/a-53047576>
13. "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy", *European Union Global Security Strategy*, June 2016, http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf
14. Conor Rodihan & Connor McPartland, "NATO in the fight against coronavirus: Coordinating, contributing, controlling, and communicating", *Atlantic Council*, 15.04.20, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/nato-in-the-fight-against-coronavirus-coordinating-contributing-controlling-and-communicating/>
15. "NATO Foreign Ministers agree measures to help Coronavirus response", *NATO HQ (press release)*, 03.04.20, https://www.google.com/search?q=%E2%80%9CI+am+grateful+for+the+the+offers+of+assistance,+which+NATO+Allies+made+today+and+for+the+substantial+support+that+Allies+have+already+provided%E2%80%9D,&rlz=1C1CHBF-en-GBGB771GB771&source=lnms&tbn=NEWS&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj8kcD9jPnoAhVM6KYKHYYahBmgQ_AUoAX-oECACQAw&biw=1280&bih=578
16. Ania Nussbaum & Patrick Donahue, "U.S. is accused of 'confiscating' a shipment of facemasks to Germany", *Bloomberg*, 03.04.20, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-03/germany-and-france-blame-americans-for-playing-dirty-over-masks>
17. Todd Shields & Jordan Fabian, "Rejected on Huawei Ban, Trump Now Faces European Defiance", *Bloomberg*, 29.01.20, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-01-29/rejected-on-huawei-ban-trump-now-faces-european-defiance>



18. Fatoumata Diallo & Niklas Swanström, “Emerging Giant Shaking up the EU? Impacts, Challenges and Implications of China’s Investment Frenzy in Europe”, ISDP, March 2020, <https://isdpa.eu/publication/emerging-giant-shaking-up-the-eu/>

