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Europe And The Language Of Power



*Josep Borrell, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has repeatedly warned that Europe must relearn "the language of power". The admonition is appropriate, although at its core it is more about the grammar of power - namely structures and rules. Powerful speech alone does not create influence. The Union as a whole lacks not so much the potential for power as the will and ability to bundle its potential and use it effectively. This is due not least to the paralyzing unanimity principle in foreign and security policy decisions at the EU level, as well as differing perceptions of risks and threats in the south and east of the continent, national reservations and a general lack of consensus on priorities, writes Prof. Dr. **Volker PERTHES**, Senior Advisor and Former Director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.*

If international politics is increasingly characterized by competition between major powers, not least between the United States and China, this also raises questions for Europe: How does the continent intend to position itself more strategically to put its potential on the geopolitical scale?

Although most EU states are members of NATO, the international influence of the European Union is certainly not primarily based on its military potential. Particularly in the case of the Common Security and Defense Policy, there is a wide gap between aspiration and reality. The EU cannot independently establish a protection zone in Syria, nor can it enforce an arms embargo on Libya or force an end to the fighting there. This means, however, that Europe, if it wants to act more strategically than it has done so far, should not primarily rely on military action, but should first of all fully exhaust its options in other fields of action.

The European Union's strongest potential for power lies in the internal market. With 20 percent of global gross domestic product and uniform trade and competition rules, the EU

can define global standards, set guidelines for production and services and set limits for megacorporations such as Gazprom or Google. When it comes to data protection, the EU has shown the will and ability to exert international influence through its own model of data governance. This is of great political importance. In the future, however, it is likely to become increasingly important to bring such influencing abilities to bear in policy areas that are more closely linked to Europe's security policy interests and the geopolitical dynamics in the European environment.

Europeans occasionally complain that the United States, China or Russia have linked unrelated issues in order to achieve geostrategic goals. Exploiting economic, trade and other dependencies is considered ungentlemanly, at least among friends – for example, when the US threatens to impose punitive tariffs on European car imports in order to force Germany, France and the UK to exert more pressure on Iran. Of course, the EU itself also uses its economic power for political goals, not only when it imposes sanctions to punish violations of international law. In most cases the EU uses access to the internal market as a – reversible – political incentive. For example, it ties negotiations on the customs union with Turkey to its internal development. Recently, it has partially suspended trade preferences for Cambodia in order to make it clear that preferential access is accompanied by expectations of compliance with minimum human and labour rights standards. In contrast to the use of comparable means by the USA, Russia or China, the EU is not attempting to impose geopolitical interests here, but normative principles.

In an international climate that is becoming generally rougher, however, the European Union will sooner or later have to ask itself the question of whether and how it will adapt to the behaviour of other major powers and use its strongest trump cards to also give greater emphasis to its own security policy priorities. There will not be a universally valid, generally satisfactory answer to this question – especially since it would first have to be clarified what are real priorities for the EU as a whole: Stability in the neighbourhood? Certainly. Limiting climate change? Without a doubt. Protecting itself and others against political pressure? Probably also. But what that means in individual cases will be politically controversial: Is the arms embargo against Libya important enough for us to deny access to the internal market to states that violate it? Can we conclude free trade agreements with countries that cut down their rainforests? When it comes to technology exports to and imports from China, does Europe have to consider not only the risk of misuse of such technologies, but also Beijing's policy toward Europe's partner states in the Asia-Pacific region? In some cases, difficult trade-offs have to be made. For example, could a restriction of privileged access to the domestic market further weaken already fragile states in the European neighbourhood? Will Europe lose not only market access but also political influence? Might we possibly have to embrace politically difficult partners rather than exclude them in order to promote changes in behaviour?

If only to avoid jeopardizing the effect, a targeted use of market power for geopolitical or security policy purposes can only be used selectively. The EU will, of course, expose itself even more than before to the accusation of applying its standards unevenly (or: in more popular language: of using double standards). But this is what states do: selectivity in using one's instruments means to use them strategically – in light of what you can achieve with your particular means. An open political and societal debate on how to link economic power more closely to political goals would do the EU good in two respects: It would force the EU to seriously agree on its long-term interests, priorities and constraints for action where this is disputed among the member states. Moreover, it would also attract the attention of actors who otherwise tend to ignore political statements from Brussels.



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