



## Whither Europe?

*Ludo de Brabander  
Donald Tusk*

*One of Brexit's less noticed consequences is the accelerating drive towards a European Army and increased military expenditure by the EU27. Previously, the UK has acted as something of a brake on such developments as it sought to prioritise its 'special' relationship with the United States, whose pursuit of global military dominance is structured through NATO, at least in part. In March 2017, the European Union marked 60 years since the founding Treaty of Rome of 1957. In May, NATO gathered in summit to inaugurate its vast new headquarters in Brussels, built at unaccountable public expense. Ludo de Brabander of Vrede, the Belgian peace organisation, helped organise a counter-summit to NATO's. He also found time to pose some searching questions to Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, in this exchange of open letters.*

Dear Mr Tusk,  
I read carefully the public letter you wrote in the run up to the EU Malta summit [03/02/17, see below]. On the eve of the 60<sup>th</sup>



anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, you warn European leaders that the Union risks perishing due to external and internal threats. I do understand, I think. With Brexit and the condescending remarks of the new president of the USA, it seems necessary to call all hands on deck. You called it 'United we stand, divided we fall'.

You see quite a lot of challenges which are more dangerous than ever, since signing the Treaty of Rome. You speak of foreign threats linked to the new geopolitical situation: an assertive China, Russia's policy of aggression in Ukraine and its neighbours, terror and anarchy in the Middle East and Africa and, strikingly, 'worrying declarations by the new American administration'.

But you also see threats coming from inside the Union. Many will share your concerns over the rise of anti-European feelings, growing xenophobia, and national egoism. And you are right, the European elite hardly hides its doubts about European integration and gets seduced by populism at the cost of fundamental values of liberal democracy.

I've read your letter several times. Not that I didn't understand your concern, but I was looking in vain for a kind of reflection. Sixty years, though, seem to me the right moment for retrospection and some critical questions. Just to mention, maybe, something on the neoliberal stance, the social consequences of the budget policy, or questions about the arms trade, about development, investment and trade policy, the refugee crisis, or human rights ...

Could it be possible, Mr Tusk, that Europe's actual situation is a function of past policies? It is hard to believe that nature just pours its disasters over humankind, to which we are then externally and internally subjected. Let us talk about the threats you mentioned above. The outside world has anti-European positions; you mention first of all the 'yellow' danger. Cold war atmosphere is not far away, I see.

It is true, China's naval force operates in its geostrategic environment some hundred kilometres off its coast, it builds small artificial islands to expand its economic zone, and Beijing does not hesitate to claim the seabed rich in resources. And, indeed, I do recognise that it must not be easy for several countries in the Pacific to feel safe when China forms an obstacle. But I don't understand why this is a threat to Europe. Nor do I recall any European concern about the worldwide presence of the US fleet and hundreds of military bases and US troops all over the globe.

In the past century, moreover, Europe had a history of quite 'assertive' global behaviour. I honestly wonder how you can legitimise such a western privilege of worldwide presence against all the ambitions of other great



powers based on the same economic, political and cultural driving forces.

This brings me, unavoidably, to Russia. Your criticism of Moscow will, without doubt, be appreciated in European elite circles whom you wish to awaken with your letter. Moscow has certainly played a role in the violence in eastern Ukraine. Annexing the Crimea is not acceptable. But have you ever tried considering these facts as an ordinary Russian citizen does, who sees NATO moving steadily eastwards since 1997?

I remember strong declarations by some NATO leaders at the 2008 Bucharest summit who said Ukraine and Georgia should be given the prospect of membership of the western military alliance. At the end of 2013 the then president of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, suggested that it was better for Kiev not to work for deeper trade relations with Russia because 'a country cannot be at the same time a member of a customs union and thoroughly immersed in a common free trade zone with the European Union'. Read: Ukraine has to choose between the EU and Russia, it is one or the other. It is not a coincidence that, shortly after, Ukraine fell into a profound crisis.

Mr Tusk, I know that you, as a Polish citizen, understand better than anyone else how it feels when a military strong alliance – which accounts for more than half of worldwide military expenditure – comes so close to your border.

I'm still trying to grasp the urgency of the Russian threat, to understand the hysteria shown by quite a lot of western leaders. It is not reasonable to think this is due to Russia's military spending, which is only some seven per cent of the combined NATO members' military budgets. Putin cannot be that lunatic to go for suicide? Even if President Trump's America should let us fall and Brexit London should turn its back on Europe, France and Germany combined still have a bigger military budget at their disposal than Russia. Is that the place to search for an urgent threat?

And so I do not understand your call to make defence spending rise, unless it is your aim to suit the powerful defence industry, of course. From 2020, after all, this sector can count on a 500 million euro gift from European tax payers for research and development. This makes me think of the former German Chancellor, Willy Brandt, who tried to find a peaceful policy in Cold War times with his '*Wandel durch Annäherung*' (change through rapprochement). Brandt's '*Ostpolitik*' cleared the way for the Helsinki Agreement and brought better relations with East European neighbours, détente and trust. It resulted in the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, in which countries of both blocs participated. The reasoning was that it is better to make security agreements instead of fuelling military confrontation.



So I wonder, Mr Tusk, if you ever thought to try this method again and invest in Helsinki Two. This would result in a win-win situation. Defence costs wouldn't need to increase anymore and the liberated funds could be used for social economic development. In your letter you state that you want to restore social economic welfare of European citizens, to work for growth and employment. Well, this would create a beautiful opportunity to do so.

It reminds me how I was surprised by European vigour after the annexation of Crimea: banning goods from Crimea and prohibiting investment there. Quick as lightning. Maybe I can take you to another occupation, one in the unstable Middle East. Couldn't you do there the same as you did in the Crimea: after fifty years' occupation of the West Bank, take the same measures against investment in Israeli colonies on Palestinian territory? Your colleague Mrs Mogherini has repeatedly stated that the Israeli settlements are illegal and are not recognised by the EU. What about cutting trade relations with the settlements? I have learned that, after a certain time, words have to be accompanied by deeds. If they aren't, your authority will wane.

It is not hard to imagine how land grabbing, demolition of houses, check points, a separation wall, random arrests and military repression affect people's daily lives. The conflict has degenerated year after year, and it is obvious that this causes anger, frustration, and counter-violence. Bin Laden often referred to the Zionist occupation of holy Palestinian land. It appeared to be an effective argument in recruiting.

You mention instability and terror in the Middle East and North Africa. I share your concerns. In the name of some morbid extremist organisation which emerges from nothing and gathers, all of a sudden, ferocious military power, attacks on civilian targets happen frequently; the number of refugees grows constantly. It is a region to be concerned about. Of course, the local population is the main victim and suffers most: daily terror attacks, bombings, and so on. I fear you will think that I feel some masochistic pleasure in cultivating a European guilty conscience, or that I am full of cultural self-contempt. But I can't help it. I see the young Iraqi who tries to cross the Channel at Calais and I realise that, in all likelihood, he wouldn't be there if Bush and Blair hadn't invaded his country. I look in the eyes of an Afghan refugee and see the pain of wars waged with hundreds of billions of dollars and euros in his poverty-stricken country. Can you believe me, Mr Tusk, that sometimes I dream of riddled, dismembered bodies of Yemenis, Libyans and Syrians? It came to me that many of them must have been killed by European bullets and bombs. I



*Whither Europe?*

55

read that 75 per cent of all weapons in the region come from the US and the EU. Your letter states ‘let us show our European pride’; I refuse to think that these are cynical words.

Mr Tusk, I dare to suggest you write a new letter – a letter of reflection, starting with thorough introspection of our own deeds. Just by making clear what has gone wrong in European policy during past decades, with some thinking about how Europe can be great and proud in another way, about how we can take care that no one will be excluded from work, identity and dignity, how we can provide appropriate welfare for everyone.

The Greek people will show collectively their gratitude. Certainly, they will not be the only ones. And, who knows, maybe this is the way to get rid of Trump’s shadow, and that of extreme right populism over our continent.

Yours sincerely,  
Ludo De Brabander  
Ghent, Belgium, 10 February 2017

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**Donald Tusk’s letter**

Dear colleagues,

In order to best prepare our discussion in Malta about the future of the European Union of 27 member states, and in light of the conversations I have had with some of you, let me put forward a few reflections that I believe most of us share.

The challenges currently facing the European Union are more dangerous than ever before in the time since the signature of the Treaty of Rome. Today we are dealing with three threats, which have previously not occurred, at least not on such a scale.

The first threat, an external one, is related to the new geopolitical situation in the world and around Europe. An increasingly, let us call it, assertive China, especially on the seas, Russia’s aggressive policy towards Ukraine and its neighbours, wars, terror and anarchy in the Middle East and in Africa, with radical Islam playing a major role, as well as worrying declarations by the new American administration all make our future highly unpredictable. For the first time in our history, in an increasingly multipolar external world, so many are becoming openly anti-European, or Eurosceptic at best. Particularly the change in Washington puts the European Union in a difficult situation; with the new administration seeming to put into question the last 70 years of American foreign policy.



The second threat, an internal one, is connected with the rise in anti-EU, nationalist, increasingly xenophobic sentiment in the EU itself. National egoism is also becoming an attractive alternative to integration. In addition, centrifugal tendencies feed on mistakes made by those for whom ideology and institutions have become more important than the interests and emotions of the people.

The third threat is the state of mind of the pro-European elites. A decline of faith in political integration, submission to populist arguments, as well as doubt in the fundamental values of liberal democracy are all increasingly visible.

In a world full of tension and confrontation, what is needed is courage, determination and political solidarity of Europeans. Without them we will not survive. If we do not believe in ourselves, in the deeper purpose of integration, why should anyone else? In Rome we should renew this declaration of faith. In today's world of states-continents with hundreds of millions of inhabitants, European countries taken separately have little weight. But the EU has demographic and economic potential, which makes it a partner equal to the largest powers. For this reason, the most important signal that should come out of Rome is that of readiness of the 27 to be united. A signal that we not only must, but also that we want to be united.

Let us show our European pride. If we pretend we cannot hear the words and we do not notice the decisions aimed against the EU and our future, people will stop treating Europe as their wider homeland. Equally dangerously, global partners will cease to respect us. Objectively speaking, there is no reason why Europe and its leaders should pander to external powers and their rulers. I know that in politics the argument of dignity must not be overused, as it often leads to conflict and negative emotions. But today we must stand up very clearly for our dignity, the dignity of a united Europe – regardless of whether we are talking to Russia, China, the US or Turkey. Therefore, let us have the courage to be proud of our own achievements, which have made our continent the best place on Earth. Let us have the courage to oppose the rhetoric of demagogues, who claim that European integration is beneficial only to the elites, that ordinary people have only suffered as its result, and that countries will cope better on their own, rather than together.

We must look to the future – this was your most frequent request in our consultations over the past months. And there is no doubt about it. But we should never, under any circumstances, forget about the most important reasons why, 60 years ago, we decided to unite Europe. We often hear the



argument that the memory of past tragedies of divided Europe is no longer an argument, that new generations do not remember the sources of our inspiration. But amnesia does not invalidate these inspirations, nor does it relieve us of our duty to recall continuously the tragic lessons of a divided Europe. In Rome, we should strongly reiterate these two basic, yet forgotten, truths: firstly, we have united in order to avoid another historic catastrophe, and secondly, that the times of European unity have been the best times in all of Europe's centuries-long history. It must be made crystal clear that the disintegration of the European Union will not lead to the restoration of some mythical, full sovereignty of its member states, but to their real and factual dependence on the great superpowers: the United States, Russia and China. Only together can we be fully independent.

We must therefore take assertive and spectacular steps that would change collective emotions and revive the aspiration to raise European integration to the next level. In order to do this, we must restore the sense of external and internal security as well as socio-economic welfare for European citizens. This requires a definitive reinforcement of the EU external borders; improved co-operation of services responsible for combating terrorism and protecting order and peace within the border-free area; an increase in defence spending; strengthening the foreign policy of the EU as a whole as well as better co-ordinating individual member states' foreign policies; and, last but not least, fostering investment, social inclusion, growth, employment, reaping the benefits of technological change, and convergence in both the euro area and the whole of Europe.

We should use the change in the US's trade strategy to the EU's advantage by intensifying our talks with interested partners, while defending our interests at the same time. The European Union should not abandon its role as a trade superpower which is open to others, while protecting its own citizens and businesses, and remembering that free trade means fair trade. We should also firmly defend the international order based on the rule of law. We cannot surrender to those who want to weaken or invalidate the Transatlantic bond, without which global order and peace cannot survive. We should remind our American friends of their own motto: *united we stand, divided we fall*.