

VIEWS

Klaus F. Zimmermann

Europe needs strategic independence

A large number of European officials have visited China in recent days. Is Europe becoming more independent, and will it adopt a more pragmatic policy with its own security and development in mind? Some observers have drawn this conclusion from French President Emmanuel Macron's responses in an interview after returning from his trip to China. Macron suggested that Europe cannot follow the United States "into crises that are not our own." Furthermore, given the complex global challenges, such as climate and demographic changes, military conflicts, refugee flows, and intensified technological and economic competition, is it even reasonable for the old continent to consider strategic independence?

The French position is hardly surprising. Since Charles de Gaulle in the late 1950s, there has been a tradition among French presidents to express independence from the United States, particularly on security issues. Unlike the United Kingdom or even Germany, France has always been the independent-minded ally. While de Gaulle was hesitant about NATO, Francois Mitterand once proposed French nuclear weapons to

replace the US-based nuclear defense shield. Jacques Chirac was also concerned about the US-led Iraq war, as was then German chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

However, the recent US administrations under former presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump have lost interest in the transatlantic relationship. Trump ("America first") even suggested dissolving NATO and prepared for the reduction of US military presence in Europe. The current military conflict in Ukraine has substantially revitalized NATO and made the value of transatlantic relationships apparent again. Europe had to realize that it badly needs economic and military support from the United States, as European resources are insufficient. For instance, substantial increases in European military spending and a reorientation of defense strategies are needed.

True, Europe needs to develop more independence in economic and military matters from both global superpowers, the United States and China, in its own interest. Economically, this means more

diversity in global trade to reduce dependencies. However, the transatlantic partnership remains a crucial relationship for Europe, deeply rooted in close political systems and cultural values. Without peace, Europe cannot become more independent from the US.

The European Union is a political entity comprised of independent states that strive to achieve unity despite their diversity through complex decision-making processes. In addition to the 27 current member states, most other European countries aspire for membership. Recently, regrets about Brexit have risen in the UK. The focus of cooperation in the EU is on economic and socio-political issues, while military issues are largely left to NATO.

Nevertheless, the individual states pursue independent goals, and strategic independence is a frequently used concept. For example, Germany has just shut down its last nuclear power plant and is relying on the rapid transition to renewable energy. However, most other countries continue to use nuclear power plants. Hungary continues to use Rus-

sian natural gas, which Germany gave up completely at the end of 2022.

Despite the damage it causes to economic progress and the improvement of global well-being, the strength of globalization has been hindered by a trend toward re-establishing a bipolar world. This trend started long before COVID-19 and the conflict in Ukraine challenged Europe and the world in general. Building border walls and fences has become popular among policymakers worldwide since the early 1990s. Since the financial market crisis and economic turbulence in 2008, world trade has not grown faster than global production of goods and services.

Geopolitical conflicts are increasingly taking place through economic means, media strategies, and even cyberattacks. Threats of the use of nuclear weapons fuel fears. Food crises and refugee flows are used as political weapons. State interventions in free trade can be easily justified because they are not internalized by market processes. This way, worldwide conflicts have strong and costly side-effects on trade-dependent nations like Germany and China, as they hinder the benefits of the global division of labor.

Moreover, to achieve ambitious climate goals and address similar demographic imbalances, Europe and China have many important common areas for successful collaboration.

This highlights the need for better understanding and trust through intensified dialogue, beyond system rivalry. More in-person visits by leaders from both China and Europe would be advisable to foster exchange. However, such a strategy is not without risk given the significant gap between the views of European leaders and Chinese officials. Recent visits by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and Germany's Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock to China have revealed some of these differences. Nevertheless, the risks of missing potential benefits from collaboration appear to be far greater.

Strategic independence achieved through collaboration may foster peace and economic progress, but without peace, there can be no strategic independence for Europe.

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Fan Lijun, Zhao Rigetu and Huang Tonglaga

China, Mongolia need better eco-coordination

The frequent and strong sandstorms that have swept across northern China and some parts of southern China this year have surprised many people after years of relative lull during what had come to be known as the "sandstorm season" in March and April. Many are surprised also because the sandstorms occurred despite China combating desertification for decades.

Since the sandstorms originated in Mongolia, China should strengthen cooperation in environmental management with Mongolia to prevent such weather conditions.

North China shares a similar monsoonal climate, a variant of the continental climate, with southern Mongolia. The fact is, Mongolia has a rather fragile ecological environment with an arid climate that can be greatly influenced by climate change and environmental degradation elsewhere.

Also, in Mongolia, the average temperature has increased by 2.25 degrees Celsius, twice the world average, over the past 80 years. And while more than three-quarters of Mongolia's land is either desert or arid or facing desertification and soil degradation, climate-related natural disasters have increased, especially over the past 10 years. And sandstorms, in particular, could cause huge losses to the local people.

Although the Mongolian government has taken measures to address the desertification problem, the huge gap between human activities and environmental and ecological revival remains a chronic environmental problem.

Joint planting can help not only improve the eco-environment and boost Mongolia's environmental resilience but also promote employment for local farmers and herdsman.

The over-exploitation of soil for farming — less than 2 percent of Mongolia's land area is arable — excessive use of water for agriculture and construction, overgrazing of land, including on pastures, and the unrestrained extraction of underground resources have been continuously reducing the underground water tables and turning the land bare, making it easier for even strong winds to carry millions of tons of sand southward.

China has been working with Mongolia to combat desertification and reduce sandstorms. Still, more efforts are needed to raise the underground water tables and revitalize the soil, including the surface soil, in order to prevent sandstorms.

In 2021, Mongolian President Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh launched a national campaign for planting 1 billion trees by 2030 as part of the country's fight against climate change. The campaign started in earnest this year.

The Xinjiang Uygur and Inner Mongolia autonomous regions, which share their border with Mongolia, can boost cooperation with Mongolia and help it build a green great wall. This will also help better protect China's "Green Great Wall", and promote the Three-North Shelter Forest Program and the afforestation projects in northern, northwestern and northeastern China.

Moreover, as parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement, China and Mongolia can also boost bilateral cooperation through the two authoritative international agreements, as well as through the UN Convention to Combat Desertification.

Under the framework of the Silk Road Fund — established with the aim of promoting cooperation and development in Belt and Road countries — China and Mongolia can jointly establish a "green fund" so Mongolia can have easy access to financing for green development projects, including the "One Billion Trees" campaign.

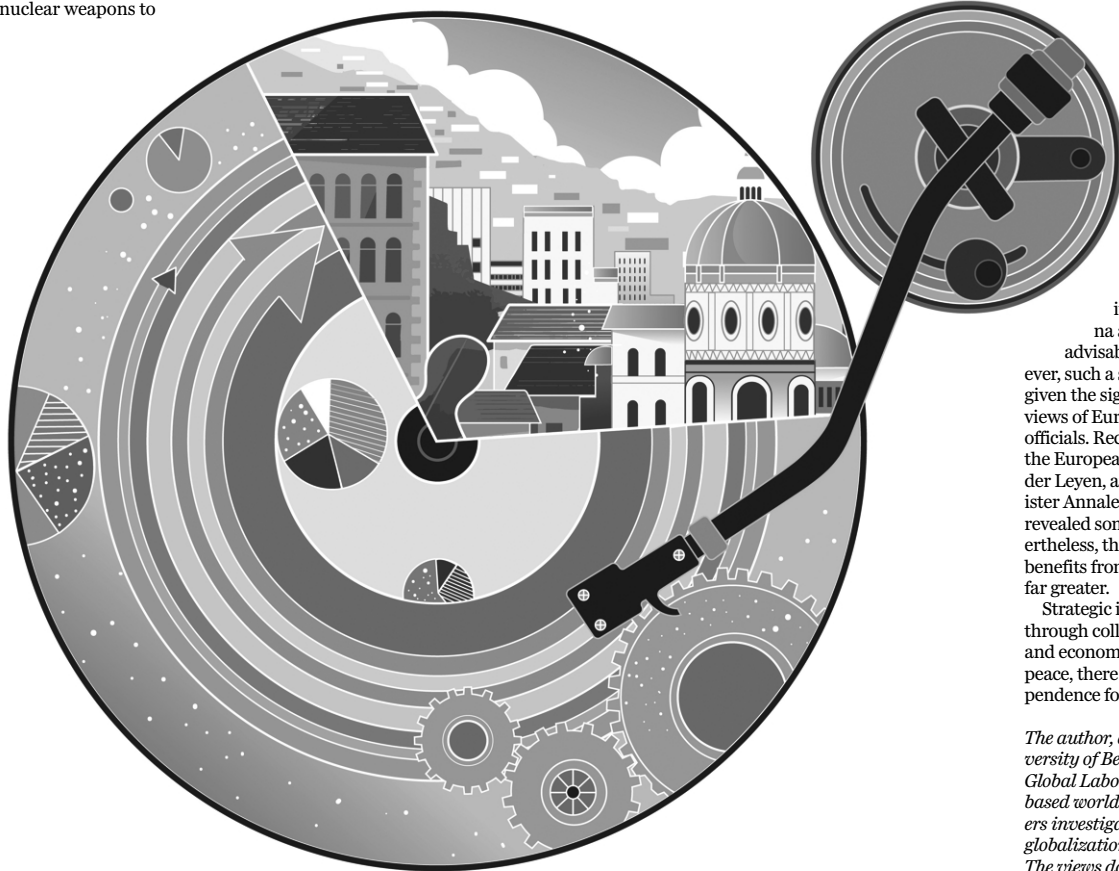
Besides, the Mongolian National Climate Committee approved the 2023 action plans to bolster the national campaign, including tree-planting programs and improvement of policies and laws to fight climate change by, among other things, setting carbon dioxide emission goals and improving the energy, agriculture and construction sectors.

Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang can deepen cooperation with Mongolia in these sectors. By doing so, they can also benefit China's green development projects. Chinese herbs with economic value, such as the drought-resistant sea buckthorn, herbacynomorii and cistanches can be planted in Mongolian areas to prevent soil erosion and sandstorms. Joint planting can help not only improve the eco-environment and boost Mongolia's environmental resilience but also promote employment for local farmers and herdsman.

Climate change is a common global challenge. Only with the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, better planning to achieve sustainable development, and a change in people's lifestyle to reduce environmental damage can a solution to the climate problem be found. Global governance of climate issues is an objective requirement and inevitable trend for all countries.

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SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

Yvonne Greenstreet

Innovating against injustice in healthcare

Medical innovation has progressed exponentially over the past half-century. And yet, the persistence of health inequality limits the potential benefits of scientific and technological advances that could save or improve lives.

The debate over the allocation of vaccines and therapeutics during the COVID-19 pandemic is a vivid example of this inequality. In September 2022, World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stressed yet again that ending the pandemic requires equitable access to vaccines; at the time, only 19 percent of the population in low-income countries were inoculated, compared to 75 percent in high-income countries.

Despite this imbalance, richer countries suffered greater losses of life years per capita than poorer countries — a paradox highlighting how health inequality exists at many levels. In the United States, for example, cumulative data show that people of color experienced higher rates of COVID-19 infection and death than white people. The disparity can be traced to social determinants of health, the non-medical factors that play a critical role in clinical outcomes. Suffering from institutional and structural discrimination, reduced health literacy, or cultural and language barriers makes it difficult to live the longest, healthiest life possible.

Reducing health inequality and helping underserved populations requires innovators to focus on these issues. There are still many diseases for which suitable therapeutic interventions are

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limited or do not exist. This is particularly true for rare genetic disorders, but also for more common ailments: impediments to patients' adherence to the existing treatment regimens for hypertension, for example, can adversely affect outcomes.

The biotech industry needs to allocate sufficient funding for research and development related to diseases that disproportionately affect specific ethnic communities. While we frequently say that communicable diseases know no borders, genetic and non-communicable diseases unfortunately do discriminate. In today's age of medical innovation, groundbreaking advances that could help these patients are within our grasp.

In a similar vein, we must rethink how we conduct clinical trials. We need to include diverse communities that are representative of the disease condition. Studies should take into consideration participants' socioeconomic and insurance status, and they should be designed to recruit people from underrepresented groups. Developing culturally appropriate and relevant recruitment materials, minimizing travel time to trial sites, reducing the fre-

quency and number of assessments, allowing for telehealth visits where appropriate, and introducing creative ways to target, gather, and disseminate information are all steps in the right direction.

Moreover, regulators and health-care authorities can do more to encourage innovation that helps to address societal challenges. As advances in precision and genetic medicines and technologies continue, public and private organizations must work collaboratively to ensure that these breakthrough treatments are available to all who need them. Creative pricing and reimbursement strategies could enable equitable and sustainable access for patients and health systems. For example, the Value-Based Negotiation Framework, which my company supports, aims to address some of the challenges related to reimbursement in Europe. The framework lays the foundation for quicker negotiations between payers and manufacturers with a view toward increasing patient access to innovative products.

Finally, biotech companies can and should be responsible corporate citizens. That means investing in organizations working to address the social determinants of health — the stark disparities in income, education, transportation, exposure to violence, and more — and to provide equitable access to diagnostics and therapies. The global nonprofit Acumen, for example, uses its patient capital model to invest in enterprises focusing on meeting the needs of low-income consumers, from housing to alternative energy and water.

Merck has been advancing this work

for over a decade through their Merck for Mothers program, which aims to promote safe and high-quality maternity care around the world. Sanofi Global Health, a nonprofit unit that Sanofi established in 2021, also supports underserved communities by selling medicines at affordable prices in 40 lower-income countries.

The biotech industry must continue to expand compassionate-use programs and collaborate with nonprofit organizations that provide access to essential treatments. There are enough successful industry programs from which to gain insights and identify best practices, such as Gilead's partnerships with generic manufacturers to produce high-quality, low-cost medicines, or Merck's agreement with the Medicines Patent Pool to diversify the supply of prescription drugs for low- and middle-income countries.

We must approach health inequality with the same passion, determination, and innovation that we apply to the development of medicines. Today's yawning gaps in access and outcomes are all the more unfair for being avoidable. And, as we saw during the pandemic, they are a problem for everyone. Collective action to improve health-care equity, including by addressing its social determinants, can extend and improve the lives of millions of people. That is the goal that all health-care companies should strive to achieve.

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