



MARTIN IVENS

EU remains tricky maze to undo

The world's largest economic bloc is proving erratic as a champion of democracy, too



Ursula von der Leyen

URSULA von der Leyen did the right thing last week after she'd tried everything else. The European Commission president finally apologized for the failings of the continent-wide vaccine procurement scheme.

It followed an unseemly few weeks of battle over the vaccine, during which Von der Leyen scapegoated the Anglo-Swedish pharma company AstraZeneca Plc for supply holdups and threatened to close the Irish land border to imports of vaccines from the European Union. Even Brussels, which is loath to admit fault, finally conceded that its vaccine rollout has been unsatisfactory.

It's an admission that reveals deeper problems in institutional Europe. Bluntly, the EU isn't as effective as it likes to think it is in many policy areas where it took over responsibility from member states.

It has also lost two opportunities to lord it over others in recent months. One is Brexit, which — while still disruptive — ended in a trade deal rather than the unregulated chaos threatened by its most vociferous opponents. Another is Donald Trump, that willful exemplar of bad faith and anti-liberal politics, who's fallen from power.

The net effect is that the EU can no longer shine on the global stage by virtue of contrast with wicked Trump and blundering Boris Johnson. Brussels is meant to work well on many fronts, but it doesn't and electorates are taking notice.

The world's largest economic bloc is proving erratic as a champion of democracy, too. It has vast reserves of soft power, but rarely deploys them. Under its largely German leadership, it

has difficulty combining commercial realpolitik with its stated aim of advocating for pluralism and encouraging democracy in Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

Navalny factor

The immunization debacle had a sorry aftermath. On a visit to Moscow earlier this week, Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign policy chief, was all smiles as he praised Russia's Covid vaccine, Sputnik V. It may have been necessitated by the EU's possible future shortages but the timing was awful. Alexei Navalny, the dissident leader who survived a military-grade poisoning, was being dragged out of prison to face more trumped-up charges.

Vladimir Putin understands propaganda better than his European counterparts and gave Borrell a public dressing down. At a joint press conference, Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, sneered that the EU wasn't "a reliable partner." The Brussels representative learned from his Twitter feed that three European diplomats were being expelled from Moscow for appearing at demonstrations supporting Navalny.

There are plenty of other failures in diplomatic muscularity to pick over. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Germany's head of State, hardly helped when he defended construction work on a Russian gas pipeline beneath the Baltic, Nord Stream 2, on the grounds that his country owes Moscow a debt of guilt

for the sins of World War II. Alas, this deal has losers as well as winners. Ukrainians will be deprived of transit payments from the current land-based pipeline (and are deeply unhappy about any downplaying of their own losses in World War II). Other Eastern European democracies fear Putin is getting the means to cut off their gas without hurting his rich German client.

Despite her upbringing in East Germany, which makes her more wary of the Russians than her Social Democrat coalition partners, Angela Merkel has opted for commercial advantage.

It's not just Russia. The chancellor and Von der Leyen also handed President Joe Biden a nasty surprise as he prepared to take office by announcing an investment agreement with China. What will Trump's replacement see when he looks at this muddled Europe?

While avoiding Trump's tub-thumping, Biden aims to continue "extreme competition" with Beijing and to hold it accountable for human rights viola-

and Britain. Biden disapproves of Brexit and had no contact with Prime Minister Johnson when the latter was the UK's foreign secretary, but the new president has been forced to fall back on his country's traditional ally for moral and diplomatic support. In a crunch, only the British and the other Anglosphere countries of Australia, Canada and New Zealand have stood up to Beijing.

The paradox is that Merkel talks the global liberal talk while acting purely in German interests — whereas Johnson sounds like a loudmouthed populist but has walked the walk on Chinese human-rights violations.

He is stripping Huawei Technologies Co.'s equipment from Britain's telecoms networks and he's offered Hong Kong residents a path to UK citizenship after China's crackdown on the democracy movement.

The EU is both a commercial trading bloc and a "values" community. There's a tension here. Von der Leyen says she

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tions. Merkel, echoed by France's Emmanuel Macron, makes clear she won't join any new Cold War against Beijing and warns against dividing the world into competing blocs. China is Germany's biggest export market for cars.

This all changes some of the diplomatic geometry between the US, EU

wants to lead a "geopolitical Commission." The gap between aspiration and reality is becoming dangerously wide. After Merkel retires in the autumn a new generation of leaders will need to choose more clearly how it sets about this role. Europe won't have Brexit and Trump to hide behind. (Bloomberg)

Sayajirao III: A ruler whose visionary reforms still resonate

VISHNU MAKHIJANI
NEW DELHI

His reign can be summed up in one word - Simply splendid

HE was born in the family of a farmer who, though he bore the name Gaekwad, was considered to be to the cadet branch of the Baroda royal family or that of the younger sons of a previous ruler and thus not eligible to succeed to the throne. It was fate that decided his ascendancy as Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III (1875-1939) and his reign of over 60 years is today remembered for an illustrious university that bears his name and a host of reforms in various spheres, including the economy, women's education, encouraging widow remarriage, abolition of child marriages and the purdah -- rather than creating edifices.

"His reign can be summed up in one word simply splendid," author Uma Balasubramaniam, who has penned his biography, "Sayajirao Gaekwad III: The Maharaja of Baroda" (Rupa), told this reporter.

"His reforms with regard to education for women which manifested in his opening a number of schools, colleges, and even teachers training colleges for them, apart from encouraging widow remarriage and abolition of child marriages and the purdah system clearly indicates his role in the empowerment of women," Balasubramaniam added.

"Sayajirao governed the State with remarkable zeal and had many firsts to his credit. As early as 1881, he opened several schools for girls and a training college for lady teachers. In 1893, he introduced free primary education for children and became the first Indian ruler to do so. He banned child marriage and untouchability and widely promoted inter-caste marriage and widow remarriage," said

Balasubramaniam, the grand-daughter-in-law of the late C.Rajam, a pioneer industrialist and educationalist of Madras.

The Baroda College that he founded has blossomed into the world-renowned MS University, while his rich library became the nucleus of today's Central Library of Baroda with a network of libraries in all the towns and villages in his State.

"Right from its incipience, (Baroda College) adopted the American system of education by following the tutorial system. Stress was laid on research by which a student understood his subject thoroughly rather than cramming notes for passing exams," the author pointed out.

Balasubramaniam, in fact, is herself an alumna of the MS University's Faculty of Arts, from where she graduated in history.

Apart from his educational and social reforms, Sayajirao played a key role in the development of Baroda's textile industry, while his other economic initiatives included the establishment of a railroad, waterworks that still feed the city of Vadodara and the founding in 1908 of the Bank of Baroda, today

one of India's leading public sector banks into which two other nationalised banks have been subsumed.

The fact that his true identity lay in being a farmer's son was never obscured by the grandeur of the palace and the immense riches of the Gaekwads, the book states, adding that he was perpetually worried about the hardships that villagers faced in times of adversity in the villages of Gujarat, the author writes.

"The chief among these adverse factors were the scarcity of water and the lack of education of the villagers, which acted as impediments to raise their standards of living. These two main factors drove him relentlessly to secure both, not only for the villagers but also for the people of Baroda. He was also aware that many of the problems arose from the social taboos and superstitions that governed the actions of the people and set about to remove

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these prejudices through reforms. He achieved all this in spite of the hostile environment created by priggish British aristocrats and also by those who ran the machinery of the British government in India," the author adds.

Balasubramaniam spent two years researching the book from August 2017 until July 2019.

"The research involved visiting libraries for books with information on the history of the royal family. Hours were spent in the Gujarat government archives and also involved months of study in the India Office records in London. For the personal touch in the story, conversations with those people in Baroda whose ancestors had been part of the Baroda administration during the reign of Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad-III was very informative," she said. On the more contemporary level, Sayajirao's grandson, Fatehsinghrao Gaekwad, an attacking right-handed batsman, represented Baroda in the Ranji Trophy between 1946 and 1958 and had the highest score of 99 in his first season. The President of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) from 1963-66, he was also an honorary life member of the MCC.

Anshuman Gaekwad, a two-time Indian national cricket coach who played in 40 Test matches and 15 One-Day Internationals, is distantly related to the Baroda royal family.

