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Europe's Best Interest: Staying Close to Number One

by

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Earlier in the year, a shrewd Canadian diplomat at one of the many meetings on European-American relations posed a question which has since rankled in my mind and has become even more pertinent since: "Do you Europeans want to be allies or a counterweight to the US?" The Europeans present answered with what has been their credo for the past forty years or so, namely that a strong transatlantic partnership requires a confident and strong Europe; counterweight-Europe was thus essential for alliance-Europe.

This, however, increasingly lacks conviction. At best, it is a long-term vision, at worst an alibi. Perhaps one day, the nations of the European Union will have grown so close together that they have become a single strategic actor on the international scene, with coherent policies and both the will and the means to implement them. But in the long in-between years until that lucky day, the states that make up the European Union will have to accept that they lack what it takes to be a counterweight. They will have to decide whether they want to be allies or not. And since not being allied to the strongest country in the world is not very wise, they will have to be good allies.

What Europe lacks

For proud Europeans, this may sound like a call for submission. Does not the European Union even before its new round of enlargement count more citizens than the United States, have a higher GNP, is a trade power second to none with the Euro a financial heavy-weight now equalling the Dollar?? The answer to all these questions is „yes". But while these are major and impressive achievements which qualify the Union as a superpower in economic and financial terms, they do not - at least not yet - translate into strategic power.

At first glance, this is puzzling. Economic and financial matters play a much greater role in international affairs today than they did during the Cold War years. The European Union has the largest market in the world, it can bloc the work of the World Trade Organisation, it is the largest donor of development assistance, and without its consent no struggling economy will be rescued from financial crisis. In these domains, the Union and its members are America's indispensable partner, were the mighty US unwilling to take their interest into account it would hurt its own interests. Significantly, it is here that America is a committed multilateralist – it needs Europe's consent and Europe's resources.

There are three reasons, however, why this considerable political and economic weight which Europe undoubtedly has does not translate into strategic power: the lack of military clout, a highly inefficient way of decision-making, and the absence of any real ambition to play a strategic role.

Of the three, the lack of military might is the most mentioned and the least important. For one, the member states of the European Union are not exactly military dwarfs. Together they have more men under arms than the US and spend more money on defence than any country other than America – half a billion dollars per day compared to the US daily billion. The problem here is not that they spend too little but that they spend it in the most inefficient and wasteful way: for 15 separate national defence establishments, for soldiers they cannot deploy and a military infrastructure with little or no relevance to the new military tasks. The advances made by the much acclaimed European Security and Defence Policy have been significant in institutions but modest in substance, with national defence bureaucracies fighting a determined and largely successful rearguard action to prevent real role specialisation among Europe's armies, not to mention any serious pooling of her considerable military resources. For another, individual European states such as Britain do enjoy a degree of strategic respect despite military capabilities dwarfed by those of the United States. It is clearly not so much the size of the armed forces a nation or a group of nations can field but the willingness and ability to use them which conveys this respect. A European Union willing and able to make decisive use of even a much smaller force than its members now dispose of together would indeed be regarded as a serious international player.

This points to the major deficiency of the Union: its decision-making process is notoriously slow when it comes to policy areas where member states maintain control. Significantly, it is in the areas where the Commission can act as a supranational

authority – in competition and, to a regrettably lesser extent, common commercial policy – that the Union has the greatest international impact and is recognized as a real player. In foreign and security matters, however, the Council, not the Commission, is in the driving seat. That means in essence that the government of each individual state reserves the right to agree not only on the decision in principle but also on each step of the implementation. While this may do when it comes to dealing with structural issues, multilateral fora or supporting a lengthy peace-process, it is a recipe for wavering and half-heartedness in an acute crisis.

European governments are aware of this deficiency. There are hopes that perhaps the Convention currently drafting a European constitution might offer solutions to the problem. Various proposals are being considered – from having the EU President elected for a number of years instead of the present six months, to elevating the position of the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, currently held by the Spaniard Xavier Solana, to that of a formal "EU Foreign Minister", anchored both in the Council Secretariat and in the Commission, and to taking decisions in this field by qualified majority vote in the Council of Ministers. All have considerable merit and a wise Convention will opt for all or most of them.

Yet none of these measures, once accepted, will remove what is – and perhaps must be – the veto each member can cast when it comes to follow up by force what has been announced as policy – the central prerequisite of strategic power. For the foreseeable future, no national government in the EU will delegate to a non-national body the decision of using military force, even of committing members to a foreign policy towards parts of the world in which the use of force might become advisable. While the institutional innovations emanating from the Convention will facilitate the Union's international presence they will not, as in the case of competition and commercial policy, lead to the necessary streamlining of decision-making.

The Union, therefore, is unlikely to develop an efficient method for looking after its international strategic interests. This is the more striking because already the interests of its members are increasingly aligned, often even identical. A decade ago, the beginning of the Balkan Wars exposed a disunited Europe; today there is total consensus. The same can be said for relations with the United States or Russia, for interests in the Middle East or Africa: while the foreign policies of bigger member states still differ on procedure and style, they are quite similar on substance. In addition, all members, big and small, have come to realize that it is only when they operate under the European

flag that they can hope to have much influence in the world; going it alone reduces the chance of success. Yet they have so far been unable to create the mechanism which could turn the alignment of interests and the value of joint action into operational reality.

Weight without ambition

A more effective mechanism must and will one day be introduced. But even then the Union will never be able to emulate the unity of decision practised by a traditional power. In contrast to the formation of the United States of America, European integration is not about turning former colonies into an "ever closer union" but highly developed and proud states. These states have lost much of the sovereignty to act on their own but they are unlikely to provide their Union with the sovereignty of acting for them in the way states used to. Ironically, as individual states they had more power than their combined power in the Union.

This is something to regret but also to welcome. After all, the European Union is the only "power" in history whose geographical extension has not caused fears or the formation of counter-alliances. From the original six member states of 1952, it has progressed to 15 today and will soon count 25. Instead of being resented by those still outside, it is being regarded as the most attractive club to join. If it were ever to become a traditional strategic power, it would face the resistance experienced by other, earlier empires.

The Union will never to become a traditional strategic power. It will probably be able one day to muster its own defence. It will also muster what is necessary to project stability beyond its borders through non-military means – and in the wider Europe is remarkably successful in this respect – as well as provide military forces for peace–keeping and even limited peace-making in crisis regions. But it will not be able to generate the unitary determination to undertake aggressive military action or, as the US is now contemplating, military pre-emption against a possible enemy.

True, the latter may exceed what is required of a serious international actor anyway; after all, few other powers in the world dispose of such a wide range of instruments as that enjoyed by the European Union to shape their international environment. But here the third European deficit in terms of exerting power and influence beyond the EU territory comes in: a lack of ambition. European governments and political elites may

pass all sorts of resolutions, write voluminous communiqués of how to treat the ills of the wider world and even donate considerable amounts of public money to deserving causes. But below the surface of caring lies a great reluctance to feel responsible.

This as a general European phenomenon, familiar to small and larger states alike, displayed by Germany and France and Britain and Spain and Italy no less than by Denmark, the Netherlands or Greece. It may be excused but cannot be explained by the challenges of EU enlargement. No doubt the historic process of bringing in the new democracies of the rest of Europe into the Union and helping to stabilize the wider region has to focus most of the energies and resources of member states on their immediate environment. Yet surprisingly the fact that the enlarged Union will soon - with the inclusion of Cyprus - extend its borders to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, that it will border on Syria, Iraq and Iran should Turkey join has not produced the ambition to address the strategic consequences that go with this extension.

This general inclination to leave the strategic problems out there to others is probably the consequence of having lived with American leadership for so long and so well. For half a century Europe's political class has become accustomed to the fact that the main initiatives and decisions are taken by the United States; European governments have practised a habit of praising or criticising them, welcoming or resenting them, and in the end to go along. When you know that someone else is coping with your problems, there is less incentive to develop the mentality and the capability to do so yourself. Europeans have been good and critical backseat drivers: they are aware they cannot get out of the car; they know the rules of traffic, they understand the mechanics of the motor – but they have never driven the car itself.

The truth is they are not particularly keen to do so. For Europe's political class to leave initiative, decision and implementation largely to the United States has been a sensible arrangement during the Cold War years. It has remained a convenient arrangement since then. After all, even when the United States acted unilaterally in the wider world, it usually served the interests of its allies as well, and if it did not do so fully, the difference was insufficient to outweigh the disadvantages of opposing or obstructing America's efforts. In return for the US looking after the conflicts in the wider world, the Europeans could concentrate on building up their Union, enlarging it and securing its flanks in the Balkans.

In sum, therefore, the Union is no counterweight to the power of its mighty ally, because it has neither ambition nor the mechanism to play such a role. This does not mean that the Union is powerless. But this power will have to be employed within the alliance with the United States, and Europe can only hope to have any influence on US strategy if it is not totally opposed to America's objectives and actions.

A demanding ally

That was convenient to European governments and acceptable to European publics during the Cold War and the decade that followed it. More encouraging, the latter part of the 1990's suggested not only a strengthening commitment on both parts of the Atlantic to the common alliance and its evolution, it also witnessed a growing compatibility of interests between Europe and the United States. In the Balkans, the US finally accepted the need to play a constructive role instead of frustrating European initiatives. In the Middle East, the Clinton Administration was actively and imaginatively seeking a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Europeans and Americans pursued very similar policies towards Jeltsin's Russia. They stood together in Kosovo, Nato's first and first successful war ever; they created and gave life to the new World Trade Organisation. While there were differences - Clinton's America was opposed to the project of an International Criminal Court and unimpressed by the Kyoto Protocol - and the growing gap in military capabilities suggested growing difficulties in joint military operations, the common ground was never in doubt.

This was to change fundamentally with the Administration of President George W. Bush. Somehow, Americans seemed to wake up to the fact that there were really Number One. Their new leadership was determined to make aggressive use of this power to pursue, if need be unilaterally and with the certainty that the Europeans had no other choice than that of going along, what were seen as America's primary interests. When September 11 shocked America and the world and the President asked for help from US allies in the "war against terror", Europeans hoped this would put a more co-operative stamp on US foreign policy. They soon found out that they were wrong – instead of changing the course of the Bush Administration, it confirmed the new team in its views and provided them with the domestic support to pursue them even more forcefully.

European publics only really woke up to this once the Administration revealed its strategy of forcing a change of regime in Iraq. But long before the signs had been ominous: Nato, once America's coalition of choice, became one among many – "the mission defines the coalition", as Defense Secretary Rumsfeld likes to put it. The new national security doctrine, formally unveiled in September 2002 but outlined earlier in the year by President Bush himself, dismisses the concepts of strategy that for decades formed the transatlantic consensus: deterrence, containment, arms control and international law. Instead, the United States faced with the threat of international terrorism and weapons proliferation reserves the right to use force however and whenever it sees itself threatened, including the first use of nuclear weapons, unencumbered by international covenants. And it advocates openly the removal of dictatorial and suppressive regimes particularly those possessing weapons of mass destruction, in Iraq and elsewhere, to promote democracy around the globe, if need be by force.

On world order – a world apart

This concept of international order in the 21st century could not be further away from the one strongly held by America's European allies. Based on the successful experience of détente when multilateral contact across the once Iron Curtain facilitated regime change all over Eastern Europe, as well as on European integration, the other and most successful experience of multilateralism, Europeans are convinced that this order can only be built on inclusiveness, on common and binding rules and institutions, and on international law. The West whose unity on basic notions of security and order were once the cornerstone of the European-American relationship, is now deeply divided, more so than at any time in its history. It is a division less about the new threats than about the new world order that can best deal with them.

And yet the difference is one America's allies will have to bear, in their own interest. To cancel the alliance with America is not a serious option for serious European governments. For one, it would mean the collapse of their own efforts for a more united foreign and security policy: forced to choose between an imperfect European security union and the alliance with the US, many, probably most EU members will side with the latter, a trend which will be further reinforced by the admittance of new members into the Western organisations from the former Soviet empire who want to join Nato

precisely because of the US link and would not want to join an EU that distances itself from America.

For another, quitting the alliance would deprive Europe of its most important instrument of influence - a voice in the US debate . Whatever grand visions the Bush Administration announces, reality will impose itself, as it has always done. Moreover, America is too lively, engaged and open a society to always and finally endorse the line of its government, and recent polls indicate that there are considerable reservations over its more ideological leanings. The pendulum will swing back again at some stage. The future direction of America's approach to the world and to Europe is not cast in concrete by the decisions now taken by the Bush Administration, it remains to be formed, confirmed or changed through controversial discussion.

The extraordinary, possibly unique feature of the American debate is that the political class of the most powerful country in the world not only does not mind others taking part in its discussions but actively invites them. In Europe, national publics are still some distance away from accepting as legitimate and natural the participation of other EU citizens in their domestic discourse. Americans, to the advantage of their European allies, have no such problems at least as long as Europeans make clear that they are and want to remain allies.

Anything else makes no sense for Europe, not today and not tomorrow. In a distant future the Union may have developed the mentality, the mechanism and the means to become an effective international player and consequently will have a much greater weight in the relationship. But even then it is still likely to share more interests than differences with the United States. After all, for neither Europe nor America is there another partner equally committed to the same values and political traditions. If these two agree on what the basic rules and institutions of international order should be, there is a real chance of establishing a fair and stable international order. If they do not, they will both fail.

The Europe in between

The problem, of course, is how to manage the relationship in the meantime when the US is at the peak of its power and the Europeans groping towards greater unity, vulnerable in their pride and convinced of their vision of international order. Yet if there is no long-term alternative to the alliance with the United States, there is no short-term one either. The European Union cannot go it alone; if it were to try it would be neither effective nor cohesive, and it would loose the chance of taking part and influencing the American debate.

The best approach to the problem is for Europeans to become smart allies. In order to have any influence on the American debate and America's policy, their commitment to the alliance and their solidarity must be as clear as their willingness to listen and consider US arguments must be evident. Alliance does not mean submission, and there is room for differing positions argued out in respect for the interests of the other partner; if Europeans disagree with America's Iraq policies, they must at least take the Iraqi challenge seriously and be credible in the alternatives they propose. At the same time, they must learn what they have neglected for so long, namely to unite their policies through efficient EU institutions without appearing to gang up against the United States. The more they succeed in combining unity in Europe with transatlantic solidarity, the greater their ability to shape the transatlantic future.

This will, no doubt, become more difficult. The Bush Administration is more assertive than any of its predecessors and its view of world order runs counter to deep-rooted European instincts. If it is true, however, that Europeans cannot risk transatlantic divorce, their governments will have to do their best to manage the marriage and, at the same time, maintain support for it at home.

The latter will require much more attention by political leaders than it has received so far. Neither the temptation to gain domestic support by criticising the United States nor that of overselling the progress of European foreign and security policy has always been resisted, leaving public opinion with the false impression that Europe can provide an alternative to the alliance with the US. Yet whatever formal declarations of solidarity with America governments may issue, their credibility will be undermined by public demonstrations to the contrary. What influence governments may hope to gain with America and her public through signs of support will then be lost.

Managing the in-between will thus demand considerable statesmanship from America's allies. Two considerations should help them stay the course when temptation beckons: For one, the maintenance of the alliance with the US is now and for the foreseeable future in the national interest of each of their countries. For another, while Europe and America are drifting apart, they do so in a container: common interests will push them back together, even if it may take some time.