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Lasting peace needs more than free trade

The EU has to develop a joint policy for security, energy and foreign affairs – By Walther Stützle

Where are the politicians with the courage to cut through the red tape? Instead of pandering to petty national egos, Europe must learn to speak with one voice on security, disarmament and energy.

What would it be like if Europe took the desires of the majority of its citizens seriously and its politicians stopped risking all that has been achieved? How about taking the next, long-overdue step toward political integration? The vast majority of Europeans tell pollsters they are in favor of a joint foreign and security policy. But voters see no leader who gives them hope that their desires will be fulfilled.

The EU is losing steam. Nearly 65 years after the end of World War II, a generation spoiled by a lifetime of peace is playing a dangerous game. It is a mistake to believe that the integration achieved so far will guarantee peace in Europe forever. It is also wrong to think that the world will put its problems on hold until the European Union is ready to help solve them.

The achievements to date are the result of courageous political leadership in the face of bitter conflicts of interest. In 1952, Konrad Adenauer said, “A united Europe would be a necessity even in the absence of the Soviet threat. Individual European states only have a past but no future.”

What he was calling for was a politically united Europe, not an apolitical one only dedicated to the free flow of money, goods and services. But the majority of today’s EU member states apparently find that quite sufficient. Their leaders do not seem to recognize that

economic integration grew and prospered thanks to the protection offered by a common security policy guaranteed by NATO and close ties with the United States.

Back then, diverging economic and trade interests could not blow up into rivalries that could jeopardize a country's entire economy. The dispute with the United States in the early 1980s over Germany's trade with Russia – in which Germany swapped pipeline technology for Russia's natural gas – proved that established foreign and security policy ties can withstand the pressure of diverging economic interests.

The lesson is clear: A European Union that is mostly or entirely based upon commercial interests has no political future. The shear forces of international politics will try to take advantage of the rivalries between EU members. They will attempt to sever the still-fragile ties of political cooperation.

In the 19th century, the German economist Friedrich List wrote about the political shortcomings of free trade. In order to preserve peace, it is necessary to have far more than just free trade. We all learned this lesson in two terrible world wars.

The German constitution has elevated this lesson to an imperative. To "work in a united Europe for world peace" is a constitutional mandate, not a recommendation. Not even the German Constitutional Court could call it into question with its recent attempt to limit European integration through its ruling on the Lisbon Treaty. Preaching nationalism today will result in European strife tomorrow. In addition, forgoing political integration is the equivalent of deciding to forgo any significant influence on global developments.

Afghanistan is one example. Nearly half of the foreign troops under NATO command there come from EU countries – about 30,000 of the 64,000 soldiers deployed. But Afghanistan strategy is made in Washington, with the U.S. assigning European countries their tasks. There is no sign of a common EU policy much less an EU strategy to

bring an end to the mess – let alone an EU foreign minister who could effectively represent European interests.

Instead, EU members compete for influence in the White House. The result is disastrous. Europe was informed of the new U.S. strategy for Afghanistan after it was completed. In the meantime, soldiers and civilian aid workers from the EU have been dying in the Hindu Kush.

Barack Obama is the kind of president whom the majority of Europeans desperately wanted after the administration of George W. Bush. Obama calls Europe his most important partner. But Europe is not responding.

Another example is disarmament. Obama's bold vision of a world free of nuclear weapons is of vital significance and of particular relevance to Europe. But there is no united European support for this vision and no EU foreign minister actively involved in realizing the goals of a majority of EU citizens.

The same applies to the difficult area of conventional disarmament in Europe. Russia has ratified the 1999 Conventional Weapons Treaty but none of the EU member states – all of them NATO members – resisted the pressure from the Bush administration and actually followed Russia's example.

The remarkable momentum toward disarmament between former enemies in Europe – so strong in the early 1990s – is in danger of grinding to a halt. And the EU is failing to act. Those in charge are ignoring the fact that the majority of EU citizens have a great interest in disarmament.

NATO is working on a new strategic concept intended to set the direction for its security policy in the 21st century. It is due for completion in the coming year. There are important issues it must address – relations with Russia, NATO's duties as a defensive alliance (and not as a global policeman, as some would like it), the role of Europe, and that of the transatlantic alliance as the anchor of stability

for an ever more complex world. The U.S. is participating at the highest level in this work, under the chairmanship of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

And Europe? Europe is present – as a cacophony of voices. Its many national representatives all seek to be heard. And the European Union? In the discussion and the decision-making process surrounding NATO's most important political document, the EU is conspicuous by its absence.

What should we do? With or without the Lisbon Treaty, Europe has to decide what kind of Union it wants to become – an organization of national states sharing a domestic market or a sovereign federal state – a United States of Europe.

This requires political leadership and freedom from the shackles of legal bureaucracy. Content must once more replace clownish declarations of good intentions. Concrete projects must demonstrate that Europe has a credible focus on the future of its citizens and not just on creating a standard for mobile phone chargers.

Take energy. The EU desperately needs a common energy policy. Why does the EU not focus on producing solar energy in the Sahara? The aim would be to meet Europe's energy needs while offering an energy-hungry Africa a project with real foreign-policy significance and economic potential.

Another example is defense. There is an urgent political, financial and military need for a joint defense policy, a joint army. In surveys, the majority of EU citizens say they are willing to abandon the luxury of national armies in favor of European armed forces.

How long must the citizens of the EU's 27 member states continue to spend €200 billion annually for the upkeep of about two million soldiers – especially as less than 20 percent of them are actually available for the current missions? This is not security – it is extravagance.

Is there a simple way to achieve political union? Probably not. But there is a tested method: First, clearly define the goals and then follow through; second, agree that projects should initially involve only states that are willing and able to participate. That is how the European Community was created – at the beginning with only six states. The same approach applied to the single currency and cross-border freedom of movement. Countries that later accepted these initiatives were always welcome.

“European union is a worthy end in itself,” former German Chancellor Willy Brandt reminded his colleagues when he relinquished the leadership of his party in 1987. “When I hear how hard it is for officials to talk of ‘Europe,’ I ask myself – what has become of Adenauer’s legacy?”

We cannot let Lisbon be the last word.

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