



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

E-NOTES

July 2013

THE RUSSIANS ARE SEEPING IN, THE AMERICANS ARE PIVOTING OUT, AND THE GERMANS ARE MOVING UP: THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

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The objective of much of US foreign policy toward Europe of the past century was, to use Lord Ismay's phrase, to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.¹ The pithy saying sounds blunt and undiplomatic, but it is still true. It is in the interest of the US to maintain an equilibrium in Europe where no power can reign supreme, to contain Russian imperialist nostalgia, and to maintain a deep level of engagement in the region – all in order to avoid another D-Day, a forceful and costly reengagement in European politics. Liberal and post-modern rhetoric about “global architecture of partners” or about the end of the 19th century balance of power notwithstanding, the nutshell of US grand strategy toward Europe continues to be this.

While NATO was and is the military component of the strategy to achieve these goals, European integration was its political and economic element. The latter is still doing fine, and continued interest by all parties in the maintenance of military interoperability and of security assurances makes NATO an indispensable tool. It certainly has its own problems, especially those stemming from the inability and unwillingness of most of its European members to maintain an adequate level of defense expenditures. But it has a clear mission accepted by all members, responding to a continued need for security. It also makes the US a European power, maintaining a firm American foothold across the Atlantic.

But the other component of US strategy – one of open encouragement for the EU – no longer matches the goal. Washington continues to push in favor of greater EU centralization even though this no longer supports our goal of a harmonious and powerful Europe. By supporting EU's drive to an “ever closer union” at all costs, Washington mistakes the tactical process for the strategic objective. The goal is a balanced, stable and prosperous Europe; the means has been, in part, European integration. But it is becoming clear that the former is not being achieved by the latter.

¹ Interestingly, this is a tripartite objective that is recurrent in modern European history. For instance, as Brendan Simms writes, the goal of the 1815 diplomatic settlement was “to keep the British in, the Russians out and the French down.” A century later, the British were being replaced by the Americans, while the French had been relentlessly weakened and replaced by the Germans. The Russians, remarkably, are always there. Brendan Simms, *Europe* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 179.

A readjustment of the policy is particularly important given that the reality on the ground seems to indicate that the Russians are seeping in, the Americans are pivoting out, and the Germans are moving up.

The Russians have been buying their way back into Europe over the past years. It is to a degree a mirror image of the end of the Cold War, when the US approach was, in Robert Gates's words, to "bribe the Soviets out" using the wealth of the West. Now, the Russians are bribing themselves in, using the deep pockets of their natural resources. It is a combination of buying political access by hiring influential political names as lobbyists, of exercising a heavy hand in the energy markets, and of lining up strategic allies as EU candidates (Serbia and Montenegro).

The Americans are pivoting out, moving military resources and political attention to the Asian theater. The Atlantic is losing strategic relevance to the Pacific and the US Navy is sailing to Asia while the remnants of American armored forces have been removed this year from Europe. Moreover, Washington has little, if any, influence over internal EU dynamics, becoming a mere spectator at a time of an economic crisis and collapse of political legitimacy.

Finally, the Germans are increasingly the dominant, if reluctant, strategic actor in Europe. Whether it is austerity plans for the profligate Southern Europeans or future political arrangements of the EU, Germany is the power *sine qua non*. Political leaders of European states embark on pilgrimages to Berlin, not Bruxelles. The foundational Franco-German axis is flailing, in large measure because of the abysmal political leadership in Paris, and new realignments are forming (notably, a Polish-German rapprochement). The longevity and effectiveness of these new partnerships remains to be seen as they are not based on an equipoise of power or interests, but rather on a plea proffered by weaker countries to Germany. Countries such as Poland fear that Germany will choose to go alone, deeming the maintenance of the euro zone and of the EU as too costly. Hence, they ask for a more proactive Berlin, one that would assume fully and consciously Europe's burden. In brief, this is not a relationship of equals, but of petitioners in front of German uncertain power.

The EU is not to blame for all three. The American "pivot," in particular, is simply recognition of the growing importance of Asia, combined with the perception that Europe is a success story no longer requiring constant American supervision and protection. The Russian imperialist nostalgia is a product of indigenous forces that, despite high hopes of the 1990s, are difficult to eradicate and will continue to motivate Moscow's political leadership for years to come. The weakness of the EU is that there is a lack of a coherent posture toward Russia, in part driven by geography (Germany, France, and Italy will naturally have a different perspective toward Moscow than Riga or Warsaw) and in part by short-term desires to cash in on Russian spending (especially in the military realm).

What the EU is to blame for is the inability to deal with the changing internal balance of power. The post-war equilibrium based on a Franco-German partnership with the UK as a watchful and engaged actor is falling apart. France is running on fumes, while the UK is choosing to be less engaged suffering from a justified "Bruxelles fatigue." And the Mediterranean countries (Spain and Italy) are in deep economic and political crisis preventing them from exercising authority and influence over European politics; they are not Greece yet, at the mercy of European bailout policies, but they are not meaningful participants in intra-European politics.

This change may be benign or simply not relevant to the future of the continent, as perhaps the most ardent fans of the EU project could argue. If the EU is truly a post-modern creation where decisions are taken by specialized experts and implemented by independent managers, then a new balance of power ought not to matter much. And indeed, if that is the case, the most appropriate policy should be to support the actor – Germany, in this case – that may be the most likely to sustain the EU.

The challenge is threefold. First, such a belief in the post-power essence of the EU is increasingly less appealing and less popular. Observers of European politics describe with some alarm a reassertion of "nationalism," the ghost that haunts Europe and that should have disappeared under the blue EU flag. The EU is becoming associated with unemployment and lack of legitimacy, rather than with the avoidance of another world war.

Second, Germany may not want to lead EU forward. It simply costs a lot of money that the German electorate is not willing to front any more. It is therefore not inconceivable to see Germany wanting to shed the more burdensome countries in Southern Europe, and rearrange the euro-zone as well as the EU into something quite different from its current institutional setting and from its original idea. A smaller "Northern" core, sharing the same currency, may

become a reality out of fiscal necessity. Moreover, a German leadership is unlikely to result in a more coherent European strategic actor because of the reluctance of Berlin to exercise a large role on the world scene. As a keen observer of European politics notes, “This avoidance has become the key feature of the German foreign and security policy debate. German dodging has always been a nuisance in Europe. Now, with Germany as Europe’s indispensable nation—and with Europe’s erstwhile strategy champions lost in self-absorption—Germany’s evasion has become a geopolitical problem. More than that, it is a scandal. And it won’t end anytime soon. Germany, Europe’s swing state, prefers to continue its strategic slumber.”²

Third, other European countries may not want Germany to lead Europe. The calls for a more active German leadership are not uniform and unopposed. Indeed, the fear of a German domination of European politics and economics is quite pervasive, if less vocal. By and large, worries about a German hegemony over the continent are quickly dismissed as ahistorical, overly alarmist, and inappropriate in a EU context. But it is too easy to discount such worries. Nobody really expects a German military resurgence, and the exercise of power occurs in a consultative fashion through economic and financial influence. Nonetheless, the worry is that in the end Berlin is imposing policies, which, albeit necessary, carry little support and legitimacy in the target countries (to wit, Greece) – and the result may be a swelling of anti-German feelings.

An American push to support German leadership in Europe is, thus, a desperate move that is highly unlikely to reap many strategic benefits. In fact, it is upsetting traditional partnerships, in particular with the UK, and has been received quite coldly in Germany itself.

More broadly and most importantly, the US should cease its public support for the continued efforts to keep the EU afloat, efforts that are predicated on greater centralization of the powers in Bruxelles. We have limited influence over the internal dynamics and, above all, we are taking sides in an intra-European debate that is far from settled. Threatening a good ally, Great Britain, that were it to leave the EU it would not be included in new trade negotiations is shortsighted and counterproductive. Such a posture allies the US not with Europe, but with one side of a vocal internal debate in Europe. It puts Washington together with Bruxelles, and alienates half of Europeans. And it deprives us of strong allies within Europe.

A partnership with Europe does not necessarily mean a partnership with the EU. On the contrary, to seek a greater relationship with the EU, to the detriment of strong ties with individual countries, weakens the US because its counterpart, the EU, is a political entity that cannot protect its own citizens, is creating deep tensions among its states, and is contributing to an upheaval of the continent’s equilibrium of power.

The success of the EU is not inevitable. We should be agnostic about the future of the EU and ought to be open to alternative ways of pursuing the continued goals we have in Europe. Whether some of these ways may involve a British exit, or a geographic consolidation of the Eurozone, or even in the most extreme and unlikely scenario the splintering of the EU project, Washington ought to be prepared. As Paul Johnson observed recently, “U.S. policy ought to take note of the general air of hostility toward Brussels. Mr. Obama faces the prospect of Britain leaving the EU and of France, Germany, Italy and Spain all weakening their links. This will have little effect on American prosperity, but it is a return to realism that Washington should welcome, if quietly.”³

A Europe that is free, strong, and whole is not necessarily based on the EU. Bilateral relations are not *passé* nor ineffective, and should take precedence over the mirage of a unified, multilateral Europe. Our goals are still there, and rightly so, but the policies need to be adjusted.

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² Jan Techau, “Why Germany Won’t Be America’s New Geopolitical Partner,” <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=52126&lang=en>

³ Paul Johnson, “United Europe – Bad Idea?,” [Forbes](http://www.forbes.com), 24 June 2013.