Europe must recapture its political vision

Any prescription for the European Union's future must take account of the political nature of the project, Nicholas Dungan asserts. Only a renewed French-German partnership can spearhead this effort

The pursuit of a united Europe has always been a political project. The treaties signed at Münster and Osnabrück in 1648, which put in place the Westphalian state system, sought to end the Thirty Years' War within the Holy Roman Empire and the Eighty Years' War between Spain and Holland. In 1815, the Congress of Vienna, following the Napoleonic Wars, specifically included defeated France in an intricate international architecture of which the Austrian and British foreign ministers were the principal designers. The subsequent Congress System kept the peace in Europe until the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. During that relatively irenic century, at the International Peace Congress in Paris in 1849, Victor Hugo appealed for a United States of Europe.

The Treaty of Versailles wrought vengeance upon the vanquished German empire, imposing a form of unbalanced peace which neither the League of Nations nor the 1920s conference system could save.

After the devastation of the Second World War, Winston Churchill, speaking at the University of Zurich in 1946, called for a United States of Europe, though not including the English-speaking peoples, who, he said, like Russia, should be 'the friends and sponsors of the new Europe'. Five years and one day after VE Day, on May 9, 1950, Robert Schuman, the French foreign minister, in his declaration at the Quai d'Orsay, proposed the formation of a European Coal and Steel Community; the Treaty of Paris among France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries creating the ECSC was signed less than a year later, in April 1951.

The political goal was to prevent conflict among these countries by combining their war-making resources, not merely to create a common market. The ECSC was meant to be accompanied by a European Defence Community, championed by the French prime minister René Pleven but defeated in the French National Assembly amid concerns about German rearmament. With the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, evoking explicitly in its preamble 'ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe' (though not among the member states), the European Economic Community was formed. This common market, too, was designed to promote peace among nations and peoples, not merely embody a commercial project such as the parallel European Free Trade Association.

From there, history becomes more familiar: the accession of Denmark, Ireland and the UK (after two refusals from Charles de Gaulle) in 1973; the Single European Act in 1986 and the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 from which sprang the euro as a single currency; further accessions of Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995 and a decade later the eastern enlargements, partly under pressure from NATO's expansion.

The European constitution, very much a political document, was signed in 2004 but defeated the next year by referendums in France and the Netherlands, replaced by the Lisbon Treaty of 2009 under which the EU largely operates today.

The institutions of the European Union – the council as the forum of the member states, the commission as the permanent civil service, the directly elected parliament – all bear witness to the political nature of the European project, as do other EU institutions such as the European Central Bank. Yet Europe today is failing to fulfil its role as a political actor, overwhelmed by events which have slowed the impetus towards unity and instigated a kind of permanent crisis management.

The accumulation of unresolved issues and internal disagreements within the EU arises chiefly from a piecemeal treatment of the problems and a habit in the EU of letting the means get the better of the ends, a loss of vision of what Europe stands for. The motto of the EU is 'unity in diversity' but at present there is far too much diversity and a dearth of uniting factors.

Lacking a political strategy and thinking technocratically, Europe made the mistake of missing the geopolitical importance for Russia of a free-trade agreement with Ukraine, arguably provoking the Maidan demonstrations and the annexation of Crimea by Russia as well as Russian destabilization of eastern Ukraine. Although no further member states are contemplated at present, enlargement versus deepening continues to be an open question. The on-again off-again application of Turkey undermines the dialogue with the Turkish government and cooperation in the diplomatic and humanitarian management of the Syrian crisis. Imagine how different the relations with Turkey would be if that country had joined the EU, or were on a path to membership. The excesses and unpredictability of the Erdogan policies would be vastly better contained.

Brexit, the potential secession of Britain from the European Union following the referendum on June 23 of this year, largely


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represents a sideshow for the EU. But it should never have been allowed to happen. There already exists a two-speed Europe, those countries within the eurozone and those outside it, and as the British prime minister sought to quell dissent from within his parliamentary and broader Conservative party, a clearer definition of the status of those EU member states in the outer ring – such as an exemption from 'ever-closer union' which David Cameron negotiated – might have reassured the Tory Eurosceptics sufficiently and avoided the need for a referendum. But no such initiative, no such clarity, emerged from the EU. Meanwhile, Norway and Switzerland exist in a limbo status. Any genuinely political consciousness in the European neighbourhood policy, both to the east and around the Mediterranean, is difficult to discern, yet these are, geopolitically, hugely important and sensitive regions.

Powers which should be exercised at the level of the Union are increasingly being returned, for a lack of EU-wide leadership, to the member states.

Brexit might not set the precedent for further withdrawals, but it could encourage repatriation of powers back from Brussels. The refugee crisis has exposed and provoked fractures within the EU as Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, sought to welcome a large number of arrivals while other countries, including Austria and Hungary, resisted.

Greece finds itself overwhelmed, Italy is the landing point for many refugees, France is tepid on the subject and much of the Brexit debate centres on immigration. Internal border controls are being reinstated within the Schengen area, for lack of a single European approach to the enforcement of external borders, the refugee crisis and the larger immigration issue.

The EU remains largely unresponsive to the strategic retreat of the United States and unprepared for a new American administration which could be either neo-isolationist and America First, or neo-interventionist in an attempt to reassert US dominance. In either case, the lack of strong European positions leaves the door open for ill-conceived US actions over which Europe will exercise limited influence. Those actions could, as they did in the previous decade, erode global support for the sort of humanist Enlightenment values that Europe seeks to embody.

Members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg take part in a voting session

'The European project represents the most successful instance in the history of humanity of beating swords into ploughshares'

Europe cannot rely on soft power alone. Europe needs policies. Europe's policies need to be framed and articulated in advance of problems arising, in order to put an end to the crisis-management approach which so characterizes the EU today.

Europe needs internal policies which reflect the genuinely political nature of the European project and clarify which member states intend to pursue ever-closer union and in what form, which member states prefer to remain in a less tightly-bound system and what the relationship between the two sets of countries is.

Europe needs to recognize the realities of its unique geography – no border in the east, a highly navigable inland sea, multiple offshore islands – all of which impose the requirement for a well-defined set of policies on refugees, immigration and neighbourhood relations with non-EU countries to the east and around the Mediterranean. The future relationship of the European Defence Agency with and within NATO, together with the role of NATO itself, whose members are mostly European, must be clarified.

One European future emerges from a pusillanimous scenario: business-as-usual crisis management, little political will, eurozone integration (such as banking union) as events dictate. Actions will depend on the initiatives from, and resistance by, individual member states. This Europe as a no-more-war safety net lacks credibility, vision and purpose.

A mid-way European future could be reached via a pick-and-choose scenario in which the EU achieves unity on a handful of policies but without adopting or implementing an over-arching vision of the future subscribed to by all members – a bit more unity, a bit less diversity.

A far different European future results from a powerful scenario: formalization of a multi-speed Europe, clear definition of which decisions belong where, a European Union which has agreed medium-term policies on critical issues, speaks with one voice and displays the willingness and the ability to exercise political power.

That powerful scenario must begin where the EU began, with France and Germany. Elites in both countries would need to shake off their current complacency: France abandoning the comforting concept that it can continue to fail to reform internally and somehow wish away the effects of globalization; Germany discarding the fallacy that it can avoid global geopolitical responsibilities in spite of its economic weight and geographical position.

The leadership in both France and Germany today seems to take Europe quite literally for granted. They accept the EU as it has been handed to them, in a kind of passive acceptance of the *acquis communautaire*, and adjust it as necessary in light of events. What is needed is to reinstate the partnership that existed between Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Helmut Schmidt, then between François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl. Giscard stated recently that during his presidency the French-German relationship was impeccable, in the sense that both coordinated their positions in advance and neither put a foot wrong vis-à-vis the other. This French-German cooperation, once critical policies are identified and agreed between the two – and that will require political will and political skill – should then be extended as rapidly as possible to the other core countries, especially Benelux and Italy, then Iberia and Scandinavia. Germany must do more to sensitize France to the Europe in the east, France must do more to ensure Germany understands the Europe of the south.

The European project represents the most successful instance in the history of humanity of beating swords into ploughshares. That project is first and foremost political. A Europe adrift represents a danger to itself. A void of European strength represents a vacuum which others less benevolent will seek to fill. For Europe to have a future, it must reaffirm its political nature, implement firm policies and be prepared to exercise power.

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