

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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A New Order for Europe?

After the devastation of World War I and the abject horror of World War II, Europe turned a significant corner in world history: Instead of embracing the nation-state with its competing passions for territory and power, Europe made a commitment to integrate itself economically and financially, but not politically. The nation states with their clearly defined borders would remain, but the economies and currencies of those nation states would integrate together into what eventually becoming the European Union (EU). The EU was to be the New Order for Europe. The economic integration of Europe as a somewhat unified trading entity with uniform regulations and standards has worked fairly well. Integrating Europe into a financial powerhouse where each nation has the same currency (the euro) has not worked as well. Great Britain, for example, never joined the monetary union, maintaining the pound sterling as its currency. Today, that dream of a unified and integrated Europe is under tremendous stress. Indeed, a new European order may be emerging.

A series of important historical treaties have shaped the development of Europe. To fully understand the development of Europe, it is important to keep these in mind: (1) The Peace of Westphalia (1648) brought an end to the Thirty Years' War and created a system of sovereignty in which each ruler determined the established religion of the state and which embraced the idea of noninterference in others' affairs. (2) The Congress of Vienna (1815) reestablished the balance of power after the disastrous French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. (3) The Treaty of Versailles (1919) dismantled four major empires (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and the Ottoman Empire) and created the basic nation states of the Middle East. (4) The 1945 peace agreements that ended World War II and the emergence of the United States as a world power produced three significant international organizations that have shaped the late 20th century: The United Nations, The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

What has caused this stress on the unified European vision? Several key developments explain this stress. Two of the most important writers and thought leaders on world affairs are Robert D. Kaplan, Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security, and Robert Kagan, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. In this series of observations, I am drawing heavily on their work.

- The first stress is geography. Since World War II, important autocratic regimes have shielded Europe from the instability of the Middle East and Africa (e.g., Saddam Hussein of Iraq, the Assad family of Syria and Muammar Quaddafi of Libya). Those autocrats are gone or their nation states are basically non-existent. The Balkans, as a result, have resumed their historic role as an immigration corridor of mass migration into Europe.

That number is now in the millions. Kaplan writes: “Europe thus now finds itself facing an unhappy historical irony: The decades in which it was able to develop its high ideals of universal rights, including the right of the distressed to seek havens in Europe, was made possible, it is now clear, by the oppressive regimes that once held sway on its periphery. The Arab world was slammed shut for decades by prison states whose dictator-wardens kept their people in order.” They are gone and the doors to Europe through the Balkans are again open.

- The second stress is a resurgent Russia. During the Cold War, the United States managed and protected Europe from the nuclear threat of the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and the subsequent collapse of Russia both militarily and economically, the threat from the East was gone. However, with the rise of Vladimir Putin, the threat of Russia is back. With his annexation of the Crimea, his military involvement in eastern Ukraine, and his deepening support of Assad in Syria, Russia is a real existential threat to Poland, the Baltic States and even potentially to Romania and Bulgaria. Kaplan argues that “Putin knows that geography and raw power—both military and economic—are still the starting point for asserting national interests. Europe’s elites take a very different view. After centuries of bloodshed, they have largely rejected traditional power politics. To maintain peace, they have instead placed their hopes on a regulatory regime run by the post-national technocrats of Brussels [the center of the European Union]. In their midst, the continent’s divisions could be healed by the social-welfare state and a common currency. Distinctive national identities shaped by centuries of historical and cultural experience would have to give way to the European superstate, whatever its toll on the political legitimacy of the EU among the diverse nations of Europe.” That assumption is being questioned and tested politically within the member states of the EU and in trying to figure out how to respond to Putin.
- Third is the growing reaction to that superstate embodied in the EU bureaucracy. Kaplan writes that the result is that “social-welfare policies once touted as a balm for the continent’s divisions have acted as a drag on national economics, and this stagnation has provided, in turn, the backdrop for nations’ (sometimes reactionary) politics and rising hostility to refugees.”

Analyst Robert Kagan observes that Europe was not in great shape before the refugee crisis and the terrorist attacks from ISIS (e.g., Paris). “The prolonged Eurozone crisis eroded the legitimacy of European political institutions and the centrist parties that run them, while weakening the economies of key European powers. The old troika—Britain, France and Germany—that used to provide leadership on the continent and with whom the US worked most closely to set the global agendas is no more. Britain is a pale shadow of itself. Once the indispensable partner for the US, influential in both Washington and Brussels, the mediator between America and Europe, Britain is now unmoored, drifting away from both.” The spillover from the Middle East cauldron and the ongoing refugee crisis threatens to undermine the continent’s cohesion and sap the strength of the transatlantic alliance.

The European confederate structure and the larger world order both put together by the treaty agreements I mentioned at the beginning of this essay are unraveling. The world is in one of those major reorientation phases that is both destabilizing and quite dangerous. Few analysts know exactly where this is all headed. Hence, we need wise, seasoned leaders on both sides of the Atlantic to deal with this. When I look at the presidential candidates in both political parties, I am not encouraged that America has the leadership potential to meet these enormous challenges. Although rarely discussed in the debates or in the stump speeches of these candidates, the new world order emerging before our eyes needs discerning, wise and gifted leadership. The next president will face a much different world and a much different Europe than what existed seven years ago when President Obama took office.

See David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* (19 November 2015); Robert Kagan, "The Crisis of World Order" in the *Wall Street Journal* (21-22 November 2015); and Robert D. Kaplan, "Europe's New Medieval Map" in the *Wall Street Journal* (16-17 January 2016).