

## Irrelevance, Europe's logical choice

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"In Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love – they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock."

Harry Lime's speech – delivered by Orson Welles – at the end of the *The Third Man* (1949) is a great cinematic moment. It also poses an interesting choice.

For roughly 500 years, Europe was the political, cultural and economic centre of the world. But bloodshed and suffering accompanied all this power – culminating in two suicidal wars in the 20th century.

Since 1945, Europe has become increasingly prosperous, peaceful and comfortable – and irrelevant. So should a united Europe attempt to reclaim its place at the centre of world affairs? Or should we settle for comfortable irrelevance?

Europe's political leaders think they know the answer. They are forever swearing to turn a united Europe into a new superpower. But European citizens seem unconvinced: faced with Harry Lime's choice, most ordinary Europeans would go for the cuckoo clock option.

I thought of Harry Lime at a lunch in London recently with Kishore Mahbubani, once Singapore's senior diplomat – and now, a far from diplomatic author. The European Union, Mr Mahbubani pronounced, is an economic superpower but a diplomatic "mini-power". The Europeans are irrelevant to the world's great issues, obsessed by internal process, culturally arrogant, craven in the face of the US and blind to the rise of Asia.

Perhaps aware that he might be offending his European audience, Mr Mahbubani paused and said: "Don't get me wrong, life is sweet here."

Well, quite. Perhaps there is a connection between the sweetness of life in modern Europe – and the fact that the EU is not a superpower and probably never will be.

Being a superpower can be a burdensome and bloody business. The US deploys troops all over the world. If the Chinese attacked Taiwan, or the Iranians mined the Strait of Hormuz, the Americans would probably get sucked in.

The Europeans, by contrast, have no military presence in either east Asia or the Gulf. There is not much of a European military to deploy – which is a source of huge frustration to the US, as it argues for more **burden-sharing** in Afghanistan.

Many Europeans are content with this situation. They want to keep their heads down, whatever their leaders say at international summits. When Germany extended its (limited) mandate in Afghanistan last October, the polls suggested that 70 per cent of Germans were opposed.

The conventional response to this European instinct is to argue that it is short-sighted and immoral. It is short-sighted, critics say, because there are security threats to Europe's comfortable existence – and unless the Europeans get their act together and start doing more to defend themselves, barbarians will break in and smash up the cuckoo clocks. It is immoral because it means that comfortable and wealthy Europeans are relying on the Americans to protect them. Worse, they then assume the right to criticise their protectors for their crassness and immorality.

But it is far from clear that Europe's passivity is either illogical or immoral. Since the end of the cold war, there has been no conventional military threat to the EU. Nobody is going to invade. Because Europeans know this, there is very little popular support for higher military spending.

Of course, there are threats to the security and prosperity of the average European: terrorism, climate change, uncontrolled immigration, demographic collapse, pandemics, energy supply. But these are not the kind of things that a "European superpower" would be well placed to deal with. What exactly is the military response to global warming or Europe's low fertility rate?

The US has launched wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of a "war on terror". There are thousands of European troops in Afghanistan, fighting alongside the Americans. But although the Europeans would be loath to say so in public, it is at least arguable that involvement in Afghanistan actually increases the terrorism threat to Europe, by helping to radicalise Muslims living in Europe.

Europe's feeble response to the Balkan wars of the 1990s is also often cited as a reason for the EU to develop greater military and diplomatic muscle. But, by the standards of the past, Europe's response to the Balkan crisis of the 1990s was a distinct improvement.

In 1914, a Balkan crisis led to a world war. In the 1990s, the EU's efforts to stop the bloodshed in the former Yugoslavia were slow and ineffectual. But there was never any question of a Balkan conflict escalating into a wider war. There are some advantages to the semi-pacifist outlook of modern Europe.

The downside is that when an international crisis breaks out, Europeans often look like irrelevant whiners. They complain about the American response – but they are powerless to alter events themselves.

Irrelevance is not particularly dignified or noble. But it could still be the logical choice for Europe. Arguably, the EU has achieved a sort of nirvana. It is too strong to be attacked; and too weak to be asked to sort out the rest of the world's problems. As Harry Lime might have pointed out, Europe has become a giant Switzerland.

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