

Europe is a geopolitical dwarf

Financial Times
21-May-2008
By Kishore Mahbubani

The paradox about the European Union's position in the world is that it is both a giant and a dwarf. It stands tall as a giant because it has reached one of the peaks of human civilisation - the achievement of zero prospect of war among European states - and also because of its enormously successful regional co-operation. The world can and does learn lessons from Europe's success after the second world war.

Yet, even though it has an economy comparable with America's, it stands as a political dwarf in responding to the rapidly changing geopolitical environment. The combination of slavishly following the US lead (with the possible exception of the invasion of Iraq), its reluctance to contemplate badly needed strategic initiatives (as in the Middle East) or provide real political leadership to complete the Doha round of global trade talks and other such failures have led to the steady shrinking of Europe's footprint on the world stage.

Another paradox about the EU is how the citizens live in a bubble of security while feeling each day a rising level of psychological insecurity about their future. Millions try to enter the EU, legally and illegally, because they want to partake of the good life that the EU has created for its citizens. If John Rawls, the philosopher, were alive today, he would probably classify several European societies as the most just societies under the criteria spelt out in his famous *The Theory of Justice*. The world sees the EU as a haven of peace and prosperity. Yes, as I told Gideon Rachman, the Financial Times columnist, life is sweet in Europe.

But the rising tide of insecurity in European hearts and minds also means that Europe cannot continue to be a giant Switzerland, which Mr Rachman suggested in his column this week it has become. The Swiss can feel secure because they are surrounded by Europe. The Europeans can only feel insecure because they are surrounded by an arc of instability, from north Africa to the Middle East, from the Balkans to the Caucasus. To make matters worse, the age-old Christian obsession with the threat of Islam has become far more acute, with Islamophobia rising to new heights in European cultures.

Given Europe's ability to dominate the world for almost 500 years, it is remarkable how poorly it is responding to new geopolitical challenges. The paucity of European strategic thinking is stunning. Most European geopolitical gurus believe that the EU can survive well as a free-rider on US power, counting on it to keep the world safe while Europe tends to its internal gardens. Mr Rachman is right when he says that most Europeans want to keep their heads down. However, he is wrong when he says that Europe's passivity may be neither illogical nor immoral.

One simple unpalatable truth that many Europeans refuse to confront is that, in the short run, free-riding on US power can significantly diminish European security. The one-sided US policy on the Israel-Palestine issue, coupled with the botched invasion and occupation of Iraq, has angered 1.2bn Muslims. But while America is protected by the vast Atlantic ocean, Europe feels this Islamic anger directly because of its geographical proximity to the Middle East and its large domestic Islamic populations. Pure common sense would suggest that Europe should reconsider the strategic costs of only playing Tonto to the American Lone Ranger.

Does the EU have other strategic options? Of course it does. Asia provided one when it

offered the union an Asia-Europe meeting (Asem), which could have created a stable triangular balance of power between the US, EU and east Asia. If all three legs of Asem were equally strong, each power could use the triangle for geopolitical leverage. The missing Asia-Europe link gives the US obvious bargaining leverage.

Initially, the EU reacted enthusiastically to Asem in the mid-1990s. I know. I was there. However, when the Asian financial crisis came along, the EU abandoned Asia in its hour of need, leaving behind a bitter residue of distrust, and demonstrated that it was a fair-weather friend. Given Asia's quick rebound and the abundant evidence that this will be Asia's century, this European decision will go down as one of its stupidest strategic decisions.

To make matters worse, Europe has forgotten the lessons of Machiavelli (a child of the Italian Renaissance) and is only pursuing ostensibly "moral" policies in Asia. It tries to impose human rights conditions before agreeing to co-operate with the world's largest democracy, India, thereby incurring Indian umbrage. Its relations with the Association of South East Asian Nations, the crucial diplomatic forum in Asia, is distorted by the single lens of Burma, ignoring the 450m south-east Asians living outside the country. Most recently Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, and Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president, once again demonstrated Europe's tendency to shoot itself strategically in the foot by signalling that they may boycott the Olympics. In short, whenever the EU gets a chance, it slaps Asia in the face.

The real irony here is that Asia is doing much more to enhance long-term European security than America is. The Asian march to modernity, which began in Japan and is now sweeping through China and India, is poised to enter the Islamic world in west Asia. When this march enters the Islamic world, Europe will be surrounded by modern, middle-class Muslim states.

Hence, Europe should encourage Muslims to look at China, India and Asean as their new development models. The success of the Beijing Olympics could help to ignite new dreams of modernisation among disaffected Islamic youth, who will ask why their societies cannot prosper like China. In short, if Mrs Merkel and Mr Sarkozy could think strategically and long-term, they should enthusiastically participate in and cheer the success of the Olympics. When the Islamic world is finally modernised, Europe can go back to being a giant Switzerland again.

The writer is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. His new book, the New Asian Hemisphere, develops the themes of this article

Companies: European Union ;

Industries: Admin of Economic Programs; Admin of General Economic Programs;

Subjects: Economic News; International Trade Agreements;

Countries: Iraq;

FT.com

Copyright The Financial Times Ltd. All rights reserved.

Powered by  InfoDesk