

Europe, Quo Vadis?

Over millennia and centuries, the Europeans dominated planet Earth. First, the Greek and Romans then the Spanish, Portuguese and the British. To a certain extent also the Dutch, the French and even the Belgians. The Germans were hardly to be seen. With their small princely states, they were too cluttered to be a force to reckon with. This changed with Bismarck and the formation of the German Reich. To show the world that the Germans now also would be a powerful nation, they started fighting with their neighbours that eventually brought on World War I. The Germans misjudged their power and were beaten up by their adversaries only to be woken up from their dreams of expansion to a reality that made it smaller than before. On top of it, they had to agree to the Treaty of Versailles that made them pay for their sins for many years to follow. In their frustration, the Germans permitted a dictator like Hitler to rise and take over with his promise to make Germany great again.

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This turned out to be a disaster not only for Germany but also for Europe and Japan, Germany's ally in the Pacific. This time the Europeans could not stop the wild Germans, and they had to be bailed out by the Americans. Where 100 years prior virtually the wild-west was still prevalent with immigrants and refugees from Europe practically colonizing a foreign land and industrialization had started on the basis of mobility with the car and railway infrastructure, megacities and power generation. Most important in hindsight, a military industry was established that should help America to change the rules of the game. The European millennia came to an end, and the American century started. The Americans though were intelligent enough to realise that they would not be able to manage the world without the countries they had migrated from a little earlier. So they put their shaken cousins, aunts and uncles in "not so Great Britain", the "not so Grande Nation France" and "Deutschland unter alles" back on their feet. And they put up institutions like the United Nations, the World Bank, IMF and GATT (later WTO) to make sure an emergence of tyranny like under Hitler would not be repeated. The conditions were clear.

The supported nations had to stick to democratic political systems, the rule of law and a common enemy - the communist Soviet Union. With this friendly but decisive push, the European Nations realised surprisingly fast that it is better to work with each other rather than to fight each other. First, they put their economies back on their feet and then they even started a political integration that would have been unthinkable some decades earlier. With the Soviet Union over judging their global ambitions and military abilities in a small country like Afghanistan and eventually breaking apart, first Germany and then most of the eastern European countries got their liberty and freedom without bloodshed, and Europe grew from strength to strength. America in the bargain lost, looked further East and made a deal with an erstwhile enemy, communist China using it as cheap manufacturing-hub to satisfy the demand of its consumer addicted American people and probably thinking that the

Chinese people would eventually also fall for the sweet fascination of capitalism and get rid of their communist rulers.

Unfortunately, the Americans misinterpreted the Chinese ability and approach. Instead of an ally, they nurtured a competitor. With the Europeans also becoming more and more independent from big brother America and a not-so-hardworking but rather hard-gambling banking industry almost destroying itself, America lost dominance. With the Bush and Clinton administrations, the world's most important nation became like a family business of WASPs and the election of Obama as the first non-white American President was the reaction. This was too much for the American establishment, and as an act of revenge they voted for someone who promised them the comeback of the American dream that could well become an American nightmare. Donald Trump.

While America went through its self-finding process, the Europeans struggled to become something like a self in the first place. Getting peace and unity as a gift from others is more than luck. It was a blessing in disguise. But turning this gift of "God bless America" into a sustainable united nation is hard work. The Euro crises, the refugee crises and now Brexit are the reality checks whether the Europeans are able to live with and groom the gift of God. Looking at the recent elections to the European Parliament and the selection of the Chairman of European Commission, the jury is still out if this way of working will be successful. The elevation of German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen was anything but planned but rather a coup like a rabbit out of the hat. She was on nobody's agenda just a month ago. And in Germany, her performance as Minister of Defence was more than disputed. The army is anything but ready for an emergency. Tanks are outdated, submarines are not working, fighter planes are not flying, transport planes are ordered but not delivered, McKinsey consultants are hired to professionalise the army, and now a parliamentary enquiry committee wants to find out where the money went. The minister is certainly more popular outside than inside Germany, and even Chancellor Angela Merkel would have never dared to recommend her. She even went to the extent to recommend Social Democratic party candidate Dutch, Frans Timmermans, a no-go for her own party men and most of the other heads of state and governments in the EU. Even a conflict with the newly elected parliament was accepted by presidents and prime ministers of Europe to please their strategies or egos or both.

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Unfortunately, Europe is still far away from a united nation that could challenge the other global players who think they are the boss in the house. The process of the selection of the Chairman of the European Commission, unfortunately, showed the dilemma Europe has. Europe needs a strong leader to be able to fight it out with the Trumps, the Putins and the Xi Jinpings of this world. But every European leader fears that if the head of the EU is really strong, they might lose out. So rather have a weak head that can be pushed around than a strong one that can push around the real heavyweights.

If Ursula von der Leyen can develop this most needed power, has to be seen. The global scenario being as it needs a powerful Europe maybe now more than ever before. The EU is an assembly of democracies of states that follow the rule of law. They are states that do not believe in bullying others or even use force to get what they want no matter if they deserve it or not.

Former Social Democratic Party President and foreign and economics minister Sigmar Gabriel proposed Chancellor Merkel to take the responsibility and run at least for the post of the President of the European Council. She certainly is the most powerful and accepted politician in Europe if not the world, but she would not be accepted by the European allies. Too powerful! Instead, as the successor of Donald Tusk, they voted 43-year youngster Charles Michel who resigned as the Belgian Prime Minister in December 2018.

Europe is a cradle of culture, education and science with the highest standard of living. And while others think they can reverse history, Europe can make history. When President Trump wants to make America great again by asking Americans whose ancestors have migrated to America and made it great in the first place to go back to where they came from, then the Europeans should follow the American way before Trump and welcome migrants from all over to build a strong democratic Europe. Hopefully, Mr. Trump does

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not follow his own demand and go back to the country of his ancestors – Germany. Unfortunately, some of the European states have also not understood the gift they got from history. While they welcomed the freedom to speak, to write and move with open arms after the torture they suffered some of their political leaders now think they should go back to undemocratic systems just for their own political game. Europe has to fight for a better world, and the nomination speech by Mrs. von der Leyen was quite encouraging. This is also what the majority of the parliamentarians must have thought; otherwise, they would not have voted for a candidate that was dumped on them. Apart from Trump and all the others the biggest problem for the Chairman and her new commission though will be Brexit. Right at the beginning of her tenure,

the unity of Europe will be challenged. How to tackle this nobody seems to know. And here perhaps history comes in handy. Ursula von der Leyen was born in Brussels and started her schooling in the European School 1 there. This schooling shaped her for

ever. A little after her, a young boy started his schooling in the same school who was born in America. Boris Johnson! He then, of course, went to Eton and Oxford where he was shaped by all the other makers and shakers with whom he created the mess the UK is in now.

So maybe the senior Ursula can bring junior Boris back to his senses if he has any. And if not hopefully it is Bexit instead of Brexit – Boris exit!