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Two decades ago, analysts expected the reunified Germany to adopt a more assertive role in international politics. Yet since 1991 Germany has been only a small and generally unimpressive presence on the world stage. In footballing terms, a Premiership club, certainly; but more West Ham than Arsenal. While Berlin is insistent on playing the role of a 'good' neighbour – so as not to reawaken memories of German aggression – for the most part this is down to routine diplomatic incompetence and policy misjudgement. A brief historical detour underlines this. In the early 1990s, German ambition was obvious. The country hoped for permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council, and made a major financial contribution to the costs of the 1991 Gulf War. But the focus of German policy was directed at Europe, and here German assertiveness and influence was clear. The Maastricht Treaty transformed the EC into an EU on German lines; agreement was reached for a single currency, again on German lines; and a form of federalism was adopted, fully compatible with German understandings of that concept. Germany also led the way in recognising the collapse of Yugoslavia, and facilitated the entry into the EU of pro-German nations like Austria, Sweden, and Finland. In essence, there was every sign that the old German 'customs union', Mitteleuropa – the dream of the Kaiser – was at last about to emerge.

But these schemes led nowhere. A seat on the Security Council failed to transpire, the Exchange Rate Mechanism collapsed, and, by 1997, Germany had even abandoned strict criteria for entry to the single currency. The domestic economy was stagnant as reunification stimulated weakness and discontent. More recently, in the current financial crisis it has become clear that Germany does not know how to restore European prosperity. And the EU has proved simply too convoluted to be an effective vehicle for German leadership. The result of all this is that Berlin has singularly failed to become the great power that its wealth, geographical location, and significance imply that it should be.

And yet, this isn't the big story. What we should take note of is that despite this failure, Germany has become increasingly assertive in its international relationships, especially since the accession of Gerhard Schroeder in 1998. Schroeder's policy was continued and indeed expanded by Angela Merkel, an unapologetic nationalist and advocate of distinctly German interests. Since 2005 Merkel has conceded little to other nations, explored a 'strategic partnership' with Russia, threatened to reconstruct the whole EU to force the 'Club Med' nations to fix their economies (despite lacking any legal means of doing so), and facilitated true German military expeditionary forces. This constitutes a marked departure for Germany. Berlin is cautiously and quietly exploring new possibilities. But even if German diplomatic clumsiness persists – and history suggests that it might – the country has still decided to take on a much larger role and flex its muscles. Its appetite increases by the year. And there will be no returning this particular genie to the bottle.

As suggested in Part I, it is far from clear that this will stimulate harmony and co-operation in Europe. And if America withdrew, Germany – currently no less dependent on Washington for security than other European states – would be compelled to look out for itself by increasing its military capacity, being more willing to assert German national interests, and probably seeking nuclear weapons. In response the rest of Europe would need to build up their own military forces. Both Germany and Russia would fear the other's control over central Europe; the region is a crucial buffer zone. Again, this anxiety would result in a security competition. Far more likely than European harmony is a return to conventional balancing behaviour. Hopefully, of course, Britain will have sufficient nous to refuse to get drawn in to a problem that is none of London's business. But German assertiveness is not going to make for a more co-operative continent.

By way of another example of fragile co-operation on the continent, consider the EU itself. The resilience of the EU to collapse lies principally in the fact that states find it convenient. That may change if security tensions ever return. Another factor is the complexity of its truly Byzantine bureaucracy, making it difficult to dislodge. But that bureaucracy is woefully inefficient. For instance, the European Commission has significant powers, but national governments are disinclined to let it off the leash, while other centres of influence within the EU (observe the obvious resemblance to the diverse points of authority in a medieval Asiatic empire) dispute its right to wield its powers. The European Court of Justice and European Parliament, for instance, have their own powers and act accordingly, hence the incoherence of policy and the impossibility of understanding the 'European' view on anything. Meanwhile, much EU expenditure consists of regional and agricultural subsidy; without this, it is doubtful how far states would deem it worth their while to bother. And as the EU expands, the previous beneficiaries of these subsidies become net contributors. The larger the Union becomes, the less likely is unity. No one can agree on what is proposed, hence the endless rounds of negotiation and revision. Now, it must be acknowledged that to some extent this is probably deliberate, a wrecking ball tactic; British support of Turkish accession is one example of this approach. Throwing a spanner in the works is a standard tool in bureaucratic politics. But the problem persists. Meanwhile the mechanism by which a common or united Europe is actually to emerge has never been defined, even by its advocates. The plan is purely one of aspiration – i.e. hot air – rather than anything of substance. Language of a 'natural progression', or 'inevitability', is a means of ducking the issue, and an unconvincing one at that. So, as the EU is not sovereign, states will simply bypass and ignore it when necessary, rendering it irrelevant. Rather than a vehicle for 'community', it is a tool for the interests of states.

The claim that the European project is responsible for keeping the peace on the continent is even more ridiculous. There is no evidence to support the argument. It overlooks the threat posed by the USSR, and, even more so, the role played by the United States. NATO was successful due to the existence of an obvious danger to western Europe; but the historical record indicates that in the conditions where contemporary real-world crises will arise – Russian pressure, German self-assertion, terrorism, energy crises – 'solidarity' gives way to calculations of individual advantage and interest. One or two sizeable demonstrations of the iron law of international relations will torpedo the whole façade of European harmony and its attendant, hyperbolic language.

For instance, when crises do occur, how likely is that European nations will even be able to

agree on what to do? There has been one example of this post-Cold War – the Balkans – and the record is not encouraging. There will be others, probably involving the Balkans again, Russia, Germany, or the Middle East if Turkey should join the EU. If the European nations couldn't agree among themselves to bomb Serbia, then there is little chance that unity will prevail in future. The players are separate nations, with distinct interests, resources, relationships, domestic arrangements, strategic visions, and geographies. The probable scenario at a time of crisis is EU paralysis and a lack of collective action.

Organisations, by their very nature, are defined by rules that stipulate how members will behave. However there is no mechanism in Europe for forcing sovereign states to obey these rules. If they judge it in their interests to defy them, they will do so. European states routinely do this over relatively minor trade quarrels; they will certainly flout the rules even more vigorously over something of real importance. Whatever the advocates of international institutions may claim, there is no evidence that they can compel states to act in ways contrary to the dictates of traditional behaviour.

What we have in Europe therefore is neither a genuine 'community' nor even a 'concert'; instead, states have been able to avoid engaging in overt security competition because of the presence of an overwhelming external power, the United States. That's it; there is no revolutionary force at work. The nature of the international system, as it has functioned since time immemorial, indicates that the fiction of European co-operation will change when, and if, the US decides it no longer wants to guarantee European security. That could happen for several reasons, from focusing on the Pacific, to doing a deal whereby the Americans concede pre-eminence on Russia's borders in return for assistance balancing the Chinese. Who needs to be afraid when the US behemoth can be trusted to squash malfeasants? But remove the American giant, and watch states began to compete, and maybe fight again. Thankfully, we can be reasonably optimistic that this won't happen for the foreseeable future. States desire, and indeed rely on US activism. Washington may adopt the view that maintaining the status quo is easier than riding to the rescue later on, and while the White House has minimal interest in 'Europe' it does have an interest in maintaining good relations with key players like Britain, Germany, and Poland. So while the rationale for state co-operation in Europe is actually fairly weak, the architecture of the American security guarantee probably is not. The Europhiles can probably rejoice for a good while longer. But, one day, the scales will surely fall from their eyes.

The lesson here can be summarised thus: all of this is remarkably fragile. The structures of European harmony are not deep, and in fact lie remarkably close to the surface. A stiff breeze, let alone an earthquake, might collapse them. The whole illusion of European harmony stems from two transient phenomena: Germany's hesitation about asserting her natural pre-eminence, and the willingness of the US to underwrite European security in the post-Cold War era. When those things change, so will the manner in which European politics is discussed.

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