A Flash of Vitality

How Europe is making its way back into the global game

by Steven Kontoyannis

A decade has passed since Brexit, and Europe continues to struggle to define its role in the world. Institutionally, the European Union has hobbled on without fully addressing the excesses its members continue to abhor. Responses of political necessity by national governments have managed to curb the forces of populism, and still the European Commission hasn’t stopped pushing for further economic consolidation. Britain’s formal withdrawal in 2019 signaled the apex of populist momentum in Europe. As if this weren’t enough of a wake-up call, it took regional outburst to Brussels’ creeping encroachment into fiscal affairs to finally force the Commission into reverse. What we see now is a suboptimal balance of national and supranational interests that has allowed the economic union fight on through the hullabaloo of popular resentment.

Opposition to centralized bureaucracy figures more prominently than ever in national politics. Conspicuous vexations continue to emanate from fringe movements influencing government actions. Perpetually dissatisfied minorities across Europe remain intent on pulling their country out of the Union. Among the residue of animosity, Eurocrats must admit of some gratitude towards the tumultuous divorce with Britain. The withdrawal figures prominently in much of the new European political mentality, and the initial distress experienced by the former member has dissuaded Europeans from following its example. A much undervalued impact of Brexit was to galvanize complacent Europhiles, in turn providing the impetus for national measures to preempt the possibility of Frexit, Nexit and Auexit. Europe has ultimately to thank for its preservation the democratic processes of individual member states that fervently oppose its bureaucratic excesses.

Few, if any, of the other members would likely prevail in the wilderness as Britain has managed. The punitive negotiation tactics each party practiced left some scars, but the Brits have not abandoned their allies. Through NATO and American arbitration, the U.K. and Europe have found diplomatic common ground, even if the former’s strategic vision aligns more with some in the region than others.

It all sounds like a broken record. For much of Europe’s case, it is. But the tug of war between Brussels and its 29 members has finally given the region some semblance of internal stability. This has allowed room for progress in the EU’s least contentious realm: security.

Did you say ‘consensus’?

After establishing its military HQ in Brussels Europe’s security apparatus has gained significant momentum, in turn augmenting its NATO big brother. Defense research and funding have increased, strategic communication and coordination are more focused and defense capabilities enhanced. Cooperation over the continent’s security has progressed while maintaining NATO’s primacy. Piggybacking on U.S. logistical and operational command is less common; Europe led the crisis response to last year’s epidemic in Central and Southeast Africa.
Leadership from Berlin and Paris has been crucial to this achievement, but after much hesitation and unwavering fealty to NATO former skeptics show greater signs of involvement in Europe’s defensive framework. Poland, which led the mostly eastern resistance to the headquarters’ establishment, is more engaged in the military configuration. To be sure, the Polish remain ambivalent, an unavoidable posture by virtue of their leadership over eastern Europe’s security priorities. Despite the degree of cooperation, Europe is still looking to address these disparities. As with its economic realm, the east-west and north-south divisions are clear, but not irreconcilable.

Consider relations with Russia. As social and demographic declines leave its economy moribund Moscow, characteristically, overcompensates with foreign policy grandiosity, primarily at Ukraine’s territorial expense but with palpable threats to Europe’s eastern bloc. With Poland’s lead, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia have beefed up their military capabilities in conjunction with NATO and Brussels’ HQ. Franco-German diplomatic maneuvers have contributed to the halt in the Kremlin’s westward forays, but the east carries the brunt of the work in deterring Russia, with a welcome level of Anglo-American activity. Nonetheless, southern and western Europe, including France, are preoccupied with sporadic terrorism. But with Brussels’ coordination, domestic security has improved, as has Europe’s capacity to respond as a collective to crises at home and overseas. The decentralized military structure has created cooperation on strategic objectives near and far through a network of unregimented interstate defense commitments. Why then does Europe continue to punch under its weight?

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Europe’s greatest strength continues to be its soft power projection. Stringent immigration policies have conserved Western values while allowing quotas of refugees the chance to assimilate and supplement the projection of those values. Although cosmo-politanism clashes with national identity, each successive day in Europe marks a new record of peace, a deepening pool of crossfertilization and mounting evidence of the power of history. Loyalty to national identity yields to bonds of civilization, assuring the perpetuation of unity. Most of Europe is defined by the same Graeco-Roman principles that spread across the region, recoiled into obscurity, and finally resurfaced with a vengeance to extend across the globe. Now Europe must concentrate on two sources of deficit that are much harder to address. First, the will to enforce its ideals. Second, a self-awareness of potential.

History demanded that Europeans embrace liberal ideals enshrined in institutions, the successes of which are dubious. But, having developed defense mechanisms to safeguard its principles, Europe is stronger and more cooperative for the first time in over two decades. Latent synergy has begun to manifest in a collegial policy of outwardness of great geopolitical importance. The world is less inclined to assume France or Germany act on behalf of Europeans. As a region it arbitrated the Kashmir negotiations, and imprints economic influence in the Far East basin.

Europe is reanimating itself. As it edges towards greater defensive solidarity, it acknowledges its interests are global and is preparing to influence the vicissitudes of international currents and respond to critical events outside the continent. While Europe’s nations resuscitate its global presence, they must not forget what Europe has come to represent: history’s most unconventional superpower, if only through its unrivaled display of morality. One should hope it’s here to stay.