

Early attempts at European unity: the “External Federators”

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From Immanuel Kant and William Penn to Aristide Briand, the idea of European Unity represents something of an age-old dream in Europe.

The early post WWII attempts at European unity, however, were the result of the destructive excesses of nationalism, and war. The motivation was to transcend the tradition of national antagonism, and create a network of economic interdependence that would virtually eliminate the possibility of renewed conflict among European states. So that Europe would not regress to a “dark continent” ever again.

Building a new economic and political structure in Europe, would subordinate national sovereignty to a wider European loyalty and decision-making process. The prospect of European unity also meant enhanced, and quicker economic recovery and eventual prosperity.

There was also the realization on the part of Western European powers that the scale of world politics had radically changed as a result of WWII. None of the great European powers alone would be able to reinstate their global position in the post war era. Only united they stood a chance of reestablishing their influence in world affairs.

European unity also became a major US foreign policy objective after the war. For one reason or another, the US found itself deeply involved in two European wars inside a generation. It became an accepted proposition that the US had a right and an interest to become involved in Europe’s postwar reconstruction. Support in Europe and the US for European unity rose dramatically with the beginning of the cold war.

The Berlin blockade and the communist takeover in Prague, with the backing of the Soviet Union, were a stark evidence of the Soviet threat to European security. In the emerging bipolar structure of the cold war, the strengthening of Western Europe became a vital interest of both western Europeans and Americans.

A further American motivation for unity was the German problem. European unity was seen as a way of addressing the German problem by anchoring Germany in the West. Germany’s economic potential could also be vital for west European recovery. It is no secret that this was a major American motive in proposing the Marshall plan in 1947 and associating W. Germany with it in 1948.

For skeptical members of Congress, European unity was seen as a major means of avoiding a situation of permanent European economic dependence upon the US.

For that reason the Marshall plan intended to rebuild European production capabilities to enable the Europeans to export sufficiently to support their import needs through their export earnings. The US position was that any new dollar aid would have to carry reliable guarantees of getting the Europeans off the US dole within a period of four years. For that reason the Marshall plan was based on a concerted regional basis unlike the earlier UNRRA bilateral aid approaches.

The US made it clear that continuation of Marshall aid funds would depend upon European cooperation and institutional creativity. In that sense the US encouraged the creation of OEEC as an organization, which would encourage West European unity. OEEC would get the questions of who gets what, settled by the Europeans themselves. Then the Europeans would present their agreed upon proposals to Washington for consideration.

OEEC was an intergovernmental organization without any pretension of supranationality or federalizing tendencies. It was an institution for the coordination of nationally determined economic recovery projects. It could not compel states to do anything.

OEEC did, however, contribute greatly to west European economic recovery, which was a precondition for European integration later represented by the ECSC and the EEC. Furthermore, OEEC through the European Payments Union (EPU) stimulated major European trade increases leading to the growth of European assets in the 50s, which was a precondition to allow European currencies to become convertible.

This, in turn, was a precondition for the integration that started with the treaty of Rome. OEEC was also successful in the import quota abolition. It also made an important contribution to the restructuring of the locus of European decision-making in the economic realm. It developed and consolidated a process of consultations among European governments with respect to economic plans and policies, which smoothed the way to the next level of economic cooperation in the context of the EEC.

The conditions of the post war era and the realities of the emerging cold war motivated and rallied a number of European statesmen around the dream of European unity. Exceptional figures such as Schuman, Adenauer, Spaak, Monet, Spinelli, and de Gasperi, seized the moment to promote the vision of a united Europe. They, rightly, came to be called the founding fathers of European unity.

To a large extent, however, the early impulses for European unity in the immediate post war era came from the so called "external federators". The positive and decisive role of the United States, on the one hand, and the emerging challenges and threats posed by the Soviet Union and the cold war, on the other.

Europe at sixty is facing a similar set of challenges, and the reasons for the continuity of the European project remain as strong as ever. Europe can only united face the challenges of globalization, and cope effectively with its current polycrisis. Its unity remains vital for the West and US interests, even under the Trump administration. While, on the other hand, Putin's assertive Russia makes unity imperative for its survival.

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