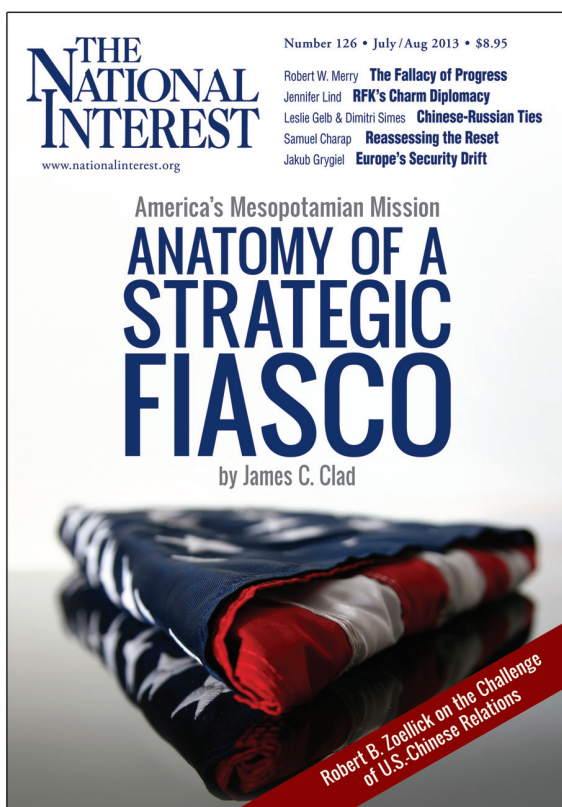


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Europe: Strategic Drifter

By Jakub Grygiel

The European Union's unfolding crisis tends to be seen as purely economic in nature and consequence. The EU is a common market, with a common currency adopted by most of its members and with fiscal problems of one kind or another facing almost all of its capitals. Most analyses of the euro crisis focus, therefore, on the economic and financial impact of whatever "euro exit" may occur or of a European fiscal centralization. In the worst case, they project a full-fledged breakup of the common currency and perhaps even the EU itself. Not much can be added to this sea of analysis except a pinch of skepticism: nobody really knows the full economic impact, positive or negative, of such potential developments. In fact, not even European leaders seem to have a clear idea of how to mitigate the economic and political morass of the Continent. While it is certain that the EU of the future will be different, it isn't clear just how.

If we look at the current situation of the EU from a security perspective, however, it becomes much more difficult to foresee any long-term positive outcome. That's because the euro troubles of today will have powerful negative effects on the security of

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the region, resulting in challenges that will preoccupy Europeans as well as Americans in the years to come.

Certainly, this does not mean that the postwar European project, backed by American power, will wither away. There is little likelihood of deadly intra-European conflicts of the kind that bedeviled the Continent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Europe, in this sense, is and will continue to be at peace. Moreover, European powers historically tended to export their conflicts abroad, often fighting each other in distant theaters (North America, Africa or Asia) before resorting to direct confrontation on the Continent. Thus, tensions in Europe often translated into instability abroad. But today's European states have little ability to project power. Long gone is the nineteenth-century Europe of expanding, ambitious imperial powers. One result is that within Europe there are no serious territorial conflicts, no need or desire to expand, and no revolutionary or revisionist forces on the horizon. Even in a (highly unlikely) worst-case scenario—a complete breakup of the European Union accompanied by a collapse of its economies—it is difficult to foresee a return to the bloody interactions of past centuries. In a nutshell, there are reasons to maintain a healthy optimism about the future of Europe as a continent internally at peace.

But any such optimism is grounded in the reality of persistent and possibly

accelerating European decline. Europe is drifting from crisis to crisis, unable to address structural problems at either the national or the EU level. Consequently, it is focused on fiscal limits, “austerity” packages, labor-market rigidities, regulations and questions regarding the legitimacy of existing institutions. Introspection and self-centeredness can breed peace but not necessarily long-term security. It is a peace of weakness, and weakness breeds challenge.

The European Union is a strategic drifter, unclear about its world role, unable to articulate a purpose and divided in its perception of external threats. This invites exploitation by other powers (Russia and China in particular) eager to reestablish their own standing in the world or to chip away at U.S. security and interests. The Continent thus faces questions about its long-term stability amid the prospect of new conventional threats. More dynamic and aggressive powers—Russia, Iran and China—are unlikely to leave a weak and divided Europe alone.

All this is reflected in four developing realities that are symptoms of the ongoing, gradual and worrisome shift in the geopolitical position of Europe and in the relationship between Europe and the United States. These are:

(1) the foreign policies of many EU member states increasingly are driven more by domestic economic concerns than by cold, geopolitical assessment of external threats;

(2) other EU members, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, are concerned with their territorial security, bringing discussions of conventional deterrence back into vogue;

(3) the EU’s fundamental weakness, rather than any strategic conviction, likely will lead Europe to oppose U.S. foreign policy, especially in the eastern Mediterranean and

the Middle East; and

(4) the United States will have few and feeble capabilities to shore up Europe because the root of the problem is not security, an area in which the United States retains considerable leverage, but rather internal economic malaise stemming from a misconceived political plan of EU unification. Moreover, while America’s benevolent power played a crucial role in fostering post-World War II European harmony, EU integration is an indigenous process far less conducive to U.S. influence.

These four developments, which are linked and self-reinforcing, are rooted in deeper problems and unresolved differences that are gaining force as a result of the economic crisis. They are widely seen, wrongly, as tangential or even irrelevant to the future of Europe and its economic struggles. That’s because the faith in a new political reality—one created by the EU and characterized by the fortuitous absence of any serious security threat—remains powerful throughout the Continent. Still, while the transformative power of the EU on international politics and security remains limited, it must be said that these four developments are trends, not outcomes. They point to the emergence of a worrisome new geopolitical reality—but one that has not yet fully materialized. It also is not fully recognized, and that renders it all the more ominous.

The EU’s member states do not agree on the nature of external threats. This is not new, of course. Estonia and Poland traditionally have had little in common with, for example, France or Italy. The EU has no power to change geographic realities; events in Moscow or Tunisia cannot be controlled by Europe and affect various European states very differently. Tunisian or Libyan refugees landing on Sicilian beaches do not produce prominent headlines in

Great Britain, while the potential placement of Russian Iskander medium-range ballistic missiles in Kaliningrad is not deemed to be a problem in Athens. Until recently, however, such disagreements remained largely theoretical and did not translate into clearly divergent actions. For example, Paris and Rome may have had a higher tolerance for Vladimir Putin's ambitions than Warsaw or Riga. In some cases, particularly on issues of energy and Georgia, views were not just divergent but in serious conflict. But there was a certain unspoken understanding that Europeans could disagree vehemently on such matters without undermining each other's security.

Now, however, such divergent views are leading to divergent actions, and this can undermine the concept of European unity, as well as EU security itself. This is not based on any dispassionate analysis of the nature of external threats but rather on domestic concerns about unemployment and deficits that drive foreign-policy decisions. Consider the case of France's 2011 sale to Russia of *Mistral*-class ships capable of carrying helicopters and amphibious vehicles. Paris ignored heated opposition to this sale from leaders of Central and Eastern European nations. The final agreement, envisaging the sale of two *Mistrals* and the further construction in Russia of two more, was a watershed event because it indicated it can be permissible for a European state to transfer high-tech military platforms to a nation deemed threatening by other Europeans. Because this transfer undermined an already-tenuous belief in European solidarity, for Russia this was a political victory more than a simple



improvement of military capabilities. The message was: watch out, Georgia and Estonia (and other states along the eastern frontier), because France will not protect you. In France, meanwhile, the decision seemed to have been driven by domestic politics and economic considerations—namely, the desire to keep a shipyard working and thus avoid thousands of layoffs that would have hampered an already-dire economic situation and a tenuous political climate. By adding the latest technologies and communications systems to the *Mistral* hulls, France signaled its openness to further business deals geared toward modernizing the Russian military.

Putin's plans to increase Russian defense spending by roughly 25 percent in 2013 are certainly appealing to the world's defense contractors. Russia has the money and political will—but not the industrial and technological infrastructure—to modernize its military. So the *Mistral* case can be explained, to some degree, as a market story of supply meeting demand. But looking at the deal merely through an economic prism misses some of the long-term military and political ramifications of the sale. At the same time that France was providing

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amphibious-assault ships to Moscow, Germany was signing an agreement to build a combat-training center for the Russian army. An analysis of the agreement by a Polish think tank states:

The centre is to enable comprehensive training—both with the use of 3D simulators and in training ground conditions—for an expanded tactical formation (brigade), including an exercise engagement between two brigades. This will be the first facility of this kind in the Russian army (very few Western armies have similar training centres) and will change fundamentally the way and the nature of the training of the Russian ground forces as well as the air forces and airborne forces which co-operate with them. The centre will enable the Russian army to shorten and improve the security of the training process, to evaluate more precisely the level achieved by the trained units and to substantially cut expenses.

This training center, expected to be fully functional by 2014, is larger than anything that the Bundeswehr has, and it will also be used by German soldiers in cooperation with the Russians. However one looks at this, the German-built center inevitably will enhance the fighting capabilities of the Russian army, increasing the risks to neighboring countries such as Georgia and Ukraine, as well as to the most exposed eastern NATO members, notably Poland and the Baltic states. But such assessments of the security impact of a transfer of German know-how to Moscow didn't seem to play a role in Germany's decision-making process, which seemed to focus instead on the

economic benefits and the potential for future deals. Russia has money to spend, while Germany seeks profits and needs jobs.

Such examples lay bare some European nations' disregard for the security concerns, perceived or real, of other European countries. It is not necessary to ascribe malicious intent here. France and Germany were acting simply on the basis of a preference for financial profits and domestic employment, choosing to ignore the impact of their actions on the long-term security of the Continent.

The most immediate impact of such business deals is that the European eastern frontier becomes more vulnerable. A more effective, modernized Russian army potentially threatens not only countries such as Georgia and Ukraine, which do not possess NATO security guarantees and are within what Russia considers its sphere of influence, but also NATO members such as the Baltic states and Poland. Consequently, these European states are focusing analytically and militarily on their territorial security, a development that is at odds with the belief, widespread throughout the EU, that the region has entered a postmodern era of peace—or at least nonviolent, negotiable conflicts.

No doubt this resurgence of territorial fear has been spurred in part by Putin's persistent tough-guy rhetoric harkening back to the days of Russian empire. The 2008 war in Georgia, aggressive Russian military exercises adjacent to the Baltic states and Poland, and growing

authoritarianism in Moscow are seen by some, correctly in my view, as evidence of a bellicose and revisionist Russia. Furthermore, the apparent American disengagement from Europe in favor of Asia and the Middle East, accompanied by a poorly thought-out “reset” with Russia, generated further fears of a weakening strategic assurance to the most vulnerable NATO members. To be sure, the preoccupation with territorial security along Europe’s eastern frontier has multiple causes. But the lack of European unity on security concerns, and the German and French contributions to the modernization of the Russian army in particular, are especially troublesome because they undermine the persistent attempts to build up a unified EU security and defense structure. Europeans have limited control over Moscow’s ambitions of regional influence or Washington’s geostrategic preferences. But they had the potential to translate the enormous economic and political successes of the postwar era, and particularly the post–Cold War period, into a strong security regime. European rhetoric notwithstanding, Europeans seem to lack the political will to do so.

As a result, some European states are arming themselves and pursuing their own defensive objectives with increased vigor and decisiveness. Poland, for instance, has purchased Norwegian antiship missiles for coastal defense, clearly in a move to deter potential Russian maritime forays. Furthermore, over the past year, Warsaw has made it clear that it plans to build a missile-defense system that would protect it against short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, as well as against aircraft and cruise missiles. (This is separate from the proposed American missile-defense system that would have been hosted by Poland and geared to intercept long-range missiles from the Middle East and North

Africa.) In an August 2012 interview, Polish president Bronislaw Komorowski argued that “Poland must have this element of defense,” implying that the country cannot rely on European efforts and certainly not on the vagaries of U.S. electoral politics for protection against short- and medium-range missiles. The system would shield Poland from Russian missiles (the Iskander) that Moscow is planning to deploy in the Kaliningrad district.

Finland is another EU member that is aggressively developing strong conventional capabilities to deter Russia. Recently, for example, it has purchased U.S. air-to-surface missiles (the AGM-158 JASSM) that no other NATO country so far possesses. The rationale behind the purchase is straightforward: Finland cannot count on Europe to guarantee its security. As a Finnish analyst put it, the U.S.-Finnish deal

suggests that clear-eyed realism drives Finnish security policy thinking: that Finland knows that it is still the United States that serves as the European bulwark (and provider of guarantees) against potential external aggression; and, that NATO is a necessary but not sufficient component for broader European defence, mainly because most European states have ignored their own defence for too long.

If most of Europe is not willing to spend money to defend itself, and if it thinks it can gain by arming Russia, then the frontier states have little choice but to arm themselves. Behind these decisions there is a consistent effort to think through the various possible security scenarios and to consider the most effective way to deter a Russian conventional attack. Indeed, discussions on conventional deterrence, a topic that many Europeans consider antiquated, are lively in Central Europe. The premise is that war of a large, industrial scale is unlikely, but that the possibility of a

small-scale, limited-aims assault by Russia is certainly not zero. The question then arises as to how to defend oneself from such an attack. The answer: to buy time by increasing costs to the assaulting army and by denying it the benefit of a quick fait accompli. The only way to do so is by acquiring sufficient denial capabilities (such as antiship missiles or theater missile defenses) that would impose unbearable costs on the Russian advance and give sufficient time for NATO consultative mechanisms and plans to work.

Conventional deterrence, especially when facing the possibility of a quick attack with limited objectives, is inherently difficult to achieve. The fact that this is a topic of lively conversation on Europe's eastern and northern flanks is in itself worrisome because it indicates that the

WWeak allies are unreliable allies. The United States might well ponder this reality as it contemplates its ongoing relationship with Europe. The persistent EU financial crisis will continue to weaken Europe militarily as well as economically. This won't necessarily have a major impact on the wider geopolitical situation. A weak Europe could remain safe if Russia turns more democratic and if the revolts in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean become contained or end up stabilizing the region. Of course, these are big and rosy assumptions. But even if we accept them, Europe's weakness ought to worry the United States.

That's because Europe's weakness will almost inevitably become a hindrance to the United States. A weak Europe will be unlikely to support the United States and its interests in the Middle East and Asia. At



territorial security of some of these states is perceived to be at risk. The bottom line is that a renewed interest in conventional deterrence and recent military acquisitions are symptoms of the recognition that the crisis in Europe is having a negative impact on the willingness and ability of both EU and NATO members to provide adequate defenses to the Continent.

the core of this statement, which is based on murmurs that can be heard in Europe, lies the argument that weakness, and the accompanying sense of insecurity, creates powerful incentives to avoid confrontation with potentially hostile powers. Whether the threat comes from Russia, Iran, Syria or even faraway China, a weak Europe is likely to ignore it or accommodate the countries

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posing the threat. Some European states, as mentioned above, seem bent on balancing the assertive power, but overall in Europe the trend seems to be characterized by a lack of political will to do so. The foreign policy that arises out of the recognition of weakness does not generally move to assert power. Moreover, it may result in less support for Europe's traditional security patron, the United States.

Indeed, a weak Europe may fear the United States more than Iran or China. An assertive America, capable and willing to protect its interests in the Middle East, may decide, for example, that a preventive war with Iran is preferable to a nuclear Iran bent on dominating the region. For some in Europe, such a scenario is worse than letting Iran continue on its path to develop nuclear capabilities. Europe's inability to deal with the potential spillover effects of a U.S. strike on Iran—for example, Hezbollah-organized attacks in the Mediterranean, medium-range Iranian missiles launched toward Europe or oil-market disruption—creates a powerful incentive for its nations to oppose an assertive American foreign policy and to accommodate a nuclear Iran. To be sure, there are good reasons for anyone to be ambivalent about a U.S. or Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. There are also, however, good reasons to be fearful of a nuclear Iran, whose leadership consistently spews anti-Western venom and sponsors terrorism. But for a declining Europe, the greater threat is the United States (and possibly Israel), not Iran, because Europe's assessment of the world is informed most

prominently by its own limitations.

Thus, U.S. global interests, particularly in the Middle East and Asia, will not be well served by a weak Europe. It is not simply a matter of not having the material support of European allies in military contingencies (as in Afghanistan) or diplomatic backing in important negotiations. Rather, the risk is that some of our traditional European allies may actually work at cross-purposes with the United States, not sharing U.S. threat assessments because they will not have the tools to join in. As François Heisbourg observes, a “potential danger flows from the interactions between, on the one hand, a Europe in relative decline, and on the other the rising capabilities, dynamic policies and great-power aspirations of emerging states.”

What can the United States do in light of this situation? Not even the worst-case scenario would resemble the immediate postwar years in Europe. There is no likelihood of Soviet armored divisions occupying half of the Continent, Communist insurgencies in European countries, or abysmal poverty, famine and material devastation. But the problem is that, unlike after World War II, the United States has a limited strategic quiver. This is due in part to America's own fiscal problems. There is no deep reservoir of economic power that Washington can direct to shore up an economically stagnating Europe. There also is a limited power of persuasion in telling Europeans to fix their fiscal profligacy when Washington runs its own trillion-dollar deficits. Finally and most importantly, even assuming the United

States could help the EU economically, that would not solve the Continent's underlying political, social and cultural malaise.

It would also be counterproductive for Washington officials to align themselves completely with either of the views that fall under the rubrics of "EU at all costs" or "Euroskepticism." The current administration of President Barack Obama appears to tilt toward the progressive vision of the EU. It consequently opposes attempts to renegotiate or resist the centralizing efforts of Brussels. Such a position is likely to damage U.S. authority. Europeans in general, and Britain in particular, are divided on the European Union. By aligning with the official Brussels line, which objects to national referenda on the EU such as the one proposed by British prime minister David Cameron, the United States may gain applause in the offices of EU bureaucrats. But such views are ignored or ridiculed elsewhere. This is a delicate internal debate, and Washington gains nothing by siding with the "EU: full steam ahead" view.

The United States has a comparative advantage in its power-projection capabilities, an important tool of influence. It can and should, therefore, maintain its varied methods of providing strategic assurance: its "visible assurance" with the presence of U.S. military forces and assets, rhetorical assurance with greater attention paid to Europe, continued commitment to NATO's Article 5 (declaring that an attack on one member is an attack on all), defensive contingency plans, greater willingness to help Europeans in arming themselves and so on. But this will not suffice to strengthen Europe. The American provision of security is necessary but insufficient. After all, the United States has done this for the past several decades, and Europe nonetheless has descended into economic stagnation and political morass. In other words, the U.S. security umbrella may enable European

decisions that could reverse the Continent's current decline, but it cannot generate such decisions.

That's because Europe's problems are not caused merely by a mistaken policy or two. This is a deep crisis caused by, among other things, a missing sense of purpose and an abandonment of Europe's distinct history and culture. The United States can try to persuade EU leaders to pursue different policies and even enable such changes of direction by guaranteeing Europe's security from external threats. But that isn't likely to make much of a difference.

Here lies the conundrum: On the one hand, as George Weigel has written, "A United States indifferent to the fate of Europe is a United States indifferent to its roots." One could add that this also implies an indifference to America's own security. On the other hand, the United States has only limited means of improving Europe's geopolitical condition. In the end, Europe's mess and decline pose a policy problem that requires civilizational solutions. The fiscal crisis can be measured; the political inefficiency can be described; the tax rates can be adjusted upward or downward; policies can be tinkered with. But Europe's underlying sense of a *raison d'être* can be restored only by a slow regeneration of its foundations based on history, religion and culture. The etymology of the word "culture" (from Latin) refers to "the things to cultivate," implying that there are certain things that transcend individuals, that are to be cherished for the future, that provide reasons to work and sacrifice—in essence, to live. Europe is missing these things now, and thus it is becoming little more than a civilizational cult, placing the individual above all else. The task at hand, therefore, is much larger and far more difficult than one can glimpse from reading the news. It may be too large and too difficult for Europe—or America—to handle. □