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Europe's Errors

By Kishore Mahbubani

Europe just doesn't get it. It does not get how irrelevant it is becoming to the rest of the world. And it does not get how relevant the rest of the world is becoming to its future. The world is changing rapidly. Europe continues to drift.

I am not exaggerating when I say Europe's obsession with restructuring its internal arrangements is akin to rearranging the deck chairs of a sinking Titanic. The focus on internal challenges when the real threats are external is the first of three strategic errors Europe is making. One does not have to be a geopolitical genius to figure out where Europe's main long-term challenges are coming from. The E.U. may be a comfortable oasis of peace now, free of the threat of wars between member states. But an aging Europe cannot ignore the rising population and Islamic anger in North Africa and the Middle East, the divisions in the Balkans and the Caucasus, and an angry Russia. Europe has not worked out any coherent or consistent long-term geopolitical strategy to handle these challenges. ([See pictures of immigration in Europe.](#))

To understand why, just study the diaries of the European leaders. They spend most of their time addressing Europe's domestic challenges. Years were wasted trying to get the Lisbon Treaty right. The goal was to produce strong European leadership to handle a more complex world. The result: Europe chose two nonentities as the first President and Foreign Minister. This alone speaks volumes.

The greatest strategic challenge to Europe is the Islamic one. It exists within the body politic of many European societies. And the fastest-rising Islamic demographic is on Europe's doorstep. Europe should, therefore, see it in its long-term interest to defuse Islamic anger. Instead, it has shown moral cowardice on the Israel-Palestine issue, refusing even to admit that an unbalanced American policy will hurt European interests more than American interests. No major European leader has the moral courage to speak truth to power on this issue. ([Read: "Halal Burgers? Another French Brouhaha over Islam."](#))

Europe's second error is to ignore its No. 1 strategic opportunity: Asia. A strong Asia-Europe partnership will yield positive dividends to both. A rising Asia welcomes European technology and culture and provides huge new markets for sophisticated European products. If Europe could think and act strategically, it would be busy knocking on Asian doors. Instead, it was the Asians who thought ahead. In the mid-1990s, Singapore proposed an Asia-Europe meeting (ASEM). Initially the E.U. reacted enthusiastically but then came the great Asian financial crisis of 1997. This provided Europe an opportunity to prove it was not a fair-weather friend. Instead, Europe turned its back on Asia. Even though the ASEM

process continues on autopilot, the Europeans fail to see that they have not won over Asian hearts and minds.

Curiously, few Asians bear any resentment towards Europe, despite centuries of colonial rule and domination. Asians are focused on the future, not the past. However, they do expect Europeans to treat them with respect, not cultural condescension. This is another thing Europeans do not get. The protests in European capitals before the Beijing Olympics, the efforts to dictate human-rights clauses in the India-E.U. cooperation agreement and the obsession with Burma show both a lack of sensitivity and of strategic thinking. If Europe does not act fast, it will miss the boat on Asia. ([See 25 authentic Asian experiences.](#))

The third strategic error is to remain obsessed with the transatlantic relationship. It is difficult to capture in a few words the strange mix of European attitudes towards America: admiration and resentment of American hyperpower, respect and condescension towards U.S. culture, dependence on and discomfort with American leadership. At the core of this is a deep European belief that culture is destiny and that the common Judeo-Christian heritage and common Enlightenment values will ensure an eternal commonality of interests. America will always put Europe first because Europe, not Asia, exists in American hearts.

Over the long run, geography — when combined with economic shifts of power — determines destiny. America's interests in Asia are rising while its interests in Europe are declining. A growing Hispanic population will make Latin America more important. This is why the time has come for Europeans to think the unthinkable: the "natural" transatlantic partnership may someday come to an end.

The whole world wants to see a strong Europe. It can provide an alternative pole of growth, a model for abolishing wars between neighbors, cultural education and a moral voice for supporting initiatives like the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court. There are no shortages of opportunities for Europe to provide leadership. But, as Copenhagen demonstrated, it may no longer even be in the room when crucial decisions are being made.

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