

Beware the Backburner: The Risk of a Neglected Europe

Heather A. Conley

Washington's pivot toward Asia and its frustration over Europe's mishandling of its debt crisis have left European nations wondering if this means they now get the cold shoulder. The risk many foresee is that the United States could take its greatest strategic and ideational partner for granted, waking up one day in the not-too-distant future to find a Europe unwilling or unable to take political or security risks in support of U.S. objectives.

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There is a more dire future possibility, however, that involves a Europe drifting away from its core values and increasingly lacking in political and societal cohesion. The next U.S. administration will need to address this early in its term and become much more engaged and more strategic in European political affairs, not simply advising on the size of its economic firewall.

Europe's reaction to its most significant existential threat since World War II—the European sovereign debt crisis—has challenged the liberal foundation on which postwar Europe was built. The economic challenges are deep and profound:

- Greece is in its fifth year of recession. Unemployment is at 20 percent, and its collective economic contraction is 13.7 percent since 2007;
- Unemployment in Spain is at a European high of 23 percent, with youth unemployment a staggering 49.9 percent;



- Today at least 7 out of the 17 Euro zone members are in recession. The 2012 growth estimate is negative 0.3 percent. Industrial output has plummeted in 15 Euro zone nations with the most distressed southern economies being the hardest hit. Output is down by 12.4 percent in Greece and 8.9 percent in Portugal;
- Despite injecting €1.3 trillion of liquidity into the European banking system, borrowing costs continue to climb in Portugal and Spain.

Austerity and a lack of economic growth, combined with growing xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment, have started to challenge certain unifying European ideals that have thrived for more than 60 years since fascism's demise. The idea that discrimination is to be contested, while tolerance and multiculturalism are to be advanced, has been openly questioned by radical political parties for decades, but typically they have been largely ignored. These parties—on both the far left and the far right—are now capitalizing on a growing societal disenfranchisement as they express their populist, nationalistic, and extremist views. These views have begun to slowly creep into the mainstream.

In an effort to pull nationalistic French voters away from Marine Le Pen's National Front party (recent polls have Le Pen in third place), French president Nicholas Sarkozy recently announced that France has "too many foreigners on our territory." Le Pen believes that France's approximately 5 million foreign immigrants, predominantly Muslim, have caused a disintegration of society and contributed to a "loss of French identity." Her party is fiercely anti-European and anti-globalization and has called for France to leave the euro, reintroduce customs borders, and nationalize banks. How can Sarkozy play to the right of the French far-right without becoming the far-right himself?

No part of Europe has been untouched by this phenomenon. Although political parties are geographically, historically, and culturally diverse, there are certain trends that remain consistent. In particular, extremist parties are energizing populations at a time when traditional political parties have been delegitimized by the economic crisis and are perceived as out of touch with "real" problems. Adroitly, these parties wrap their message in populism and advance into the heart of society through the Internet and social media, an effort that has been referred to as the "de-demonization" process.

The Hungarian far-right party Jobbik, an anti-Semitic and xenophobic party that has been linked to anti-Roma violence, has risen in popularity in Hungary to 14 percent, compared to the Socialists' 13 percent, and is drawing support away from a government that is already pursuing antidemocratic policies. Gert Wilders of the Freedom Party (the third-largest party in the Netherlands) casts himself as the champions of the "everyman" and against "outsiders." For his part, Wilders recently launched a website urging Dutch citizens to register complaints against immigrant workers from EU member states such as Poland with the question, "Are immigrants from Central and Eastern countries bothering you? We'd like to hear from you." None of this is new, but the messages tap into deep wells of economic resentment. The dismal economic situation provides fertile ground for recruitment.

Europe in 2012 is unlikely to revert to Europe of the 1930s. But Europe today is under significant internal stress, and the United States has not shown it the attention it requires. This is understandable considering the pressing front-burner demands of the past three years. But Washington cannot diminish its vital leadership role in Europe at this critical moment. The next administration—no matter its stripe—must put Europe back on the front burner. ■