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The European Union Watershed Moment

Being 'pro-Brussels' has become an ideological cult, rather than a political project, writes Alastair Crooke

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The US launch of talks in Abu Dhabi with Russian and Ukrainian representatives finally confronts the EU with the existential contradiction — one which it cannot postpone further. The EU construct was always a US concept with a purpose.

But if the US now has turned its back on its proxy, just as its proxy teeters at the brink of kinetic exchanges with Russia, what then is the EU strategy for Ukraine? It can offer none. Will it always simply commit wholly to Zelensky's maximalist positions?

The EU has offered no solution of any sort, beyond insisting that Russia back-down, and agree a ceasefire along the Contact Line.

It is a watershed moment because the EU's dysfunctionality cannot be plainer. Even their US 'sugar daddy' despairs and Russia has turned contemptuous, as FM Lavrov made clear just days ago:

> *"The negotiations are focused, at the suggestion of the US mediators, on discussing the parameters of the future security architecture for Ukraine, Russia and our entire region. Or, one might say, for European security. This is a fundamental point, because everything we are now hearing from Brussels and other EU capitals amounts to a demand for an immediate ceasefire … Von der Leyen has said that there will be no discussion of the parameters of a security architecture until there is a sustainable truce. It is the same old logic all over again. They feel it is absolutely necessary to "buy time" for their "clients", the Kiev regime, and to use it to rebuild its military. We will not agree to this … [She] has said that there must first be a truce, and then a security architecture. Meanwhile, another representative of the Brussels bureaucracy has said that the EU would not allow a settlement that takes account of the interests of the Russian Federation. That is essentially all there is to say on this subject".*

The 'Atlanticist world together' EU project was never the millenarian ideal of a shared western civilisation myth that enveloped it; it was all along rooted in Realpolitik.

An EU institutional framework had clear purpose to Washington manoeuvrings 'behind the scenes'. Its purpose was to sustain US pre-eminence over the post-war European space; to keep the political Centre as the enduring European *status quo*; to keep the Soviets 'out'; and to ensure Europe's trading surpluses were re-cycled into financing America's deficit. In other words, European trade surpluses were about 'surplus recycling' into the US financial system and maintaining dollar hegemony.

It was, in short, a purely mercantile project, dressed up in the frills of liberalism — a prop for US great-power competition to keep a hold on its primacy. The 'financial plumbing' was simple: the ruling European élite and their friends benefitted from

the grift created by the EU cartel (the original Iron and Steel core), and the well-paid élite posts which came with it, subject to the proviso that the beneficiaries remained compliant to the US and its foreign policy.

But the US defence paradigm has changed during the Trump administration and the trilateral negotiations in Abu Dhabi this week starkly underline how surplus to US interests the EU now has become. Does the EU leadership have a strategy for this shift in US security thinking towards fortress western hemisphere? No.

But the shift in US security doctrine does not encompass fully the limit to the EU's watershed moment. The EU may be reaching its breaking point, or more likely perhaps, the beginning of the beginning of disaggregation. It is no longer a useful vassal. Rather, it is now in the way. The US has shifted (mainly because of munition limitations) towards seeing the world in great power competition terms, with the 'middle powers' as 'hangers on'. Irrelevant really.

How did we reach this stage? Archival work on the Bush administration (1990–1992) shows US officials embraced eastward expansion as Realpolitik to sustain US pre-eminence and suppress challengers, not only Soviet, but also potential west European challengers (i.e. a French/German-driven European security pillar). However, by 1997 the EU had capitulated and accepted to open accession talks with the first wave of Central/Eastern European candidates.

Nevertheless, the standard narrative remains that EU enlargement was a technocratic, Commission-led process from which the US just happened to benefit. What I saw from the viewpoint of being a part of the EU High Representative Javier Solana's team at that time, is that Washington actively saw the political payoff to east European accession and used bilateral leverage to accelerate it. In consequence, the EU's foreign-policy apparatus watched its own relevance being undermined by the very expansion it was supposed to manage.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's 2003 remark to a journalist underlines the shifting US mindset: *"You're thinking of Europe as Germany and France. I don't. I think that's old Europe … There is a new Europe"*. The context here was then-President Chirac's refusal to accede to President Bush's push for war in Iraq.

Secretary of State Colin Powell explicitly warned that France would face "consequences" for its opposition to the war. In a later diplomatic context, then-Secretary of State, Condoleza Rice, reportedly told French officials, *"We have paid our victory with our blood and treasure … we don't need you"*, rejecting offers of French cooperation in post-invasion Iraq.

France, it appears, by 2004 had conceded and President Chirac explicitly softened his position, acknowledging the *fait accompli* of the invasion, describing Saddam Hussein's removal from power as "a positive step".

In essence, this 2003 'Iraq War moment' effectively ended the EU as a coherent political project — and events this past week in Abu Dhabi, with the Europeans struggling to storm uninvited into the Trilateral summit, has turned the EU's claim to be a serious geo-political actor into farce. The 'fruits' of the 2003 crisis are being harvested today.

The EU is no longer a useful vassal (beyond the writing of cheques to Zelensky),

Washington may be beginning to understand that Ukraine cannot be resolved without *first* addressing the security architecture of Eurasia. This — ultimately — can only be resolved between the three Great Powers – US, Russia and China; Middle Powers will have to fall into line.

The past pro-Atlanticist model has simply ceased to work. Europe's efforts to distance itself from Trump on Ukraine through 'playing piper' to the war-hawk gallery in the US Congress and to the deep Russophobia in the monied strata is not emancipating Europe from America. Rather, it is serving the latter's interest. For Europe assumes the costs and political risks of acting as disposable proxy to effect the weakening of Russia. For what European benefit? The implicit economic costs are plain enough. The upside is not.

But this is not the end to the consequences of the EU having allowed itself in 2003 to be outmanoeuvred by US bilateral leverage. The EU was rendered irrelevant then because the US was operating to a strategic framework in Iraq (based on Netanyahu's directives) that the EU as a whole neither understood, nor accepted.

But with regards to the project for Europe, the US was operating to a strategic economic framework, as well as to a geo-strategic one — the American neo-liberal technocratic model was to be adopted by Europe. That model was first and foremost a theory of how to re-engineer the state in order to guarantee the success of the market, and that of its most important participants — modern corporations.

The theory was that all a government had to do was to create the right environment (low taxes, few regulations) and the 'animal spirits' of entrepreneurs would spontaneously do the rest, through the 'invisible hand' of the market.

The West is today in crisis, though not in the way some people, including the bureaucratic Technocrats think. Its problem is not the 'Far Right', nor populism, nor polarisation. The deeper underlying affliction is structural — power is so

diffused and fractured that no meaningful reform is possible.

This was evident even when the EU consisted of 12 member-states. At last week's *European Political Community (EPC)* summit in Dublin, over fifty delegations were being hosted, with some 500 participants. Plainly this is dysfunctional. Every member-state has a certain power, but no one state leader is able to impose any coherent 'lead' across the EU as a whole.

The protests, rioting and breakdown of social fabric across Europe reflect the crisis within global liberalism's intellectual paradigm. The latter's delusions, together with its associated oligarchic and autocratic structure of governance, have underlined that the project has no core. Being 'pro-Brussels' has become an ideological cult, rather than a political project.

What does Brussels make of all this? Absolutely nothing. The EU technocracy is still entranced by the America of the Obama years -- a land of soft power, identity politics, and cosmopolitan neo-liberal capitalism.

Does the EU leadership have any answers for Ukraine? No.

Does it have a meaningful further strategy for Ukraine? No.

Has it re-thought its US relations for the future? No.

Does it have an answer to the crisis within global liberalism's intellectual paradigm? No.

Can it survive as it is? No.

The social and political unrest, and the pain of coming austerity, will force change.

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