By Dr Robert Crowcroft

Today the spectre of conflict in Europe has receded to the point that a general war is virtually unthinkable. Since the termination of the Balkan wars, smaller conflicts are also unlikely. A view has arisen that the structures of stability and co-operation are now so deep that Europe is perhaps in a state of 'perpetual peace'. This is usually attributed to post-war Franco-German reconciliation, the rise of the European Union, economic interconnectedness, and the Euro. And it is true that no region has such a range of well-developed institutions as Europe from the EU to NATO, the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Western European Union, and more. Indeed analysts now often find Europe – the arena that inspired International Relations theory – so dull that they look elsewhere for the required fix of tension, competition, and violence. But the current state of affairs is not as resilient as some maintain. It might be that the whole rationale for co-operation between the states of Europe is, actually, remarkably thin.

The ancient Greek scholar Thucydides, in his History of the Peloponnesian War, offered one of the first – and still probably the best – insights into the motivating forces behind the behaviour of states. His hypothesis was simple: in their external policy, states are driven by [1] fear [2] honour and [3] interest. That framework provides a useful series of tests when analysing modern Europe.

Fear sat at the heart of the European project at its inception. And contrary to what some think, this remains the case today. Since 1991, European states have been worried about American withdrawal; renewed conflict on the continent emanating outwards from the Balkans; and, more recently, Russian bullying on matters like NATO expansion, energy security, and missile defence. But, crucially, what must be grasped is that there is no distinctly 'European' perspective on international politics; merely the priorities of defiantly individual states. Each nation has its own fears, stemming from history, geography, and resources.

The countries of eastern Europe remain petrified of domination by either Russia or Germany, the two major powers of the region. These smaller states also worry about each other. Thus, their chosen foreign policy is a classic hedging strategy motivated by fear. For those nations, membership of NATO and the EU represent a thoroughly old-fashioned, realist strategy for survival; a mechanism for linking themselves to Uncle Sam and connecting with other European states. In the west, recent Anglo-French military co-operation, and even hushed talk of a new, unofficial military entente, is certainly not aimed at Portugal or Iceland; Germany and Russia are the only conceivable targets for such hedging behaviour. There is painfully little evidence of new, harmonious, 'globalised' thinking here. For its part, Berlin worries about being encircled by other states keen to tie Germany down like Gulliver at Lilleput. The German strategy is therefore to construct an image of being a 'good' European, not the militaristic menace of old. The hope is that Germany will be perceived not as a traditional state, but something different – something

better. In Part II we will return to this theme and see how Germany in fact is as self-interested as any other nation.

But fear and traditional calculative behaviour are evident elsewhere. The lack of interest among European states in crafting a common security policy underlines the absence of genuine trust. If Europe really is the beacon of hope that we are told, surely this wouldn't be a problem? Yet there is no significant willingness to pool critical security resources; no desire to be anchored to other countries where it matters most – defence; and no desire to sacrifice advantage for the gesture of unity. It proved exceptionally difficult to craft common policies even during the Cold War – often due to French pretensions to significance – and in the period since the collapse of the USSR this has proven even more problematic over the Balkans, energy security, and missile defence. The blunt truth is that states do not stick together.

This leads us to another point. Despite the political rhetoric of anti-Americanism circulated by the usual intellectuals, swallowed whole by gullible publics, and exploited by politicians – most famously Gerhard Schroeder – the reality is that European nations all remain desperate for the United States to remain politically involved in Europe, as the security underwriter of choice; truly the 'indispensable nation.' Being located across the Atlantic, Washington harbours no territorial ambitions in Europe and is thus the only nation who can be just about 'trusted'; and trust is a rare commodity indeed in international relations. The reality is not that European nations no longer need the USA; it is that the USA doesn't give a hoot about Europe. The desire for the USA to retain its security architecture in Europe – most obviously NATO – stems from a fear of other regional actors. While American supervision has facilitated cautious co-operation, this does not equate to a transformation of international politics and is inseparable from the fact of Washington's military might.

Honour is probably less of a force in Europe than fear, and what little 'honour' is at stake, is largely for show. European states enjoy being seen as a 'player' in world affairs, and like to bask in the glow of being invited to summit meetings and consulted. France, particularly, is obsessed with this, and likely to spit the dummy when others do not indulge Gallic pretensions. But we can detect the pattern across the continent. On either side of the English Channel, London and Paris jealously guard their membership of the United Nations Security Council and are, to say the least, unlikely to endorse any reforms that will see them thrown off. European nations turn up in Afghanistan to show solidarity with NATO, but conviction is patently lacking. But European egotism can be identified most readily in the incessant interference as 'brokers' in the Middle East and Africa: diplomatically intervening in conflicts, holding talks, trying to put together packages of aid or sanctions to encourage peace. The record is hardly a successful one, given that Europe has limited influence and less power. But that doesn't stop Europeans from basking in symbolism. Nor does the fact that in many cases – like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – European states have no national interests. Yet they enthusiastically become involved in any available crisis, baffling the participants as to what precisely they are doing, and then heading off to the next trouble spot, wholly undeterred by failure.

In contemporary Europe, 'honour' tends to mostly be about values. For western European politicians this tends to equate to the rather empty language of democracy and human rights; and for eastern Europeans (and the publics of western Europe), nationalism and identity. The

fact that the rhetoric of human rights and democracy (particularly when set against the anti-democratic excesses of the EU) is empty is obvious; so is the weakness of this as a basis for long-term political co-operation. Additionally, by their very nature the more substantive issues of nationalism and identity entail not harmony, but division.

Perhaps we can find more of a basis for optimism in Interest. Unfortunately, this turns out to be an equally difficult crusade. Interests will in all likelihood diverge, consensus shattering, if put to the test. Take the EU project. The rationale for the EU is economic advantage, but it is simply not the case that prosperity is dependent on the structures of the EU. This is not to deny that good neighbourly relations help to improve trade links. But, as the last few years – especially the Greek crisis – have shown, the economic advantages to be gained from co-operating in the EU are deeply debatable; and there is even talk of the Euro collapsing. Sticking to the same monetary policies for radically different kinds of economies was never a good idea, and the consequences of this are clear to see. In turn, this means that the advantages to be won from co-operating with the EU are rapidly reducing. Moreover, as is obvious to every honest observer, sovereignty is not diminishing. Why would states permit themselves less flexibility in making choices by giving more powers over to foreign bureaucrats? Interests are aligned to a point – usually to the point of convenience and no further – but, rhetoric aside, is there any substance to back this up? The reality of the EU is that some states benefit more than others. Thus, nations judge it in their interests to co-operate to only a very limited extent; little of substance is conceded. France, for instance, has repeatedly defied EU financial rules when domestic pressure increases. Britain is famously an awkward European, and has at times played a cunning game in that respect. But, crucially, every other European state has been more concerned with its own interests than with those of their neighbours or a nebulous 'community'.

It could plausibly be argued that there are important interests in the security realm served by European co-operation in the economic and political realms. But this is only true to a point, as would be painfully obvious if the United States withdrew from the region, or a crisis arose that generated disagreement (say Russian or German pressure in the east). The key to the current peace is a stable balance of power in Europe – most importantly, the United States acts as a pacifier in both eastern and western Europe; Russia sits on the periphery, ambitious but as yet without the strength or incentives to be a genuinely destabilising presence; Germany has been both diplomatically inept and cautious so as not to generate alarm; Britain aligns itself with the US while hedging among the European states; and France attempts to sit close enough to everyone to defend her interests effectively. No state is more anti-American than France, but yet Paris rejoined NATO in order to underpin its federal experiment with US security. This system, then, is very precarious; the most stable element is the role of the US, but this might not persist beyond the medium term. If the balance was upset, the picture would change rapidly. The reality is that the security architecture of European geopolitics is not self-perpetuating or natural. It is unsustainable without American acquiescence. Only the presence of the United States raises the stakes for Germany and Russia to the point that they do not throw their weight around in the east.

Certainly nuclear weapons enhance stability and make war among the major powers exceedingly unlikely. However, miscalculation is still plausible; the potential for being predatory

against the weaker, non-nuclear states is high; and in an environment of tension, states will still have to form balancing alliances whether they are armed with nuclear weaponry or not. It should thus be clear that the traditional dynamics of state behaviour remain dominant in European geopolitics. The international system consists of independent states with no entity exercising sovereign power over them. These states are all inherently dangerous, because they have some capacity to inflict damage. Moreover, states can never be certain about the intentions of others. No matter how pacific their rhetoric, there is always the possibility that states will take decisions which menace others. This means that states seek to maximise their options and relative power position. In this environment of uncertainty, they have no choice but to take precautions and hedge. And, flowery rhetoric aside, what is the whole superstructure of modern European politics but one giant hedge?

Economic interdependence might be thought of as another area of mutual 'interest' that changes the calculation to compete. It certainly raises the costs of security competition by damaging trade. However, considering that a state's commerce is divided between many nations this is very unlikely to encourage a government to compromise on security. Surprisingly, the levels of international economic interconnectedness today, when set aside domestic economic transactions, are probably no higher than they were a hundred years ago – and certainly not markedly so. And democratic peace theory – the idea that democratic states do not fight each other and generally have compatible interests – is based on a dreadful reading of the historical evidence. The reality is that national interests diverge – often widely. It is difficult to see how this will change.

Finally, if we step outside the realm of politics, public opinion is even less harmonious. There are forty-four countries in Europe. Most private citizens are unapologetically nationalist; anti-immigrant sentiment is a powerful force; there is great concern about the dilution of national cultures; and support for federalism lags far behind Brussels. Although western European politicians are usually too frightened of their indigenous liberal intelligentsias to exploit these sentiments, there are few such qualms among the politicians of eastern Europe. Certainly, the contrasting tone of political language in eastern and western Europe shatters many of the more cosmopolitan assumptions aired in the seminars and newspapers of London or Paris. Nationalism glorifies the people and their country; it is the strongest political ideology in the world, and certainly the strongest in eastern Europe. The ethnic groups in the region are densely intermingled and usually fairly hostile. There are also powerful historical legacies at play in the east, of virtually every group having been menaced at some point by the rest. The record is definitely not a multicultural love-in, a pattern that, worryingly, we now see being replicated in western Europe as well. Without harmony in even the domestic sphere, there is precious little chance of it arising in international relations.

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