



Europe needs to get its act together

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There is safety in numbers, and in unity. This is why it was such a good idea to establish NATO in 1949 and, two years later, the European Coal and Steel Community, which grew little by little into the European Union of today. NATO, with twelve founding member states, now has 32 members. The ECSC, whose main objective was to avert renewed cross-country conflict by putting Europe's main natural resources under common management, counted six member states at its inception. Today, the EU has 27 members. Unbroken peace and growing — though lopsided — prosperity over the years bear witness to the brilliant foresight¹ behind this long-lasting Atlantic/European architecture.

Unsurprisingly, in view of their significant success, the number of NATO and EU member states continues to rise. The accession of so many Central and Eastern European countries to the EU and NATO following the collapse of communism 1989-1991 and then the sudden entry of Finland and Sweden into NATO following Russia's intensified invasion of Ukraine in 2022 closes ranks within Europe. In the same vein, without further delay, Iceland and Norway urgently need to reconsider their reluctant attitude toward EU membership to further close ranks on the outskirts of Europe. With the United States increasingly viewed as an unreliable ally, Russia's war against Ukraine compels the EU to fortify its external defenses on its own.

After the Second World War, a ravaged Europe needed the protection generously provided by the United States through NATO. In 1960, the US accounted for 40 percent of world output measured in terms of Gross Domestic Product, compared with 21 percent for the EU, four percent for China, and three percent for India. This is no longer the case, however, because by 2024, the US share in world output had declined to 26 percent compared with 17 percent for the EU, another 17 percent for China, and four percent for India plus a paltry two percent for Russia, whose current share in world output is only slightly larger than that of the five Nordic nations — Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and

Sweden — combined (1.7%).

Europe is strong². While still behind the US in terms of GDP per person, Europe outperforms the US along several other important dimensions³: Europeans live three years longer than Americans on average, they have stronger democracies, more civil liberties, more political rights, less corruption, more equality, stronger rule of law, and perform better in the battle against climate change.

Moreover, Europe's population (i.e., EU plus the United Kingdom) is now 519 million compared with Russia's 144 million — and 484 million for Russia and the US combined. Clearly, Europe is capable of defending itself, including its eastern border, on its own, without external help. True, at 1.7 percent of GDP in 2023, military expenditures in the EU are lower than in the US (3.4 percent) and Russia (5.9 percent), but this imbalance is easy to rectify, a process already underway.

Democracy is paramount, as is the prescription and protection of human rights by law. This is why the EU and NATO are bound to welcome new democratic members, who refuse to be again held hostage by Russia as buffers, or worse. It is not for third parties to decide which multinational organizations the people of Ukraine may be permitted to join. Perhaps Ukraine will choose to be like Austria, since 1995 a staunch EU member whose 1945 constitution declares permanent neutrality, thus not permitting NATO membership. But Austria is now flanked by NATO members on all sides except for a 180 km long border with neutral Switzerland to the west. In this light, in addition to the more than 3,000 km long internationally recognized border separating Ukraine from Belarus and Russia, the people of Ukraine may understandably wish to be accepted as members of both NATO and the EU. If they do, they should be welcomed with open arms.

There is a lesson here for Africa. Several African countries continue to face, and in some cases even intensified, external interference — from their neighbors as well as from China, Russia, erstwhile colonial powers,

and others. Even Iceland has been implicated, as shown by the Fishrot scandal⁴, where Icelandic fishing interests exploited Namibian resources and authorities in Reykjavik have been slow to hold those responsible to account. Abundant natural resources, if not well managed, can invite conflict. The African Union needs to offer protection to its 55 member states by adhering to uniformly high standards of democracy and human rights as well as by developing mechanisms for common oversight of the continent's natural wealth — somewhat along European lines — to avert conflict. The completion of the harnessing of the Congo River is a case in point as this gigantic undertaking could face fewer hindrances and shorter delays if it were treated as a truly pan-African concern under the auspices or supervision of the AU.

Let just one more example suffice. When, in its quest for access to fishing rights in Namibian waters, an Icelandic fishing firm violates the rights⁵ of Namibians, then, in an ideal world, the AU should come to the defense of the people of Namibia. For there is safety in numbers, in unity, and in cohesion.

Footnotes

1. <https://euinstitute.europeaninstitute.org/index.php/archive/sort-by-date-2/167-ea-january-2013/1675-qjean-monnet-unconventional-statesmanq-by-sherrill-brown-wells-lynn>
2. <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/economic-performance-two-dimensions-how-europe-beats-us>
3. <https://www.socialeurope.eu/g7-versus-the-brics-taking-stock-in-12-figures>
4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64526018>
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64526018>