

# European leadership was once strong and admired, but no longer

By Conrad Black

Europe was accustomed for so long to an alliance with the United States where the contributions and benefits were so uneven in Europe's favour that the Europeans became addicted to an asymmetrical relationship with America. The American rationale for the Western Alliance was born in Franklin D. Roosevelt's conviction, as the most Euro-knowledgeable and multi-lingual president in US history, that without an American presence in Western Europe and the Far East, there was a constant danger that the entire Eurasian land-mass would fall into the hands of forces antagonistic to democracy and that the security of the Americas could be at risk every generation.



When European leaders were worth listening to: in 1953, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer confers in Paris with US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. (Bettman)

In practice, this led to the inherently rather sleazy trade-off between the concepts of burden-sharing and risk-sharing. Western Europe was staring into the mouth of the monster while the United States was at a safe distance and the theory arose and swaddled itself in self-righteousness that the United States, and proportionately Canada, should compensate Europe for its less fortunate geography of being much closer to the great threats to the West, Nazi Germany and then Soviet Russia. That totalitarian communism, fascism, and Nazism were concepts for which the world had Europe thank was an inconvenient fact generally left unmentioned. For most of the Cold War, Canada replicated American efforts to scale in assisting Europe, economically, and pulled its military weight also, in the air defence of North America.

In the opening phases of the Cold War, when the West was facing Stalin and Khrushchev and in the early days of Brezhnev, European leadership was strong and admired. Churchill and de Gaulle, Adenauer and Schmidt and Kohl and de Gasperi and even Andreotti, and Thatcher and Mitterand were serious leaders generally respected and valued by their American analogues. Gradually, there crept in the intellectually corrupt opportunism that where the two superpowers were perceived to be of equivalent strength, a minimal initiative by a major Western European statesman could affect the balance of power. This led to a good deal of pretentious but ultimately harmless mischief by essentially neutralist leaders in the West including Willy Brandt, Pierre Trudeau, Edward Heath, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, and at their most pretentious, Valery Giscard d'Estaing, Jacques Chirac, and even de Gaulle himself.

Because the leading European powers were historically of approximately equivalent geopolitical strength through most of the history of the nation state, they formed and changed alliances on a basis of approximate parity; with the British free because of their insularity to assert their influence on

one side or the other to balance the continental powers. Circumstances changed during and after World War II when the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as powers on a greater scale than had been known or imagined in the old Europe. But the disintegration of the Soviet Union achieved by the American Containment strategy, and the reunification of Germany as a respected member of the Western Alliance changed the equation. This was thanks to American statesmanship as the United States alone was not afraid of a united Germany and President Eisenhower brought that country to the top table of NATO over the reservations of Mr. Churchill and the French. The collapse of the Soviet Union and a unified Germany anchored in the West made the American alliance less necessary to Western Europe and the alliance with Western Europe less necessary to the United States.

NATO slipped into the complacent sophistry of "an alliance of the willing," meaning a gracious acceptance of an American military guarantee while it would be decided on a case-by-case basis if America's so-called allies actually wished to join them in any endeavour or not, as they arose. Effectively, the United States was to be a great St. Bernard which took the risks and did the work while Europeans held the leash and gave the instructions. Obviously no serious alliance could go on for long on such a basis. Except for Great Britain and a couple of the NATO members who'd recently had the pleasure of Soviet domination such as Poland and Estonia, European defence contributions fell short of their commitments. And the American practice of tolerating large trade deficits with most of Europe became steadily more annoying to the US as the political argument for tolerating such a condition evaporated.

Now that Europe is under no threat whatever from Russia, assuming the Ukrainian incursion can be rejected and surmounted, and a stable peace including the unambiguous recognition of Ukraine as a sovereign state, albeit in slightly reduced borders, the United States will be in a

position to make Russian cooperation with the US, India, Japan and other Asian powers in the containment of China a more attractive proposition than its current status as a virtual vassal of China in the forlorn Marxist *beau geste* enterprise of Beijing's attempt to replace Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union as the principal rival and alternative to the West. The United States wishes to bring Russia back into the West, and this is a worthwhile ambition.

Europe should stop pouting and sulking about "chaos" in American trade policy and keep in mind that in the last 20 years the European Union has gone from a GDP equal to that of the United States to one that is only half as large. It is not "chaos," it is only what happens when 130 countries scramble to help reduce the trillion-dollar American trade deficit, which is no longer strategically justifiable. Western Europe and the United States are natural allies and that must continue. But Europe has practically no influence or interest in the Far East and that is where the threat now is. Europe, and especially Germany, should fulfil its role as a great power in the world allied to the United States, and become more self-reliant. The Americans will assemble the coalition they need and ensure that China does not pose a threat to the West on anything like the scale that Germany and Russia did. The only European political leader who evidently discerns this is Alice Weidel of the Alternative for Germany party who has remarked that the United States can have a freeloading Germany which does what the Americans tell it to or a Germany that pulls its weight and takes orders from no one. The United States has no desire to boss anyone around, only not to be threatened. The political hero of the incoming German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, (whom the Germans should have elevated instead of Angela Merkel twenty years ago), is Ronald Reagan. He is the logical person to pursue this course.

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