

Forging 'United States of Europe' is key to the future

By Guy Verhofstadt

Fifteen years ago, a page of history was turned. The implosion of the Soviet Union brought a bipolar world tumbling down, leaving in its wake a disjointed patchwork of new countries and the United States as the world's sole, undisputed political and military superpower.

However, new economic rivals are emerging in the East, where major centres of development such as China and India are undergoing unprecedented transformation, following the trail blazed by Japan. Indeed, within just a few years, Asia has single-handedly shifted the focus of the world economy, a development that looks certain to gain further impetus in the future. After all, in some parts of South-east Asia, the economy is growing ten times as fast as it is in Europe, and many people feel concerned that these new economic heavyweights are suddenly helping to determine the prices of the clothes we buy and the cost of our petrol. Economic growth in China, India and Japan, which between them are home to two-and-a-half billion people, will also translate into greater political influence. That is the natural run of things and it is already clear that in four years' time the world will have four major powers: the US, China, India and Japan.

What role will Europe still be playing? European unification was once a most promising project. But today the European Union is politically divided and economically weakened. On key occasions, like the war in Iraq, the Union has failed to speak with one voice. Economically too, we appear to have lost momentum. Our prosperity is under pressure from increasing globalisation, a challenge to which the Union is responding, once again, in a non-unified, ponderous manner. So it's hardly surprising that more and more of our citizens are entertaining doubts about Europe.

If Europe intends to be a true world player in the future, it must become more closely integrated. Only a 'United States of Europe' that is capable of acting decisively can rise to the challenges facing us and meet citizens' expectations. So we must let the Union switch direction. Europe must stop being patronising and should leave the member states in peace to deal with issues that they are better equipped to tackle. At the same time, however, Europe will have to concentrate on a few major tasks.

The first task of the 'United States of Europe' is to develop a joint strategy for rising to the two main socio-economic challenges currently facing Europe, namely globalisation and our ageing population. Globalisation exerts pressure on the European social model from outside the Union, whilst the ageing of its population exerts pressure from within. Providing a well-targeted response to both trends is the best way of combating weak economic growth and high unemployment.

The basis of this joint strategy is convergence, determining minimum and maximum requirements, including in areas such as social protection and taxation, to serve as the basis for the member states' future development. In this way the European economy can become competitive again without descending to social dumping. The 'United States of Europe' will also have to step up its efforts in the areas of research and development and the establishment of transEuropean information networks.

Furthermore, we will need a single European area of justice and security if we are to fight crime more effectively. Finally, we need to set up joint armed forces and conduct a foreign policy through which Europe speaks with one voice.

Only if Europe adopts a unified approach in all these areas will it really count as a world player. Preferably, all the Union's member states should take part, but if this proves impossible, all the countries belonging to the eurozone plus those set to join it shortly should be mobilised. In such a scenario, Europe will comprise two concentric circles: a political core, a 'United States of Europe' based on the eurozone, and surrounding it a confederation of countries, or 'Organisation of European States'.

Naturally, the political core must never oppose any form of broader co-operation. All those member states that wish to join it, old or new, should be able to do so. The sole precondition should be their willingness to work unconditionally on pushing ahead with the overall political project.

The notion of a 'United States of Europe' is the only option for the old continent. After all, it makes no sense for us all to retain holds over each other and continue bickering about which path to go down, whilst other continents sail merrily past us. We face a clear choice: we can either do nothing and remain sidelined, or we can embrace reform and become an active world player. I suggest we opt for a United States of Europe.

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