

The Political Implications of the EU's Enlargement

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This May, the EU realized its another enlargement. Compared with the previous ones, this one is of much larger scale: accepting at once 10 new member states to increase the total number to 25, to expand the area by some 23%, to increase the population by near 20%, and to add to the GDP by some 4.6% (2001 figure). This enlargement makes the EU to look truly like a “Europe”.

This enlargement is, however, is more a political than an economic process, and must be looked at, beyond these figures and first of all, for its political implications. In this context, its impacts are to be felt at three layers: the EU itself, Europe as a whole and the world at large. To the EU, the enlargement brings the European integration process to new turning point; To Europe, it stabilizes the political order of the post cold war period; and to the world, it might purport a more pronounced role of the EU as a political entity.

A Critical Juncture in the European Integration Process

The greatest impact of the enlargement lies in its challenges to the EU itself, which will come mainly from three directions.

In the first place, it will bring about a period of difficult adjustments between the old and new member states. An apparent cause is the glaring development gaps between the old and new member states. Such gaps mean different national interests and different policy objectives, and purport, therefore, mutual accommodation and adaptation. Happenings since last year show that the merger between the old and new member states will be much more difficult than expected. It will be so in their economic adjustment, and more so in their socio-political grinding-in and psychological adaptation.

Secondly, there will be the practical difficulties in connection to the financial transfers among the member states through the budget. Here, what the EU faces is dilemma. To satisfy all by keeping the present schemes unchanged would need to double or even triple the budget—that is something impossible, especially at the moment when most of the richer member states are in economic and fiscal difficulties themselves. On the other side, any change of the schemes would mean a change in the budget position of the member states, and will be fought against desperately by the losers in particular. It seems that in the enlarged EU, the budget problem that had haunted the EU for many years is very likely to reemerge, made more complicated with the interweaving of the “north-south” and “east-west” conflicts.

Thirdly, gaping differences and interests would also mean a change of the foundation underlying the European integration—the convergence among the member states. In an EU of 25, it will be much more difficult for the member states to go at the same pace as in the EU of 15. It seems that the limited practices of the so-called “multi-speed Europe” might become a way of life. The paradox is whether it would mean the institutionalization of the “core-periphery” structure?

Finally, this enlargement will induce a change in the EU's power balance and functioning mode. After several rounds of widening and deepening, the institutional structure developed in the 1950's fits no longer the needs of the European integration of present and future, especially in terms of its functional capabilities and decision-making efficiency. During the last two years, the EU threw in great efforts to push forward the Convention in order to take chance of the enlargement to smooth up the power structure and to upgrade the institutional efficiency. The Rome summit of last December indicates that as the reforms might affect the vital interests of the member states, the making of the constitution will not be that easy.

Stabilization of the Political Order in the Post Cold-War Europe

The enlargement also implies the stabilization of the new European political order in the post cold-war period, featuring a leading role of the EU, a phasing-out by the US, and a losing of weight by Russia. The ending of the cold war has given the EU the opportunity to realize its dream of the Grand Europe. For its fulfillment, the EU is enfolded a strategy of 3 steps: first to expand its territory with a stable political structure; second to form around it a "ring of friends", and third to build up its own security and defense capability.

The motivation behind this enlargement is apparently more political than economic, namely to bring into the EU the intermediate zone neutralized by the ending of the cold war. In the enlargement, which stabilizes Europe's political order in accordance with the EU's expectation, rests its huge political interests, as well as long-term economic interests. And this eastward enlargement is not to stop here, and has the prospect of taking in another half a dozen countries to push the EU's frontier further to the CIS' or even Russia's western border. When an EU of such a scale emerges, will there be any doubt of its leading role in Europe's political order?

There is yet another part of the EU's "new frontier". In a speech in 2002, Mr. Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, said: "I want to see a 'ring of friends' surrounding the Union and its closest European neighbours, from Morocco to Russia and the Black Sea."¹ By this "ring of friends", the EU is to acquire, as well, a vast political buffer zone and economic space embracing the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea.

In the new political order, Europe can no longer rely on the US' nuclear forces to preserve its security. What we are sure to expect from the EU, in the not-too-long future, will be the development of its own security strategy and defense capabilities, within or without the NATO.

Another Super Power?

Looking back the history of the postwar European integration, we could discern a return from the political process to the economic and back to the political one.

¹ "A Wider Europe—A Proximity Policy as the Key to Stability", speech at the 6th ECSA-World Conference "Peace, Security and Stability: International Dialogue and the Role of the EU", Brussels, 5-6 December 2002.

From the initial waves of European unification in the late 1940's, to the establishment of the first European Community—the ECSC in the early 1950's, and till the aborted efforts of the EDC and the Fouchet Plan in the early 1960's, European integration enfolded around a definitely political target—to avoid another war in Europe.

In the following 30 or so years, it took, however, to a mainly economic course instead. Three factors might be behind this shift: First, the rebound of the European nationalism blocked the path of supranational political integration; second, the settlement of the German problem and the US-USSR nuclear equilibrium in Europe relieved the Western European countries of the pressure for its own defense²; and third, Jean Monnet's ingenious creation—the Common Market—fit well with needs of the postwar European economic development.

In face of the challenges in the post cold war period, and with the economic integration process reaching its final stage, European integration seems to take along the political course again, earmarked by three great developments: the launch of the single currency--Euro³, the establishment of the EU on the “three pillars”, and the eastward enlargement.

Whether the political return of the European integration process would mean the eventual birth of another super power? Having witnessed its unexpectedly rapid paces both in deepening and widening, we should learn to be a bit cautious as to predict what is possible or impossible. Although all signs show the path of political integration will be much more difficult, the EU's drive for political construction will not reverse, and we could expect it to assume more and more the role as a political entity.

² Here we are reminded once again of John J. Mearshimer's argument: “It might be just the Cold War that brought about the 40 years of peace in Europe.” (“Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War”, INTERNATIONAL SECURITY, No.1, 1990.)

³ The single currency is an economic act, but there no denying of the political motivation behind it.