Does Europe have a future? Of course, it does

On 1 March, the President of the European Commission, Jean Claude Juncker, introduced a Commission White Paper on the Future of Europe which contained 5 possible scenarios for the European Union by 2025. This did not come about in a vacuum. There has been debate on what shape the EU should take for some time now. In fact, as the White Paper explains some of the drivers of the Union’s future, and hence the need for this debate, included the EU’s place in a changing world; the transformation of its economy and society as a result of the global financial and economic crisis that began in 2008; and the heightened threats and concerns about security and borders as a result of terrorism and increased migration flows. Of course, Brexit has speeded up the need to revisit the process. After all, the official EU definition of a White Paper is one that contains “proposals for European Union action is a specific area….The purpose of a White Paper is to launch a debate with the public, stakeholders, the European Parliament and the Council in order to facilitate a political consensus.”

Juncker’s White Paper does just that by outlining the following proposals: a) carrying on; b) nothing but the single market; c) those who want to do more do more; d) doing less more efficiently; and e) doing much more together. On 6 March, the leaders of France, Germany, Spain, and Italy met in Versailles and declared their support for proposal c) those who want to do more do more – in other words, a multi-speed Europe. This brought about a reaction from other member states, especially some of the countries of Eastern Europe that this is unacceptable. The debate has now officially been launched.
In fact, the time of reckoning has arrived for the European Union and the future of the project of European Integration. In a way, we find ourselves in the midst of a 1950 moment when on 9 May, five years after the end of the Second World in Europe, France’s Foreign Minister Robert Schuman’s speech stayed in history as the Schuman Declaration and that day henceforth became Europe Day. What did Schuman say? A new model of governance is needed for Europe, one that would avoid a third and fatal world war; hence he called upon a new relationship with Germany (at least the Western part) of piecemeal integration open to any other country that was ready to join. And the rest is history.

Today’s moment is not quite that one as no decisions have yet been taken but it is important in that it launches a debate that something has to change whether it is a renewed commitment to what exists or the creation of something new such as a multi-speed Europe or two speed Europe.

Is this a good thing? In a way whether the multi-speed model or doing more of the same prevails, the positive aspect is that either approach vindicates more integration and that most countries that are not in the hard core would aspire to join it soon. In other words, the debate is not about the merits or demerits of integration but about what sort of integration.

Of course, it is not an easy process to swallow for many of the smaller countries that form the majority of the member states of the Union. For, example, it would be an anathema to Greece, that has always had as a strategic objective to be at the hard core, the ‘noyau dur’, of Europe for its security and stability as a flank state of the EU, as a state with external borders in a troubled neighbourhood. Undoubtedly, its lost credibility suggests that it has a long road ahead of it, much like many that of other smaller EU member states.

It might also prove to be difficult for Turkey to swallow as its links with the Union become ever more tenuous and as the period of reflection the EU ahead of it has more to do with how member states interact with each other in the future rather than the relationship with countries that are not yet members. On the other hand, some possible suggestions for how Turkey could play a role, in what Meltem Müftüler-Baç calls “an alternative model of differentiated integration” in the absence of a formal membership for Turkey, are worth considering. Nevertheless, in the Turkish case, much depends on its government’s commitment to remain part of the Western world. Also, much remains to be cleared as to whether the multi-speed model is the preferred model of choice allowing for further integration in the domains of defense, fiscal, or welfare policy or whether, what The Economist, calls the “multi-tier” Europe model which allows for a role “for non-members as well” is the way forward.

On the other hand, a multi-speed Europe might be the impetus the integration process needs. Yet, several questions come to mind especially in contrast to the past --from 1950 to Messina in 1955 when the foreign ministers of the six founding states opted for more integration to the
Treaty of Rome in 1957 that launched the European Economic Community as we were just reminded with the gathering of EU leaders to commemorate its 60th anniversary. The meeting of the four in Versailles suggest that the model at two (France and Germany) is not powerful or enticing enough to spur on further integration in today’s context. But most importantly, the question that arises are whether the current leaders of the Union’s member states and their institutions and their eventual successors carry the gravitas that Europe’s many founding fathers carried with them in the past World War II era. Do they carry the gravitas needed to convince their societies that a new way forward is necessary? Only time will tell.

In a world that is rapidly evolving with an emerging leadership vacuum by the United States that tests the tolerance of the European integration project, the EU needs to focus on the defense of its interests. It is not the first time the EU is being shaken to its core. The last time was in the immediate post-Cold War period when it had to deal with the destruction and chaos of war in its own backyard with the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. With the Treaty of Maastricht and subsequent treaties, foreign, security, and defense policies have taken center stage in the integration process. Of course, until now, much of the Union’s foreign policy output has been supported by the United States in its slow transition out of Europe with the transfer of a leadership role to its European allies. The Trump administration with its lack of defining foreign policy objectives and intentions accounts for more uncertainty in transatlantic relations at least since the end of the Cold War. This in itself coupled with growing Russian assertiveness, as well as Britain’s exit, should act as enough of a motivator to spur the EU into action to defend itself as well as its values including free trade, human rights, social cohesion, diversity, and democracy and to do more for its own defense and the protection of its interests by being forced to define them better. This could also mean a greater European role within NATO.

There are other encouraging signs, though, that the Europeans are taking their wake up call seriously. The recent Dutch elections with their massive turnout could in part be attributed to the egoism of the majority that played its part in ensuring that Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom did not receive the most votes; that they are the aberration rather than the rule. In France, the campaign of the front runner, Emmanuel Macron, has steadfastly promoted the idea of a united Europe where France plays a leading role in contrast to Marine Le Pen’s rejectionist discourse and beliefs. In Germany, the emergence of the pro-Europe Martin Schulz, as the Social Democrats choice to counter Angela Merkel for the Chancellery in September, neutralizes the right-wing populist and Eurosceptic discourse of the AfD and its leader.

On the other hand, the Union, its member states, and their citizens need to commit to the extension of the integration project and the strengthening of its edifice. The danger herein lies in their inability to escape their comfort zones and take the multitude of challenges to task. Their many divergences coupled with the wishy-washy commitment to integration by some of the leaders could lead to an implosion of the process from within. The vulnerability here is an
end of ambition to feed the process of integration and to seek to protect the current acquis from whatever internal and external challenges that emerge at the expense of its vitality.

Nevertheless, the current set of challenges - ranging from how to move closer to political union to dealing with the migratory and refugee challenges to shortening the distance between the elites and the people to defending free trade to finding the right balance between the promotion of its normative features and beliefs and the reality demanded by its capacity, ambitions, and potential both within the Union and internationally – need to be tackled.

Does the European Union have a future? Of course it does, provided it takes its current challenges and those that will arise in the future to task. It needs both to have a comprehensive vision and to move toward integrated action on all fronts. On the security front, the challenge of the 2% of GDP spent on defense has begun to be met by many of the European countries thereby strengthening simultaneously the EU, and given the close correlation in membership with NATO, the European pillar of the Alliance. This in turn implies, defense cooperation and leadership from Paris, Berlin, and London as the challenges of the debatable nature of Trump’s America and Putin’s Russia. Thus, albeit Brexit, France, Germany, and Britain can take the lead in defense cooperation in light of their common interest in managing the geopolitics of Europe.

On the home front, the continuing support for the European Union by the citizens of its member states is heartening. A recent study by Catherine de Vries and Isabell Hoffmann for the Bertelsmann Stiftung, based on polling data, suggests that “people are somewhat conflicted when it comes to the EU. While a majority of citizens support their country’s membership of the Union and further political and economic integration, they are not satisfied with policy direction in the EU.” Thus the significant mass to move forward is there. The question is how to or to use Christopher Hill’s famous terminology, how to bridge the capabilities-expectations gap. The challenge is the challenge itself given the monumental task ahead in a world that is increasingly complex with shifting benchmarks and in a Union that is complex and perennially divided as to its current and future construct. Although, the history of European integration has been anything but linear and smooth, it has reshaped the continent and touched much of the world beyond it. It has been shaped by vision and commitment as well as crisis and expediency and eventual compromise. There is no reason to expect anything less in the future.

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1 I borrow the terms "comprehensive vision and integrated action" from Thierry Tardy's latest article, although, it makes reference exclusively to the Union’s external action.