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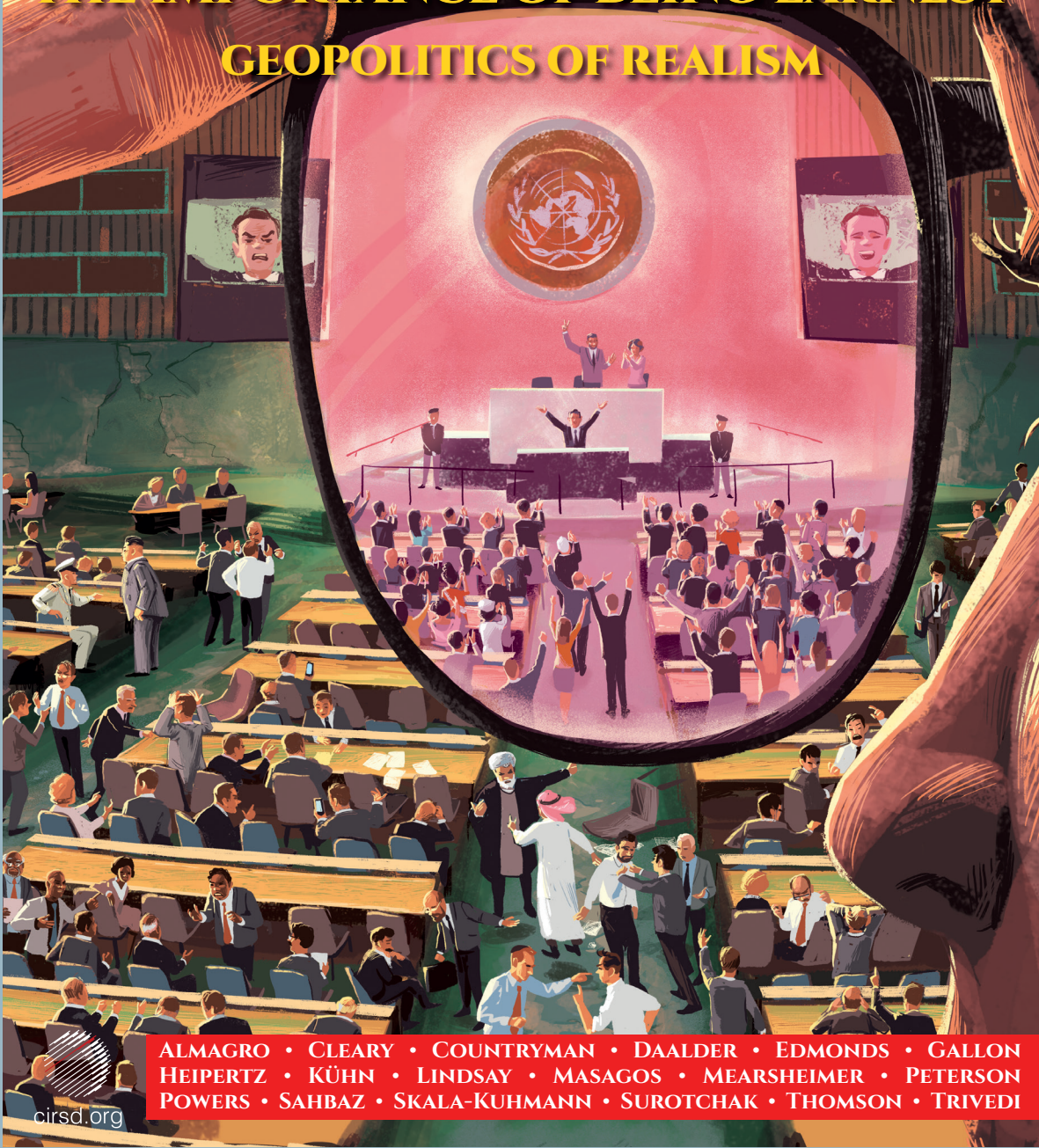
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HORIZONS

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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST GEOPOLITICS OF REALISM



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THE EUROPEAN QUAGMIRE

REFLECTING ON THE 2019 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Martin Heipertz

EUROPE is at a crossroads. In and of itself, this is nothing unusual, for Europe has been at a crossroads throughout history. But this time, it is *our* crossroads, as Europeans. That is what makes the situation special, at least for *us*. Inquiring into Europe's current crossroads is about inquiring as much into Europe as into ourselves. Who are we? Where do we come from, and where do we want to go? Where, maybe, do we *have* to go?

The result of the May 2019 European Parliament elections is but a moment in the course of time, and posterity will not look back with any amount of detail on the travails of forming a coalition or implementing a *Spitzenkandidat* as new Commission President. But this moment may serve at least some of us as an opportunity to take a step back and look at the bigger picture, as we shall now set out to do.

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CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS

We are Europeans. However, already the meaning of this proposition is a matter of controversy. I can only offer a personal view: to be European means, aside from relating to a given geography, to rest on two cultural foundations: occidental antiquity and Christianity. Putting geography to one side, I turn to address briefly Europe's two cultural foundations in turn.

By occidental antiquity, I mean the Greek *polis* and the Roman Empire (as opposed to, for example, the Persian, Chinese, or Ottoman empires). Roman statecraft and Greco-Roman culture are the historic foundations of the various successors to the Roman Empire after its fall. In fact, Roman heritage placed the imperial seed into every European nation—not only the Germanic ones or the offspring of the Franks, but more or



Photo: Gulliver Image/Getty Images

Faces of German revival: Chancellor Angela Merkel in front of a portrait of her greatest predecessor, Konrad Adenauer

less indirectly even the Russians and the Serbs, for example. The Russian Empire, for instance, has been referred to as the *fourth Rome*, following Constantinople and the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. Hence, even a nation which has never been subject to the Roman Empire, like the Russians, or one that was even subject to another empire, like the Ottoman Empire, for instance the Serbs, can still be European by relating, via Byzantium, to the Roman Empire—the one and only original pattern of a European empire.

I am arguing that the Roman imperial echo is part of being European—and vice versa. This is true until our days,

even if unconsciously. The core notion of that imperial quality is to strive for universality. In principle, there can only be one legitimate empire. This imperial striving sits uneasily with competitors of a similar mindset and has given rise to countless straits of conflict among Europeans in the past.

To be Roman, after Constantine the Great, has always meant to be Christian as well. Throughout most of history, Christianity was European and Europe was Christian. Imperial universality came along with religious universality: one legitimate empire, one legitimate faith. Theology and political thought went hand in hand during those eons.

At the outset, Saint Augustine defended Christianity against the charge that, as a state religion, it had in fact corrupted and brought down the western Roman Empire, which had been built on pre-Christian beliefs and values. In his work *The City of God*, written after Rome had been sacked by the Visigoths, Augustine interpreted history as the eternal struggle between good and evil, and propagated a fusion between Christian faith and imperial statehood.

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This idea evolved and changed greatly over time. The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, for its paramount part of European history, was cast in the Catholic teaching of the *two swords*—the spiritual and the temporal (i.e. Church and Empire). Later, Protestantism and its doctrine of the *two kingdoms* gave rise to the post-medieval idea that faith and politics should in fact be separate. The genesis of the modern European nation state would have been impossible without that fundamental shift in political thought.

Centuries of warfare in the name of religion turned out to be the labor pains of tolerance and enlightenment for Europe. Religion was used to justify war not dissimilar to the use of moral argument for the sake of personal

disputes. Only after three centuries of religious warfare across Europe was war tamed to become merely the continuation of politics by other means (in the memorable formulation put forward by Clausewitz), and that period of the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not the worst in European history, by far.

PLANETARY DOMINATION

Thanks to technological innovation and economic growth hitherto unheard

of—itself resting on legal, administrative, and, above all, scientific progress at increasing speed—Europe came to dominate the entire planet. However, Europe’s colonial effort was not undertaken conjointly, but rather in fierce competition and infighting between leading European powers. Our position of global supremacy imploded after the turn of the previous century, when we raged against each other until complete exhaustion in World War I, precipitating the global rise of our own offspring, the United States of America.

Furthermore, European civilization collapsed into the twin totalitarianisms of Soviet communism and Nazi fascism. In their kinship, both of these regimes showed the grim totality of modern statecraft under the nearly complete

absence of religion, culture, and civilization—and in this sense totalitarianism on European soil became the attempted annihilation not only of Europe, but of humanity itself.

Much has been debated—by the likes of, for instance, Ernst Nolte—about whether Nazism arose in Germany as a *bourgeois* panic reaction to Soviet Marxism. Vasily Grossman’s masterpiece *Life and Fate* contains a dialogue

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between a Gestapo officer and a Bolshevik prisoner, modeled on the Grand Inquisitor scene in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*: “When we look one another in the face, we’re neither of us just looking at a face we hate; no, we’re gazing into a mirror.” The two totalitarian twin systems, each dominating their respective part of Eurasia for the purpose of cannibalizing each other, left it to the Anglo-Americans to tip the balance in favor of one of them wearing down the other in military terms. Harry S. Truman in 1941 succinctly coined the phrase: “If we see that Germany is winning we ought to help Russia and if Russia is winning we ought to help Germany and in that way let them kill as many as possible...”

In the end, all European countries had lost World War II—only some did not fully realize this right away. The world

became bipolar and, with the benefit of hindsight, exceptionally stable. One part of Europe was lucky enough to prosper under American hegemony and protection. The other part, which extended as far as the Red Army had been able to drive the frontline against Germany in

1945, had a more difficult existence. Thanks to the doctrine of Mutual-Assured Destruction, the two great powers of the Cold War refrained from military confrontation and engaged in global economic and systemic competition.

The situation was, discounting spurts of crisis, remarkably stable. The outcome of the economic competition between the two systems is known to all contemporaries.

THE EU RISES

The European Union (previously called the European Community) was able to blossom as a child of the Cold War in the American-controlled part of Europe. It was all about economic integration, because there was little politics left to do in a bipolar world. With NATO and hence Uncle Sam taking care of security, the EU focused on becoming the world’s largest integrated marketplace in a U.S.-backed environment of trade liberalization among free-market economies in healthy competition with each other.

Europeans—and particularly the West Germans—were coerced by Washington as early as the 1950s to carry their load in the defense of the West, as defined by the Atlantic Alliance, in terms not at all dissimilar to today’s debate about NATO spending targets. But the main focus of Western European political systems throughout the Cold War was on economics rather than military and security affairs.

At last, the Soviet Union—and with it all other countries that were situated behind the Iron Curtain—derailed in economic terms, and the systemic competitor of the West imploded largely peacefully. The Berlin Wall fell and the western and central parts of Germany were re-united within NATO and the EU, the eastern parts having been permanently lost. Furthermore, those European countries previously under Soviet control were eager to join as well.

Across the globe, more and more countries opted for democracy and free-market economies. The United States seemed poised to enjoy global military dominance, and Francis Fukuyama famously declared the “end of history.” This, however, lasted only until the break-up of Yugoslavia, in the face of which Germany, the UK, and France failed to align along a common strategy, confining themselves to the role of impotent bystanders, falling back in line behind American leadership, for better

or worse. Germany turned anti-Serbian, first by tactical reflex, then by psychological error—it had found another culprit for another “Auschwitz” as argued by then Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer in justifying the 1999 bombing campaign.

Meanwhile, in the wake of unification, Germany had given in to longstanding French demands for monetary union—ending decades of Deutschmark monetary policy leadership in Europe.

Prudently, Germany tried to negotiate contractual safeguards against having to act as fiscal lender of last resort. But this reservation crumbled once sovereign bailouts were indeed required in the wake of a global banking crisis, in order to preserve the common currency from disintegration.

At the same time, tectonic geopolitical shifts had started. Russia emerged from the ruins of the Soviet Union as an economic dwarf, but also as a military force to be reckoned with, bent on revenge. After a short, unhappy flirt with democracy, it had fallen back into more authoritarian forms of rule and a notable aspiration to traditional, imperial attire.

Yet more fundamental was the case of China. The Middle Kingdom, equipped with an even greater dose of imperial self-confidence and even less allegiance

to personal and political liberty, set course to become a global superpower.

Concurrently, the United States plunged into hegemonic fatigue and started, under the presidency of Donald Trump, to lean increasingly toward an isolationist course, backed up by having gained a position of energetic and economic autarchy.

THE GERMAN QUESTION

Where does this leave Europe, in strategic terms? From a distance, and in terms of principle, it actually looks rather simple.

To begin with, European countries ought to take better care of their security, first of all, without relying all that much on the United States. They should stick with NATO to the extent possible, but they should not remain entirely dependent on the Alliance. This is particularly true for Germany, the greatest of the European economies, and hence the country best disposed to live up to additional military responsibilities.

The European question is, again, a German one. It will require a phenomenal leap of mind for Germany’s political leadership and public discourse to embrace a much more ambitious military posture. Even more than

financial resources, this will require a change of thinking and attitude, boiling down largely to a profound reversal of postwar demilitarization.

The political leadership in Berlin would have to positively embrace military affairs and should, as a very

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first step, immediately set up a General Staff and a Joint Command of German armed forces, which, to date, does not even exist. Strategic and military thought will have to be properly reintroduced in German political discourse, and the fact that this will be far from popular shows the extent of leadership

actually required.

Assuming Germany regains military standing commensurate to its economic weight, it would and should indeed intensify its alliance with other European powers, in particular the other two relative heavyweights, France and the UK.

This does not necessarily have to be based on an EU approach, but, interestingly, procurement integration and the consolidation of Europe’s defense industry are more likely to succeed within EU institutional settings than outside of them. Also, complete German military

autonomy realistically remains out of reach, including strategic capabilities such as carrier groups or nuclear weapons. It is much more likely that German political leaders will be able to argue in their favor if they are set up as joint European efforts.

This would obviously require a much more advanced integration of foreign, security, and military policy at the EU level than is

currently imaginable. In fact, it would amount to complementing the existing Economic and Monetary Union and the Single Market with a Foreign and Security Union. And it would require serious post-Brexit strategic thinking on the aforementioned issues.

That being said, the three groups of participating member states (market, currency, security) would not necessarily be identical, but certainly France and Germany would be part of the core, constituted by the overlap of the three circles. EU institutions would have to be hybrid in order to cater for each policy sector, and the political structure would need to be fully developed in terms of democratic participation, parliamentary accountability, and judicial enforceability. The end-state, or *finalité*, of European integration would resemble a modern version of ... one of the preceding empires!

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Such an entity is the only one I can imagine standing up, in geopolitical terms, to a more secluded, isolationist America and a more assertive China.

The United States would remain our obvious ally—to the extent possible, given

constellations of mutual interest. We would also seek *accord* with Russia as soon as we would no longer have to be liable to military blackmail by Moscow. We would seek jointly to contain China.

But the American-European connection is likely to be stronger than any other, because of shared heritage and values.

This is also where Christianity comes back into play. A religious renaissance is required in terms of personal faith, and Europe will have to overcome the effects of two generations of strong materialist and relativist ideological influence by reasserting its Christian foundations, inspiring societal and political values that should shape public discourse and policy-setting more than at present, such as the values of family, education, justice, liberty, and order.

In summary, what I propose is a reassertion of Europe's past in order to address the future. We should positively embrace the ancestral echo of empire and Christianity, and turn it into a viable political option for tomorrow. All else I can think of is substantially bleak. ●