

# Shifting sands of Europe

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By Mahdi Masud

THE European Union, whose parliament approved the Third Generation Cooperation Agreement with Pakistan on April 22, 2004, is Pakistan's largest trading partner and the world's largest economic bloc.

By virtue of its two permanent seats on the UN Security Council, its role in Nato, long-standing ties with the Third World and its recent expansion to a 25-member union, the EU plays a significant political and economic role in the world community. While still lagging behind its own vision, the EU is clearly ahead of all other regional blocs in the quest for an identity that transcends the traditional sovereignty of nation-states. While Asean has made considerable progress, Saarc took two decades before taking concrete steps towards regional cooperation and integration.

The EU's expansion heralds not merely the extended reach of EU law and policies but also signals the transformation of the Union into an entirely new geopolitical entity. At the same time, it signifies the end of the dream of a "United States of Europe", with its homogeneity deeply diluted by the admission of largely East European members. While all earlier expansions brought about, in varying degrees, a political shift in the orientation of the EU, the recent 10-state expansion is a clear departure from the founding fathers' vision of a homogeneous Europe. The expansion is, however, an impressive symbol of the EU's success in spreading stability across the continent.

The founding fathers of the European Community, now the European Union, although imbued with the necessary incentive of idealism, were practical, hard-headed people who followed the precept of one of the

create not only new divisions but also opportunities for new alliances within the Union. Britain has already enlisted the support of Poland and some other East European states in defending the primacy of Nato (including the US), while the French and Germans, with Belgian support, continue to work for a more autonomous European military posture. Different approaches towards the current US unilateralism will constitute a serious obstacle to a common European foreign policy.

The 100th anniversary of the historic Entente Cordiale between Britain and France, which fell on April 8, 2004, was marked by the two states occupying opposite positions in a divided Europe on matters concerning the new EU constitution, relations with the US, Iraq and the Middle East. The Entente Cordiale of 1904 had revolved mainly around colonial issues, with Britain agreeing to leave Morocco for France and the latter agreeing to let Britain have a free hand in Egypt.

The present polarization, however, centres not on disputed African spheres of influence but on issues of direct concern to the geo-political and geo-economic interests of Europe and the US. The EU is being pulled in two directions with Prime Minister Blair insisting on partnership with the US as the panacea for Europe's ills and the French on Europe becoming an alternate centre of power.

With the era of Soviet domination only recently ended in East and Central Europe, the concern for national sovereignty on the part of most new entrants will produce greater emphasis on an inter-governmental approach at the expense of supra-nationalism.

The entry of the Eastern and Central European states will involve the EU more closely with issues concerning Russia, that until recently held suzerainty

Community's great founding fathers, the Belgian statesman Paul Henry Spaak. "The best Europeans," he said, "are not those with the most beautiful and generous ideas who become discouraged when these fail to materialize. The good Europeans are those who know where the difficulties lie; who try to solve them, and who never allow themselves to become discouraged."

These are useful precepts for the leaders of South Asia looking to strengthen regional cooperation, provided that the way is first cleared by Indo-Pakistan understanding over the achievement of the legitimate rights of the Kashmiri people and the fulfilment of their aspirations. It may be pertinent to recall that the European Community was built on the stepping stones of the Franco-German reconciliation, without which the great achievements of European unification, that we see today, would have remained a mirage. A similar reconciliation has yet to be reached in South Asia.

The expansion of Europe reflects a transition in the political status of the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, on the path of democracy, with the admission of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Cyprus and Malta into the EU.

One of the likely sources of discord in the enlarged Union could be fear on the part of the larger member-states (France, Germany, Italy and the UK) of being crowded out by the increasing number of smaller members and the resulting conflict over the question of weighted voting (favouring smaller states) in the Council of Europe and the European Commission. Other imponderables include prospects for a more permanent presidency to replace the present rotating six-month presidency, as espoused by the larger members.

The enlargement will also highlight the vast gap between the richest and the poorest states of the Union and exacerbate the already existing struggle over resources. While new political structures will facilitate the objective of European unity, the Union is already rent with serious disagreements over the invasion of Iraq and the war against terror, with France and Germany pushing for an independent policy and the UK espousing a firmly pro-US line.

However, the enlargement will

over the affairs of East Europe. Relations with Russia will, therefore, need to be handled by the EU with greater sensitivity.

Although to a great extent the recent expansion completes the original vision of European unification, other countries are already knocking on EU doors. While Romania and Bulgaria have been asked to undertake more comprehensive economic and administrative reforms, Croatia is also in the queue.

Talks with Turkey are expected to be renewed in December 2004. With Turkey no longer held responsible for blocking the admission of a unified Cyprus in the EU on May 1, 2004, the remaining obstacles include EU concern about human rights, a democratic dispensation, economic reforms and the Kurdish problem. The economy is in the doldrums with a negative growth rate of 0.45 per cent and an inflation of 30.4 per cent expected in the current year.

It is feared that the autonomous Kurdish entity in occupied Iraq may fuel similar ambitions on the part of the Turkish Kurds, which in turn may provoke a military response that could complicate Turkey's entry into the EU. Influential political circles in the EU make no secret of the fears of Turkey's Islamic character constituting a strong deterrent to its acceptance in EU ranks, in the context of the current Islamic phobia afflicting the West.

The management of Europe's single currency will remain an important divisive factor. The stability and growth pact setting out the fiscal framework of the EU has already run into serious difficulties with France and Germany failing to control their budget deficits. The failure of the growth and stability pact highlights the difficulty of having a common currency, side by side with a dozen different, national fiscal policies.

For five of the EU newcomers, May 2004 is a doubly historic month with the Baltic three plus Slovakia and Slovenia not only formally joining the EU but also Nato. The latter entry will, however, attract less interest than membership into the EU. The required ratification of the new constitution by all member states will not be smooth sailing either. Britain has joined the list of states planning a referendum on the issue, apart from Ireland, Denmark and the Netherlands.

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