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No. 253

08 December 2017

CAN THE “WEST” SURVIVE?

Masayuki Tadokoro

- Europe’s democratic institutions are fundamentally sound, but established political elites are widely distrusted by the general populace.
- The countries of Europe will likely become more inward-looking and mercantilist in order to assuage the dissatisfaction of the supporters of “populist parties.”
- If Europe abandons its “geopolitical responsibilities,” the “West” will lose meaning as a global political entity.

The views expressed in this piece are the author’s own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

The democratic institutions of Europe's major countries are robust enough that even controversial "ultra-right" parties can operate within the democratic framework. Despite the keen sense of crisis surrounding the series of elections that took place in 2017, their outcomes amply demonstrate that "ultra-right" parties such as FN or AfD have practically no chance of coming to power as long as the democracies work. At the same time, though, these elections also clearly showed that Europeans at the grassroots level now strongly distrust the political elites that have led such post-Cold-War European projects as EU integration and the liberal multicultural accommodation of immigrants from the Islamic world.

European integration no doubt achieved many successes but Russia, to say nothing of China, has never democratized as was widely hoped, and the Islamic world has not stabilized and accepted European norms since the "Arab Spring." On the contrary, illiberal "emerging countries" have never been as powerful as they are now. The Chinese and Russians are now utilizing their economic resources to shape Western national interests through their economic might rather than the other way around, and they have already translated this new economic reality into their more aggressive military postures.

Under the newly emerging geo-economic conditions, it is not surprising that dismissing the nation-state as an outdated exclusive institution and weakening it without creating reliable alternatives have invited strong negative reactions from citizens at the grassroots level who have nowhere else to turn to protect their livelihoods.

Chancellor Merkel said that she would listen to AfD voters and win their votes back. Other European leaders are also aware of the need to address the concerns of those who voted for "ultra-right" parties. Restrictions on immigration will be strengthened, and more intensive redistributive policies will be adopted. Economic growth and job creation will likely be given priority over human rights and environmental issues. Instead of taking on global political challenges, Europeans may be following a "Europe First" policy. In this context, East Asia may be regarded merely as a place to make money in a myopic manner.

If the sorry state of trans-Atlantic relations, particularly since Donald Trump came into office, is not repaired and EU-Japan relations remain just a matter of trade and investment, the “West” may be so weakened by its internal discord and bribed by illiberal economic powers that it disintegrates and is reduced to a powerless onlooker rather than a shaper of history.

In the post-Cold-War period, Europeans proudly avouched themselves as a “normative superpower.” Japanese are constantly urged to follow the European model by improving their relations with regional neighbors rather than cherishing their traditional alliance with the US. It was more than a half century ago that General de Gaulle allegedly called visiting Prime Minister Ikeda a “salesman of transistor radios.” However, with the British and Germans rushing to join AIIB without even seriously trying to coordinate their foreign policies with the US and Japan, it is now the Europeans who look like salespersons in the eyes of Japanese. What matters for Japan is whether or not Europe is a reliable political partner, and what matters for the world is whether or not the “West” will survive. 

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