



"European Integration is Inexorably Moving Ahead"

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Condemning both the euro-pessimism and the harsh media coverage of the European Union summit in Nice, France last December, French Ambassador to the U.S. François Bujon de l'Estang emphasized the progress that Europe has made on the road to integration in the post-war era, adding that he expects this progress to continue as plans for enlargement of the EU gain momentum.

Bujon de l'Estang discussed the EU's future during a visit to campus on January 18. France, which recently completed its six-month turn as rotating president of the EU, passed the leadership baton to Sweden on Dec. 31.

Bujon de l'Estang acknowledged the general opinion that Europe is at a "crossroads, and that the many challenges it faces simultaneously are causing it to lose its sense of direction...Every time you pick up a newspaper or turn on the television, there's some naysayer announcing that the European Union is running up against a brick wall and that the end is near."

Bujon de l'Estang emphatically disputed that impression. "Certainly the challenges facing the EU are significant and no doubt unprecedented. Not the least of them is integrating within the next few years a dozen candidates who until recently belonged to the former Soviet Union's sphere of influence. Yet I think it's important to put these challenges into perspective. Since 1957, Europe has been steadily moving ahead on the road to integration, and the progress made during that period ... is extremely impressive."

The Nice meeting in December brought together heads of state and government to conclude the Intergovernmental Conference, which began in February 2000 and is responsible for drawing up reforms of the treaties of the EU. It was viewed as a key milestone in ensuring that European institutions could handle the strain of adding new members in the years to come.

Bujon de l'Estang focused in part on the current status of the EU, asking at one point whether the EU "has gotten stuck, as a number of people are saying? Has the impetus of the early days been lost? Is America dealing with a partner lacking in backbone or spirit?" Clearly the Ambassador doesn't think so. "Obviously the EU's situation isn't entirely rosy, but it is much better than generally said," he noted. "There is, however, a certain complacency; even in Europe there is a kind of euro-pessimism, which I believe is due to a natural tendency to blame on Brussels and a disembodied Europe all the problems encountered by our citizens, our voters, our businesses, our communities..."

In the long run, Bujon de l'Estang said, two crucial issues dominate the European integration process: The enlargement of its member base and the deepening of the Union. On the enlargement issue, the Ambassador cautioned that "the bigger we get, the harder it becomes for reform, and any compromise has to stem from a consensus ... even the smallest partner can block everything." This principle of unanimity in decision-making will have to be altered with the Eastward expansion, he noted.

The European Community – the predecessor of the EU, which emerged with the signing of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty – was created in 1957 as the union of six contiguous European countries (France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands). It then grew to include Great Britain, Ireland and Denmark (in 1973) and Greece (in 1981). The latest countries to join the EU were Spain, Portugal, Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995. The 15 countries now comprising the EU have agreed on a need for structural reform before the next enlargement, which is forecast for 2004-2005.

"Although media coverage was quite harsh, the recent European Council in Nice will enable the EU to



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successfully enlarge its membership in the future," Bujon de l'Estang said. "The 15-member EU, which is already having trouble functioning smoothly...will no longer function at all with the addition of another 13 members. Institutional reform had been postponed, or failed, for years. It was understood that reform had to take place before the next enlargement."

The resulting Treaty of Nice, the Ambassador said, "will no doubt disappoint the most ambitious among us...but it has the huge merit of having been agreed to by all 15 members" and it has "averted the risk of a breakdown in the enlargement process."

Bujon de l'Estang divided the countries that have applied to join the EU into three categories: those whose candidacy is self-evident (all 13 applicant countries, including Turkey); those who are fairly likely to be part of the Union (Switzerland, Norway, the Balkan countries) and those whose membership remains unlikely (countries of the former Soviet Union or countries with no geographic connection to Europe) because "enlarging too much would risk diluting the project and cause it to lose its whole meaning."

On the issue of the deepening of the Union, Bujon de l'Estang cited major achievements in the fields of monetary union and a common security and defense policy. During the Nice summit, EU countries pledged to contribute troops for a European rapid reaction force to lessen dependence on the United States.

The issue which has generated the most attention has been the launch of the euro, the single currency adopted by the European Union on Jan. 1, 1999. The introduction of the euro will culminate in the first half of 2002 with the introduction of banknotes and coins in the new currency and the gradual withdrawal of the 12 national currencies of the euro-zone (Great Britain, Denmark and Sweden, although members of the EU, do not belong to the euro-zone).

Monetary union is already a success, the Ambassador stated, downplaying fears created by the plunge of the euro last year. "The euro zone is benefiting in terms of external stability and internal functionality, resulting in increased growth and accelerated job creation. The relative depreciation of the euro since its launch may affect the European ego, but that's being compensated for by increased exports."

Bujon de l'Estang noted that under the French presidency, major decisions deepening the level of European unity have been made. He cited the creation of a unified European corporate status, the definition of a European social agenda, an agreement on a fiscal harmonization package, the agreement in principle to establish a High Authority for Food Safety, and decisions on maritime safety following various oil slicks.

"The European integration is inexorably moving ahead," he stated.

Beyond the issues of the enlargement and the deepening of the Union, the question of which political model the EU should follow raises intense debates between advocates of a federalist approach and those supporting a confederation of national states, who favor relinquishing, respectively, more or less national sovereignty to supra national jurisdictions, the Ambassador said.

The debate was revived last summer as Germany Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer declared in a speech in Berlin in May 2000 that Europe needed a stronger political integration and that it was time for a European constitution and an elected president. A month later, French President Jacques Chirac stressed the possibility of establishing "pioneer groups" of countries that would move quickly towards economic and political integration.

The principle of subsidiarity – the idea that the EU will not seek legislation on issues better left to national and local governments to handle – will determine how to organize the division of jurisdiction between the European, national, regional and local levels. Bujon de l'Estang warned against a federalist government, stressing that the EU should resist the urge to follow existing schemes and not develop into the "United States of Europe."

The United States, in turn, should not consider a more politically unified European Union in terms of rivalry, the Ambassador added. More biting, Bujon de l'Estang warned against the "attitude of ambivalence" towards European integration sometimes adopted by the U.S., which he defines as

"showing support on one hand, but then trying to torpedo it as soon as some solid or coherent project emerges on the other side of the Atlantic."

The partnership between the EU and the U.S., "which tends to be eclipsed by trade disputes, is in fact the densest and most lively such partnership in the world," he added. "In the economic domain (trade and investment) and in the areas of politics and culture, the EU is by far the United States' leading partner."

Bujon de l'Estang also framed the existing debate over the question of Europe's "finality" as a choice between two approaches. He made clear which one he favored. "Our former president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing put this in terms of a debate between a 'European space,' favoring a rapid, ambitious enlargement at the cost of weakening solidarity, and a 'European power,' no doubt smaller and aiming to become a real political entity, a new unified 'pole' on the international scene.

"The first approach is supported by those who see Europe as an open, deregulated market, while the second is favored by those who want the Union to assume greater responsibility on the international scene and to strengthen its internal integration on the domestic scene."

The path that is chosen will have an impact on the U.S., Bujon de l'Estang noted. "At first glance, it would be tempting [for the U.S.] to support a 'European space' containing and stabilizing the entire continent and confining Europe in the role of a large open market. That would be a strategic error. The advantages from a more integrated, more politically unified partner should not be perceived in terms of a rivalry with the U.S., but rather in terms of complementarity. The emergence of a more cohesive European pole would be in the United States' interest, giving it a solid ally in a still uncertain world.

"Such a pole would obviously remain open on the economic and commercial level. The old myth of a 'fortress Europe' never corresponded to the reality, which is that the EU is the most open market in the world and plans to remain so."

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