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## EU in position to be world's next superpower

**By Andrew Reding**

While U.S. media focus on Europe's transition to the euro, Washington doesn't seem to understand the full implication of a unified continent across the Atlantic.

The adoption of the euro by 12 European countries signals something far more important than anyone on this side of the Atlantic seems to realize.

Europe is gradually emerging as the world's new superpower. Within a couple of decades, the European Union will equal—if not surpass—the United States as the dominant economic force on the world stage.

Consider the arithmetic. The U.S. dollar is used by about 285 million Americans. The euro is beginning to be used by 304 million Europeans with comparable levels of prosperity. When remaining EU members Great Britain, Sweden and Denmark join the euro zone, as now seems inevitable, that sum will rise to 378 million.

And that is just the beginning. Another 12 European countries are preparing to join the EU. Their accession in the next decade will bring the total to 483 million, in current figures.

Taking a longer view, Turkey, the Balkans and eventually Russia enter the picture. Turkey is already in a customs union with the EU, and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder is advocating bringing Russia into the fold.

For his part, Russian President Vladimir Putin is likewise tilting toward Europe. Russia is already a member of the Council of Europe. It is only a matter of time before it joins the EU. Together with the remaining holdouts, that will bring the total to roughly 800 million people in current terms, almost equal to the population of India or China.

But the EU is qualitatively different from India and China. It is enormously more prosperous and technologically advanced. It encompasses four of the Big Seven economic powers: Germany, Great Britain, France and Italy.

Geopolitically, it includes a unified Germany in further union with its historic rivals, France and Great Britain. Add Russia to the mix and the implications are mind-boggling. Never before has Europe been united through peaceful means. The emergence of the continental superpower raises the prospect of a union more formidable than the United States, stretching from the Atlantic across Eurasia to the Bering Sea.

So why aren't we hearing more about it? Because Washington still doesn't believe Europeans will be able to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers.

Yet border checks have vanished, so that crossing from one country to another is about as eventful as crossing a state line in the United States.

The EU already has a functioning parliament, courts, capital city, flag, license plates, passports and now a common currency.

Despite all of this, Washington still isn't taking the EU all that seriously. Where, after all, is the European president? The current European executive has 15 heads, a recipe for gridlock that can only get worse with the admission of more countries.

But even that is about to change. The EU is convening a constitutional convention under former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to consider a federal structure with an elected president to complement the existing directly elected parliament.

Cynics will say that even so, Europe will never match the vitality and the commitment to freedom and free enterprise that has made the United States the world's greatest-ever economic and technological powerhouse.

But all that is changing too. Europe now has its own bill of rights, and a court in Strasbourg, France, to enforce it. Just as tariff barriers are vanishing all across the continent, so are the national monopolies that have until now stifled competition. With a single currency, reduced telecommunications and transport costs and a market larger than the United States, vast new opportunities are opening up for free enterprise.

Already, there is a new dynamism in Europe. Futuristic rail lines are spreading across the continent, whisking intercity passengers at 185 m.p.h.

Cellphones are more ubiquitous than in the United States. And even Americans are now flying in Airbuses instead of Boeings.

And, if you think about it, the adoption of a common parliament, bill of rights, and currency by 12 nations with as many different languages is an even more audacious feat than the union of 13 English-speaking colonies a little more than two centuries ago.

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