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Dashboard

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LINDLEY-FRENCH'S BLOG BLAST: SPEAKING TRUTH UNTO POWER

A REGULAR COMMENTARY ON STRATEGIC AFFAIRS FROM A LEADING COMMENTATOR AND ANALYST
2018 BOOK PROJECT: LITTLE EUROPE? TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY STRATEGY FOR DECLINING POWERS



Tuesday, 27 March 2018

Sloan: Transatlantic Traumas

Alphen. Netherlands. 27 March. “Radical centrist populism” is on the face of it an oxymoronic contradiction in terms. And yet, that is precisely what my old friend and colleague Stanley R. Sloan calls for in his new book “Transatlantic Traumas”, which has just been published as part of the Pocket Politics series by Manchester University Press and is no doubt brilliant and very reasonably-priced. Now, it is not my custom to praise a book I have not as yet read. but I have known Stan for over twenty years since his days at the Congressional Research Service in Washington. The three things I have always valued in Stan are his intellectual courage, his insight, and his judgement. Having read about the book I have no doubt it contains all three in abundance.

The focus of the book is the loss of strategic confidence in the West about the West’s role in the world, fuelled by the loss of confidence in each other. It would be easy to suggest that this loss of confidence in each other is temporary. There can be no doubt that Brexit and the election of President Trump have reinforced a sense of divergence that have led some commentators to question whether the West exists at all. Ironically, and in a timely fashion, the co-ordinated and cohesive response of the West to the Salisbury attack would suggest that those predicting the demise of the West, and those seeking to accelerate that demise (Moscow!), maybe premature.

Sloan touches on an issue that I have also been long considering – the changing nature of the West itself. This morning Australia also announced that it was expelling two Russian diplomats for what Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull called, “an unlawful use of force by Russia against the UK and her people”. The West, it seems, is evolving and has evolved from

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Blog Archive

- ▼ 2018 (20)
 - ▼ March (6)
 - Sloan:
Transatlantic Traumas
 - Time for Russia's 'Friends' to Face Hard Truths
 - Skripal: NATO's Next Steps?
 - The Skripal Attack: Britain's Options

a place into a world-wide idea of liberal democracy, free speech and a law based concept of international community.

And yet, the central argument of Sloan's book is that the West and its inherent liberalism is in crisis. Specifically, that illiberalism within the West has brought 'it' (whatever 'it' is) close to collapse. At the heart of the book is Stan's long-standing concern that the threats posed by Islamist terrorism on changing Western societies allied to tailored Russian meddling in domestic political processes is generating illiberal populism of such ferocious intensity that it threatens to destroy the very ideas that the West pioneered and which define its very existence. In such a political context Brexit and Trump are mere symptoms of an illiberal backlash by large segments of a Western populace that has become deeply dissatisfied with the response of traditional liberal elite Establishments to complex problems.

Here, Stan and I are in complete agreement. However, attractive political demagogues may appear during times of crisis with their neat sound-bites and their even 'neater' solutions they, in fact, offer nothing but danger. The paradox of the West is that complexity and freedom are the twin sisters of liberty. The very pressures faced by Western societies are pressures of success for which neither nostalgia nor simplicity can afford 'solutions' or satisfy people many of whom have little idea why they are dissatisfied beyond a sense that 'things are not as they were'. Welcome to change.

It is change that I think is at the heart of Stan's thesis, and more specifically how to manage it. Sloan argues that weak and divided political centres across Western states have failed to rise to the challenges that the West's very success has generated, such as terrorism and immigration. And, that this has created the conditions that Russia has thus far quite skilfully manipulated.

At the heart of the book is a warning: domestic unrest in Western states cannot be separated from the effectiveness of such states in the global arena. If the liberal centre fails to once again demonstrate it has the political will, the vision and the strategies to deal with the concerns now spawning mass populist political movements the security and defence of the West will be profoundly weakened. Brexit has already weakened the EU and there are already profound concerns in Europe and beyond that Trumpism could profoundly damage transatlanticism and NATO.

Which brings me back to Stan's "radical centrist populism". By employing such a concept Stan is calling upon fellow centrists to recognise that they will only seize the political agenda by recognising the scale of the risks, challenges and threats posed to the West and its societies, and by then taking the necessary radical steps to deal with such threats. The populism? Populists are great communicators. Indeed, they tend to be little else. Stan Sloan is suggesting a new marriage between centrist policy activism and populist communication. In that case, I am a fully paid up radical centrist populist.

As I said at the outset I have not read Stan's book, but soon will. There will no doubt be things in the book with which I disagree, possibly profoundly. However, knowing Stan as I have for many years I have no doubt that his book is worth reading and for this reason, I recommend Stan Sloan's *Transatlantic Traumas* to you.

Chairman Xi's
Bipolar
Disorder?

Analysis Paper:
The Battle of
Brexit

- ▶ February (8)
- ▶ January (6)
- ▶ 2017 (81)
- ▶ 2016 (101)
- ▶ 2015 (119)
- ▶ 2014 (135)
- ▶ 2013 (101)
- ▶ 2012 (118)
- ▶ 2011 (101)
- ▶ 2010 (3)

About Me

Lindley-French's Blog Blast

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Julian Lindley-French is Senior Fellow of the Institute of Statecraft, Director of Europa Analytica & Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow, National Defense University, Washington DC. An internationally-recognised strategic analyst, advisor and author he was formerly Eisenhower Professor of Defence Strategy at the Netherlands Defence Academy, and Special Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of Leiden. He is a Fellow of Respublica in London, and a member of the Strategic Advisory Group of the Atlantic Council of the United States in Washington. Latest books: *The Oxford Handbook on War 2014* (Paperback) (2014; 709 pages). (Oxford: Oxford University Press) & "Little Britain? Twenty-First Strategy for a Middling European Power". (www.amazon.com) The Friendly-Clinch Health Warning: The views contained herein are entirely my own and