

It's cold outside the EU embrace

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Let me count the ways in which European countries need each other. The relatively small and shrinking economies, compared to rising stars in other parts of the world, face a number of challenges unprecedented in depth, breadth and height. Yet, the EU, the most effective mechanism for them to cooperate on meeting most of these challenges, is straining at the seams, with Brexit having exacerbated previously existing contradictions. The UK, in the meantime, did not have to wait long after Brexit to experience the kind of international buffeting that the EU used to shield it from, having been caught between China and the US with the Huawei 5G controversy.

Let's start with only the most obvious, global, crises that we all have to contend with, whether we want to or not: COVID-19 and climate change, with a smattering of species extinctions. Shall we add overall destruction of the environment, plastics pollution and resource depletion as well? Only the most myopic of politicians will maintain that these are issues that can be solved by any one country individually. They might say that the EU cannot tackle these problems by itself either, which is partly true but beside the point. It's clear that on any of these issues, cooperating in an EU context would be far preferable for a variety of reasons, from being able to make a good start with things to having more international clout, than to go it alone. On COVID-19, joint EU-programmes on the acquisition of PPE, and medicines and vaccine development, can actually make a huge difference all by themselves.

Then there's an almost equally worrying array of geopolitical shifts, all tremendously disruptive in their own right but in concert, and in the context of the challenges so briefly dispatched above, possibly cataclysmic in their consequences. While a common foreign and defence policy is not something that the EU has ever made a serious stab at, and may not even be wholly desirable, the common economic and political heft of a moderately united EU is something that can make a real difference on the world stage. Again, only the most self-interested of politicians will make the case that it's better to negotiate these geopolitical currents outside the EU, and, let's say, take a chance on tying your country's fortune to either China or the US.

For an all too brief moment after the demise of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany, did it seem as if some of the old heft on the international stage was returning to Europe, courtesy of a nicely humming along EU. By now, after recent wars on the EU periphery, in among other places Ukraine and the Middle East, a financial crisis followed by austerity and a bad-tempered and patchy recovery, and mainly a rapid and dangerous erosion in the international norms of conduct on the part of Russia, China and the US, that illusion of power, as far as it went, has once more evaporated. All three aforementioned powers now exert a destabilising influence across the globe. Decline and revanchism play a role in Russia, expansion and revanchism in China and decline pure and simple in the US. European countries acting in isolation will be hard pressed to keep them at bay. Even in

unison in the EU, it will be a Herculean task. No wonder each of these restless world powers are trying to undermine the EU every chance they get.

The problem is that they have ample material to work with, as tensions between European countries appear to be inexorably on the rise. Some of this goes back about a decade to the financial and Euro crises. Some of it goes back further, to the rapid admission of former East Bloc countries. And in one particular case it goes back to the height of the British empire. Some of the tensions are due to serious differences of opinion, on solidarity, cohesion, social and economic models, democratic mechanisms, oversight, autonomy etc. But many other disagreements spring from heedless political ambition, populist manipulation and cynical opportunism.

It should not matter. Whatever the source and nature of disagreements between EU countries, each and every one of them is better off together than apart. The EU, like society in general, is maintained, contrary to popular belief, not by an unending and infinitely detailed maze of regulations that stifle the life out of our societies (although we can debate whether there are too many such regulations) but by a number of red lines that we agree are in the common interest not to cross. In society in general these are things such as not solving disputes through violence, respect for basic rights and for property etc. In the EU these include things such as the level playing field, democracy, rule of law etc. Countries can and do diverge significantly from each other on most other matters. Only in extreme cases would there be a reason to leave the bloc the way the UK has done. But having seen the UK leave, will inevitably at some point tempt another country to at least threaten to follow. That such a move is neither in the national nor in the collective interest, is sadly not a deterrent. Another problem with the UK having left the Union is that its obstructionism often served to unite the rest or provide cover for other sceptics. What we've seen recently with the political grandstanding that the Dutch PM has indulged in over the EU recovery fund (Dutch elections next year!), is therefore in part another consequence of Brexit, and further puts a strain on EU cohesion.