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Europe's Post-Brexit Retrenchment

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ALEXANDER MATTELAER, JAN 30 2017

After many years of British advocacy of an outward-oriented EU, the prospect of Brexit threatens to leave the continent more introspective and less engaged in world affairs than ever before. This is due not only to the UK leaving the Union, robbing the latter of a member state with substantial international clout, but also to the internal effects that Brexit engenders for what remains of the European project. As such, European leaders will struggle to generate the resources required for crafting foreign and defence policies commensurate with the challenges the EU faces in and beyond its neighbourhood. Caught up in a long and unpleasant negotiation process, its internal divisions ruthlessly exploited by Russia and perhaps no longer enjoying the firm support of the United States, the EU is set to enter a period of strategic retrenchment unseen since the empty chair crisis of 1965 and perhaps of even greater magnitude.

The headwinds created by the Brexit negotiation process derive from the fact that the Union will become substantially smaller in economic, military and demographic terms. Even if the UK were somehow to retain access to (parts of) the single market and maintain some informal affiliation with the Union, the European project is set to shrink for the first time since its creation. While the UK always remained a special case, it is hard to see how the Union could quickly overcome the loss of power Britain can mobilise. Moreover, the Brexit negotiation process itself will consume vast diplomatic energy and political bandwidth. The material loss of international clout will therefore be compounded—for at least a few years—by the necessity to cope with the changes this brings about. If the painstaking negotiations over the Lisbon Treaty are any guide to European navel-gazing, one can only fear that the upcoming Brexit negotiations will be a sorry waste of time and resources.

In terms of domestic politics, Brexit has resonated strongly across Eurosceptic communities across the continent. Even in founding member states like France and the Netherlands, candidates hostile to European integration are expected to do well in upcoming elections. Should Marine Le Pen or Geert Wilders assume political leadership, all bets are off with respect to the question where the EU itself is heading. Even if the political centre holds in all remaining 27 member states, the negotiation dynamics within the Union will become more difficult. Despite the UK's reticence to participate in key policy areas and frequent vetoing of proposals to deepen the Union, a British departure does not immediately make European consensus easier to achieve. Without London, the axis between Paris and Berlin becomes not only crucial for realising any progress, but potentially also more adversarial. This is likely to ring true regardless of who wins the French presidency.

The world will not stand still while the UK and EU member states negotiate mutually agreeable terms of divorce and the remaining members of the club ponder what the future of the project boils down to. Rising interest rates may well create new economic turmoil in Europe, and foreign crises across the European neighbourhood are unlikely to abate anytime soon. In this turbulent environment, the Union must by necessity put a premium on maintaining as much internal cohesion as can be garnered. This is likely to sap the Union of external assertiveness and transform it into an easy target for outside coercion. At the same time, the incoming Trump administration seems set to adopt a transactional approach to the transatlantic relationship and squeeze European states to increase their levels of defence spending. What's more, Russia may seize the opportunity to foster and exploit European disorder with a view to redressing what it has long seen as a historical injustice: the enlargement of both the EU and NATO to include former Soviet republics. As Russia practices its own version of the 'comprehensive approach'—harmonising all instruments of power to achieve a strategic goal—it remains to be seen how resilient the European construction is

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when facing a determined and wily adversary.

In democratic societies, external strength and internal weakness seldom go hand in hand. If the EU struggles to maintain broad domestic support in its own member states, it seems likely to face a prolonged period of strategic retrenchment—not by choice but by necessity. We have already reached a stage in which a large share of Europe's military power is tied up by domestic tasks, ranging from counter-terrorism to refugee management. At the same time, economic institutions and private companies will be consumed by coming to terms with the costly fragmentation of the single market. With anti-globalism gaining political traction across the Western world, the resurrection of trade barriers is far from inconceivable.

In the light of the above, the probability of the European decision-making system screeching to a halt in intergovernmental gridlock continues to rise. This brings about memories of the 1960s, when Charles De Gaulle, discontented with the trend towards supranationalism, relentlessly pursued his vision of a Europe of nations and ultimately left the negotiating table. Despite important differences in context, some similarities with Brexit are striking. The eventual compromise reached in 1966—giving members a veto to stall majority decision-making—prevented the breaking up of the community, at the price of the relative stagnation of integration for some twenty years. Then, as now, the appeal of intergovernmentalism may help to contain disintegration, but at the same time render pro-active policy-making impossible. Increasing European security cooperation on an intergovernmental model is unlikely to yield the benefits of scale promised at the European level. It is false to assume that Europeans presently waste precious resources on defence: they are merely paying the price of national decision-making autonomy.

Yet there may be a silver lining. Facing challenges on all fronts will at some point shake Europeans out of their complacency. As illusions give way to harsh realities European citizens face major choices: to stick together and weather the storm with the least amount of damage, or to break into acrimony and suffer the consequences. As member states individually and collectively limp from crisis to crisis, their relative powerlessness becomes painfully obvious. This is not to say the turn of the tide is near: if history is any guide, there is ample room for continuing deterioration in terms of internal as well as external security. And given the dire state in which the military establishments of EU member states find themselves, it will take many years to rebuild a meaningful ability to act. Nonetheless, the coming period of retrenchment may serve both the UK and the EU as a painful but educational reminder of the importance of European cooperation in the pursuit of international power.

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