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Opinion – UK-France Relations Under a Liz Truss Premiership

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, SEP 6 2022

Amongst the many campaign interviews, incoming Prime Minister Liz Truss' response to the question of whether French President Emmanuel Macron was a friend or foe of the United Kingdom was perhaps the most revealing. Truss' answer that the 'jury is still out' on Macron spoke volumes as to her mindset and that of Britain when it comes to its neighbour across the Channel. Truss can easily identify Vladimir Putin as a foe, a man determined to break Europe and hold it hostage to Russia's revanchist aims and geopolitical grievances. In contrast, Macron is a longstanding ally who is only guilty of trying to maintain and strengthen the very union the UK decided to break free from. Macron responded as a true European and Anglophile, saying that 'if France and Britain cannot say whether they are friends or enemies, then we are headed for serious problems.'

It is a safe and common tactic to throw barbs across the channel and hope for the worst to blow over. However, as Truss moves into 10 Downing St, the UK is not in a position to pick and choose who its friends are. Macron extended a hand to Truss and to the British people, but Britain's history of continental scapegoating suggests a long-standing animosity remains.

Truss' words speak to a long-held sense of grievance and victimhood that the UK has placed on the continent's leading powers, namely France and Germany. In his book on Brexit, the writer Fintan O'Toole termed this as one of 'pleasurable self-pity' and 'heroic failure', as well as a preoccupation or even obsession with the Second World War and the divergent economic outcomes in Britain and the founding members of the European Economic Community. For France, the goal of Brexit was always to make the conditions of the UK's withdrawal less favourable than those that the UK enjoyed as a member state. This served the dual purpose to both dissuade other EU member states from leaving but to also not allow Britain to cherry-pick the parts of the EU that it wanted to keep or remain a part of, like the single market.

A successful Brexit also risked giving a boost to Marine Le Pen and the prospect of a 'Frexit', or a French exit from the EU. Thus, for mainstream French politicians it was important for Brexit to be a political failure for Britain, something British leaders would regret doing as well as something French politicians of both the far-left and the far-right would avoid pursuing should they ever assume power.

During her time in government, Truss has been a hardliner on Europe in the vein of Margaret Thatcher and her infamous scuffles with European Commission President Jacques Delors. The economic circumstances, social unrest, and fear of the collapse of the union are not too dissimilar to the conditions of Thatcher's arrival to Downing Street in 1979. Britain is facing a 21st century Winter of Discontent when it comes to inflation and social unrest, with strikes paralysing almost all means of transport and various industries throughout the summer months. The continent is also likely to be in deep economic pain for the remainder of this year given its reliance on Russian energy and the economic shocks from the war in Ukraine. However, Britain is forging ahead alone, to the benefit of Ukraine and its ability to fight back against Russian aggression, but to the detriment of its citizens and constituent nations who are screaming for a new approach.

One of Macron's greatest frustrations with Boris Johnson was his government's seemingly haphazard respect for

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international law and for treaties signed by his own government – such as the Northern Ireland Protocol. Truss enters Downing Street with the deadline approaching on 15 September for the UK to respond to the legal proceedings launched against it by Brussels, which believes Britain has failed to properly implement border checks in the Irish Sea. Truss has threatened to trigger Article 16 proceedings, an emergency clause that allows either the UK or the EU to take unilateral action if they perceive the protocol to be causing ‘serious economic, societal, or environmental difficulties.’

The issue of Northern Ireland will be one of Truss’ first battles as Prime Minister and one she is likely to relish participating in. To follow O’Toole’s logic, Truss has little incentive to suddenly compromise with the EU and make amends, even if it lessens tensions in Northern Ireland. What is more important is the extent to which the hardest elements of Brexit are followed through with, even if self-induced pain is the most lasting by-product of Truss and her party’s displeasure. Renegotiation is less important than staying true to the terms of Britain’s own submission, no matter how painful it may be.

For Macron, acting as the grand strategist and architect of Europe, it likely gives him no pleasure to debate the merits of friendship and collaboration on the continent he is so determined to shape. Macron has learned to live with short-lived governments in Britain that negate long-lasting relationships with individual leaders. Britain and France are unlikely to be led by ideological bedfellows not least because French politics is much more fractured with weak centre-left and centre-right parties, which is the opposite of Britain’s two-party system. As Truss assumes power, France will be more interested in maintaining the existing European Union, while Westminster will be keen to uphold the union of the United Kingdom.

Both the UK and France have global ambitions, however France’s ability to exert strength by virtue of its position within the EU is its greatest asset. From Macron’s perspective, Britain remains tethered to antiquated imperial connections in its bid to restore ‘Global Britain’, lacking the foresight and alliances to deliver on important matters of grand strategy in the 21st century.

The UK would be wise to keep France close while it still can, not because of any cultural affinity or personal relations Truss may have with Macron. Rather, a renewed alliance should be fostered for the raw purposes of political expediency and domestic legitimacy, something the Conservatives have proven adept at since the Brexit vote.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for Global Risk Insights and Foreign Brief, two political risk publications, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

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