

The EU: Germany is the Reason...

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In Brussels this week, the English-speaking journalists are all speculating about which way British Prime Minister Boris Johnson will jump.

He's there now, dithering over whether to cave in to the European Union's terms for a post-Brexit free trade deal. Most people reckon it's his last face-saving show of defiance before he surrenders to the bitter truth that Brexit with no deal would be brutal for Britain. But he might jump the other way.

If Johnson thinks that surrendering to reality would infuriate the fanatical Brexiters in his own Conservative Party so much that it endangers his job as prime minister, he will bluster some more about 'sovereignty' and lead Britain out into the cold and the dark. His own future is all that matters, ever.

However, the EU's leaders aren't really holding their breaths about this anymore. 'no deal' Brexit would cause minor damage to a couple of European economies too, but the presidents and prime ministers (who are meeting in Brussels this week) have bigger fish to fry.

Top of their agenda is Poland's and Hungary's threat to veto the EU's 1.8 trillion euro budget (\$2.2 trillion), which includes a desperately needed 750 billion euro (\$900 billion) post-COVID recovery plan to rebuild Europe's shattered economies.

The two Eastern European countries, both ruled by authoritarian governments on the extreme right-wing of political parties, are the 'awkward squad' of the EU. They face financial sanctions for their attacks on democracy in their own countries, so they are blackmailing the EU by vetoing the whole 7-year budget, including the recovery plan.

That's what the EU summit in Brussels this week is really about, but the leaders are probably not going to solve the problem there. There is a plan on the table, however, put there by Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa, who assumes the EU presidency next month.

Costa's suggestion is that they split the EU in order to save it. Let all the 'awkward squads' - the aspiring dictatorships, the other Eastern European states that just hate all migrants and refugees, and the so-called 'frugal states' (the Netherlands, Austria and the Nordic countries) that hate high spending and fiscal transfers to poorer EU members - just go off on their own.

There would still be an EU, but it would be a two-speed Europe and they'd be the slow-moving part. German, France, Italy, Spain and some others would stay in the core group, forging ahead with ambitious initiatives like the recovery plan and 'ever closer union'.

Costa didn't mention it, but this core group could also be the foundation for a more self-sufficient defence strategy as the United States gradually withdraws its old NATO security guarantee to Europe. (Trump might have done it eventually, Biden won't do it, but it's bound to happen eventually.)

Thanks, António, but no, thanks. Germany won't play. It has a deep-rooted horror of having to underwrite the debts of other EU members, all of whom it sees as spendthrift and improvident, so 'no' to the two-speed Europe.

And 'no' also to French president Emmanuel Macron's ambition for a 'global Europe' with an independent European defence strategy that matches the clout of the United States and China. It would cost too much, the Germans think, and, besides, they'd rather go on clinging to America's skirts.

In the words of Germany's Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer: "The idea of strategic autonomy for Europe goes too far if it nurtures the illusion that we could ensure Europe's security, stability and prosperity without NATO and the US. Germany and Europe cannot protect themselves without America's nuclear and conventional power. This is simply a fact."

The hell it is. In the mid-1980s NATO's total population was about 675 million and the Warsaw Pact's was around 390 million, but almost half of NATO's population was far away across the Atlantic so each side did pose a plausible threat to the other in terms of the strength they had on the ground in Europe.

Now it's 2020. The Warsaw Pact was long gone and all the former Eastern European satellites had joined NATO. Even the Soviet Union's fifteen republics broke apart, leaving 145 million relatively impoverished Russians all alone to face a NATO alliance now drawing on the resources of 870 million people.

The NATO-Warsaw Pact population ratio used to be about three-to-two. Now the NATO-Russia ratio in population is more like five-to-one. In terms of wealth it's around fifteen-to-one. Local and limited clashes here or there are still conceivable, but it is not possible to write a convincing scenario for a continent-spanning conventional war in Europe today.

As for a nuclear deterrent, the French one is big enough if you really feel you need one. It's still a bit bigger than the Chinese one, and that seems to work. Grow up, guys.