

Squaring the Brexit Circle

On false assumptions on both sides of the English Channel

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: During the referendum campaign and after, the British debate on Brexit alternately cast Germany as saviour or hereditary enemy.

SIMMS: In the past, Germany played a central role in the British psyche, for obvious reasons to do with the two world wars. This had changed by the second decade of the twenty-first century: The British public generally did not share the widespread anti-German sentiment which spread in Greece and other countries affected by the sovereign debt crisis following the EU's "austerity policies".

The referendum debate did lead to a revival of certain resentments on both sides: It was the former deputy prime minister and arch-remainer, Michael Heseltine, for example, who suggested that for Britain to leave the EU would be tantamount to handing Germany the victory it failed to achieve in World War II. Leavers overestimated Germany's desire to maintain good bilateral political and economic relations with the UK, and underestimated its commitment to "defend" the Single Market and the European project in general.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Germany has been among the strongest advocates within the EU-27 for an orderly Brexit. Given the red lines articulated by the UK, what should Berlin have done differently?

SIMMS: Germany, like the rest of Europe, has acted in a way as to make disorder likely because it



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assumed that any solution would have to be within the ordering system of the EU. In other words, Britain can leave, but will have to leave Northern Ireland in a then-separate ordering system. They insisted on "sequencing", agreeing the "backstop" before getting to trade, whereas a good trade deal would make solving Northern Ireland much easier. At every stage, Germany and the EU were determined to show that they were in charge. Instead, they should have recognised Britain's enormous contribution to Europe in military and political matters, and worked out a good deal without fears

of “cherry-picking”, which, actually, the Europeans do on defence.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Many advocates of Brexit championed the vision of a “Global Britain”.

Three years after the referendum, how will Brexit impact the UK’s influence around the world?

SIMMS: In the short to medium term, Britain’s influence will decline, buffeted by the economic and political headwinds of Brexit. The horizon may shrink, as Europe becomes the new “near abroad” for the UK – and vice versa, of course. What will happen in the long run is not clear. My guess is that within 20 years, the UK will be about as prosperous or more so than had it remained. But it will be a different place. For reasons to do with her economic strength, military power and other factors, the UK will remain an important global actor for the foreseeable future.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Looking back at three years of negotiations, are there lessons to be learned for the EU?

SIMMS: Because we do not know the outcome yet, that is a hard question to answer. I suspect future generations will wonder why, after 2016, the EU decided to add to its existing problems of a leaky border, a wobbling currency, and a resurgent Russia, a fundamental conflict with the UK. But who knows, maybe Brexit or a punitive Brexit deal will be celebrated as a great EU victory in future times.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: What makes you feel that the EU decided to add to its problems? From a European perspective, the current confrontation seems rooted largely in the Brexit camp failing

to think through, for example, the incompatibility of the UK leaving the customs union and the Good Friday Agreement (GFA)?

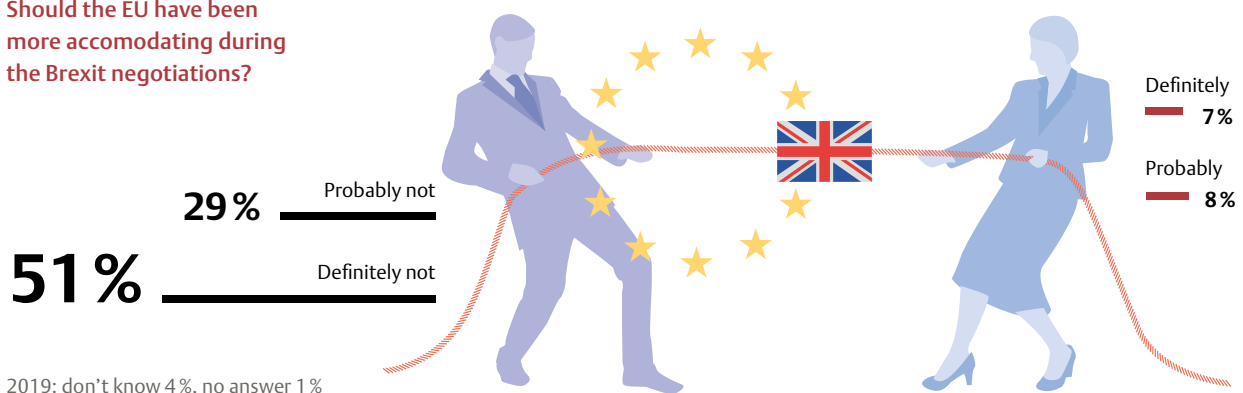
SIMMS: The criticism of the Brexit camp is justified. That said, it was not the GFA which eliminated the need for customs infrastructure, but EU membership. The GFA would have happened if neither country had been in the EU. The EU needs to accept that a compromise solution on Northern Ireland must not violate the Act of Union by taking Belfast out of the UK customs union. Such a compromise is vital and indeed could be the basis for a more comprehensive deal with the UK. At the moment, Berlin and the EU are asserting an ordering claim over part of the UK. The analogy would be if Italy were leaving the EU, the Austrians demanded that South Tyrol must stay in the customs union, and the EU said Italians must accept this before trade talks even started.

KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Whatever the eventual outcome, relations between the UK and continental Europe have been damaged significantly. What can both sides do to support a return to a more functional relationship?

SIMMS: If we assume that the UK emerges with sovereign control over its own territory, then we will need to find some sort of arrangement to stitch the UK and the EU back together for the management of the European system. There will need to be a larger European settlement involving a full political federation of the EU and confederation with the UK.



Should the EU have been more accomodating during the Brexit negotiations?



2019: don't know 4%, no answer 1%