

BETTER TOGETHER

It is the “silent alliance” – British German relations – and the vast majority of the political class inside of Berlin’s political square mile wants to keep things the way they are. Most Germans familiar with the high stakes game in the UK over the EU, as well as over the future of Scotland, refuse to believe that the United Kingdom could split or leave the EU. The economic and political elite in Germany is far from indifferent on both scores. Business as well as the media have developed a strong dislike of UKIP and its bombastic sporting leader. They find it difficult to believe that the British, famous for their common sense and a healthy realism, could embrace the populist promise and pay a high economic price for going it alone. What is good for thundering sermons at the local pub cannot possibly survive scrutiny in bright daylight.

Germans tend to describe their national interest in three terms: To eat well, to sleep happily, and never to be alone. While the EU provides a reasonable answer to the “eat-well” requirement, it is through NATO and the strategic link across the Atlantic that military reassurance is being secured. The German-British relationship is essential in this dimension: While Germany cultivates its pacifist tradition through a combination of military reluctance, political opportunism and Realpolitik, Britain follows a real-world-load star. The US-UK “special relationship” of 1941 vintage is more than political romanticism and a leftover from the 20th century: From cooperative intelligence via GCHQ/NSA to nuclear deterrence via Trident and strategic submarines, the British link with the US superpower is still existential for the balance of Europe – and it is predominantly maintained through Great Britain and the hardware and software shared between Britain and the US. Without Britain, if things go badly, somewhere out in the distance, Germany’s security position vis-à-vis Russian imperial dreams and creeping expansionism would be distinctly uncomfortable. The world would be a much more dangerous place.

This is not a matter of German Angst or of a British quest for Little England, but a matter of to be or not to be. Things can fall apart. Without Britain, the European Union would be downgraded not only in its standing in the world at large but would also, as a natural consequence, develop a different internal equilibrium, with France and the Southern periphery, including Greece, lined up against Germany, with protectionism and state socialism much stronger, and the levelheadedness of London sadly amiss.

This silent alliance, however, has deeper roots than mere convenience. The foundations of political philosophy are broadly shared between Germany and Great Britain, and so are many of the unspoken assumptions on how to do business or run the EU. The Eurozone and its permanent state of crisis should be enough of a warning. German business elites, especially small and medium sized enterprises, find the EU cumbersome enough in its present state, and are not keen on more meddling by Brussels, let alone tectonic shifts as a consequence of “Brexit”. There is a feeling throughout Germany that once Great Britain

says goodbye to the European Union – clearly in a fleeting moment of absentmindedness – the law of unintended consequences will kick in.

Would Scotland, after a UKIP triumph at the polls, feel obliged to stick to treaties 300 years old? It sounds fairly unlikely. Suddenly a new dynamic would unfold if the question of whether to stay part of a disunited United Kingdom or opt for Scottish sovereignty within the Greater Europe were on the table.

The case for Scottish UDI has been strengthened through the recent Scottish referendum and the unexpected demise of the Labour Party. Would a future Scottish government feel bound by a popular vote which clearly runs against Scottish interests? Staying in the EU, possibly as a member of the Eurozone, would offer any government in Edinburgh long-sought manoeuvring space, almost risk-free.

There is more at stake than a fence where two thousand years ago Hadrian’s Wall separated the Roman Empire from the Northern Barbarians. Strange as it may sound in our modern world, cultural differences run deep and will not soon be relegated to the archives.

Whatever happens to foreign direct investment into the British Isles if disintegration beckons, the even more important question is what would happen to the balance of Europe. This question, of course, is not framed in traditional terms from the times of Castlereagh, Palmerston and Disraeli, but in economic, political, military and even philosophical terms.

Germans not only admire the Queen, still going strong after more than six decades of reign; they trust in the wisdom of the British people, the strength of their ancient institutions, and the common sense of the man on the Clapham omnibus.



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