

The EU's Symmetry of Crises

By Ferry Biedermann

Amsterdam

A strange, through-the-looking-glass type of symmetry is at play in the EU as it slouches towards the end of 2021. It's a temporal symmetry on the one hand, with the end of this year very much starting to look like the end of last year in terms of new lockdowns and coronavirus restrictions. And there's a spatial symmetry, with crises spiralling out of control on both the bloc's eastern and western borders.

While the former, the coronavirus symmetry, is impacting life both in the EU and the UK much more directly, the latter has the potential to become much more dangerous. The most glaring example of the symmetry of crises is the one involving refugees and migrants. They attempt to enter the EU in Poland from Belarus, and they're trying to leave the EU from France for the UK. In both cases the crisis is either caused or exacerbated by political conflicts, in the east over the Belarusian dictator Lukashenko and Poland's defiance of Brussels. And in the west over the UK-French fisheries spat and the threat to the Northern Ireland protocol.

The virus is much more the immediate threat of the two, yet the danger posed by internal Western squabbling while in the east the house is on fire, could in the end be much more devastating. It seems unlikely that Belarus would have dared to defy the EU without robust backing from the Kremlin. It is but the latest in a sequence of Russian tactics to destabilise the West that would seem opportunistic if the list wasn't so long, possibly including influencing the Brexit vote.

The coming months could prove to be particularly combustible for the international security situation. Russian troops have been massing on the Ukraine border and that country has alleged that it found evidence the Russians have been planning a coup d'état. Russian forces remain in control of the Crimea and separatists supported by Russia still control a slice of the east of Ukraine; the situation is unsustainable. Apart from Belarus and Ukraine, there's also a smaller but equally explosive issue brewing more towards the core of the EU, the similarly Russian-supported separatism of Bosnia's Republika Srpska. Its ultra-nationalist leader, Milorad Dodik, has already said that potential EU sanctions would be countered by closer ties with Russia and China.

The reference to China signals another aspect of the pressures that are currently converging on a divided West. The European situation is not the only international security problem that is heating up again. China's attitude towards Taiwan has also hardened over the past year, its actions in the South China Sea remain troublesome and Hong Kong has been suppressed.

The West at the same time has been in disarray, reeling from a badly executed exit from Afghanistan, slipping in the Middle East and above all internally weakened. The nuclear submarine spat between the US, UK, Australia and France could well be symptomatic of a wider breakdown of trust on security matters. The very public rows between France and the UK over everything from fishing to refugees and migrants further undermines unity. Within the EU, a slew of populist, nationalist Eastern leaders challenge the cohesion of the bloc, in some cases cheered on by the UK's Brexiteers who still hope that their pulling out will make the whole edifice come crumbling down like a Jenga tower. In two of the main EU countries, Germany and France, domestic politics could next year bring a moment of reduced focus on international affairs, as Angela Merkel disappears from the stage in Berlin and Emanuel Macron concentrates on re-election. At the same time, the US position is still fatally weakened by four years of Trump and the continued potency of his brand of politics.

All this has the potential to be a perfect storm. Not that anybody deliberately and consciously might be driving towards violence and conflict but certainly Russia and China, as well as some smaller actors, could conclude that now is the time to test the West's resolve. Russia has after all gotten away with its aggression in Ukraine and its support for Minsk. And China has had free reign in Hong Kong, so why not push further? Especially if Europe and the US are preoccupied with internal matters. More destabilisation of Ukraine would just be an extension of earlier Russian policies and a tougher line towards Taiwan would merely be an extension of China's behaviour in Hong Kong. Even if this is not what Moscow and Beijing are planning, a small mistake could set off a chain reaction.

Such challenges require the careful and deliberate planning of a united Western response. An overreaction would be fatal but an under-reaction might just be as damaging. The one prerequisite is to recognise the danger of the situation and present a united front. It seems that both are beyond the scope of the current pool of European leaders. It's mystifying how they seem to be playing into the hands of the forces that are manipulating the situation, for example by failing to resolve the EU's refugee and migrant crises.

It's no secret that autocratic and opportunist regimes from Syria to Turkey to Libya have manipulated the flow of refugees in order to pressure and in some cases blackmail the EU. This has been going on for more than a decade. The issue of migration has been destabilising to various degrees in the whole of Europe, creating nationalist-fanned tensions that tend to boost anti-establishment forces, including the Leave campaign in the UK. In all those years, despite pious utterances, the EU member states' response, except for Germany's, has consisted mostly of keeping people out or pushing the problem (back) across a border. It's the failure to implement a humane common approach, combined with the failure to forcefully counter the potency of domestic anti-migrant rhetoric that makes it possible for cynical regimes and politicians to exploit the human tragedy of those seeking refuge.

It is but one area in which a common position would mitigate rampant external pressures, or at least make them less effective. Rows between the EU and the UK, the US, the UK and France and countless other internal Western fissures are an open invitation to others to grasp an opportunity or settle a score. The pandemic might seem the most urgent challenge that's facing the world, but one symmetry that everybody could do without is the first half of the 21st century ending up as racked by conflict as the first half of the 20th.