

What Afghanistan tells us about Brexit

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The post-Brexit ructions keep coughing up amusing little titbits on both sides of the Channel and the North Sea but, really, who can freely indulge in schadenfreude over empty supermarket shelves and the prospect of a turkey-free Christmas while Afghanistan is going on? Sure, we Europeans can smack our lips at stories of the great McDonalds milkshake shortage in the UK or even, more seriously, a lack of blood sample bottles. But it's tough to enjoy those little misfortunes while desperate Afghans are fleeing for their lives, which they had often risked in the first place to work with their American, UK and European allies.

The world's response has been woefully inadequate but the UK government has once more plumbed new post Brexit, anti-immigrant depths with its measly offer for taking in Afghans. While Britain has never been very generous with taking in refugees compared to other countries, the offer to take 5000 now and up to 20,000 in total over the coming years doesn't stack up with its long involvement in Afghanistan.

This should not come as a surprise, as the same anti-foreigner sentiment that stoked Brexit still holds sway, if not so much among the population, then certainly among populist politicians and politicians-turned-television-presenter (cough-Farage-cough). Maybe the reasoning is that you cannot have Priti Patel fork over GBP 54 million to the French to stop migrants coming across the Channel – uselessly as it turns out – and offer a meaningful number of Afghans refuge. Or maybe the reasoning doesn't even reach that point and is just stuck at: foreigners bad, borders closed.

Now, there's something about casting stones and glass house, which is quite apt from an EU and Dutch perspective. If one country with a former Afghanistan presence was less prepared than the UK, it probably was the Netherlands. The government even had to be forced into a U-turn over its decision not to take in Afghans who worked alongside the Dutch military. Then, when evacuees started arriving, a nasty xenophobic protest took place outside one of the reception centres. Contrast that with the speed and attitude of the French evacuation, with president Macron having his *wir schaffen das* moment when he said that France was honour bound. To each his own but I see neither Boris Johnson nor Mark Rutte live up to an international humanitarian crisis with integrity, let alone grace.

Afghans have been turning up in record numbers on Europe's borders again for months and many will make it through. The EU is not welcoming, Greece has extended its border fence, for example and has said it will not be a gateway to Europe. But both land and sea borders remain porous. Many people across Europe, including politicians who should know better, forget or rather ignore that it's everybody's right to request asylum, which is to be granted if refugees' lives are in danger back home. That hasn't stopped governments from sending back Afghans until very recently. Just weeks before the fall of Kabul, six EU countries – The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Austria, and Greece – insisted that Afghanistan was safe for repatriation.

The UK continued to do so almost until the Taliban took the Afghan capital, and Priti Patel suggested that Afghans coming through "irregular" routes, such as crossing the Channel, would not be given special consideration. In the end, the main difference between the EU and UK positions on asylum seekers is not one of tone and intent but of practicalities: The EU as always will experience any

migration stream set in motion by the fall of Afghanistan much more keenly than the UK, which can keep hiding behind the Channel and, as usual, will be least affected in terms of the number of asylum seekers that it will get to process. This has always been so, even with the Syrians that were used by Nigel Farage as a scare tactic in the Breaking Point poster during the Brexit referendum campaign.

The links between Brexit and anti-immigrant sentiments are hard to ignore but there are other ways that Brexit and the Afghan crisis are connected. The Brexiteers' long-term strategic selling point of refocusing Global Britain on the US and Asia has been shown to be nothing more than a chimera. The US will go its way, irrespective of EU or UK interests. Maybe that has always been so, but between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the turn of the millennium, those interests largely aligned. Now, they no longer do, at least not as closely as they once did. This is a problem both for the EU and the UK, especially when it comes to stabilising Europe's eastern neighbourhood and the Middle East.

The UK might be tempted in this rather isolationist moment to turn its attention away from the rest of Europe, as it can do in the case of the influx of asylum seekers. But ignoring developments on the continent has never turned out well for Britain. And as the spectre of a renewed Islamist terrorist threat rises from the smouldering wreck of Afghanistan, the UK should remember that it was not immune in the past. Links of proximity, trade and strategic depth at the very least, keep the UK's fate firmly tethered to the EU. The idea of turning towards Asia is also problematic on several levels, as was shown for example when the Suez Canal was briefly blocked earlier this year. This strategy is also beholden to Washington's Asia policy, which seems to be increasingly aimed at containing China, which clashes with the UK's ambitions.

If there's any lesson that both the EU and the UK should draw from the Afghan fiasco, it's that they should unite in order to influence, as far as possible, American policy. Many observers have noted the Europeans' impotence in military and even diplomatic matters if the Americans are not on board. This was clearly on display in Afghanistan and it's being extrapolated to Europe's eastern neighbourhood and the Middle East. The answer, many argue, should be a long and painful build-up of Europe's military, intelligence and logistical capacity. That, however, is probably a pipedream. The chances of the disparate European states stepping up and then effectively running such a machinery, are small, even if the UK joins in. The real cost of Brexit is not a loss of European military or strategic heft, which wasn't there in the first place. It is the idea that the West is falling apart and acting less and less in concert. While disagreements have always been part of the relationship, think Iraq for example, the West most effectively operates when it pulls in one direction. For this, the EU and the UK need each other, now more than ever.