Disagreement should strengthen, rather than weaken the UK and EU

By Ferry Biedermann

Once again we're in the home stretch of Brexit. The deadline for a deal on the post-Brexit relationship between the EU and Britain was supposed to have been this week but no one should be surprised that this too has now become fungible. That could be positive or it could just be spin, with both sides manoeuvring to deflect blame if it all goes south. Yet, time might favour a deal, as the corrosive potential of a hard Brexit becomes clearer every day.

The torrent of both turbulent and low-level upheaval that has washed over the world since the Brexit referendum in 2016, and in 2020 alone, should nudge even the most ardent Leaver to realise that keeping some kind of working relationship with the EU in place is more important than reclaiming every last illusive bit of sovereignty, whatever is meant by that. It should also spur the EU to go the extra mile to keep the UK on board.

One problem with achieving this is the enormous measure of distrust that has built up over the years between both sides, even on the official level. Take the Internal Market bill, for example, which is being seen by the EU as the latest proof of bad faith on the part of the UK Leavers. The EU fear is, not unreasonably looking at some of the statements from senior Brexiteers, that the UK endgame, in close alliance with the Trump administration and Russia, is the weakening and ultimate demise of the European Union. On the British side there's justified concern that a lopsided deal will leave it beholden to the EU in multiple ways without having a seat at the table.

These are highly emotive issues and there are only a couple of ways to overcome them and impress on both sides the urgency of taking a risk and reaching a compromise that will inevitably not wholly satisfy anyone. Fortunately, external circumstances have provided just such a set of reminders that might override mutual suspicions.

The latest is, of course, the corona crisis that is wreaking exponentially more havoc the longer it continues. But there are other

geopolitical developments that should have caused Leavers pause since 2016. While the election of Donald Trump later that year might have looked like a boon from their point of view, the destabilisation of the international system he has caused, on climate issues, international law, the economy and more, should go far beyond what would have been seen as advantageous to a UK outside the EU. At the same time, the increasing willingness of Russia to flout international norms, in Ukraine and elsewhere but also in the UK itself, and China's increasingly militant and authoritarian posture, domestically, in Hong Kong, and on the world stage, should all argue for minimising tensions between the world's remaining liberal democracies. The EU is facing similar pressures, including from within, with countries such as Poland and Hungary taking increasingly illiberal turns.

The argument that a UK freed from the EU's admittedly often ineffective and mealy-mouthed foreign policy constraints would be nimbler in dealing with these challenges, doesn't hold up. When it came down to it, for example during the Iraq war, individual EU countries were able to follow different paths. And the imposition of sanctions is definitely more effective if done by the world's largest trade bloc than by the UK alone. Only those wholly blinded by empire nostalgia and delusions of grandeur could argue that in the current geopolitical climate it would be a good idea for the UK to go it alone, fall back on its tenuous Commonwealth connections or rely on the United States. This doesn't mean that the EU too, would not be well-served by keeping the UK's economic, diplomatic and security heft on board in these uncertain times. It is hard to see how any deal that preserves cooperation between the two sides as much as possible would not be win-win rather than lose-lose.

For this to sink in and be embraced also on a popular level, which is always something that politicians keep an eye on after all, it is important to lower the temperature of the debate on both sides of the Channel. Many accusations of dishonesty, nefarious intent or worse have been levelled in both directions. Within the UK, the recently concluded investigation into the Cambridge Analytica case, which cleared the company of all the charges that were levelled at it with regard to interfering in the Brexit referendum, with or without a Russian link, should serve as a warning also to Remainers that

nothing is to be gained by raising the temperature and flinging around unproven conspiracy theories.

[A recent piece in the Spectator](#), of all places, rightly remarks that: "If they'll use their suspicions to undermine trust in the institutions that hold British society together, they further its goals far better than a Leave voter ever could."

It quotes Chatham House consulting fellow Keir Giles who emphasises that Russia plays both sides, Leavers and Remainers, and that ultimately it is interested not so much in the outcome as in sowing discord. That is an important observation that especially those in the public sphere who engage with these issues should bear in mind. It's probably fanciful to speculate that Boris Johnson's recently more muted persona is partly his way of working towards lowering the temperature. What about the Internal Market bill, for one?

At first sight, societies that value free expression, discussion, dissent even, and where playing hardball is part of the legitimate political process will have a hard time guarding against discord and discourses that undermine public trust in institutions. Certainly that is the way it feels now in many democracies where there can even be violent disagreement over pandemic prevention measures. The time-tested response to such concerns is to say that we are stronger for our freedom to disagree and discuss. And that's true as long as we don't cross certain red lines and we recognise that a total melt down of our systems is in nobody's interest. Let's hope the UK-EU talks are predicated on the latter.