

## **Fracious Future Relations**

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The whole Brexit debate? That's so five years ago, to speak with the UK's chancellor of the exchequer, Rishi Sunak. He was answering a question in a BBC-radio interview a day after presenting his autumn budget. The main takeaway for many news outlets was the quite staggering hit that the UK economy is liable to take because of Brexit, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, which is funded by his own Treasury. At four per cent of GDP, Brexit is expected to be twice as harmful as the corona pandemic. With the relationship between the UK and the EU taking a nosedive over disputes on everything from Northern Ireland to fishing, that could even be optimistic.

Sunak's blithe dismissal of the effects of Brexit fits entirely with the general British political class's desire to get on with things and move on. The Labour party too, would rather gloss over the ugly scars than relive its internal Brexit debate. Not so for the population at large, it emerged from the latest British social attitudes survey. Nine out of ten people questioned would still vote the same way in a referendum and polarization has only become more entrenched, with leavers tending to be more confident in the way the UK is governed, and remainers quite obviously not.

What's also becoming more entrenched is the fractious nature of the emerging relationship between the EU and the UK, which is folly. All the issues that were flagged as problematic, have indeed turned out to be just that, from Northern Ireland to fishing, to scientific cooperation. Most glaringly, the French are losing patience with the UK over fishing rights and started intercepting British trawlers. Both sides are threatening escalation; the dispute could even see ports blockaded and lead to disruptions on the important Dover-Calais link. This comes on top of the fraying tempers over Northern Ireland and another imminent deadline that could send trade over yet another cliff.

Simply put, two views of future EU-UK relations are clashing here: The UK believes that the EU wants to retain undue influence over its affairs and hasn't truly accepted that it has left. And the EU believes that the UK wants to have its cake and eat it, i.e. retain as many of the benefits of the EU while no longer being a member nor fully contributing to it. There may be some truth to both views but this is not a zero-sum game.

Take for example the EU's scientific R&D cooperation programme, Horizon 2021. The UK is keen to keep participating, as it clearly stands to benefit, and Sunak has reserved some £ 5.9 billion the coming years in contributions, that were formerly part of the general EU contribution. The EU too, is keen to have UK scientists continue their often leading roles in the Horizon programme. After agreeing a limit on how much the UK could receive in funding beyond its contribution, both sides seemed all set to continue what can only be termed a win-win proposition. It would have been an ideal basis to expand on for other mutually beneficial programmes, were it not for the Northern Ireland protocol throwing a spanner in the works.

The EU has started formal proceedings against the UK over breaching the Northern Ireland protocol, a so-called infringement procedure. The EU research commissioner has said that the protocol is a "transversal" political issue that should be resolved before the UK's status in the Horizon programme is resolved. Participation is continuing but UK researchers say they cannot for the moment apply for new funding. Rather than having become a blueprint for future mutually beneficial deals, the UK's position in Horizon 2021 has now become hostage to the fractious politics that emotive issues such as Northern Ireland and fishing have engendered.

And this is more than likely just the beginning. With the British government weighing whether to suspend the Northern Ireland protocol and the French threatening a red tape slowdown of British trade into the EU, we could be heading into a very hot winter. The French trade threat might be timed to coincide with the end of yet another transition period on 1 January 2022, when UK exporters will no longer be able to self-certify the so called rules of origin of their products.

The rules of origin are part of one of the EU's main pillars: its customs union. Simply put, it prevents exporters from selling goods that are mostly, or entirely, produced in third countries to the EU as British. Until now it was enough for the exporters to attest to this, from 1 January they will need more onerous backup documentation. UK-EU trade, in both directions but mostly UK exports, have already taken a significant hit. The end of the transition period is expected to see more British companies, especially small- and medium-sized ones, stop exporting to the EU altogether. This is part of the 'regular', foreseen effects of Brexit, yet it will mean a further uncoupling of the two economies, more red tape leading to more frustration and further resentment on both sides of the channel.

A fish and trade war is a far cry from a real war but the situation in Northern Ireland serves as a reminder that the kind of violence between communities or nations that was allayed by the founding and expansion of the EU can easily resurface once it retreats. It would be irresponsible for Brussels and even more so London to lay the basis for not only an even more divided Europe, but for possible future conflict by setting a fractious tone for bilateral relations from the outset.