Brexit exacerbates EU's security and foreign policy challenges

By Ferry Biedermann, freelance journalist working both in the UK and in Europe. He has contributed to the Financial Times, CNBC, the Washington Post, Trouw newspaper in the Netherlands and many others. He is also a former correspondent in the Middle East for the FT and Dutch newspaper de Volkskrant.

It's politics, stupid. It might serve UK and EU leaders well to paste that updated version of James Carville's supposed exhortation for the 1992 Clinton campaign around their offices at a time when security threats on its periphery proliferate.

For Clinton back then, it was the economy, stupid. It helped him gain two terms as US president and the truism that the electorate cares only, or at least mostly, about its pocketbook has also dominated the debate in Europe, certainly on the merits of the EU. Migration might have played a major part in the Brexit debate but a large part of the anti-migration sentiment was again due to the fear of 'migrants taking our jobs'.

Europeans, being in a much more geopolitically insecure spot than the US and having lived through two world wars in the 20th century as well as several major conflicts since then, should be aware that worrying about the economy is fine and well but it becomes quite irrelevant in the face of insecurity. Economic well being is predicated on stability, without denying that in its turn a good economy and economic cooperation can help foster security.

It was exactly with those mechanisms in mind that the European project saw the light in the post-WWII years, cheered on by both the US and the UK at the time. The European Coal and Steel Community sounded like an economic proposal but was firmly aimed at a political goal: to prevent the rival powers of Europe from clashing on the battlefield ever again. Of course, it also was born in the shadow of a new security threat: the emerging cold war between the capitalist and communist blocs. It came on the heels of the founding of NATO but those who exclusively look at that alliance as being responsible for security and stability in Europe miss the point: the two were supposed to work in tandem and European cooperation and unity was very much part of the strength of the alliance.

Brexit by itself is not to blame for the increased security challenges that we now see emerging in and on the edges of the EU. But it is not helping and may contribute to the heightening of some of the tensions. The most obvious example is Northern-Ireland, where an admittedly unfinished and possibly troubled peace process is in even more trouble as a consequence of the hard Brexit that the Johnson government pushed through.

If there is one place and one situation that should have made clear to the UK that, indeed, the EU is a first and foremost a political project, it should have been Northern Ireland. The Good Friday agreements were made possible by European integration. It was the micro of the original Pan-European macro-vision. Hopefully, now that the residents of Northern Ireland have tasted a period of stability and peace, they will not allow the situation to slip back to the bad old days. And there are hopeful signs that the EU and UK are working together to address some of the tensions unleashed by the Northern Ireland protocol of the Brexit agreement.

The increased Northern Ireland tensions are a very direct and therefore visible result of Brexit but there are many areas where the spectre of a divided Europe could contribute to greater instability. First of all, there's the European periphery, with the clear and present danger of Russian encroachment in Ukraine looming largest. Then there's the farther exterior, the wider world, where China's rise and sabre rattling over Hong Kong, Taiwan and the South China Sea is threatening global

stability. While Russia's and China's current ramping up of the pressure is seen as a test for the new Biden administration in the US, it also coincides with the first year of actual Brexit and with a weakened EU that is struggling internally and with the UK over the corona pandemic and vaccination programmes.

This is not to suggest that a common European foreign policy was ever effective in world affairs, let alone that there has been, or that there's a prospect of, a truly combative common security policy. These two realms remain firmly in the hands of national EU governments, who guard them jealously, despite pious professions of tighter cooperation and coordination. In one scenario, Brexit will help forge a closer European foreign policy and defence alliance as the objections of the Atlantic-oriented Brits are taken out of the equation, but the remaining differences in Europe make that unlikely as well.

There is one area in which the EU has managed with some success to advance its collective interest in the field of foreign affairs, and that's the deals with Turkey and other Mediterranean countries to stop the flow of migrants. It could be regarded as ironic that this arrangement, which is widely seen as questionable in terms of human rights, is the EU signal foreign policy success while the bloc is deemed ineffective in addressing human rights issues in Russia and China.

The deal with Turkey stems from 2016, the year that Nigel Farage used a queue of refugees in his Breaking Point poster to whip up fear of immigration during the Brexit campaign. British concern over migration certainly played a part in reaching the refugee deal, as did the heft of the UK's foreign and defence presence in the EU. After Brexit, it is thought to be harder for the EU to come up with a new financial package for Turkey to extend the deal. The EU is also involved in a dispute with Turkey over energy exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. While the UK has extended sanctions against Turkish drilling in disputed waters post-Brexit, it has trodden a much more cautious path than for example the French, a policy which may have been partly informed by the imperative of a UK-Turkey free trade deal, and by its expansion now that it has been signed.

In none of these situations is Brexit solely to blame for the entanglements and challenges that the EU is currently facing in the realms of security and foreign affairs. But like in so many other things, it's certainly not helping.