



Commentary

Brexit, Donald Trump and the threat to Europe

Britain is courting a president-elect who looks forward to the unravelling of the EU

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British prime ministers are prone to spend their last days governing from a bunker. Convinced of their own immortality they dispense with forthright advisers in favour of devoted aides. The passage of time narrows their sight of the world beyond the front door of 10 Downing Street.

Theresa May has started out where her predecessors ended up. Scarcely six months in the job, Mrs May is roundly mistrustful of her senior civil servants. Officials are shut out of decision-making. Unvarnished advice invites histrionics from her political sidekicks. It is not an intelligent way to run a government — never mind one charged with managing the biggest upheaval in the nation's political and economic life since the end of the second world war.

Mrs May has now set out her plans for a "hard" Brexit — a clean break with the EU that will take Britain out of the single market and the customs union. There can be no half-in, half-out, she said, if Britain wanted to curb EU migration and renounce the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. The prime minister had previously dismissed the idea of such a trade-off. She would get a bespoke deal, and Britain, in the tactful phrase of Boris Johnson, the foreign secretary, would have its cake and eat it. Sir Ivan Rogers, the UK's permanent representative in Brussels, resigned in frustration. It was not until this week that Mrs May finally accepted the remorseless logic of her determination to shut out Polish plumbers and Hungarian fruit-pickers. Sir Ivan, it seems, had been right all along.

The prime minister's speech offered the usual pro-forma reassurance about strong, post-Brexit ties with Europe and fanciful guff about the vast new opportunities for a nation now rechristened "Global Britain". Yet no one should doubt the cost, economic and geopolitical, of the proposed break with the EU.

Britain will cease to be a platform for foreign businesses — manufacturing and services — that want to sell unimpeded into the world's largest market. Companies will face new barriers to trade with an EU 27 accounting for more than two-fifths of British exports. Dozens of third-country trade deals will be upended. As economic ties weaken, political relationships will wither. British prime ministers will be absent from the councils of their own continent. Perhaps Mrs May has understood this in her eagerness to court US president-elect Donald Trump. Before the election she shared the Westminster establishment view of Mr Trump as a dangerous vulgarian. Now, word has gone out from No 10 that nothing is to be said or done to put in question Britain's admiration for the new administration. At Mr Trump's bidding, Mr

Johnson is busy scuppering European criticism of Israel. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth will be obliged to ready Buckingham Palace for a visit from the Trump circus.

British leaders always fret about getting on with new incumbents in the White House. The relationship is an essential pillar of national security. As the English Channel widens, the neediness looks set to grow. Mr Trump has promised a trade deal. So there would have been no harm in a little flattery. There comes a point, though, at which fawning sinks to self-abasement. The president-elect scarcely presents himself as a predictable or reliable partner. On every measure — free trade, climate change, Nato, Russia, Iran — his views collide with Britain's national interests. British spooks are already wondering whether it will be safe any longer to share their secrets with Washington. Is Mrs May soon to join Mr Trump in lauding Russian President Vladimir Putin, denying global warming and disarming the Nato alliance? The prime minister's threats of retribution if talks go badly will doubtless sour the Brexit process. It seems reasonable that Britain's partners will not allow it to pick and choose from the customs union. Nor can they be expected to agree special protections for financial services. They should acknowledge, however, the line between a tough but reasonable and a punitive response to Mrs May's opening gambit. No one would gain from a disorderly Brexit. After all, the 27 have troubles aplenty of their own — from slow growth and incomplete monetary union to rising anti-migrant populism. Mr Trump is promising to make things worse.

For more than six decades the US has been at once the cheerleader for, and guarantor of, European integration. America, in effect, has been Europe's pre-eminent power. Mr Trump wants to turn the policy on its head. Brexit, he hopes, will be the beginning of a great unravelling of the European project. There is no purpose in looking for logic here. America's interests are still served by a cohesive Europe. What Mr Trump means for Europe, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel said this week, is that its fate lies in its own hands. If the far-right Marine Le Pen wins France's presidential election the game may well be up. But the election of almost any of the alternatives will present Berlin and Paris with an opportunity as well as a challenge.

More than half a century ago Britain bowed to US pressure and pulled out of an Anglo-French enterprise to retake control of the Suez Canal. France cried treachery. Konrad Adenauer, the German chancellor, told his French counterpart Guy Mollet, that a united Europe would be France's revenge against the perfidious Anglo-Saxons. The world has moved on, but the parallel is telling.

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