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The importance of Atlantic Europe in a Post-Brexit Europe

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1. The challenges of Brexit

Brexit, that is the exit of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU), is one of the biggest challenges that we find ourselves confronted with. Not only the EU, but Europe as a whole. The balance between the continental and the maritime dynamics is, so to say, an underlying thread of the Old Continent's evolution in history. In that balance, it is the Atlantic space that secures the maritime dimension, given that the Mediterranean is indeed, as the Romans put it, a *mare nostrum* bridging two banks of the same world.

The United Kingdom was not only a great maritime European power, but in numerous, historically significant occasions, its position precluded situations where major continental traction would lead to dangerous unbalances. The beneficiaries of that position were undoubtedly the small and medium European countries on the Atlantic

coast who, differently from France or Spain, did not have enough territorial reach to internally cope with the continental, the Atlanticist and the Mediterranean dynamics.

These are not, to be sure, abstract considerations.

First, they relate to distinct histories and cultures, and that fact is quite significant in a Europe that has always been and will always be a mosaic of nations. The singularity of each country is an unsurmountable fact with (not against) which European integration is built. The same applies to sub-regional affinities, consolidated through space and time. Therefore, it is true that being Atlantic, Mediterranean or continental weighs significantly in the positioning and rapports of any country in the Old Continent.

Naturally, maritime or continental geographic location has clear economic and social implications. Economic activities vary, the place in international value chains differs, as do jobs and the dimension and influence of social groupings, arts and traditions. All of this is widely known. This allows us to focus on three additional aspects.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, welfare state, social market economy and industrial relations have been shaped in most different forms in the continental and the Anglo-Saxon Europe. That is why we speak of a continental model and of an Anglo-Saxon model when it comes to describing the dynamics between State, economy and society. The dialectic between these two models has greatly benefitted Europe and the western world as a whole. But the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century happened against the backdrop of Anglo-Saxon retreat. This is indeed evident in the repositioning of the United States towards the Pacific and in its attraction to Asia (significantly reflected, already back in 2011, in President Obama's characterization of the United States as a Pacific power). It is also evident in the most recent questioning by the Trump Administration of the terms on which the Euro-American relationship had been structured since the end of the First World War. It is reflected in the ever so complex UK approach to European integration, which now comes to unfold as a dramatic rupture, damaging also British social fabric. The symbolic and cultural implications of the Anglo-Saxon retreat are not, in my view, less serious than its economic and political consequences.

The second aspect that I wish to underline here can be outlined in the traditional terminology of alliances. True, in the long term, the interplay that fundamentally determined the evolution of a Europe of nations up until the Post-Second World War

occurred in the backdrop of the opposition between continental and maritime states. Notwithstanding, history is only half of the tale: it is also a matter of how Europe means to project itself *now*. The prevalence of continentality steers it turn inward (*inside* Europe), or towards the territorial continuity of the Euro-Asian shelf. On the contrary, the Atlantic side of Europe forces it to open itself to the North Atlantic, South Atlantic and even to the Indian and Pacific oceans.

The last aspect is of a thematic nature. Maritime states are naturally more prone to some of the most pressing agendas of our time: oceans, of course, but also climate change, global trade (which is based on maritime trade routes) and cooperative security (which bears specific marks in terms of maritime security).

For all of these aspects, Brexit poses formidable challenges in a context heavily tainted by uncertainty, complexity and volatility. The European Union may lose the United Kingdom; but it cannot lose the Anglo-Saxon civic, political and economic culture. If, because of Brexit, the effects of the “special relationship” between the homelands of Churchill and Roosevelt are not instantly incorporated in the European context – and, if more prosaically, the second most important military NATO power will cease to be fully European – the transatlantic link must not suffer. Brexit means the exit from the Union of its second most important economy, the third biggest population, a nuclear power and a permanent member of Security Council, one of the oldest and most experienced diplomacies and, let us take good note of this, the country with the only two non-American top ten universities in the Shanghai Index.

So, beyond the shadow of a doubt, this will steer unbalances in the maritime *versus* continental dynamics in Europe. And these unbalances need compensation. Europe must strengthen, not weaken, its capacity to speak afar, at least with the Americas and Sub-Saharan Africa. And it goes unsaid that multilateral agendas, such as that of the oceans, climate change, regulated trade and cooperative security are key to the global role the EU means to play.

2. The future of Europe without and with the UK

The consummation of Brexit will thus put us in a worrisome situation, exactly 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and its promise of a united, democratic Europe. Even

more worrisome would be a no-deal Brexit. For two reasons: because of the no-deal itself; and for the astonishing difficulties it would impose on the negotiation of a future relationship between the Union and the UK.

I wonder whether we, Europeans, are totally aware of the crossroads we are at and for which the UK is not alone to blame, while, to be sure, it self-inflicts damage before our very eyes. As much as the responsibility for this situation may lie with a political leadership who was definitely not up to the challenge it itself triggered for purely tactical reasons; as evident as the tensions between generations, territories, professional and social groups may appear; as bizarre as the decision-making deadlock may be in London – the remaining 27 Member States cannot pretend that this is a British-only problem, that none of the responsibility lies on them or that, above all, they do not have the onus to care for the future.

Obviously, the future that serves us is truly one where the United Kingdom, albeit outside the European Union, remains grounded in Europe. This, again, is not an abstract consideration. Rather, it has the potential to become very concrete – should we wish to develop it positively – in the form of an economic agreement, in regulatory convergence, in cooperation in the field of security and defense and in foreign policy, and in the alignment of policies in fields such as energy, climate, science and technology.

Small and medium-sized maritime European countries will be extremely alert for the need for such a future. And, rightly, it is their responsibility to contribute for the awakening of consciences throughout Europe in this regard. And, for that contribution to be effective, they should act together.

I am not merely talking about EU Atlantic Member States. I am talking about all Atlantic European countries. I am talking about Ireland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal, Belgium, Sweden and Finland; but also about Norway and Iceland. Not because I see these countries as some sort of ambassadors of British interests in Europe. It is not about taking the side of the UK, which would be absurd, or to sign off on every of its criticism towards the Union, which is excessive for the most part, misplaced and even plain wrong. Least of all to close ranks against “continentalism”, the *Mittleuropa* or the Franco-German axis. To my understanding, the balance we need to strike in

Europe between continentality and atlanticism is precisely that: a *balance* between the two.

The point I am trying to make here is not that small and medium-sized European Atlantic countries show greater understanding or solidarity than the rest of us in the face of London's present circumstances and existential doubts towards the EU. I am indeed more pragmatic than that, and more opportunistic: I want them to take on a dual responsibility.

Firstly, they should build bridges with that Anglo-Saxon world that seems to be drifting apart from us – but who we do not wish to lose. They should, therefore, be trying, right now, to avoid a chaotic Brexit. In the short and medium terms, they must fight for a future agreement between the UK and the EU, and the sooner the better; they should insist on better coordinating policies that touch upon sovereignty; they should lobby for stepped-up cooperation in the various institutional frameworks – NATO, for instance, but also Permanent Structure Cooperation, the OSCE or the Council of Europe; they should strive to preserve academic mobility and the convergence of knowledge and innovation systems. Finally, if such an important interlocutor to the United States of America as the UK decides to abandon the EU, then others must learn how to put their own ability to speak to Washington more profusely. And these are necessarily the Atlantic European countries.

Secondly, and even more importantly, to strike the right balance between Europe's continental and Atlantic projections, maritime countries must play a more active role in the European decision-making circles precisely to compensate the absence of the UK.

This scaled-up activism can certainly steer progress on areas such as blue economy, governance of the seas, sustainable development, sea-related sciences and technologies. Let us not stop there, though. Again, the key issue here is opening Europe to the world, to project Europe beyond itself towards other regions.

3. The Atlantic countries bear new responsibilities

If I am thinking right, the main target of Atlantic European countries is really to direct Europe outwards. Portugal and Norway are good examples of such.

Norway and the other Nordic countries are on the frontline of the Arctic, which will be one of the greatest global challenges of the nearest future. The Arctic is not a mere regional issue, it is a global affair and one that calls on the very fundamentals of the geostrategic relationship between Europe and Russia, as well as the trade routes between the East and the West. This matter is utterly important for the whole of the EU, but rather particularly for its maritime states and, of course, for critical partners such as Canada, the USA, Norway and, in the next future, the UK. We should thus approach this matter in consultation with each other.

Along with Spain, Portugal is the main link connecting Europe and Latin America; and it is, together with France or Belgium, a sort of a window open to the whole of Africa. Portugal does not stand alone in this. The Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (CPLP) is built on a population of 280 million people in nine countries, all of which maritime, scattered through four continents (America, Africa, Europe and Asia). CPLP offers a cooperative platform of enormous potential (and well behind its real potential) for global action on oceans. For obvious reasons actually, Portuguese writer Vergílio Ferreira once said that Portuguese was the language from which one could see the sea.

Therefore, I would say that the reality is promising on the bilateral front. Portugal and Norway today hold an economic relation that can be stepped up. Their respective geographic locations are definitely similar. In the 70's, Norwegian support was paramount during the democratization process in my country. The two sides have been coming across each other in similar issues, such as human rights, peace and security and development, cooperation between equals, gender equality, confidence in the virtues of education and empowerment and multilateralism. Today, we work together to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 14 on the oceans.

However, the bilateral framework is no longer enough if we assume, as I have discussed, that countries like Portugal and Norway now bear new and larger responsibilities in the post-Brexit Europe, that is: (a) to keep the UK firmly grounded in Europe and close to the European Union, as well as (b) to secure the balance between the continental and maritime dimensions of Europe. But we are only two among the small and medium-sized Atlantic European countries, and all are indispensable. The best that we can do is to act to mobilize them, act with them. A platform built for cooperating, even if informal in format, would be a useful tool.

It is not about behaving the same way or doing the very same things. History, culture, economies and international standing are indeed very diverse on the Atlantic front; any attempt of uniformization and redundancy would prove useless, if not dangerous. The relations with the UK are also different, which is to say that the impact of Brexit will also prove very different, as are the interests that each of us needs to safeguard, with or against British intents. But the strategic balance inside Europe that I am trying to outline here, and its importance to enabling a global vision of Europe, call on us all to coordinate – EU Member States, countries of the European Economic Area, and the UK as well. Small and medium-sized Atlantic countries must lay on the frontline of a process of awareness-raising in Europe. This is in fact the best contribution they can offer so that Europe, our shared home, can overcome the tremendous challenge that Brexit poses to all of us.

I cannot guarantee that this view is widely disclosed. However, I can guarantee that those who wish to share it will have Portugal by their side.