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Keep calm and carry on — together

With or without Brexit, the United Kingdom belongs alongside the European Union. Both benefit from a good relationship

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Anglo-German relations have rarely been a major issue. Dealings between the two countries have never been framed by an imposing treaty or solemnised in grandiose ceremonies. Historically, that has always been reserved for the reconciliatory mission of Franco-German cooperation. Nevertheless, the relationship was and is a key component of the European peace order and so it will remain, even if Brexit puts relations between the United Kingdom and its European neighbours to the test.

We are all fascinated by how the world's oldest parliamentary democracy has come to be at odds with itself. We follow the debates in the House of Commons spellbound, monitor the positions of the various parties and look on anxiously as a whole country becomes ever more polarised. The rifts caused by the referendum have only deepened since 2016 and compromise seems further away than ever.

We are saddened by the fact that for some people in the UK Brexit appears to be a battle in a war with the EU. Such people talk in terms of 'surrender' and interpret every concession as a capitulation and a defeat. On the other side of the Channel, this gives rise to anger and resentment – after all, every vilification of the EU in the British debate also serves to disparage a crucial pillar of peaceful cooperation in Europe. All those who profoundly believe that coexistence in solidarity between Europeans paves the way for a peaceful and prosperous future feel affronted by what is said or written in the UK. Brexit has inflicted deep wounds not only in the United Kingdom, but also in the EU. Frustration is therefore growing and also a desire that the whole argy-bargy be over and done with as soon as possible.

Divided for the foreseeable future?

But especially in such turbulent times we need to look beyond the next Commons debate. The mutual sniping, the clamour surrounding current developments in parliament, the feverish pursuit of a workable solution for the Irish border and the looming, no doubt eventful EU summit on 17–18 October must not cast a cloud over the medium- and long-term future.

Germany and the United Kingdom, Europe and the United Kingdom must remain partners and friends, whatever kind of Brexit might occur. We need to heed this maxim not only over the coming weeks and months, but also in subsequent years. Because Brexit is likely to be with us for the long haul, regardless of whether it takes place, in some form or another, on 31 October, or is postponed yet again.

Neither Germany nor any other European country should attempt, purely on formal grounds, to tip the scales on whether Britain remains or exits.

Britain will remain a divided country and no one can as yet foresee the long-term consequences of this. Over the past three years, a previously unimagined degree of political and institutional instability has been laid bare. As things stand, for example, one-third of British people claim to want a hard break with Europe, a so-called 'No Deal'. Another third, want to remain in the EU, come what may. That shows that we're in for a bumpy ride, however short-lived it might turn out to be. Considerable tact and patience will be necessary for the foreseeable future. After all, when it comes to cooperation with Europe any British government will feel it's treading on eggshells, constantly aware of the complex domestic situation.

Keep calm and carry on

Having said that, Brexit would not be the end of negotiations, far from it. Even if the UK leaves, the much more important agreement on the future relationship will have to be negotiated: the treaty on how the United Kingdom and the EU will deal with one another in the coming years. This will not be confined to trade issues. A treaty would be needed that does justice to our common history and the immense importance of this relationship. And precisely because Britain is so divided on the question of Europe, these negotiations will not be easy.

We must therefore never lose sight of the goal of a stable partnership between the EU and London, however tough the going gets. On central global issues, such as climate change, fair globalisation, fighting terrorism and the management of migration the EU and the United Kingdom will be sitting on the same side of the negotiating table. Both would benefit from a constructive agreement, even if some Brexiters currently present this as a zero-sum game, in which if the EU wins, the UK loses, or vice versa. This argument comes straight out of the Donald Trump playbook: no wonder he's such a big fan of Brexit.

What does all this mean for pending common challenges we face? In the short term, it means, as the British say: 'keep calm and carry on'. Even in the face of fierce contention between parliament and the government to dictate the terms of the debate on Brexit, we shall remain open to a further extension of the deadline.

Neither Germany nor any other European country should attempt, purely on formal grounds, to tip the scales on whether Britain remains or exits. Instead, we should make it crystal clear that the United Kingdom belongs alongside the European Union, whether inside as a member or outside, but always very close. And so that our friends across the Channel shouldn't be in any doubt, there will always be a European sun-lounger reserved for them, draped with a towel in the colours of the Union Jack.



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