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Take a different look at the neighbours

With Brexit and Trump, Europe needs a new geopolitical compass, write Luuk van Middelaar and Monika Sie Dhian Ho. Four tips for a new Europe policy.



Farewell Brits,

It's time for
a new Europe

Today's Europe is more than just a market; it is a community of destiny. That requires a different way of viewing 'sturdy Germans' and 'Catholic French', write Luuk van Middelaar and Monika Sie Dhian Ho

Illustration
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The Netherlands shouldn't dramatize Britain's departure from the European Union. Sure, it's a downer for the economy and a political blow, but not a catastrophe. Brexit may even help us to break the established patterns of our foreign policy. And that is urgently needed: Brexit and Trump require us to reset our geopolitical compass towards our neighbours and partners on the continent.

As inhabitants of the river delta between the major powers that are Germany and France, we have traditionally believed we have a particular affinity with the British: another maritime trading nation reliant on America and the sea for its freedom. In the EU you could count on London to promote the single market or sabotage French plans for common defence. It is nonetheless true that in practice the ambivalent Brits have not turned out to be the ally and kindred spirit the Netherlands hoped they would be when Britain joined the EEC in 1973. And yet many in The Hague watch the imminent Brexit with anxiety. Grand words are proclaimed: could a Franco-German bloc attempt a power grab? Will the EU lapse into southern protectionism and profligacy after Brexit? And will we still feel at home in a Union without the British?

The initial response has been a move to try and take over the British role. This spring, the Dutch Finance minister Wopke Hoekstra forged a new "Hanseatic League" with other north-western European countries, teaming up with the Danes, Finns, Swedes, Balts and the Irish (and in some cases Belgians and Luxembourgers) to oppose the activist French president Macron and his eurozone plans. The home audience was proud, even though the international press soon labelled it [Dutch PM] "Mark Rutte and the Seven Dwarfs". It is of course sensible to join with like-minded voices to amplify one's own. But as a diplomatic response the Hanseatic move lacks credibility. To begin with, the numbers don't stack up: a coalition of exclusively small countries – even 10 or 12 of them – will not produce any majorities in the EU to launch any initiatives, nor blocking minorities to stop undesirable plans. The population figure plays a role in the decision-making procedure. Italy alone

has more inhabitants than all the 'Hanseatic' states combined. Little can be achieved without large member states.

More importantly, the 'British' EU agenda supported by the Hanseatic states is outdated: the time when Europe revolved only around market liberalisation and relied on the US for security really is over. Citizens in the Netherlands and Europe no longer just want the freedoms that the EU offers – studying or selling your wares abroad –, but also protection and support for modernisation. They want action against climate change, tax evasion and low-wage competition; an effective response to irregular migration flows, terror networks and autocratic neighbours. For that kind of Europe, new partners are emerging. First, partners for a Europe that can *modernise*: from economic deregulation to attracting investment, in the digital economy, in research and sustainability. Digital start-ups, innovation and clean industry as a response to growing competition in the global market. A Europe with a modern budget for today's problems: somewhat less money for farming and more to guard the EU's external borders. And secondly, partners for a Europe that *protects*: from a focus on business and consumers to a recognition that people are also employees and citizens. A Europe that supports rather than undermines its social-market economy and welfare states. One that upholds the values of the democratic rule of law. And one that is not naive with regard to multi-billion euro investments from China, which have economic benefits but come at a political and strategic price.

Below the radar Dutch officials and diplomats are already seeking out new partners for such tasks. Interesting new coalitions are emerging – alongside the 'Hanseatic' states – to promote modernisation and sustainability of the economy; with the Benelux countries, France, Germany, Poland and Spain. Likewise, the Dutch special envoy for migration, for example, has already toured the Sahel with her French, German, Spanish and Italian colleagues. But practical behind-the-scenes collaboration is not sufficient to thwart ingrained traditions and visibly reset our geopolitical compass.

The new coalitions need an audience. Show the Dutch public that Macron's France consistently features in these new coalition patterns. Not as the visionary, protectionist counterpart to the pragmatic, frugal Dutch, but as an essential ally for a European Union that modernises and protects. In his speech to the European Parliament, Prime Minister Rutte explicitly referred to France as a partner in raising European climate ambitions. That is a start.

A fresh look requires a break with historical clichés

This fresh look at an open and dynamic field does, however, demand a break with historical clichés, with old images of neighbours in which the pragmatic Brits are our best friends, the Germans are a formidable and sturdy neighbour and the Catholic, centralist French are in principle suspect. That will require effort. There is a seamless match with our historical self-image, from the Stadtholder William III who held out against the Sun King Louis XIV (and who with his Mary even became King & Queen in London) to foreign minister Joseph Luns who torpedoed De Gaulle's plans in the 1960s (and pushed for British accession to the EEC). Or take the notorious speech on Europe which British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher gave in Bruges in 1988. This was an overt attack on the push for more centralisation by (French) European Commission President Jacques Delors. Her vision of Europe was based on cooperation between sovereign states, that are open to enterprise, as a pillar of the Atlantic community. In retrospect Thatcher's speech released the genie of Euroscepticism in her Conservative Party, which none of her successors managed to put back in the bottle. That speech also struck a chord in Brussels circles, particularly due to its institutional 'heresy'. Someone who did appreciate Thatcher's Atlanticism and free-market-drive was Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers, a no-nonsense businessman after the Iron Lady's own heart. At that time his support was understandable: her vision resonated with our centuries-old tradition of entrepreneurial spirit, a preference

for political detachment (initially due to neutrality and, after WWII, due to the Pax Americana) and a wariness of continental blocs in Europe.

But that was 1988. A year later the Berlin Wall fell, the Cold War came to an end and Europe gave itself a currency, an area free of internal borders and a foreign policy. The British – nervous about the loss of sovereignty – participated half-heartedly if at all in those leaps towards more unity. Since then that foreign policy paved the way for an age in which the Americans would no longer meet the cost of our security. With Trump – a brusque representative of this long-term trend – that age has indeed dawned. It makes the reorientation of the Netherlands' European policy all the more urgent. What should the government do now?

One: Europe is more than a market. Recognise that it is growing into a community of destiny made up of states and citizens that do politics together. It is not only about technocratic haggling over product standards, beet prices and cohesion funds, but also a political struggle around values and interests in a shared arena, about how to respond to new challenges or threats – recognising that in Europe we share not only a continent but also a history, an identity and, hopefully, a future. The yearning in The Hague for a 'less political' Europe is nostalgia for the lost world of Maggie & Ruud.

Two: look for partners who are right for the time. A European Union without the United Kingdom will become a more open field for the Netherlands. That requires a flexible and active stance with open lines to all countries. A fabric of varying partnerships also helps prevent divisions in Europe – North versus South, West versus East – from solidifying and becoming entrenched, with all the attendant consequences for the Union's credibility among its own public and on the world stage.

Three: let go of the basic mistrust towards Franco-German cooperation. Naturally not every plan emanating from Paris and Berlin needs to be embraced immediately. Criticism



and adjustment are sometimes necessary. But it is also fundamentally in the interests of the security and prosperity of 17 million Dutch people if 80 million Germans and 65 million French stick it out together, if their leaders trust each other and are willing to work together to give Europe as a whole the capacity to act.

Four: don't treat the Dutch public merely as taxpayers. Otherwise they will feel that the payments to 'Europe' are always hitting them in their pockets, whereas as citizens they also obtain public goods from the EU: a job, an opportunity, a protected area of free movement. Instead of diplomatically clinging to the belief that the clubhouse can be run more cheaply if a member resigns, as was the government's initial position in the ongoing negotiations for the EU's multiannual budget for 2021-2028, we must come to realize that the remaining members will benefit from new services or an extra guard at the gate in a harsher environment. But this will be a major task for Prime Minister Rutte




and his government, given the unilateral emphasis in the public debate on 'bringing back the silver fleet'. Nevertheless, being 'the most frugal of the bunch' is perfectly consistent with a vision of 'value for money'.

Finally, yes, Europe is full of strange people, dogmatic Germans, improvising Italians, chaotic Greeks, fiddling Romanians and more besides. But all those differences and irritations between neighbours are small beer compared to what is actually at stake. Amid all the diversity a community of destiny has evolved, and there is an ideal to be maintained of democratic states, secular and free, that uphold the rule of law, with sustainable, social-market economies. In contrast to Chinese authoritarian state capitalism, Putin's retro-nationalism, the opportunism of Trump's 'America First' and the trail of destruction caused by religious hatred in the Middle East, you would think that the Dutch would be in no doubt that what unites us as Europeans is stronger than that which divides us.

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Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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