Opinion **Brexit**

The EU is doing more – lots more

Contrary to some expectations, the forces of change in Europe have been centripetal rather than centrifugal

PHILIP STEPHENS

Governments that were once jealous guardians of national competences have been shifting more decision-making to Brussels © Yves Herman/Reuters © REUTERS

Philip Stephens YESTERDAY

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The British way of looking at the EU is through the prism of its squabbles. The Franco-German motor has stalled. New Europe in the east wants Old Europe to take a tougher line against Russia's Vladimir Putin. A dispute is brewing about fiscal targets in the eurozone. All true in so far as it goes. Only, the naysayers are missing the forest for the trees.

Think back to 2016, the year of Britain's referendum. Remember the predictions that a leave vote would see the EU collapse under the weight of its intrusions into national affairs? Sovereigntists were on the march, the Brexiters declared. Brexit would beget Frexit and the whole house of cards would collapse. It was delusional stuff but tapped into a scepticism about European integration that reached beyond the UK.

And now? The little Englanders, it turns out, were right about one thing. The EU has changed profoundly during the past seven years. The forces, however, have been centripetal rather than centrifugal. Far from breaking up, the EU is doing more. Lots more.

Governments that were once jealous guardians of national competences have been

shifting more decision-making to Brussels. Policy arenas from which the Brussels institutions were debarred — think health, defence and policing of national borders — now fit inside the *acquis communautaire*.

A united Europe would be forged in crisis, the Union's founders said. Well, Europe has had its share of crises these past few years. The wave of migrants fleeing the war in Syria in 2015 persuaded governments that individual nations cannot alone police national borders. To preserve free movement within its frontiers the EU agreed to common oversight of external borders. Frontex, the European border and coast guard agency, had a budget of about €140mn in 2015. By 2022, that had risen fivefold.

Incidentally, Britain has learnt much the same lesson. Brexit was supposed to see it "take back control" of the borders. Now Rishi Sunak's government is struggling to stop the small boats crossing the channel. Belatedly, Brexiters have discovered that securing the British border requires the collaboration of France and other EU states.

Health policy also belonged to member states — until the pandemic exposed the inadequacies of the national responses. No one doubts now that the European Commission should play a central role in an EU-wide public health strategy.

Covid put paid to other taboos. Germany's opposition to debt mutualisation within the eurozone came under extreme pressure during the euro crisis of 2009-12. It was blown out of the water by the €672bn Covid recovery fund. So was the insistence of Berlin and its fiscally conservative allies that the euro's rules should be a one-size-fits-all affair. The eurozone is beginning to resemble an economic as well as monetary union.

Most obviously, Russia's war against Ukraine has transformed the EU's role in European security. Member states have been arguing since before the Treaty of Rome about whether to build a "European army". The revanchist threat from Russia has provided the answer. For now. Ukraine's armed forces are filling the role. But few in the continent's capitals now doubt that the EU needs to start building its own military capabilities.

Suddenly, it seems obvious that European military procurement and standardisation should be co-ordinated through the European Defence Agency and that the European Defence Fund should set aside more than €1bn for collaborative research and innovation. Also that the EU should co-ordinate military aid to Ukraine through a European Peace Facility. It's not an EU army, but what's taking shape is a serious European pillar of Nato's collective defence.

The striking thing is that these shifts are not a product of EU power grabs. It helps that the Commission has a determined leader in Ursula von der Leyen, but there has been more national push than EU pull in the shifting balance. There has been a change of mindset: whether it is a financial hurricane, surging migration, a pandemic or the threat from Putin, nations have seen that their interests are best served by collective action.

Thirty years ago, the eminent British historian Alan Milward wrote *The European Rescue of the Nation State* to explain how postwar leaders alighted on integration as a way for sovereign nations to meet the economic and political challenges of the times. It is happening again.

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