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Boris Johnson Should not be Making New Global Enemies When His Country is in a Shambles



Drawing by Nathaniel St. Clair

Antagonising China may not be wise, particularly as it's clear that dysfunctional leaders like Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro could not control an outbreak of acne.

When Voltaire on his deathbed was asked by a priest if he renounced Satan, he responded: "Now, now my good man. This is no time to be making enemies." Britain may not yet be on its deathbed, but it is politically and economically sick and this might be a good moment to follow Voltaire's example and avoid taking on new opponents.

Instead Britain is joining a US-led confrontation with China over everything from the future of Hong Kong to the treatment of the Uighur and future British business dealings with Huawei. Both the concerns over the Uighur and the citizens of Hong Kong are important, but there is a good dollop of hypocrisy here since Britain managed to rule Hong Kong for many years without showing much interest in the democratic rights of its inhabitants, and concern over Chinese mistreatment of the Uighur is in marked contrast to British reticence over India's ever-more oppressive rule in Kashmir.

Self-interest alone should argue that this is a poorly-timed moment for Britain to join a new cold war against China or anybody else for that matter. Relations are already bad with Russia, a nuclear super-power whatever the state of its economy, and Brexit ensures enhanced rivalry shading into hostile relations with the 27 nations in the European Union.

The inevitable consequence of this is a greater reliance on the US under a uniquely dysfunctional and divisive president Donald Trump, when Americans are more at each other's throats than at any time since the Civil War. The very fact that Trump is president at all is evidence of an imploding political system that will take long to recover.

Skill in making alliances was at the centre of Britain's rise to be a global power from the beginning of the 18th century onwards. The country was only isolated for brief and unwelcome periods, usually because continental allies had been defeated in war and could not be immediately replaced. Winston Churchill had his failings as a military strategist (witness Gallipoli in 1915 and Norway in 1940), but he made immense and successful efforts to forge alliances with the US and Soviet Union to win the war against Adolf Hitler.

It is this sort of Churchillian political realism that is so lacking in Boris Johnson and his government. They espouse a self-aggrandising populist nationalism that is provincial in its attitude towards the rest of the world and Britain's position in it.

Many suspected that this might be the case during the Brexit crisis over the last four years. So much of what the Eurosceptics believed about Brussel's iron, though incompetent, rule was demonstrably false that it was difficult to imagine them running the country. All the same, I wondered at the time if the Remain predictions of national ruin when Britain left the EU might be overstated.

This was what Johnson and right-wing Eurosceptic Conservatives and their media allies derisively dubbed "Project Fear".

But, as it turns out, the proponents of “Project Fear” were more correct than they could have imagined about the negative things that were going to happen to Britain, though wrong about one important aspect of the threat.

It has since become clear that it was not so much Brexit as the Brexiters themselves that were the true danger. This might not have mattered quite so much if it had not been for a terrible piece of ill luck: on 31 January, the very day that Johnson and Dominic Cummings were congratulating themselves on taking Britain out of the EU, the coronavirus pandemic was hurtling towards them.

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