The EU’s grand strategy of muddling through

Threats from Turkey and Russia, the risk of Brexit, growing Italian debt, defiance in Poland and Hungary: it seems as if the EU is being torn apart. However, by studying the history of the Habsburg Empire, a state that is highly similar to the EU, a different picture emerges. Could the EU survive for much longer than is widely anticipated by “muddling through”?

Our observations

- For nearly 4 years, the EU and the UK have been negotiating terms for Brexit. Although the UK officially withdrew from the EU on 31 January, negotiations for their future relationship are still in full swing.
- The European Commission and Italy are locked into conflict over Italy’s growing public debt.
- Geopolitical conflicts at Europe’s borders have intensified in recent years. Since 2014, there has been violent conflict in eastern Ukraine between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed rebels. In the Mediterranean, several conflicts are brewing: in war-torn Libya, the Government of National Accord (GNA), backed by the U.S., Turkey, Qatar and Italy, is waging war with the Libyan National Army, backed by Egypt, the UAE, Russia, Saudi Arabia and France.
- A critical challenge for the EU is the tension between divided member-states and the necessity of pan-European solutions (e.g. European Stack, European Green Deal, European champions).
It is no longer controversial to assume that the EU will not survive for very long in its existing form. Critics point to the weakness of European institutions and the growing amount of tension that threatens European unity. However, by taking a closer look at how the EU actually deals with this situation, a different picture emerges. In his book *The Grand Strategy of the Habsburg Empire*, historian Wess Mitchell presents some interesting ideas to understand the strategy of the EU. That is because there are remarkable similarities between the makeup of the Habsburg Empire, with its heyday between 1700 and 1866, and the EU. The Habsburg Empire was, like the EU, surrounded by several geopolitical frontiers: the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, Prussia and France. It was also one of the most ethnically diverse places in the world with its population of Germans, Hungarians, Italians, Czechs, Poles, Slovaks, Croats, Serbs, Slovaks, and Romanians. Indeed, the Habsburg state was actually made up of historically separate polities with their own constitutional arrangements. That is why the Habsburg Empire lacked a centralized, efficient state administration and conflicts between its members were always around the corner. Habsburg rivals, like France and Russia, would attempt to sow division between its member-states. More than a centralized state, the Habsburg Empire was a “common market” of Austrian textile, Hungarian wheat and Czech finance. The legitimacy of Habsburg rule, then, was built upon the belief in the dynasty’s mission to protect fragmented peoples from conflict. Indeed, the comparison with the EU writes itself. The EU too is surrounded by (often the same) geopolitical frontiers, highly diverse with different constitutions which results in a lack of centralization, its rivals try to sow division, it is more a common market than a state, and its legitimacy is built upon a moral mission of unity. The most important similarity between the Habsburg Empire and the EU, however, is their grand strategy to survive. In *On Grand Strategy*, historian John Lewis Gaddis explains “grand strategy” as the balancing between means and ends to further your own interests in a global landscape. Grand strategy, then, is the unconscious strategy that emerges from the geopolitical reality of a state. For the Habsburg Empire, to survive in the geopolitical environment of several security frontiers with a weak centralized state (the end), it did not have much administrative or financial power (the means). Consequently, its grand strategy was characterized by “timing” and “sequencing” conflicts: to delay conflicts through any means (whether through diplomatic negotiations or military tactics) and never deal with more than one conflict at a time. Interestingly, the Habsburg rulers eventually called this strategy “fortwursteln” (muddling through). It seems that the EU (necessarily, whether consciously or not) deals with its geopolitical and institutional reality in a similar fashion. The huge risk of one of its most powerful member-states leaving the union has been actively delayed for years. If the EU manages to reach a deal with the UK, it could then focus its attention towards Italy, but not before. By carefully balancing conflicts through timing and sequencing, the EU could survive for much longer than is widely anticipated, just like the Habsburg Empire, whose rivals always thought it was on the brink of collapse.

Implications

- The EU could survive for much longer than is widely anticipated by its skeptics. Indeed, the Habsburg Empire managed to survive (eventually, in a different form) for much longer in a more dangerous geopolitical environment with even less resources and weaker unity.

- Moments in which several conflicts heat up at the same time put enormous pressure on European politics, financial markets and economies. That is why European institutions are focused on never attempting to deal with too many risks at the same time (e.g. Brexit, Italy, Poland and Hungary, conflict in the Mediterranean, Russia).