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BREXIT TO NOWHERE: THE FOREIGN POLICY CONSEQUENCES OF “OUT”

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SUMMARY

- A British exit from the EU would have major foreign policy consequences – damaging both Britain and the rest of Europe.
- Brexit would likely trigger Scottish independence and fresh violence in Northern Ireland.
- Britain can already trade where it likes around the globe – and does so on better terms from within the world’s biggest trade bloc.
- The “Out” campaign’s talk of a lone Britain deepening ties with the Commonwealth and the US are unrealistic; these countries are either indifferent, or want Britain to stay in the EU.
- Brexit would handicap Britain’s response to the migrant crisis, making border control more difficult. And only by working within the EU can Britain hope to address the crisis at its roots.
- Britain has a uniquely privileged position in the EU, with an opt-out of Schengen, the euro, and justice cooperation, as well as a leading voice in how the union has developed.
- Brexit would diminish both Britain and the EU on the world stage, encouraging anti-democratic forces across the continent and beyond.

Foreign policy might be seen as a mere sideshow to the present crisis in Britain’s relationship with the rest of Europe. Foreign affairs are largely absent from the tales of ludicrous impositions by foreign judges and faceless Eurocrats which fill the British tabloids; foreign policy does not seem to feature among the proposals for reform of the European Union that Prime Minister David Cameron is seeking to negotiate ahead of the British referendum. It is, after all, an “intergovernmental dossier”, as those annoying continentals might express it – an area of EU activity which works essentially through voluntary cooperation between member states, with little scope for Brussels to call the shots.

Yet the foreign-policy impact of Brexit would be huge, most obviously for Britain, but also for its erstwhile partners – the other 27 member states who would be “left behind”, as those annoying Brits might express it.

It is British voters who will decide the outcome, so this brief focuses mainly on the British angle. But it is the other 27 who will decide how much slack to cut Cameron in his renegotiation, and what the terms of a post-Brexit relationship between the EU and Britain might be. So, aided by ECFR’s European-wide network of offices and researchers, this brief also assesses what Brexit would mean for the foreign policy of an EU minus the United Kingdom.

Brexit to where?

As elsewhere, national plebiscites in Britain are typically decided on domestic issues. So, in the coming referendum, the “In” campaign will hope to win on the back of economic arguments; “Outs” will see immigration concerns as a trump card. But behind the specific arguments and barrage of statistics there will also be a substantial emotional content to the debate, based on conflicting senses of national identity. History plays a significant part in Britons’ sense of who they are (and, indeed, the extent to which they see themselves as “Britons” at all). So foreign policy may not be quite the sideshow it first appears: opposing visions of what Brexit would mean for Britain’s role in the world can be expected to weigh heavily in the referendum’s outcome.

National identities emerge through narratives: and already the shape of two competing narratives about our place in the world are becoming clear. The Out narrative calls for the restoration of sovereignty – the reassertion of Parliament’s power over unelected continental officials and judges, and in particular restored control of the national borders. But this need not mean a retreat from the world to a “Little England”; indeed, quitting the EU will put the “great” back into Britain, allowing us to resume our historical vocation of a truly global power. Links with Commonwealth and Anglophone nations around the world will be renewed; “unshackled from the corpse” of the sclerotic EU, Britain will restore its prosperity by trading freely with the emerging markets of a globalised world.

The In narrative will be less uplifting. Yes, Britain has a global vocation – but globalisation and its accompanying power shifts from West to South and East mean that no individual European nation can hope to exercise real influence on the world stage by itself. Britain no longer has the economic, diplomatic, or military weight to count for much in isolation. Real sovereignty is about remaining masters of our national destiny, and that requires combining our weight with that of our European partners. The road to shaping the twenty-first century world in accordance with British interests and values lies through leadership within Europe.

This essay will consider five aspects of British foreign policy in order to assess these competing narratives.

Abroad gets nearer

Brexit would mean a lot more foreign policy for Britain to cope with, a lot closer to home. Or, more accurately, for England to cope with – one of the most bankably predictable consequences of Brexit would be an early Scottish vote for independence within the EU, rather than continuing as part of a withdrawn UK. Sorting out the implications of “abroad” beginning for both countries along the line of the Cheviot Hills – especially in the context of the urge to “restore control of national borders” – would be anything but easy.

At least violence is not likely to ensue – unlike in Northern Ireland. Any attempt to impose a fully controlled border between the UK and the Republic would not only be futile, as the years of terrorism demonstrated, but would also undermine the foundation upon which the Good Friday peace process is built, namely greater cross-border cooperation in the context of shared EU membership. Brexit would also mean that the generous EU funding that has oiled the settlement would dry up. So Brexit would further jeopardise the already-shaky power-sharing structure in Belfast, and significantly increase the risk of a return to sectarian violence in the North.

The cooperation between London and Dublin to bring peace to Northern Ireland is only one example of how shared EU membership has replaced the often-contentious bilateral relations between member states with the interaction of partners. Such interaction is not always free of friction, and is often competitive. But it is always informed by the need to settle problems through negotiation and compromise, with a bias towards cooperative outcomes. If Britain chooses to terminate that relationship with the other 27 EU members – to make itself a “foreign country” – what incentive will Spain have to moderate its campaign to recover Gibraltar? Or France to continue to allow the British (in what might reasonably be viewed as a violation of sovereignty) to operate their border controls on French soil?

Trade: size matters

The attraction of “unshackling from the corpse” lies in the perception that the UK needs to reorient its trade away from the low-growth EU towards booming emerging economies. But that is what the whole of Europe wants, too – the skies over Beijing are black with the planes of visiting European leaders and business delegations. The real point to consider is whether this reorientation will work better for the UK as part of the EU, or as a lone wolf.

Globalisation has universalised trade. It has also, counter-intuitively, balkanised the global trading regime. As emerging economic powers have become readier to challenge the old, Western-dominated system, the World Trade Organization is increasingly deadlocked – resulting in a global race to substitute a cat’s cradle of bilateral, regional, and plurilateral arrangements.

The term “free trade agreement” (FTA), for the generic vehicle for these arrangements, is a misnomer. Freeing trade – abolishing tariff barriers – is the easy bit. The real challenge, and the reason why the deals typically take years to negotiate, is to ensure that they are “fair”. This means ensuring that your trading partner does not pirate your technology or other intellectual property; exclude you from key parts of their market (notably government and other public procurement); dump exports on you at artificially low prices; manipulate regulations to disadvantage your exports or frustrate your investments; misuse plant and human health safeguards to block

exports; and so on. All these potential problems and abuses need to be provided for in advance – and the terms hammered out in negotiations will determine just how “fair” the trading relationship will be.

In short, getting a satisfactory FTA depends upon complex and tough negotiations – with the balance of the outcome ultimately depending on who wants the deal more. Here the EU, as the largest trading bloc in the world, offering access to its single market, has a massive in-built advantage. Other things being equal, the EU will always secure better deals for its 28 member states than any single one of them, Britain included, could obtain for itself.

Against this, the Outs have to argue that the EU, ponderous bureaucracy that it is, moves much too slowly, and wastes time and negotiating capital getting all its beloved regulation and red tape incorporated in the deals. These are pretty desperate claims.

The newly fragmented global trade environment is a big challenge to all trading nations: just how many of these complex negotiations can you handle at the same time? And just which potential trading partner will you prioritise? In point of fact, the EU record in getting these deals done is second to none. The EU has the widest range of FTAs in the world, and EU goods exports have increased threefold since the turn of the century. In the four years since the South Korea FTA came into force, EU goods exports have grown by 55 percent and a longstanding trade deficit has become a surplus. What’s more, the negotiating pipeline is full: talks with Canada and Singapore have recently been wrapped up, and deals with the United States, Japan, Vietnam, and others are in the works. An investment agreement with China is also under negotiation – a sensible intermediate step to test China’s as-yet undemonstrated readiness to actually implement such agreements, and one which will facilitate European services exports (a particular interest of the UK). Overall, the EU has the most ambitious trade agenda in the world, across all continents.¹

As for the EU’s concern to see proper social and environmental standards reflected in its trade agreements – the alternative would simply be to watch European enterprises forced out of business by unfair competition based on sweatshops and uncontrolled pollution.

The EU disappoints its advocates in many ways, but vis-à-vis the rest of the world it is, and behaves like, an economic superpower. The idea that Britain could somehow forge more advantageous economic relations with the wider world by negotiating on its own is a triumph of hope over the reality that, when it comes to global trade, size matters.

The Commonwealth pipe dream

But, the Outs assert, Britain has what the EU and most continental countries lack – historical links around the globe. Britain could replace its relations with 27 EU partners by reinvigorating ties with the 53 members of the Commonwealth. Sometimes the emphasis is on the emerging economies among their number, especially India; Cameron went to Delhi to unilaterally declare a new “special relationship” in 2010. Sometimes the emphasis is on the (white) Anglosphere – the “Five Eyes” intelligence alliance (with the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) is held up as a model of the sort of international security relationship open to Britain in place of Europe.

The problem with these ideas is that they never receive any answering echo. Thus, while Britain’s ties of culture, history, and kinship with Australia are strong, the twenty-first century reality is that Australia’s economic links are now with China and Southeast Asia, and its strategic links are with the US. The Five Eyes club is good for intelligence-sharing – but that is all. As for India, it is unclear whether our shared history is more liability or asset. At all events, Cameron’s declaration was simply ignored by the Indian side – and Prime Minister Narendra Modi is buying his new warplanes from France, not the UK.

In 2010, the new coalition government appointed Lord Howell as a minister in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to put the “Commonwealth” back into its activity, as well as its title. Despite his committed efforts to inject some life into the network, it turned out that there was nothing left to revive. He departed after a couple of years. The Commonwealth, as an alternative to the EU, is nothing but a pipe dream.

Defence and security

What impact would Brexit have on Britain’s defence and security? Some Outs argue that, throughout history, Britain’s security has been best served when it steered clear of continental entanglements. Of course, this assertion is actually unhistorical; even in the Elizabethan “golden age”, Sir Philip Sidney met his death in the Netherlands not in a fit of romanticism but because England knew it had a vital strategic interest in helping the Dutch resist the Spaniards. Nor does this isolationist argument – especially when allied, as it often is, with guarded admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin’s robust values and methods – sit comfortably with Britons’ longstanding preference for seeing their country as “a force for good in the world”.

So the better Out line is simply that a non-EU Britain can and would remain a leading member of NATO; and, to the extent that British withdrawal further exposed the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as a useless vanity project, this should help get some much-needed realism back into continental strategic thinking.

¹ For full details of the EU’s trade agenda, see “Trade for All”, the European Commission’s new account of its trade strategy, published on 14 October 2015, available at <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=1381>.

The notion of turning the clock back to the comfortable Cold War situation, when the US led NATO with Britain as its loyal first lieutenant, has obvious appeal (even if this discourse glosses over what would happen to the UK's nuclear deterrent if Britain left the EU and Scotland left the UK). But history works forwards, not backwards – the US, with its eyes on the future, has a vision of how the transatlantic alliance must work, and it is no longer a NATO-centric one.

To remain the world's leading power, the Obama administration has concluded that it must husband its resources, disengage from debilitating wars in the wider Middle East, and focus on the Western Pacific, where the real strategic challenges of the coming decades lie. For Washington, the European role should be to take up the slack: spend more on their own defence to ensure that Russia resists any temptation to repeat what it has done to Georgia and Ukraine on any NATO ally; and do more to contribute to security in the Middle East and Africa.

This is not about the US leaving Europe in the lurch; the essential US security guarantee, especially its nuclear component, will remain solid. But it is about keeping in proportion the threat that an overextended Russia really poses; and recognising that sanctions are a much more effective way of responding to Putin's Ukraine adventure than any panicky sabre-rattling. Seen from Washington, this economic clout makes the EU just as interesting a security partner as NATO – and potentially more so, if it would only live up to its rhetoric and not leave small but important interventions in places like Mali and the Central African Republic to the French alone. And, as the Ukraine crisis gradually subsides, intra-EU discussions about how to rebase Europe's long-term relationship with Russia will be critical. So the US is more irritated than impressed when Britain beats the NATO drum. It wants Britain as a committed and leading EU member state – as President Barack Obama has not hesitated to make clear.

Of course, Obama's guiding light is what is good for the US, not Britain. And a bit less British obsession with the "special relationship" would be a good thing. But it would take a bold Out to argue that Britain's defence and security interests would be best served by ignoring US interests and preoccupations. We have a fundamental national interest in keeping the US interested in and engaged with Europe: and weakening the EU by a retreat into isolationism would be exactly the wrong way to go about it.

Migration: the drawbridge fallacy

To date, this issue has been owned by the Outs. "Restoring control of our own borders" is an argument that unites racists and xenophobes; those unhappy with social and economic change; and those who simply feel that we are a small and overcrowded island (almost uniquely in Europe, demographers expect the UK's population to keep growing; and the housing crisis and transport congestion in London and the south-east support a sense that this part of the island at least is now "full"). Freedom of movement within

the EU, taken up especially by newer member states from the east, has been seen as the prime culprit. No wonder so much of Cameron's agenda for EU reform ahead of the referendum focuses on trying to find ways to diminish the appeal of the UK for potential European migrants.

But this intra-EU issue has now been dramatically overlaid by the great migration and refugee crisis breaking upon Europe from the Middle East and Africa. For the Outs, this only heightens the risk of the UK becoming "swamped", with internal borderless travel on the continent compounding the threat. But as a more coherent and humane collective European response emerges, the terms of the British debate may, and certainly should, change.

Only a few short months ago many Britons were sure of two things: first, that the UK was a uniquely desirable destination, as a "soft touch for benefit-scrungers and bogus asylum-seekers"; and second, that a combination of the English Channel and our wisdom in keeping out of Schengen would keep the non-European "swarms" at bay. Neither belief is tenable any more. Germany and Sweden are the destinations of choice for the desperate: the numbers waiting in Calais are insignificant by comparison. And Britain, it transpires, is well down the lower half of the European league table in terms of asylum grants in relation to population size.²

And, as for the non-European "swarms", the disruption to Dover–Calais transport links over the summer should not obscure the fact that Britain, today, is uniquely well-placed to handle such migratory pressures. As so often in the EU, we have the best of both worlds; out of Schengen, yet benefitting from the Dublin arrangements that allow us to return non-EU migrants to the country where they entered the Union – and permitted by France to operate our border controls on French territory. All leaving the EU would achieve would be the likelihood of having to pull those controls back from Calais to Dover.

The real lesson of the summer's cross-channel disruption is therefore that, island or not, we have in practice no "drawbridge" option to insulate ourselves from the continent's crisis, any more than the continent can insulate itself from its conflict-torn periphery. As Home Secretary Theresa May has acknowledged, writing with her French opposite number, it is simply too late to try to hold the line at Calais: "That is why we are pushing other member states – and the whole of the EU – to address this problem at root."³

Of course, "addressing the problem at root" is no more the answer to the current crisis than is a fair distribution across countries of refugees who make it to Europe: the challenge is multifaceted, and requires a range of responses. But May's point is nonetheless a fair one – especially given

² Niall McCarthy, "EU Asylum Applications In Perspective", Statista, 6 August 2015, available at <http://www.statista.com/chart/3701/eu-asylum-applications-in-perspective/>.

³ Theresa May and Bernard Cazeneuve, "Migrants think our streets are paved with gold", *The Telegraph*, 1 August 2015, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/11778396/Migrants-think-our-streets-are-paved-with-gold.html>.

the population explosion that demographers predict for Africa over the coming decades. If Europe does not wish to be faced with repeated mass population movements from the South and East for years to come, it will have to put a lot more effort into doing what it can for stability and prosperity in the Middle East and Africa. The combined efforts of the EU will self-evidently be necessary: like an increasing number of the world's problems, no individual European country can hope to make a meaningful impact on "the root of the problem" when acting in isolation.

Staying in the EU will provide little comfort for Britons who want to keep other Europeans out of their country (though neither will leaving, if we want continued access to the single market – Norway and Switzerland are bound by freedom-of-movement rules). For those who are horrified, for whatever reason, by the current mass movement of people towards the safety and prosperity of Europe, working with EU partners is the only course that makes sense.

What about the other 27?

What, then, do Britain's EU partners make of the Brexit saga? The picture emerging from ECFR's European-wide network of offices and researchers is essentially one of perplexity and frustration. What is it that the British actually want? When will they actually specify their renegotiation proposals? (Both questions, it seems, shortly to receive their answers.) How long will this drama drag on for?

But the perplexity and frustration run deeper than this. Across Europe, Britain is perceived as already enjoying an extraordinarily privileged position within the EU. The budget rebate means that these days luckless Italy makes a bigger net contribution to the EU budget than the UK. Britain did not want the euro, so has an opt-out (and crows about how well its economy is doing as a consequence). Ditto Schengen (so that, the movement of other Europeans excepted, Britain retains full "control of its borders" – whatever the rhetoric to the contrary). Ditto cooperation in the fields of justice and home affairs (where the UK has even been allowed to choose which bits to stick with, and which to reject).

More broadly, too, the whole EU enterprise has developed on British-preferred lines: Britain urged that the Union be hugely enlarged to the east, and it has been; Britain prioritised the single market, and that is what the EU now has; Britain fought for open trading and investment relationships with the wider world, and that is now EU policy. In partners' eyes, the British have their cake and eat it – and yet are *still* unsatisfied. No wonder those Brits seem to be having such difficulty defining what more it is they want!

So to perplexity and frustration is added resentment, in varying degrees – which recent British behaviour has done little to assuage. The new member states from central and eastern Europe were uniformly well-disposed to the UK when it was the leading advocate of EU enlargement – but

have now been almost as uniformly estranged by British determination to block their migrant workers. Britain used to be a leader of European defence; now it is seen as obstructive, persistently blocking the European military and security headquarters in Brussels which everyone else wants, and vetoing development of the European Defence Agency. Furthermore, British refusal to take any part in helping either southern economies stricken by the economic crisis or with the hundreds of thousands of displaced people now washing around Europe has earned it no friends, except perhaps Hungary's Viktor Orbán.

Nonetheless, other EU member states would generally prefer the UK to remain. Many fear the boost an Out vote would give to populist and nationalist forces across the continent, from Eastern Europe to Scandinavia to France. Disintegrative forces, too: if the UK leaves the EU, and Scotland leaves the UK, what chance is there of resisting Catalan, or Flemish, independence? Nor are many member states attracted by the prospect of an EU increasingly dominated by Germany, or the Franco-German pairing, without Britain there to provide balance.

Some have their own, more specific, reasons for hoping that Britain stays. Free-traders such as Germany and Sweden see the UK as a valuable ally in ensuring an outward-facing EU. Italy sees common ground in British ambitions for development of the single market, particularly its digital dimension. France, long suspicious of Britain as a US "Trojan horse" and advocate of dangerous Anglo-Saxon free-market liberalism, can console itself with its recent (albeit unlooked-for) elevation as the US's preferred military partner in Europe, and sees the value of retaining in the EU another nuclear power and fellow permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Indeed, most of Britain's EU partners are conscious of the damage Brexit would do to European influence in the world. The international perception would be that the EU's economic failure of recent years was being followed by political failure, with further decline and possibly unravelling to follow. The contempt in which Putin – and other authoritarian nationalists from Beijing to Baku to Cairo – already tend to hold the EU would be encouraged and confirmed, and the ability of the remaining 27 to protect their interests and promote their values in a world where liberal democracy is on the retreat would suffer a body blow. (The same, of course, could be said of a post-Brexit UK.)

Britain's partners know that the EU would be losing not just any old member state, but one of its star international players – a country with a robust approach on defence and security and close transatlantic links, as well as the capacity and historical inclination to operate on the global stage.

Against that, our partners are also aware that this inclination has not been much in evidence in recent years – certainly not since the first Cameron government came

to power in 2010. What the Obama administration has characterised as the UK's excessively "accommodating" attitude to China has dented its reputation for robustness. And wherever our partners might have expected or at least hoped that the British would be engaged, they have been conspicuous by their absence: from French-led efforts to combat lawlessness in the Sahel; to the projected bombing of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces in 2013; and crisis diplomacy, led in the end by the Franco-German couple, following Putin's assaults on Ukraine.

Instead, the traditionally "pragmatic" British seem to have been more concerned with conducting a sort of legal guerrilla campaign in Brussels, on the constant hunt for "competence creep".⁴ This has manifested itself in such actions as persistent efforts to clip the wings of the fledgling European External Action Service, by preventing it from speaking on behalf of the member states. Britain has even attempted to challenge the exclusive authority of the Commission, and then of the European Parliament in the ratification process over trade deals – thus complicating the implementation of just those open-market policies which Britain is meant to favour.

There are compensating factors. The competence of British diplomats and officials is widely respected. Britain has also been decisive in holding the line on sanctions against Russia. And this is not the first time that other member states have had to put up with one of their number's monomaniacal pursuit of a national line "of principle", irrespective of any wider consideration – see Cyprus *passim*. But better is expected of the Brits – and their constant refusal to lend a helping hand, as over the refugee crisis, is wearing patience dangerously thin.

A properly committed and engaged UK would be widely welcomed by its EU partners. Especially in foreign and security policy, British leadership would not only be welcomed, but followed. The sad truth is, however, that the departure of the obstructive and unhelpful UK of recent years would, in and of itself, elicit few tears. Any efforts partners are still ready to make to help Cameron in his "renegotiation" will be made less by warmth towards the British than fear of Brexit's impact on the cohesion, the balance, and even the sustainability of the remainder of the EU.

Conclusion

The temptation to hunker down behind the Channel is nothing new. It took Churchill's leadership to induce us to resist it in 1939, and that moment has been the single most important element in our national identity since. The accompanying tendency to nostalgia, and sense of British exceptionalism, has not always been constructive. But with it has gone a belief that "British values", whatever exactly they may be, do not sit easily with an "I'm alright, Jack" isolationism. The Ins will be right to argue that in the twenty-first century those values, as much as economic self-interest, require us to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to a leadership role within the EU.

"Wholehearted" and "leadership" are, however, important qualifications. A grumpy, obstructive, semi-detached Britain that defaults to the "In" option for fear of something worse will be of little use to the EU or to itself. In matters of foreign policy – dealing with an outside world which, year by year, will become an ever-more pressing and vital interest to all Europeans – the single most effective reform of the EU which Cameron could deliver would be full-blooded British re-engagement.

⁴ The UK government's "Balance of Competences" review of foreign policy, published in July 2013 and available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/227437/2901086_Foreign_Policy_acc.pdf, concludes that "the majority of the evidence we received argued that it was generally strongly in the UK's interests to work through the EU in foreign policy", and that "the majority of our evidence judged that Member States were firmly in charge of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)". But the review also is much preoccupied by "the legal form of EU agreements with third countries, the EU's status in international organisations, and whether statements in international organisations should be on behalf of the EU or of the EU and its Member States".

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