

# Brexit puts the UK in the Cockpit of History

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The British vote to leave the EU was only one among the many unexpected events of 2016. It sometimes seems as if the new normal is constantly changing assumptions about what the West will be like in the future. After the immediate shock that Brexit would happen the process of actually leaving has been overshadowed by other developments, in places as different as Syria and the US. Nevertheless, Brexit is a ‘big deal’, for the UK, Europe and the West, and it will haunt European and transatlantic security in the years to come.

With Brexit the UK is launched outside the orbit of regular European politics. By leaving the European Union the UK is no longer the proverbial ‘awkward partner’. Brexit will have an impact on many essential areas of politics. But, the leave negotiations will take time and the nature of the deal the UK will get is yet unknown. Security and defence will suffer from both economic realities and political compromises, hence Brexit’s impact on the British armed forces and European security is especially difficult to forecast.

## **Brexit is a big deal for the West**

Brexit will have significant consequences for security and defence in the future, for three reasons that concern the UK, Europe and the West respectively. First, Brexit is a big deal for the UK. During the four decades the UK took part in European integration the country recovered from being ‘the sick man of Europe’. In 1976 the UK even had to turn to the IMF for help. The UK always preferred European integration as an economic vehicle – the British talked about the EEC as ‘the common market’ – and the country was apprehensive about further political integration. The British commitment to the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy, (CSDP), following the St Malo declaration in 1998, can be interpreted as compensation for the UK opting out of the euro. The UK leaving the EU can be regarded as an assessment that European integration has peaked and that the country now is better off outside. But the referendum result also reflects a number of less far-sighted factors, such as domestic discontent in communities that feel left behind.

The UK is taking a significant economic risk by leaving. There are many predictions claiming that the British GDP in the coming years will be less than it would otherwise have been. Before the referendum there were also predictions about how Britain was on track to overtake Germany and become the largest economy in Europe by 2030. If the result of Brexit is less economic growth the UK has in fact also taken a risk with its leading role in European defence. Even if the UK continues to make defence a priority and lives up to NATO’s goal of spending 2% of GDP on defence, it most likely will be 2% of a lesser GDP.

The UK’s status in NATO is predicated on being a transatlantic interlocutor. Beyond being a model member and helping the US and Europe to get along it has usable military forces with an expeditionary capability. However, it was only after American pressure that the last government confirmed that the UK would live up to NATO’s goal of spending 2% of GDP on defence. But, after ‘taking back control’ from Brussels, the UK might put less emphasis on maintaining the country’s great power status – or in a more modern vernacular its medium sized power status – than on seeking economic growth by establishing new relationships beyond Europe.

Second, Brexit is a big deal for the EU. The British vote to opt out the EU has already weakened the EU. The UK leaving is a critique of European integration that galvanizes similar discontent in other EU countries. Brexit also adds another intractable problem to those the remaining members of the EU have to manage: the aftermath of the economic crisis, an assertive Russia and the refugee crisis. In fact, the UK cannot escape all these problems, but it has opted out of the joint efforts to come up with solutions.

Without the UK the nature of the EU is likely to change. Restraints on Franco-German efforts to increase planning, centralization, harmonization and protectionism may weaken. France and Germany are set to continue with European integration. For example, they are making a new effort to increase integration in defence. Their suggestion of an EU Headquarters may be mostly symbolic. Yet, it shows the direction of where the EU is heading. After all the

common European currency did not come about overnight, but was the result of a long process. In the long run an HQ can be a key step towards a European Armed Force.

The EU is not likely to have an equal Franco-German dual leadership in the future. Instead European integration is much more likely to be dominated by Germany. Such a combination of leadership and deepened integration might become unpalatable for some members, making them consider leaving the EU as well. Consequently, the EU might experience a return of the so-called eurosclerosis of the late 1970s and early 1980s, where it has to shelve all kinds of plans, both for increased integration and for reforms. Apprehension among the member states could again contribute to European integration reaching such a stasis.

Third, Brexit as a big deal for the West. Brexit might signal the start of the unravelling of the formal and informal structures that have held the West together since 1945. The United States wants a strong UK in NATO, but the US would also have preferred the UK to remain in the EU. Without the UK as a member the understanding of American viewpoints in Europe – in the EU and NATO – is likely to diminish. By leaving the EU the UK is effectively reducing its own influence in Europe, especially as the EU is moving closer to the alliance, after the joint EU-NATO declaration at NATO's Warsaw summit in 2016. The US might have to find another key European partner. However, if Brexit turns out to only be the first in a series of similar problems within Europe the US might more or less tire of the continent. As a result, security commitments risk being scaled back to the bare bones.

The rise of Asia is of course not a threat comparable to communism in the Cold War, but a more multipolar world does pose a challenge to the influence of the West as a whole. Without strong transatlantic ties the ability of either the US or Europe to shape global affairs will be reduced. Accordingly, even if Brexit would turn out to be the best option for the UK that is not the same as it being the best option for transatlantic relations and commitments to collective security. The reverberations of Brexit can be expected to be felt for many years to come, but not necessarily immediately.

### **Brexit – no immediate impact on European defence**

In the next few years the UK will make an extra effort to be active in NATO. There might be at least two reasons. First, the obvious one – Russian aggression. The latest British National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review, the SDSR, confirmed that the UK has changed its view of Russia. The UK no longer believes that Russia can be brought into the Western fold. The UK also expects the present Russian regime to last for the foreseeable future.

After the Russian aggression in Ukraine the UK committed itself to reassurance of the alliance's Eastern members. During 2016 the UK significantly increased its naval presence in the Baltic. The UK has also declared that it will shoulder the burden of leading NATO's new spearhead force, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, the VJTF, in 2017. Furthermore, before the outcome of the referendum was known, the UK also indicated that it would contribute to NATO's new enhanced forward presence scheme. The UK will lead one battalion, stationed in Estonia, which will be one of the four battalions that are to be stationed in the Baltic. In fact, the British commitment comes close to constituting a trip-wire, ensuring that the UK becomes militarily committed early on in a conflict in the Baltic.

Secondly, the UK might try to compensate those European allies that are also EU members for leaving the EU. But it is difficult to compensate for weakening the EU. The UK might try to do more in NATO as a means of cutting a better deal in the EU leave negotiations. However, an overt and direct linkage of NATO and EU issues could be seen as problematic for both organizations and even as confrontational. Hence, it would be politically risky for the UK's future reputation as a NATO ally and a future partner of the EU. If the UK wants to make up for leaving the EU by bolstering its defence efforts in NATO, even more than it has already promised to, it is not certain that it will be politically possible to do so. Even before France was hit by terrorist attacks in 2015 terrorism was a top priority for the UK and British national security might have to focus on efforts to combat terrorism.

If the British economy weakens, with a lower GDP growth than expected, the public might prefer government

spending to be directed at the national welfare institutions, such as the National Health Service, rather than at defence investments. If the UK spends less on defence, the UK might come to struggle to preserve its influence within NATO. NATO structures might change. For example, the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, DSACEUR, has often been British. If such posts are given to other nations the character of NATO will be ever so slightly altered.

The international role of the UK has diminished since the Second World War, but the country still regards itself as a major global actor. Participation in European integration provided post-imperial Britain with a safe port in a world of sometimes stormy geopolitical changes. Brexit means that the UK is trying to establish a new role. In the short term there might not be much change to the UK as a leading NATO member. However, in the long run there is little to prevent the UK from losing its status as a medium sized power. It could become a lower ranking power, while remaining as a member of the alliance. If the UK should shrink – by Scotland leaving the UK – or if the UK's economic circumstances are reduced that is not an unlikely outcome. In fact, the UK gradually relinquished its imperial role over several decades. Likewise the UK could also give up on being a great military power, but that would mean giving up the British independent nuclear deterrent and the country's seat at the Security Council in the United Nations. However, it would not necessarily happen all of a sudden, but could be the result of a process of managed decline. Nevertheless, the ambition to remain a middle power with a global reach may be precisely what is needed to keep the UK together.

### **UK in the cockpit of history**

Brexit might be a harbinger of things to come. It is possible that with Brexit the UK has left an EU that has peaked as a force for economic growth and regional stability. According to some of the leading Brexit supporters leaving the EU provides the UK with an opportunity to prepare for a multipolar world without being hamstrung by the EU. However, some of the schemes concerning an alternative role in a so-called 'Anglosphere' might prove to be a mere pipe dream. Nevertheless, the UK can be expected to try to make the most of all its Commonwealth connections.

The question is whether, in the future, 'geography is destiny', as classical geopolitics suggest, or if Britain will return to a traditional approach of building key relationships far beyond the shores of Europe. It depends on whether former Prime Minister David Cameron's was right when he, before the referendum, warned: 'Whenever we turn our back on Europe, sooner or later we come to regret it. We have always had to go back in, and always at a much higher cost.'<sup>1</sup>

The alternative to heading that advice is for the UK to increase both its economic and its military commitment to far flung regions. In fact, throughout history the British have been primarily a sea-faring country. Something easily forgotten when thinking about the role of the British Army on the Rhine during the Cold War and recent complaints that the British army risks becoming the smallest it has been since the Boer war. But in 2021 the first of its two new aircraft carriers, HMS Queen Elizabeth, will be available. The aircraft carriers constitute an expeditionary capability and as such a bargaining factor for the UK's participation in the EU's future CSDP missions – if the UK is invited to join these. The new capability could also provide essential power projection for coalitions of the willing. The new carriers can perhaps also be used by the UK to build up a role as a security provider, for example further afield in the Persian Gulf where the UK is building a new base.

Brexit is a bet that by leaving the EU the UK has put itself in the cockpit of history in an attempt to control its own destiny. The bet is based on the assumption that globalization continues apace and countries like the UK are better off belonging to new security and trade networks with countries far away rather than in regional groupings. The bet may fail. Developments in the last few years, indicate that tomorrow's multipolar world heralds a return to great power politics dominated by superpowers and possibly powerful regions. Then countries like the UK are better off by safeguarding their economic and military security together with others in their own neighbourhood – in the British case in Europe.

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1. Cameron, David, 'PM speech on the UK's strength and security in the EU', gov.uk online, 9 May (2016).