

Towards a not so Great Britain? Consequences of a Brexit

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Against expectations the British conservative party attained a majority in the latest general election in May. Prime Minister David Cameron now has to live up to his promise to hold a referendum on the UK's EU membership before the end of 2017. First the new government needs to negotiate new terms with the EU and the other member states. Eventually, this year's election result may lead to a British exit from the EU, a so-called Brexit.

The risk of a Brexit translates into a two year period of uncertainty for both the UK and the EU. Such prolonged political strain is undesirable at any time, but especially so when Europe faces geopolitical challenges due to Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the crisis in the Middle East and North Africa. At present the UK is still recognized as a great power, but will it be tomorrow?

Should the UK exit the EU it leaves behind more than European integration – it risks its great power role. The UK has always required a larger international context to sustain its claim of being a great power. In the past it had the Empire, which was a trading emporium protected by military power. Today NATO provides the UK with an essential framework for its defence efforts. The EU, however, provides a market as well as an economic anchoring in a turbulent world. With a Brexit both the UK and the EU face considerable problems.

The UK leaving the EU could result in the further fragmentation of two unions, the EU as well as the union of Scotland and England. Scotland prefers to remain in the EU. A Brexit increases the likelihood of another referendum on Scottish independence and the potential divorce from the UK. Also, a Scotland outside the UK might be less interested in maintaining the nuclear weapons facilities for the British nuclear deterrent.

For the EU the UK leaving could mean that more countries will head for the exit. There are other potential difficulties for the EU if the UK leaves. Germany would be strengthened politically by a Brexit. However, neither Germany nor other remaining EU members would necessarily welcome the increased importance of Germany relative others within the EU. France would be the only

great power left in the EU that could act as a counterweight to Germany.

For the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) the consequences of the UK withdrawing would be limited. The CSDP is already running at low speed and neither the European Council meeting on defence in 2013 nor the Russian annexation of the Crimea have succeeded in giving new impetus to the EU's defence cooperation.

A majority of the EU members hold dual membership in the EU and NATO and many of them see both organisations as crucial for European security. If the UK exits the EU those countries will not easily forget that the UK undermined their geopolitical position, especially in view of a more assertive Russia. This could complicate relations between the UK and other NATO members.

For the UK to have any wherewithal in military matters it needs to cooperate with others. The UK might face a challenge in maintaining its level of defence spending amongst other political priorities. Even at the present level of spending the UK is orientated towards cooperating with others with regard to development of military capabilities and commitments overseas.

A UK outside the EU would probably want to deepen its bilateral cooperation with France and the US, and multilaterally within the framework of NATO. In theory, at least, France has made cooperation easier by reintegrating into NATO. French-British bilateral cooperation has been a priority for David Cameron since 2010 with the signing of the Lancaster House Treaties. Nevertheless, France traditionally known for giving priority to the EU will be less likely to pursue joint defence efforts with the UK if it no longer is an EU member.

The US wants the UK to remain in the EU. In order to remain a military power of any relevance the UK needs to keep its close military relationship with the US. The US, however, seeks the political support of the UK in world affairs much more than it requires British military assistance. For example, the US would not like to see discussions about a Brexit disrupt the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations. The UK



is regarded as an important American ally, especially as it often perceives international affairs in the same way as the US. In terms of American strategic considerations, the EU is a much more important partner than the UK could ever become.

Although the UK considers itself a great power, it is not willing to take the lead on any major international issue. During Cameron's time in power, the UK has opted for a less active stance on the international stage, focusing more on trade than on current security issues, at least since the intervention in Libya in 2011. In the coming two years the government will have to focus on the UK's future in Europe. As a major European actor the UK has been notably absent with regard to the annexation of the Crimea and developments in Ukraine. If the government wants to ensure that the UK remains a great power it needs to keep the UK in the EU. The UK's status as a great power is less likely to be questioned if it remains an EU member.

The upcoming referendum on the EU will be a balancing act for Cameron who is an advocate for continued membership in the EU. He must – seemingly without passion for the issue – convince the electorate and his own party that a continued membership will be in the UK's best

interest. The Cameron government will struggle to get an agreement with the rest of the EU that is palatable both to conservative party back benchers and the electorate as a whole. Cameron will be helped in convincing his party if he explains that EU membership might be the only way in which the UK can continue to be a great power.

EU membership is important for European great powers. It supports their position in an increasingly multipolar world of new rising global powers and regional trading blocks. If the UK wishes to remain a great power it needs to strike a deal that steers UK-EU relations away from 'ever closer union' but keeps the UK's open access to the free market of the EU. In a worst case scenario the UK risks ending up like Turkey – troublesome for European politics but always dependent on EU policies.

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