

The International Impact of Brexit

by Nicholas Westcott

The domestic and European politics of Brexit have understandably dominated discussion in the UK parliament and media. Yet Brexit will have a profound international impact on the world at large. This needs to be better understood, as Britain will be living with the consequences for decades to come.

The advocates of Brexit have argued that it will have little impact on the UK's international standing. The Prime Minister says we are leaving the EU, not Europe, and that we will continue to seek the strongest security and foreign policy links with other European countries. We maintain one of the largest and most effective militaries in Europe, alongside France with whom we coordinate closely; we will remain a leading member of NATO and of the Commonwealth, will retain our Security Council seat, and are still the seventh largest economy in the world and one of the largest aid donors as well as being a world leader in sport,

language, literature, culture, the arts and all aspects of soft power.

Some may concede that Brexit might cause a temporary blip in Britain's international engagement while we sort out the departure arrangements, but nothing a little Dunkirk spirit cannot overcome. We will then be free to pursue what the former Foreign Secretary called our buccaneering tradition in world affairs, and the Defence Secretary has spoken boldly of the Royal Navy once more patrolling the South China Seas.

Sadly, this misunderstands the way the world works, just as the UK's negotiations with the EU revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of how the EU itself works.

Brexit constitutes a fundamental change in British foreign policy – in practice a complete reversal – while posing great risks to the liberal multilateral world order that the UK

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purports to defend, and on which it will be increasingly dependent to exercise future influence.

The contradictions between the rosy prospects painted by the Brexiteers and the cold, hard reality of world politics will become swiftly apparent, though by then it will be too late to do much about it.

The Second World War revealed starkly the depth of Britain's dependence on the US, but this country has nevertheless been adept in managing its relative decline while remaining a global actor. Dismantling the empire before it started costing too much and joining the Common Market were two masterstrokes of British foreign policy, along with our unstinting support for the mechanisms of multilateral diplomacy – the UN, the Bretton Woods institutions, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and NATO.

The EU is part of that mix, in fact the lynchpin of maintaining a stable neighbourhood in Europe. Margaret Thatcher and John Major were the architects of the UK's successful relationship with the EU: sorting-out the budget costs, building the single market, supporting enlargement and creating a variable geometry that kept us out of much that did not suit us.

The UK has profited enormously, both economically through inward investment and the export of goods (e.g. cars) and services (especially financial) not only to the rest of the EU but through its free trade deals to the rest of the world, and diplomatically through the amplification of British

foreign policy. Many EU members acknowledge that the UK has played a disproportionate role in defining and implementing the EU's foreign policy.

The UK has continued to "punch above its weight" in world affairs because of its alliances – with the US on one side, and the EU on the other. That is what gave heft to our positions in the UN, NATO and the Commonwealth.

Both those alliances are now called into question, by an "America First" nationalism in the US which is likely to outlast Trump, and by Brexit. For all the bluster of the Brexiteers, far from demonstrating our strength, Brexit illustrates our weakness, as already shown clearly to the world in the exit negotiations themselves. In reality, since the referendum Britain has been punching well *below* its weight.

Brexit will impact the world in four areas: Britain's image; its relations with the EU; the EU's own role in the world; and the solidity of the multilateral structures we so value. In global terms, the beneficiaries of Brexit are not the UK nor the EU, but Mr Xi, Mr Putin and Mr Trump.

Britain's international credibility has taken a hard hit. To renege on signed treaties and ditch your friends of 40 years leaves a mark. The shock and disillusion of other EU member states has resolved itself into a resignation that the UK is no longer acting rationally and there is nothing they can do about it. Yet, this image is further tarnished by pushing a mantra about "global Britain" that is clearly contradicted by everything other countries read in the

media about what is happening here. The only ones deluded are ourselves.

Secondly, for all the Prime Minister's pledges of warm and close relations with Europe after Brexit, trust has been lost and will take time and effort to restore.

With another five years or more of fractious trade negotiations to follow our formal departure, good relations with the EU will not be restored swiftly. There will always be something to argue about, and inter-state relations are all one ball of wax: it is never easy to argue furiously on one thing and cooperate intimately on another, even with friends as close as France and Germany. So even where we agree on foreign policy issues – on Russia, China or the Middle East – cooperation will be less easy than it was.

This, thirdly, will also weaken the EU in the world. British membership gave the EU collectively greater weight, greater reach and wider contacts, to our mutual advantage. In speaking with one voice on trade, sanctions and human rights, the EU was able to exert significant influence in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Africa. This will be harder to organise after Brexit, and the EU voice may sound less like Britain's than it did, losing some of the influence and balance the UK brought to bear.

It is not in Britain's interests for the EU to be weaker on the world stage: we will be weaker acting separately than together, and outside parties will be happy to drive wedges between us. No one will be happier than Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin who both seek to weaken the EU by all possible means, for

their own advantage. Former German foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel, has eloquently made this point.

This highlights the fourth challenge: that in leaving the world's most effective multilateral institution, which was a model for others, the UK is significantly weakening the multilateral system as a whole at a time when its integrity is seriously under threat. It is wrong to argue it will make no difference: it will significantly weaken the very system we depend on.

To tout the benefits of the international rule of law while pulling out of the most successful example of it in action, partly because it provides for supranational jurisdiction, smacks of a hypocrisy which is not lost on others, even if lost on the Brexiteers themselves.

All this will have consequences for the UK, the EU and others. The international environment is no longer benign. Those who prefer the law of the jungle are gaining ground on those who advocate the international rule of law, and the big beasts of that jungle will not hesitate to bully the small that need to stick together if they are not to be eaten for lunch.

Though Brexiteers like to think of Britain as a big beast, sadly it is not. A country that can barely afford the aircraft to put on its aircraft carrier, let alone the fleet necessary to protect it, will scarcely inspire fear or respect in others. Post-Brexit, the UK will be in a profoundly vulnerable international position, deeply divided internally and with no coherent foreign policy – at sea on a rudderless raft.

There are choices, of course: to cosy up to a US ally who has made it increasingly clear that any alliance must be strictly on their terms; to curry favour with authoritarian governments from Beijing to Riyadh in the hope of some economic advantage; or to eat humble pie and hang close with the European friends we have just turned our back on.

No doubt we will keep warm relations with our old friends Japan, Switzerland, Australia, Canada, India and the rest of the Commonwealth. But that is not a foreign policy; it will not assure our security or our prosperity.

There are three ironies in all this. Firstly, in weakening ourselves and the international system that protects us, we will weaken our own claim to a leading role in that system. When UN reform finally comes about (which may be sooner than we think), our permanent membership of the Security Council will be hard to defend. As David Cameron found out, a veto is only useful if you have the power to enforce it. Britain will not.

Secondly, Brexit reveals the truth that true sovereignty comes not from autonomy but from participation, not from ditching your friends, but from keeping them close.

Thirdly, to continue to play the global role we aspire to and keep our economy growing, Britain will have to open its borders to *more* visitors and immigrants from the rest of the world, not less.

So the whole exercise will have been in vain. Unless of course the dying wish of the ageing British middle class is to end its days in a comfortable nursing home by the sea, wearing its slippers, and slipping gently into international irrelevance while a world in disorder creeps ever closer to the front door.

There is time to change this fate. But not long. The die are almost cast. To endorse the Prime Minister's misbegotten deal will set the seal on Britain's decline and fall.

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