

UNDERSTANDING BREXIT'S REASONS AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPACT ON THE FUTURE OF THE WESTERN ALLIANCE

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The Brexit referendum of 23 June 2016 will be remembered for some time to come as a turning point in the politics of the United Kingdom (UK), the European Union (EU) and the Western alliance. Although historical reasons for Brexit go back to decades, the outcome of the referendum was to a certain extent still unexpected, with a relatively small margin of the population voting in favour (52%). The challenges that were ultimately faced in the process of the UK's divorce from the EU were also unanticipated. By January 2021 Brexit was officially concluded, but it also became clear that the shape of the UK's relationship with the EU and its ramifications for Western Alliance will continue into the future.

Why Brexit?

The reasons for the Brexit referendum can be traced back to the early foundations of the EU. When European nations first conceived of integration after the Second World War, Britain had maintained its distance. Although the UK changed its opinion in the 1960s, it became a member of the Community a decade later in 1973 after France's veto was lifted. However, scepticism toward the EU in Britain continued, with the first referendum on the matter held only two years after accession. Within the EU, the UK also opted out of areas of integration, such as the Schengen area, the common currency, or contributions to the EU budget.

This uneasy balance within the EU was in part due to the UK's self-identification as a European nation that can project its power globally through its historical Transatlantic and Commonwealth connections. Thus, when the financial crisis hit in 2009, Euroscepticism gained ascendancy in the UK with more dramatic outcomes than the rest of the EU member states. The Conservatives proposed to hold a referendum on the matter also due to the strains on the UK's two-party system. While the combined votes of the Conservative and Labour parties dropped to their lowest share in the previous elections, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), campaigning for Brexit, had taken over the Liberal Democrats as the third largest party in the 2015 elections. When considered against this backdrop, the decision to hold the Brexit referendum in 2016 was the culmination of a series of long-term developments.

The Process of Brexit

Although the decision on the referendum was in the making, the challenges an actual Brexit would lead to were barely discussed. This was, in part, because no other member country had attempted

to severe ties with the EU and, in this respect, this was a new experiment. During the referendum campaign, voices that pointed out that the UK was already selectively out of EU's several areas of integration (and therefore was in an ideal position) fell on deaf ears. The Remain camp focused on the economic risks of Brexit while the Leave campaign stressed immigration and the possible financial and security gains that Brexit would bring to the UK.

Yet, in the nearly half a decade between the referendum outcome and the UK's actual break up from the EU, it became clear that "disintegration" was far from an automated process. The difficulties of disentangling rules and regulations after membership are common to all EU countries, but the UK also faced additional complications due the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In the absence of the four freedoms of the single market, the undesirable outcome of a hard border was avoided only by establishing checks between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and thus drawing a border within the UK. The incompatible preferences of the UK and the EU also became an impediment in the Brexit negotiations. The hopes of the UK to choose some of the benefits of the single market (such as the free movement of goods, capital, and services), but avoiding others (such as the free movement of people and complying with the EU's rules and regulations) were frustrated by the EU, leaving the signing of a free trade agreement between the UK and the EU as the only acceptable option for both parties.

Consequences for the EU and the Western Alliance

It is hard to foresee how Brexit will change the EU's internal dynamics, the foreign policies of the UK and the EU, and the Western Alliance of nations. Bearing in mind that the UK and the EU would continue to reconsider their relationship, three possible outcomes in the medium-run can be listed.

First, the exit of one of the most populous and largest economies from the EU would have an impact on the relationship between the remaining members and institutions. Witnessing the difficulties of a complete divorce, the fear that more countries may decide to leave the EU has not materialised, at least for the time being. On the contrary, the voluntary removal of an awkward member opened the possibility of further integration in areas that lagged relatively behind. Common security and defence policy appears to be a zone of such further integration. There were already steps taken, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), to pool defence resources within the EU. These efforts can be accelerated in the near future, increasing the defence capabilities of the EU in its neighbourhood. While such integration can work together with NATO, it can also be parallel to it, reducing the effectiveness of the Northern Alliance.

The impact of Brexit on NATO is further complicated by the fact that the UK was an EU member that also prioritized its relationship with the United States. The intermediary role of Britain had been significant for Europe, which relied on NATO for its defence in the aftermath of the Second



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World War. The future American position on NATO would also be critical in determining the significance of the alliance in the changing international context. However, the EU losing a Transatlantic member will have effects not only on the EU but also on NATO and potentially even on the dominance of the West in the international order.

Finally, with Brexit, the EU also found itself surrounded by three leading neighbours, namely Russia, Turkey, and the UK. These neighbours project their power globally in an extended scale. Unless the EU finds new ways to cooperate with these nations in a mutually understanding manner, it will find itself circumvented to a narrower neighbourhood in the Mediterranean and its Northeast. In addition, internal dynamics of the EU may result in a new division of labour between Germany and France taking more proactive roles in economy and foreign policy, respectively. As the only EU member with a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, France would be able to increase its influence in foreign affairs as long as it can also galvanize support from other EU members. The future consequences of this evolving new condition have already been witnessed in the Eastern Mediterranean as France has taken on a more active role.

Lessons and Conclusions

An overview of the reasons behind Brexit reveals political and cultural dynamics internal to the UK. However, the process of negotiating Brexit has also exposed important lessons on the difficulties of European “disintegration.” For the EU project itself, Brexit became as a watershed moment. Combined with the ongoing refugee crisis and predicaments caused by COVID-19, Brexit will change the internal dynamics and external relations of the EU. Finding stability amidst multiple changes would take time and would depend on the decisions of EU member states. EU-UK relations will also evolve until a new status quo can be found. Until then, it would not be surprising to observe the weakening of the Western alliance and European powers with active foreign policy agendas to take on more leading roles in the EU’s immediate neighbourhood.