Brave new world?

Brexit Britain and its EU neighbours

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Britain’s imperial cultural residue has always expressed itself through reluctance about Europe, coupled with an obsession with the idea of British international leadership. With Brexit, Britain’s ‘go-it-alone’ syndrome has returned with a vengeance, writes Anne Deighton.

Brexit is a one-off British adventure with no agreed or self-evident proactive strategy that has created terrible uncertainty for the EU and the UK. Dropping the political pebble of Brexit into the pool reveals ever-widening ripples as the full implications of Brexit only now become clear.

What lies behind Brexit, this greatest of peacetime diplomatic challenges for the UK? The core questions seem rather simple. Why did this happen? Why are the diplomats taking this forward in such an antagonistic way? What outcomes can we expect? The answers to these three questions are related to each other, and can in part be explained by Britain’s own history and political culture. Of course, economic and social factors are vitally important, but I will explore the imperial and historical context of Brexit to find more clues about what is going on.

To state the obvious: every state that has become, or wishes to become a member of the EU has its own baggage of history. We cannot escape past empires. Europe was a continent of empires and conquests: some overseas, some land-based and nearer to home. By empires, I mean the domination – in some way – of one state over another. ‘Busy and bossy’ was one historian’s apt description of European states. Now, every state has to learn to understand and live with its past. But, ultimately, every state has also to learn to overcome and not be controlled by the historical baggage of that past, whether it was a state that was a colonizer, or colonized, or an outside observer of empires and their consequences. Only by understanding and thereby dealing with its past can each state genuinely be part of a common future. And there is not a single EU member state which does not bear either some of the traces of its own imperial past, or that of another state’s: traces that lurk in the perceptions and the sometimes the actions of governments. These contribute to our national identity: this matters, and dealing with it appropriately also matters. My argument is that Britain’s ‘imperial cultural residue’ has always expressed
itself through reluctance about the EC/EU, coupled with an obsession with the idea of British international political leadership, even as its vast global empire has slipped away over time.

Why?

The Brexit vote of 23 June 2016 changed everything for the UK. The British voted 52 per cent in favour of leaving the EU on a turnout of 72 per cent. We really do not know how robust and representative the June 2016 Brexit vote was. There is still lively discussion in the UK about the reliability of the result, relating to unregistered funding streams and to external interference via social media, but how the impact of these can be assessed is hard to ascertain. It was a very poor campaign on both sides. There was no serious national discussion about the EU role in justice, military and human security, education, R&D, the environment or European culture. There was no serious evaluation of the future of the UK in the wider world, of relations with Russia or indeed with the US mainstream, with China or the Middle East. In all, the campaign was marked by half-truths, innuendoes and deceptions, which academics, including myself and many others, tried to confront at the time.

Some have pointed out the differences in ages and educational attainment of those voting to remain and those voting to leave. Others have looked at the differences in voting outcomes between major metropolitan areas and more rural or coastal areas. Much ink has been spilled as to whether the Leavers were the so-called ‘left-behind’ – those for whom globalization and social change had worked out badly, and for whom the UKIP agenda had an attraction. ‘Leave’ may also have been in part a general protest vote – like we find in other referendums – against authority and the status quo.

However, the 23 June 2016 vote was neither just some politico-strategic blip, nor a vote that only had its roots in recent social and economic changes. The vote actually reflected a very profound and deep dimension of British political culture, revealing how desperately slow any process of cultural change has been in the UK.

Why do I say this? Wars can of course overcome empires and the imperial mindset, but wars can also reinforce past images of imperial glory. The EU was born of military defeats and occupation across the continent. Those defeats and the end of imperial dreams shaped the creation of the EU. Unlike its continental partners, the UK was not invaded in World War Two, and the US–UK wartime alliance formed the basis of a lasting – if rather one-sided – attachment to the US both during and after the war (America was of course our former colonial possession). Victory in the war also embedded a belief in the superiority of British values, leadership (as epitomized by Churchill), politics, legal systems, and a constitutional system that survived the war, unlike those on the continent. And then, between 1945 and 1955, the British really did hold a leading role, in the closest conjunction with the US, in the creation of a new international institutional order that still remains. The degree to which the memory and power of that success affects British political culture today cannot be underestimated. In many respects, we have not got over this yet.

Even as international and European institutions were being built after 1945, the
dismantling of the British Empire was underway, and this touched the British population more directly than European integration. While the OEEC, the Council of Europe, and the Coal and Steel Community were being discussed, Britain was disentangling itself from its empire - in India, Ceylon, Malaya and Palestine. African decolonization, then withdrawal ‘east of Aden’, were the backdrops to continental developments in the field of integration in the 1960s. Losing an empire left the British with a narrative of a sea-faring nation with close ties to the US through culture, language and economics. British political leadership was connected to the US through institutions and military power coupled with NATO (including nuclear weapons as the real hallmark of a great power). This gave it the capacity to balance power on the continent through the military occupation of West Germany. The French, also decolonizing, took a different course, using the European Community as a substitute locus for French power and prestige, while keeping a firm trade grip on their former colonial assets. The UK failed to grasp this European game-changing diplomatic initiative.

This meant that the UK had a difficult relationship with continental Europe, when the early movements for a European Union began. We rebuffed the early founders of the EU (then EEC/EC) in the 1950s, setting up alternative arrangements (EFTA), but then realizing that we actually had to join the EU in our own interest. There were both ideological complaints about the EU from the political left (the EU was not socialist enough), and nationalistic complaints (that it was more foreign than the Empire/Commonwealth and undermined national sovereignty). All the while, the UK never had a consistently pro-EU political party of any weight. Both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party have veered between favouring and disliking the EU. Both parties have applied for membership and opposed aspects of the EU, and both have run a referendum. (The 1975 referendum vote, held under a Labour government, was to stay in, but the circumstances and organization were very different then). British political parties have been very poor at adaption. It is a terrible irony that we have been much better at telling others to adapt, especially from communism to the post-communist world in Europe, than we ourselves have been at adapting.

When the UK finally decided to apply to the European Community (EC) – which by then was up and running – it took over a decade, from 1961 to 1973, to get accepted as a member, being twice vetoed by French President Charles de Gaulle. He completely understood our cultural distance from continental European integration, even as the US consistently wanted us to get into and then stay in what later became the EU – a trend observable from Kennedy to Obama.

Once we were in the EC, we started to try and reform it in our own image – especially in the area of foreign policy-making in the 1970s. It needs to be remembered that it was Margaret Thatcher who argued for an effective single market. Likewise, the UK has always favoured enlargement, but the unspoken subtext – denied in London – has been that enlarging might eventually weaken the core integration project. So our EC/EU track record has been patchy: the phrase ‘awkward partner’ is one that had great salience.

How?

How can policymakers manage Brexit? Thus far, we are doing badly. In Britain, as in every democratic country, domestic politics are inevitably intertwined with foreign policy.
Brexit has destabilized the party-political and constitutional structure of the country, and will continue to do so. Domestic pressures upon the Conservative government of Theresa May, a cautious Remainer, are as great as any prime minister has had to live with for well over fifty years. Her legitimacy as leader stems from the Leave vote for Brexit and the immediate resignation of David Cameron: she was selected without a final vote, as other candidates fell by the wayside. She chose to put three main Brexiteers into positions of responsibility - Boris Johnson, David Davis and Liam Fox. May has lost much of her legitimacy since the last general election, in which she lost her Conservative majority in the House of Commons. This has crippled her capacity to act.

There was no plan in London for how the UK might deal with a Leave vote. The possible ways forward ranged from a hard Brexit – where no deals are struck and we operate, we hope, through the WTO – to a soft Brexit, which has many varieties, although the models of Norway and Switzerland have largely been discarded. Some advocate a series of compromises and deals that veer between special deals for certain areas of the economy, and a new bespoke arrangement, still others want a complete re-think of the referendum decision. Fudge. We are undecided.

This isn’t a decision for the UK alone. Despite our rhetoric, the UK cannot set the terms of the negotiation. We have to realize that we will never get a better deal with the EU than that which we now have inside the EU. We already have opt-outs, budget rebates, no euro, no Schengen. We even had a remarkable promise in February 2016 that we could somehow opt out of ‘ever closer union’, a promise that has now been withdrawn.

Inevitably, British negotiators are still talking up the adventure to the UK public – not just in England, but also to voters in Scotland and Northern Ireland (which voted for Remain). We are still essentially talking to ourselves about the kind of country we are and wish to become. This reveals that Brexit has generated another spasm of British post-imperial angst – we do not want to be seen as weak, indecisive, declining and merely regional players. Brexit has to contain a positive message as well as the more negative, ‘leaving’ component: a plague on foreigners and experts. Britain’s post-imperial global leadership (‘go-it-alone’) syndrome has returned with a vengeance with the revived talk about the new global Britain. As the British satirists remark, we have been here before.

For the EU, the Brexit process can be very roughly depicted as an ‘enlargement in reverse’ negotiation, in which the EU - perhaps unconsciously - has established the rules of the game, and is now measuring the UK’s will and capacity to understand and play by these EU institutional priorities and rules. Of course, Brexit is a one-off for the EU, too; but EU strategy is to keep within procedures, and to develop them in similar fashion to that developed over the whole of the EC/EU enlargement process – albeit with a more demanding time-frame. Institutional consolidation and precedent-building remains vital. Giving way to one member state cannot become a precedent for the EU. Avoiding ad-hocery with the UK also reduces the pressures for a more de-stabilizing two-table game for the EU itself, because the Commission, and not individual states and constituencies, can lead on the formulae for the UK’s departure.

And then?

What will be the outcome of the Brexit negotiation? The historical record shows that to
project from the past to the future is an uncertain art, and that largely unexpected events ('paradigm shocks') are always possible.

The government has not said what precisely the sunlit uplands of a post-Brexit world may look like beyond some aspirations for free trade deals and greater bilateralism in foreign policy. While the long ending of Empire did indeed cause successive British prime ministers of both parties to resort to British leadership as an alternative trope, surely neo-imperialism is not a serious proposition? Yet British politicians still use the catch-phrase ‘leadership’ and ‘global leadership’ – often linked to ‘national interest’ – while Brexitors talk about single-handedly taking on global entrepreneurial leadership today. It is entirely relevant that Northern Ireland and Gibraltar, with their deeply imperial connotations are such delicate issues, as is unpicking the complexities of bases in, for example, Cyprus.

The first fear: any post Brexit policy will be contingent upon the UK managing not to suffer an economic decline that some have estimated could amount to as much as 4–6 per cent of GDP. If that happens, all bets are off.

The second fear: institutional unravelling. Political scientists tell us that we need states as well as powerful individuals to create international organizations. These institutions can then generate survival momentum. Interdependence between international organizations can strengthen them too. The UN, NATO and the EU have become part of the backbone of the western system, along with other regional and international institutions. They are in many respects interdependent for their own good functioning, and the sound functioning of the wider system. But states can also be destructive: as you pull out one thread from the fabric, you alter and weaken the rest. We may experience negative spillover through lack of confidence in policy, and maybe even the collapse of parts of the edifice of international institutions, although of course the trajectory of US policy is more significant than is Brexit to this possible outcome. Ironically, both the US and UK were global leaders in the decade after the War, when this web of institutions was created.

The third fear concerns the EU itself: Brexit has exposed the contingent nature of the EU and its reliance upon mutual solidarity and cooperation, boosted by a strict rule regime. I understand the EU’s negotiating stance to be largely driven by this need to sustain institutional solidarity within the EU, and not to set precedents for other discontented member states to follow. More positively, the EU is also now thinking about stemming the contagion of Eurosceptic and populist ideas. Its constitutional legitimacy and the old institutions are being interrogated; political and policymaking legitimacy on financial and other economic initiatives and EU-wide projects are under review.

However, integration has only flourished with economic growth and political will, especially in the face of other outside threats, as well as a generally positive view about the intrinsic worth of the project. This can-do, psychological effect is very important. The role of Marshall Aid on post-war reconstruction in the late 1940s and 1950s was vast, but as an exercise in boosting self-confidence in western Europe, it was even more spectacular. Today, the idea of one major member state actually leaving the EU will inevitably reduce confidence. Given the US pivot to Asia and the rise of China, Brexit may come to be seen as a negative when the EU is struggling for post-Cold War relevance in a
globalized world, and when it is itself demographically challenged. Decline in the role of existing international organizations would not necessarily happen quickly – but it could, especially if there are further exogenous shocks to the system. Ironically, if Brexit were to unravel and a long-term ‘fudge’ compromise were to be secured, this would be worse for both the UK and the EU than if we had had not embarked upon this route at all.

The historian’s fourth fear: will the western security dimension be affected? Of course it will. The UK has been at the heart of the existing western system: a founder member in the 1940s of the UN, the IMF, the World Bank, NATO, the Council of Europe and the OEEC (OECD). The UK is now a bridge to NATO and the US from within the EU (not the only one of course, but cultural and linguistic ties are still powerful). We should not exaggerate, but language, ‘western’ culture, plus the UN Security Council, nuclear power, Five Eyes, etc. are an integral part of how the security system works, and here the UK has a key role. The NATO thread has also always been much more powerful than the EU military security thread for the UK, and we can expect to see the UK seeking to strengthen the NATO dimension further.

But the UK’s own position is actually weakened if we are not inside the European part of the transatlantic security structure, and other states will quickly seek to replace our already heavily contested role. The most recent British policy paper on security attempts to deal with this issue, but I do not see how we will see the UK staying anywhere near the heart of Common Foreign and Security Policy. This works at both ends of the security process: first with the political, diplomatic and initiative-raising questions, that requires being pro-active as well as reactive; then training, Common Security and Defence Policy, leadership and coordination-training; no Europol or common arrest warrant; internal Justice and Home Affairs and border measures. Intelligence sharing also relies on trust as well as access to information. Brexit undermines the coordinated responses suggested most recently in the 2016 EU global strategy. If the EU does also indeed wish to pursue this line of joint and ‘necessary’ collaboration with the UK as a non-EU member, the issue of how policy changes are managed while the UK remains distant from the ECJ and the core decision-making processes have yet to be determined. But the real fear has to be a major crisis before the new procedures and instruments at the EU’s disposal are absolutely clear, especially if US policy shifts or the really sensitive areas around the EU’s borders hit a crisis.

The security dimension is not just in relation to external challenges. Moreover, there is a wider but delicate balance of power and interests inside the EU in all policy areas, not just security. The challenge for EU member states will be to smoothe over the consequences of this, rather than allowing old tensions to re-emerge. The international system is a harsh place where states have no ‘friends’, but only interests; much of the function of the EU, with the strong participation of the UK, has been to mitigate, manage, and contain competition between member nation-states – naming no names. The UK had become effective at this kind of balancing (to use the old fashioned term) within the EU; the prospect of it trying to balance from the outside once again is not promising. There is also much talk of the UK increasing the web of bilateral relations and alliances with EU and non-EU members in both trade and security areas. Such an approach has the potential to create reciprocal alliances, instability and overt competition, which was such a destructive feature of the first half of twentieth century Europe.
All this makes it very clear that a referendum can be a slippery and dangerous tool. The 23 June 2016 exposed the very worst aspect of taking a referendum route, at least in the UK. It was poor and lazy politics, with low content and planning, bad timing, and feeble presentation. Yet before we concede negotiations with the EU that may throw away fifty years of an emerging European global strategy, politicians owe it to citizens to consult again. It would be inexcusable not to take back any negotiation results to UK citizens, either through parliament, a general election or another referendum (although there are huge legal issues relating to this). A proper mandate for any proposed changes will be essential for a healthy democracy, and perhaps only a referendum will do.

This is, of course, deeply ironic, since I have argued that the cultural seeds of the 2016 referendum lie deep in the UK’s imperial past, the consequences of decolonization, and fear of European engagement, and Britain may only now be beginning to realize this. We in Britain have to get over our post-imperial syndrome, hopefully without a decline into petty nationalism, isolationism and economic slowdown. Indeed, several decades hence, we may find ourselves wanting to re-apply to the EU. But could our EU neighbours bear such a new twist in UK/EU relations?

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