

Perfidious Albion – Again? The UK, BREXIT and EU Foreign Policy

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Geoffrey Edwards

Abstract

The paper explores factors behind the critique of the UK as being perfidious and awkward. It examines Britain's core beliefs of being a global rather than merely a European power, of having a special relationship with the United States, of being internationalist in terms of trade and, somewhat paradoxically, of taking pride in being pragmatic. These beliefs have led to the rejection of blueprints for integration and a preference for bilateral cooperation rather than multilateral relationships. Post-BREXIT Britain will be confronted with potential dilemmas if the Franco-German tandem leads to closer cooperation on security and defence within the European Union and in cooperation with NATO, especially given an unpredictable United States under President Trump. These dilemmas and Britain's preoccupation with the consequences of BEXIT suggest that it will have minimal influence on Europe's future.

Keywords: BREXIT, European Union, foreign policy, global power, special relationship, pragmatism, influence, United Kingdom

1. Introduction

Perfidious Albion – again! It is a term long used by the French to describe the British in their countless wars and rivalries over the centuries, but used, too, by Germans not least in the period leading up to the First World War (Schmidt 1953). The frequency of its use points to a paradox: Britain is often seen as unreliable, but this perception also indicates a certain consistency and continuity in British policy, not least towards Europe. And, indeed, the UK has been termed the ‘awkward partner’ in Europe ever since it finally arrived as a member of the European Community (EC) in 1973 (George 1989). British behaviour may not, in fact, have always been so out of line with others who have, at some points, proved equally individualistic – though perhaps the British have taken it further than most of its partners, given its opt-outs (and opt-ins!) on Schengen, justice and home affairs, and the euro. But what has been different is the British pride in, and sense of entitlement to, being difficult – especially on the part of the popular press, for instance, *The Sun* (of ‘UP YOURS, DELORS’ fame, its headline of 1 November 1990). In the media and on the part of government, it has so often been a case of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ rather than being a party to building a European consensus on a particular issue, or even simply building Europe.¹ For the duration of the UK’s membership of the EC/European Union (EU), Europe has never been presented as an integration project, merely as a transaction between states that, too often, was portrayed as to Britain’s detriment. It was a sentiment easily commandeered by the BREXITERS in the form of ‘taking back control’ from Brussels.

Of course, all states, including the Member States, inculcate a sense of exceptionalism on the part of their publics, whether a sense of patriotism, nationalism, or simply a distinctive identity, via their education systems, their traditional media and other institutions. The British, and especially the English (this written by an Anglo-Welshman) seem especially exceptional, even when compared to the French, to the point of actually invoking Article 50 of the EU Treaty to leave the Union. So why have the British proved so exceptional – and again, especially when compared to the French who are also of course a former Imperial power with their own sense of *grandeur* and position in the world?

What follows hopes to explain this puzzle and its consequences. I have divided the text into four parts: Britain’s core beliefs; how these have impacted on the UK’s relations with the rest of Europe – i.e. accounting for the ‘awkward partner’ description; potential British policy post BREXIT; and the potential impact on the EU.

2. British core beliefs

Starting with British core beliefs, the first conviction is that Great Britain is a global power. This is not only recognised symbolically in Britain’s retention of a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, but also in its ability to project force overseas (especially once its aircraft carrier, H M Queen Elizabeth, is actually in operation after 2020), and its maintenance (despite continued cuts) of an extensive diplomatic service that has the reputation of being a Rolls Royce among diplomatic services. Whoever is in charge of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) (and the present incumbent, Boris Johnson, may not have quite the *gravitas* of some of his predecessors), on key issues such as BREXIT, trade, counter-terrorism, migration, Foreign Secretaries have lost influence to other ministers as well as to the Prime Minister). But there is a firm popular (and elite) conviction, well reflected in the media, that Great Britain punches (or should be punching) above its weight.²

¹ As in the case of John Major in December 1991 who returned from the Maastricht Treaty negotiations, winning an opt-out on the euro, claiming he had won ‘game, set and match for Britain’, or David Cameron in his use of the veto in December 2011 on any EU Treaty reform – a strategy which John Redwood, a prominent sceptic, called ‘excellent statesmanship’ and, further: ‘Europe knows that it is dealing with a prime minister who will say no.’ (*The Economist*, 2011a)

² A term often attributed to Douglas Hurd when Foreign Secretary in 1993. For its use see, for example, *The Economist*, 2015.

The logic of this is that Britain is internationalist or global in its approach and not simply European. It may no longer be at *the centre* of Churchill's concentric circles of Commonwealth and Empire, the Anglosphere with the United States, and Europe (Harvey 2011), but it continues to emphasise its unique position as a member of the Group of Eight (G8) along with its membership of NATO, the OSCE, as well as the EU, and the Commonwealth. William Hague, when Foreign Secretary, tried 'to put the C back into the FCO' (Hague 2011b), but without any conspicuous success (*The Economist*, 2011b). Six years later, though, Theresa May, as Prime Minister, speaking to the Republican Party in Philadelphia in January 2017, reverted to the theme by evoking Britain's close relations with the Commonwealth, through history, as well as kith and kin – thereby including not just the old dominions of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, but also India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (May 2017).

Mrs May was, of course, the first foreign leader to meet the newly-elected President, Donald Trump, in Washington. The special relationship has many dimensions, but one of the most important – for the British – has been its evocation of global leadership. Mrs May mentioned this some seven times in her Philadelphia speech, as in, for example:

'the leadership provided by our two countries through the special relationship has done more than win wars and overcome adversity. It made the modern world. The institutions upon which that world relies were so often conceived or inspired by our two nations working together [...]. As Americans know, the United Kingdom is by instinct and history a great, global nation that recognises its responsibilities to the world. And as we end our membership of the European Union [...] we have the opportunity to reassert our belief in a confident, sovereign and global Britain, ready to build relationships with old friends and new allies alike [...]' (ibid.).

It may not have been a particularly modest claim, but it was designed to win over a President who had emphasised 'America First' in his electoral campaign, and it won enthusiastic plaudits from its audience. It was like manna to the British tabloids (it was welcomed by *The Sun*, 2017, for example, as 'A New Dawn').

The special relationship with the United States (US) has been a key element in British policy over the last 40 years, both bilaterally and through NATO. It has been regarded by the British as providing a vital transatlantic bridge – regardless of accusations of being an American Trojan Horse from America's 'oldest ally' (i.e. France). And, of course, the relationship had brought huge benefits as far as the British were concerned, not simply in the sense of so often being cast as America's 'most trusted' ally (most notably during the Bush-Blair years) but, particularly, in terms of shared intelligence. There were sometimes elements of paradox – not least in the Brexiters' rejection of President Obama's advice that the UK was valued *especially* because it was an EU member state (*The Telegraph*, 2016), even while presidential candidate Trump appeared to give strong support to Britain's exit. Nonetheless, there was a suggestion of desperation in May's visit, given the uncertainties of Trump-tweeted policy, to gain as early a consultation with the new president as possible. The tenor of the May speeches was in marked contrast to that of Tony Blair; in place of the Blair attitude that the UK could not let the US go it alone over Iraq (see, for example, Weaver 2016), in May's case the message was rather 'don't let England be left alone'.

A third core belief again follows logically. If Britain is internationalist, a critical element is that it is in favour of free and open trade. This bulked large in the referendum campaign, with claims that the EU was holding British traders back (Johnson 2016a). The fact that Germany and the Netherlands were able to cope and expand their trade with the rest of the world was not discussed despite EU negotiations being likened to riding "a vast pantomime horse' with the member states pulling in different directions' (ibid.).

At the same time as these elements have remained constant, the UK has taken pride in being pragmatic. Much is usually made of the adage of a nineteenth century prime minister, Lord Palmerston, that 'nations don't have permanent friends or allies, they have only permanent interests'. So the British tend to dislike blueprints, especially federal ones, on the basis that the national interest is best served only by looking at the merits of the case. This means, of course, that as governments and circumstances change – not least with the seeming unpredictability of election results – the UK becomes unpredictable.

3. Britain and the EU's Common Foreign, Security and Defence Policies

There has, therefore, been consistency in terms of British suspicion of and opposition to European federalist blueprints or moves to create a sense of a European identity in foreign policy. From a British perspective, EU membership has always been transactional, often seen in simple cost-benefit terms. A common European foreign policy has been welcomed when it multiplied Britain's voice and complemented British interests; on the other hand, it has been criticised, or impeded, if it was deemed to undermine either of them. William Hague (2010) illustrated the consequent tension when he was Foreign Secretary. In 2010 he declared that the EU could play

'[...] a crucial role in enabling the countries of Europe to work together to face the vast challenges of this century: the maintenance of our global competitiveness, the problem of climate change, the grim facts of global poverty and the need for the nations of Europe to use their collective weight in the world to deal with foreign policy issues.'

But, as he was later to argue:

'It is right that it [the EU] can be an extension of our influence in the world, but it is not a substitute for it [...]. The External Action Service does not mean that we do not need British diplomatic posts or a British diplomatic presence, which are the only ways to be sure of advancing the interests of the United Kingdom [...].' (Hague 2011b)

The Cameron government of 2010-15 had drawn up a *Review of the Balance of Competences between the United Kingdom and the European Union* (HM Government 2013) in an attempt to draw the sting from the growing Eurosceptic clamour in his party. Though not framed in the most enthusiastic language, the report on foreign policy concluded that, given the increasing interdependence of the political, security and defence aspects of international relations, and the broader aspects of foreign policy, the benefits of working together outweighed the disadvantages. And it listed the key benefits of acting in concert, especially when Britain, France, and Germany acted together (*ibid.*). Sadly, as an evidence-based piece of work, it was quickly consigned to political oblivion. What the Review reflected, though, was that the UK had always cherished – and relished – its own alternative networks. Apart from a (declining) Commonwealth link, these connections obviously included the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as the body to go to first on any security and defence issue. This was clear from the Franco-British meeting at St. Malo in 1998 which kick-started the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) (Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance de l'Europe 1998). As far as Britain was concerned, the EU's CSDP was never to challenge NATO primacy – hence, among other things, the UK's rejection of an EU Defence Headquarters. A further, equally important network was that of intelligence-sharing, the so-called 'Five Eyes' group, led by the United States, which was especially important on counter-terrorism (Dearlove 2016; see also Lander 2004).³

Yet, where possible, as in the relationship with the US, the British prefer a bilateral approach over multilateralism. Even within the European defence and security field, this was reflected in the Anglo-French Lancaster House Treaty on both nuclear and conventional force cooperation. The whole point of the Treaty was that it was outside the EU framework; as Liam Fox, one of its negotiators, put it, it was an opportunity to have 'defence cooperation with a country inside continental Europe that had nothing to do with the EU' (quoted in Pannier 2016). Interestingly, a close bilateral relationship has rarely been managed with Germany. And, indeed, in the early days after the BREXIT vote, there was even talk over going beyond Germany to Poland (Mrs May, for example, visited Warsaw in July 2016 though she was clearly reminded of the significance of Polish workers in the UK, as well as the importance of the security

³ Sir Richard Dearlove, a former head of MI6, was satisfied, though, that on intelligence sharing: 'if Brexit happened, the UK would almost certainly show the magnanimity not to make its European partners pay the cost.' (*Prospect Magazine*, 6 March 2016)

relationship; *Daily Telegraph*, 28 July 2016). Within the EU framework, itself, the British have not always been particularly good at building from the bilateral to working coalitions – there has perhaps been a tendency for successive prime ministers to see good personal relations as a substitute for policy agreement. But it was not surprising, given the UK's frequent show of reluctance or opposition to any further deepening of cooperation on CSDP matters, that BREXIT has come to be seen as an opportunity to overcome what the German Defence Minister called the 'paralysis' in Europe (*Reuters*, 13 July 2016).

4. Post BREXIT?

If the Balance of Competences Review had it more or less right, then there are a whole range of issues where the UK, having up-loaded its concerns while a Member State, will want to continue to cooperate with the EU27. Mrs May herself, when Home Secretary, was keen to ensure that the UK opted into participation in EUROPOL, the Schengen Information Systems etc., in the interests of more effective counter-terrorist policies. Her successor, Amber Rudd, has continued this support. Whatever the strengths of the Five Eyes in intelligence cooperation, the British Government clearly believes that, in the face of threats posed by, say, returnees from the conflict against Daesh in Syria, and elsewhere, it needs cooperation on police data, as well as intelligence. Similarly, it is likely to wish to continue cooperation with FRONTEX, especially in the Mediterranean and beyond, and on cyber security, and so on. Britain has also been a strong supporter of EU sanctions against Russia over the Ukraine and Crimea crises; it has strongly supported the opening of the Chinese market, while being the most ardent supporter of Chinese investment into the UK.

While the UK, along with others in the EU, has seen China in terms of economic opportunity, this perception contrasts markedly with the US view of China as a threat, or at least a challenge. In addition, there are transatlantic differences over the Iran nuclear agreement, over climate change, protectionism, and so on. Theresa May might appear to have straightened President Trump out about NATO on her January visit (Sparrow 2017), but there was no endorsement of Article 5 of the Atlantic Treaty during his attendance at the NATO Summit in May 2017 (*New York Times*, 2017). There may be old NATO hands in Trump's administration and in Congress, but it is still an uphill struggle to engage the President. At the same time, under EU High Representative Mogherini and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, there seems to be ever closer coordination between the EU and NATO, which makes for further complications in Britain's security and defence policies. There may well, therefore, be tensions in a post-Brexit UK-US relationship, even if that relationship will remain central to the British government. And with the added complications in the relationship with the EU, it is even more difficult to see how a post-BREXIT Britain, outside the EU Council room, will be able to maintain its favoured position as the transatlantic bridge.

Britain is, of course, 'open for business' with Liam Fox, the Trade Minister, trailing around the world, touting for trade. Significantly, in public at least, the rhetoric creates the picture of queues of states waiting to sign new trade agreements with the UK – though whether the US will be first in the queue to sign an agreement or last has been the matter of speculation (see for example *Forbes* 23 April 2017). Nor has British optimism been at all diminished by Mrs May's reception in India when faced with the prospect of having to negotiate an increasing number of visas for Indians in return for trade cooperation (*BBC*, 2016). Until March 2019, it is, therefore, highly likely that the UK will be a strong supporter of EU trade and investment agreements with Japan and others on the basis that they will provide a useful basis from which the British might be able to negotiate their own post-BREXIT agreements – presumably on the (questionable) assumption that it, with a market of 60 plus million, can win similar concessions as the EU with its market of 500 million.

Nor is there yet in the UK, though it is beginning to dawn, much recognition of the unknown costs of a hard BREXIT – i.e., there is no agreement on the 'divorce' and a reversion to WTO rules without any agreement, as well as a falling pound, rising inflation, and a generally tougher economic climate. There also appear to be ever more divisions within and outside the government. Given Britain's ever-aging population, its still limited housing stock, and a health service at breaking point – waiting perhaps not for the £350m a week promised by the Leave campaigners, but at least for some better funding – it is

not surprising that prospects look a little gloomy. At the same time, however, as the British Foreign Secretary claimed, 'Britain is back East of Suez' (Johnson 2016 b), with Mrs May adding on her visit to the Middle East, 'I am determined that we should seize the opportunity to get out into the world and to shape an even bigger global role for my country [...]' (*Bahrain News Agency*, 2016). It will be interesting to see how the global political and the national economic views are reconciled.

5. The impact of BREXIT on the EU and its foreign, security and defence policies

Will BREXIT be the 'liberation' of the EU27 from the shackles of a half-hearted, awkward partner? Is this the Franco-German moment, given the agreements on HQs, and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) (see, for example, Chase 2017)? There is almost a consensus that the combination of the election of President Trump and BREXIT creates the need for change; as German Chancellor Angela Merkel put it, Europe could no longer 'completely depend' on the US and the UK, so that '[w]e Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands' (Henley 2017).

Yet, despite all the activities over the last year, there are still grounds for doubt that the Franco-German tandem will actually be the motor that we may hope for. President Macron has to show results, especially in the economy, that will win the French away from Marine Le Pen. Furthermore, there are still some distinctively different voices within both Germany and France on closer defence integration. It would be ironic if Britain came to be missed as the easy scapegoat for inaction, but the tandem also has to neutralise or assuage the Eurosceptic governments, as well as parties in Poland and Hungary, who on security and defence look more to NATO than perhaps to the EU. The United States under President Trump may be an outside federator as often in the past – though this time negatively in dividing opinion, rather than positively. But Russia, too, is an important factor, frequently adding to the divisions and tensions in Central Europe, the Balkans, and the Mediterranean. Some things may not change much with the UK being absent!

6. Conclusion

The UK is going to be preoccupied with BREXIT for the next two years and more. It may well encourage further introversion if Remain prophesies come about, given the increase in hate crimes, inflation etc. The passage of the 'Great Repeal' or Withdrawal Bill will be difficult for a minority government. One certainty given its behaviour during the referendum campaign is that, as the BREXIT negotiations get tougher, the British media – perhaps encouraged by elements within government, especially from the 'hard BREXITERS' – will seek to discredit the EU, and its actions at every turn, challenging its legitimacy. Such a reaction may be dismissed by everyone else in the EU as sour grapes, but to the extent that the British narrative is carried in other national media, it may contribute to existing scepticism and the volatility of our publics.

Externally, tensions are likely to arise in the special relationship with the United States under a more unpredictable president – despite the likelihood of increased dependence on the US under Boris Johnson et al.

Still, it is clear that over the past decades, and especially this last one, the British have constructed an identity that still emphasises their *distinctiveness* from Europe rather than being part of it. Similar discourses are not absent elsewhere in Europe – Britain has not always been exceptional nor the most awkward. But while BREXIT will continue to preoccupy British politics, it is already clear that the EU27 are looking towards a different future. Britain 'missed the bus' back in the 1950s; it is again seemingly determined to ensure it has only minimal influence on what Europe's future may be.

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