**Britain and the World after Brexit**

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**Abstract**

‘Brexit’ – Britain’s forthcoming exit from the European Union (EU) – can be understood as a series of related material and ideational processes. These processes served to bring about the ‘Leave’ vote in the referendum of 23 June 2016, and will continue to shape subsequent outcomes: both the Brexit settlement that is eventually negotiated, and Britons’ satisfaction (or otherwise) with such a deal. Building on Tim Oliver’s recent article in *International Politics* (2016), this essay contends that the most suitable targets for future research into the causes of the Brexit vote include the economic and cultural distortions of globalization and the factor flows associated with it, public and corporate policy failures over more than three decades, a strong public attachment to representative democracy, and distinctive conceptions of Britain’s role in the world. The article then progresses to consider the potential UK national security implications as the Brexit process unfolds. It suggests that – while such implications should not be overstated – plausible outcomes could include the fragmentation of the UK and its collective defence effort, diminished political and fiscal capacity for national security policymaking, and a less benign regional security environment, including the possibility of a federal ‘United States of Europe’ eventually dictating terms to Britain.

Keywords: Brexit, European Union, Britain, defence, globalization, democracy

**Introduction**

‘Brexit means Brexit’: the message from Theresa May, the United Kingdom’s fifteenth post-war prime minister, could not have been clearer as she prepared to take office, twenty days after Britain’s historic 23 June 2016 vote to leave the European Union (EU) (Cowburn, 2016). The intended meaning was ostensibly simple. Despite having campaigned – reluctantly and half-heartedly – for Britain to remain in the bloc (Bennett, 2016), May will head an administration that does indeed lead the UK out of the EU, without resorting to a second referendum to avert Britain’s exit (‘Brexit’).

Yet as commentators subsequently revelled in pointing out, it is far from clear – beyond mere tautology – what ‘Brexit means Brexit’ itself means (Crace, 2016; Menon, 2016a). Despite then-Prime Minister David Cameron’s 2013 assertion that his referendum gamble would finally ‘settle this European question’ in UK politics (Mason and Waterfield, 2013), it is now open to political contestation and negotiation as to what question British voters have actually answered with their 51.89 percent decision to leave the EU. Britons rejected the EU for many reasons – and 62.54 percent of the electorate did not vote to reject it at all[[1]](#endnote-1) – so different citizens will expect different things from the eventual exit settlement.

Every aspect of the post-ballot preparation for Brexit has subsequently become fraught with acrimony. Even as many in Parliament, the media, the general public, and abroad sought clarification on the terms of Brexit that the government will pursue (McTague, Oliver, and von der Burchard, 2016; Sparrow, 2016), a vocal counter-coalition – and, initially, the government itself (Merrick, 2016) – resisted such disclosure, lest Britain weaken its negotiating position by ‘showing its hand’ (*The Guardian*, 2016; Goodman, 2016). Even as the High and subsequently Supreme Courts began parsing the question of where constitutional authority to withdraw from the EU lies (BBC News, 2016c), so these legal proceedings became the focus of pro-Brexit rage against alleged pro-EU elite attempts to subvert the ‘will of the people’ (Phipps, 2016). Hitherto vehement critics of the EU on the grounds that it undermines UK parliamentary sovereignty and legal supremacy have latterly criticised these same institutions, inhabiting a paradoxical tension between attachment to Britain’s constitutional establishment and fear that that same establishment is being used by well-informed and -resourced pro-EU insiders to overturn the referendum result (Allegretti, 2016a). The victorious ‘Vote Leave’ campaign premised largely on keeping the favourable aspects of the European Single Market without the perceived migratory or budgetary downsides (Allegretti, 2016b) is now invoked as a mandate for severing such Single Market membership (Wilkinson, 2016; May, 2017), as May prioritises immigration control and ending the UK jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) over market access.[[2]](#endnote-2) A fractious government is at odds within itself over the version of withdrawal to be sought (Parker, 2016; Owen, 2016). Brexit, in short, may mean circa 17.4 million different things to those who voted for it, a further 16.1 million to those who voted against it, and all manner of things to those ineligible to vote in the referendum – due to age or nationality – but who will nonetheless be affected by its consequences.

As a result, even assuming that May’s proposed March 2017 deadline for triggering the two-year withdrawal negotiation timetable of the Lisbon Treaty’s Article 50 is met (Elgot, 2016) – and recent endorsement of this timetable by her political opponents makes this more likely (Sparrow, 2016) – it is beyond the reach of any single scholar, think-tank, journal article, or indeed prime minister to offer reliable predictions of the final Brexit deal that will eventually unfold. Such an observation should be uncontroversial: Britain’s membership of the EU is part of a complex system, characterised by many layers of political, economic, and social interaction effects, both domestic and international (Jervis, 1997). Any attempt to achieve the linear advancement of some unitary ‘national interest’ by simply rescinding a treaty is therefore likely to yield multiple unforeseen consequences, both positive and negative (Edmunds, 2014). This is why referendums have long been recognised as problematic vehicles for settling complex policy questions (Taub and Fisher, 2016; Lowe and Suter, 2016; Friedman, 2016; Rampen, 2016a), even conceding that the fundamental constitutional question of who holds legitimate authority to govern merits democratic input of a kind that may, arguably, be provided only by a direct plebiscite.[[3]](#endnote-3) For every chief executive of a German car company desperate to see the continuation of unimpeded exports to Britain, there will be Poles demanding continuing migrant worker rights and Spaniards seeking negotiations on the status of Gibraltar. Developments elsewhere in the EU, in UK domestic politics, and in the wider world – Donald Trump’s America, Vladimir Putin’s Russia, and an economically decelerating China, in particular – will continually modify the power and preferences of both EU and UK negotiators. Before any of the stakeholders decide how to best ‘play their hand’, to continue the poker metaphor, they will first have to decide what game they are actually playing. That decision may itself be hostage to intersubjective dissonance and change, furthermore, both over time and between various actors. Any assessment of the progress of Brexit negotiations, either formal or tacit, presented in an academic article will thus be out-of-date even before it is published – at least until March 2019, and possibly beyond.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In the hope of nevertheless imposing some semblance of systematic analysis on this fast-shifting morass, therefore, Tim Oliver’s helpful recent suggestion in the pages of *International Politics* (2016) is that Brexit be conceptualised not as an event, but as a process. In such a vein, this short essay seeks to offer initial answers to two sets of related questions. First, what sets of ongoing material and ideational processes – and relationships between them – led to the referendum result? And second, what potential implications for Britain’s national security situation might begin to manifest themselves as the Brexit process runs its course, complete with second- and third-order contingent effects on the constitutionally complex political construct that is the United Kingdom? The article does not purport to offer a comprehensive analysis, but is merely another step towards identifying the key questions that Brexit raises for policy and scholarship, so as to identify targets for further research. It also takes no view on the desirability or otherwise of Brexit in the round, seeking only to parse its underlying causes and potential strategic implications.

The article concludes that some of the most potent causes of the 23 June result – and thus some of the most significant targets for future analysis – include the economic and cultural pressures of globalization and the cross-border factor (especially labour) flows associated with it, systematic failings of public and corporate policy, a justified attachment to representative parliamentary democracy, and powerful conceptions of Britain’s role in the world. It further concludes that while the security implications need not prove the calamity that many hysterical pundits have suggested, they nonetheless merit caution. Such possibilities include the fragmentation of the UK and its collective defence effort, diminished fiscal and political capacity for national security policymaking, and the possibility of a less benign regional security environment: including, potentially, one that contains a federalising ‘United States of Europe’ capable of dictating terms to London. Again, however, we will only be able to provide decisive answers to such questions once further data materialise.

**Where did Brexit come from?**

As many commentators have already remarked, the referendum result – and the acrimony that has followed its announcement – illustrates starkly that there are two Britains (Curtice, 2016). When disappointed supporters of the campaign to remain in the EU (hereafter, ‘Remainers’) took to social media in the days following the result to declare that they ‘don’t recognise their own country anymore’ [sic] (Penny, 2016), a statement intended as a reprimand also served as a tacit admission of ignorance – including, it must be said, on the part of many professional scholars of politics. There is a Britain for whom the EU has meant continent-spanning professional and educational opportunities, the boom of UK high-skilled service and knowledge sectors, and cheaper coffee and home improvements (because of the influx of low-wage baristas and builders). And there is a Britain for whom that same mass migration has meant seemingly stagnant real wages, increased professional insecurity, and cultural dislocation (Blinder, 2011; Nickell and Saleheen, 2015; Clarke, 2016).[[5]](#endnote-5)

Pro-globalization Remainers’ indignant contention that the EU has grown Britain’s overall economic output, through high-skilled immigration and reduced trade barriers – while correct (Springford, 2013; Cavalla, Corfe, and Davis, 2014) – does not offset the charge that those same factor flows have produced severe inter-regional and inter-sectoral distortions that public policy has failed catastrophically to ameliorate (Overman and Winters, 2004; King, 2016). The same charge can be levelled at ‘maximum globalization’ enthusiasts around the world (Rodrik, 2011), as witnessed by the sharp rebuke to that neoliberal consensus delivered by US voters via the election of Trump (Keen, 2016). The two camps have found violent agreement in the echo chamber of social media, hardening entrenched positions (Daykin, 2016). That both sides played fast and loose with the truth at times, egged on by a partisan and little-censured media,[[6]](#endnote-6) further diminished the quality of debate. The Leave campaign’s claim that Brexit would free £350 million a week for healthcare spending – immediately repudiated in victory (Stone, 2016a) – has become particularly totemic. Misleading conflation of the Mediterranean refugee crisis with EU labour migration deserves similar opprobrium (Devine, 2015).

Material interests, then, tell much of the story: it has not escaped notice by plenty of those who voted to leave the EU (hereafter, ‘Leavers’), for instance, that many of the virtue-signalling ‘Twitterati’ have decided that democracy is not so great after all, now that 17.4 million people whose existence they neither knew nor cared about have voted to curtail their economic opportunities (Taibbi, 2016). The EU’s inflation-busting budget growth demands during an era of severe fiscal consolidation in member states were similarly noted by Eurosceptics (BBC News, 2011). But material interest is both a complex story in its own right, and only one element of the whole tale.

Labour migration in the post-Cold War globalization era has indeed done much to harm Western working class living standards, consistent with Heckscher-Ohlin trade theory (Neilson, 2015; Krugman and Obstfeld, 2006, pp. 54-87): not only wages, but employment conditions and – of particular ideational potency – communal esteem too. Of course, the form of labour movement that has done *most* to harm those living standards is not in*ter*national *within* Europe but in*tra*national *beyond* Europe: specifically, the movement of hundreds of millions of Chinese workers from fields to factories, exported via manufactured goods (Bivens, 2013). That is not what British voters were offered a referendum on, however. Instead, they were effectively offered a proxy ballot on a cosmopolitan, metropolitan, London-centric elite consensus in favour of unfettered factor-of-production flows that had been sustained by both (right-liberal) Conservative and (left-liberal) Labour governments continuously since 1979 (Prasad, 2006) alongside a short-termist corporate culture (Skidelsky, 2013; Warner, 2016) that has preferred cheap labour imports to long-term investment in human capital.[[7]](#endnote-7) And they rejected that consensus (Harris, 2016; Jack, 2016; Kirby, 2016), despite warnings from that same elite – derided by Leavers as ‘Project Fear’ (Skinner, 2016) – of the very real risk of grievous economic consequences (BBC News, 2016b, #1). The perceived association of the ‘mainstream’ media with this same elite establishment has further impeded the delivery of nuanced, non-partisan information on the complexity of the cases both for and against Brexit – witness the accusations of BBC bias by *both* sides of the campaign (Efstathiou, 2016; Dixon, 2016). One does not need to be personally poor, moreover, to feel that one’s country is changing unfavourably, both in terms of regional/sectoral wealth disparities *and* cultural dislocation. This is why some op-ed commentators’ rush to proclaim that ‘it was immigration, not poverty’ (Salam, 2016) versus others’ declarations that ‘it was poverty, not xenophobia’ (O’Neill, 2016b)[[8]](#endnote-8) produces such an unhelpful dichotomy, appropriate to the age of clickbait punditry but missing the more complex socio-economic interaction effects between wealth and socio-cultural change.[[9]](#endnote-9)

There is more to it still. Many of those who voted to remain in the Common Market in the referendum of 1975 voted to leave the European Union in the referendum of 2016. In the deluge of classism and ageism by the educated young that has followed the result, this group has largely been dismissed as an elderly alliance of the ignorant poor and bigoted tabloid-readers sat atop generous pension pots and lucrative property portfolios (Williams, 2016).[[10]](#endnote-10) But plenty of Leave voters – including the highly educated, young, and Southern, as well as the less educated, old, and Northern – also balloted as they did out of a considered opinion that the EU has evolved into an undemocratic, federalising project that many never expected the Common Market to eventually become.[[11]](#endnote-11) There are clear economic drivers for this federalisation: as the Eurozone crisis has shown – and as many warned in advance (Feldstein, 1997; Obstfeld, 1997) – monetary union requires market and fiscal similarities to function well (Krugman and Obstfeld, 2006, pp. 548-575; Johnston and Regan, 2016), and such fiscal union in turn necessitates some form of political union if it is to be governed. Yet recognising the drivers of such federalisation does not stop it being deeply unsettling to European citizens, only a small fraction of whom put European identity ahead of national identity, as Eurobarometer polling demonstrates consistently (European Commission, 2014, pp. 10-14). Indeed, this ideational disconnect between federalising EU elites, who embrace the idea of ‘ever-closer union’, and national citizens who do not explains why the EU’s democratic deficit cannot be solved simply by ‘more democracy’.[[12]](#endnote-12) British voters, like many of their continental counterparts, do not just want a *more democratic* European Parliament (say) – they are uncomfortable, rather, with *any* federal body taking precedence over their national legislatures. And it is undeniable that European law supplants national law in certain domains (Menon et. al., 2016a); a critique not diminished for its adherents by the retort that such European law was opted into by national legislatures (Freedland, 2016a).

The politics of the referendum campaign itself also bear causal significance in explaining its outcome. Both Leave and Remain were coalitions of contradictory interests (Larison, 2016). The latter contained both enthusiastic Euro-idealists and ‘reluctant remainers’ with little love for the EU as an institution but a belief in its material benefits, which made for an underwhelming campaign to simply maintain the status quo. The former, meanwhile, having triumphed in June, must now somehow content a coalition of pro-globalization free traders (who believe that Brexit will unshackle British capitalism from Brussels regulation) and anti-globalization nativists (who hope that Brexit will protect them from the wage-depressing and community-altering effects of unchecked labour, capital, and goods flows). Just as Trump could not have won without the votes of both rich pro-business Republicans *and* economically disenfranchised whites[[13]](#endnote-13) – a coalition that may struggle to be simultaneously satisfied in victory, given their mutually contradictory policy preferences (Sherman, 2016) – so too Brexit could not have been secured without a coalition of longstanding Eurosceptics, many of them affluent and educated, *and* disaffected protest voters. Despite having ‘won’ in June 2016, therefore, one or both components of this coalition may emerge bitterly disappointed from the eventual Brexit settlement.

Sticking with the politics of the referendum campaign, personalities look likely to have played a critical role too (BBC News, 2016b, #4-6): it is hard to imagine a Leave victory in the absence of Boris Johnson’s charisma, for example.[[14]](#endnote-14) Indeed, an alleged paradox of the campaign’s personal dynamics was that it saw Jeremy Corbyn (Labour) pretending to be pro-EU in order to retain control of his party (O’Neill, 2016a), making for a lacklustre Remain campaign on the left, whilst Johnson (Conservative) pretended to be anti-EU in the hope of winning control of his (Demianyk, 2016). Not unlike Trump’s successful presidential bid in the United States, the irony of privileged millionaires and close-to-government society figures backed by oligopolistic media moguls posing as anti-establishment champions of the marginalised was lost along the campaign trail. The vocal pro-Remain wings of both major parties also bore the taint of association with the policy failures of government, particularly the pro-immigration consensus (without adequately offsetting social policy) of liberal-centrist Labour, under Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and liberal-centrist Conservatism, under Cameron and his powerful finance minister, George Osborne. As noted above, the centrist ‘mainstream’ media also bore taint by association with this same liberal establishment consensus, driving recourse to more partisan news sources. And for their part, other EU leaders failed to offer meaningful concessions to Cameron during his attempted re-negotiation of Britain’s EU relationships during late 2015 and early 2016 – the re-negotiation that he hoped would assuage Brexiteers’ demands for repatriated powers (Wright, 2016) – failing to appreciate the severity of the bloc’s crisis and believing that Britons would ultimately vote Remain anyway.

Rightly or wrongly – this author thinks rightly, for what it’s worth – Britons still think of Britain as a special country.[[15]](#endnote-15) Tellingly, *both* sides in the referendum campaign framed their positions as appeals to British greatness (Ellis, 2016); the belief that the UK still plays – and should play – an elevated role in the world is enduring and widespread (McCourt, 2014; Hill, 2016). Repeatedly holding the line against all of the great totalitarian aggressors of the modern Euro-Atlantic system and thereby saving liberal international order, whatever that conception has meant at the time, is part of the national historical consciousness. The narrative of standing alone against the Nazis in the dark days of 1940-41 is deeply engrained within living memory; not for nothing is Churchill ranked the greatest ever Briton in polls (BBC News, 2002). (Indeed, given this pride in standing against Nazism, recent calls for Britain’s liberal constitution, rule of law, and independent judiciary to be subjugated to greater partisan-political control are arguably the most troubling aspects of the whole Brexit process (Peck, 2016; Norman, 2016; Allegretti, 2016a; Phipps, 2016; Harries, 2016) – states can weather changed trade terms and external political relations and still prosper, but not if they destroy their freedom- and prosperity-creating domestic institutions in the process.) UK contributions to science, art, literature, education, music, medicine, law, media, language, sport and government have all been seminal historically. And while the British Empire did awful things, few of which are well understood among the electorate, that does not diminish its greatness in the minds of many Britons (Dahlgreen, 2014). Today, despite obvious decline since the zenith of UK power, Britain remains a cultural, political, financial, scientific, and military heavyweight across many metrics. This public self-perception, taken together with concern over the seeming creep of EU federalisation, seems to have added a further ideational component to anti-EU material considerations: the question ‘what did we win two world wars for, if we were just going to let ourselves be taken over by Brussels[/Berlin] anyway?’ has had enduring currency for the Leave campaign (Cole, 2016; Maddox, 2016).

**UK national security implications of Brexit**

Having reflected on some possible drivers of the referendum result, this section now progresses to consider potential security implications of the Brexit decision.[[16]](#endnote-16) The focus is on Britain itself, although possible consequences for the rest of Europe are touched upon in concluding. Again, this analysis does not pretend to be exhaustive; it merely seeks to identify certain key issues.

First, and most fundamentally, a popular definition of security in international relations focuses on state survival (Mearsheimer, 2001a, p. 31): the continued existence of the political entity that contains a certain territory and safeguards its inhabitants in an anarchic international system. Brexit increases the danger to the fabric of the United Kingdom, because of the different referendum results seen in Scotland and Northern Ireland compared to England and Wales (Macpherson, 2016). Having closed the book on Scottish independence with the referendum of 2014, at least for a generation, the Remain vote north of the border has seen the separatist Scottish National Party (SNP) voice calls for a second such independence ballot (Gourtsoyannis, 2016; Smith, 2016). Scotland’s 62 percent Remain vote was hardly the crushing mandate for independence that the SNP depicts: given relatively low turnout (67.2 percent) compared to the rest of the UK (BBC News, 2016a), only 41.5 percent of the Scottish electorate actually voted to stay in the EU, which is itself not the same question as whether to leave the UK – and support for another independence referendum reportedly remains muted (Carrell, 2016). Nonetheless, the outcome still creates the possibility of some of the 56 percent of Scots who voted to remain in the UK in 2014 (BBC News, 2014) eventually being persuaded to switch sides in a second ‘IndyRef’, especially if the eventual Brexit settlement deprives Britons of substantial material benefits (McEwan, 2016; *The Economist*, 2016c).

While not currently seeing such an energised pro-independence movement as Scotland, related questions now also exist for pro-EU voting Northern Ireland, given the potential economic and social damage of reintroduced border controls with the southern Republic (Humphries and Ferguson, 2016). Anything that disrupts Northern Ireland’s delicate political *status quo*, meanwhile, could yet prove the cue for a resurgence of dissident paramilitary activity (Morrow and Byrne, 2016). And whilst fervently pro-British, Remain-voting Gibraltar – a British Overseas Territory rather than a constituent part of the UK, constitutionally speaking – must now seek to safeguard its economic future, which depends on continued free movement over its border with Spain (Gatehouse, 2016). Madrid could also yet seek to make sovereignty negotiations a precondition for continuing UK access to the Single Market (Nazca, 2016). In short, attempting to parse and refashion the relations between constituent nations and territories in the aftermath of Brexit in a state already as constitutionally complex and *ad hoc* as the UK promises the mother of all politico-legal tangles,[[17]](#endnote-17) with ample scope for disintegration (Gordon, 2016). It will be a cruel irony if pro-Brexit voters who believed that their ballot would (re-)increase the standing of the UK instead bring about its demise.

More generally, the divisions between nations, regions, cities, districts, neighbours, and even families and friends exacerbated and solidified by June 23’s acrimonious outcome may have harmed Britain’s social compact in corrosive and long-lasting ways (*The Economist*, 2016a; Harries, 2016). The post-referendum classist sneering of Remain-voting Londoners at Leave-voting Northerners (Taibbi, 2016) – and conversely, the gloating triumphalism of many Leave campaigners at Remainers’ expense, despite little comprehension of the possible socio-economic consequences or willingness to do the legwork necessary to make a success of the result (Bloom, 2016) – are both cases in point. Such severe and sustained damage to the fabric of Britain’s ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 2006) – the idea of a cohesive nation, united in certain shared socio-political ideas despite the absence of direct interpersonal relations with the vast majority of other community members – will not be quickly or easily undone. And it may yet be exacerbated further, if Brexit’s economic fallout is used as a pretext for gutting Britain’s post-1945 social compact (Beattie et al., 2017). The tension between the two simultaneous truths created by the referendum outcome – that there is a direct-democratic mandate for Brexit *and* a representative-democratic mandate to scrutinise, modify, and subsequently legislate anything that changes UK law – is also exerting worrisome strain on Britain’s constitution.

Second, a more specific potential consequence of the previous general point could be the loss of the wider UK contribution to British defence. In the event of Scottish independence, this could manifest itself most obviously as the loss of existing basing facilities for Britain’s nuclear deterrent submarine (SSBN) force (often collectively dubbed ‘Trident’, in reference to the D5 missiles carried) (Chalmers and Chalmers, 2014) – another question that Unionists hoped had been put to bed for a generation by the pro-UK result in 2014’s Scottish independence referendum. The SSBNs themselves are based at HMNB Clyde at Faslane, while warhead storage and loading takes place nearby at RNAD Coulport. Taken together, this complex with its deep, protected waters and unfettered access to the North Atlantic represents a uniquely suitable base for submarine operations of all kinds, SSBNs included. Moving to an alternative location in England, Wales, or an Overseas Territory would be, at best, very expensive – and in the face of possibly limited governmental resolve, potentially infeasible given the political and fiscal costs involved.

Trident is not the only aspect of British defence that could be undermined by the UK’s fracturing, however. Scotland and Scottish bases form a crucial part of the UK’s air defence perimeter and maritime zone (HM Government, 2014). Numerous major platforms (such as warships) and munitions (such as naval heavy weapons) are built or stored in Scotland. Scottish regiments have long formed a core part of the British Army’s spine; as a tongue-in-cheek Army meme has it, ‘Bagpipes: because Europe wasn’t liberated by French horns’. Looking beyond Scotland, the same goes for Northern Ireland, from where several British Army regiments are still drawn. And Gibraltar’s naval base (including nuclear-capable Z Berths used by UK and US submarines),[[18]](#endnote-18) RAF station, and other military facilities are of significance to UK and NATO area control, maritime security, and power projection throughout the Mediterranean and *en route* to the Gulf. All of these dimensions of UK defence are therefore potentially put at risk by the Brexit decision and its fallout.

Third, if the economic shock of the eventual Brexit settlement results in economic deceleration – and if some loss of trading access, high-skilled labour movement, and inwards investment results in a lower long-term growth trajectory – the associated fiscal conditions may feed through to national security spending, and strategic capacity more broadly (Elliott and Fletcher, 2016; Chalmers, 2016). 2015’s Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) had been lauded for going some way towards reversing the cuts to UK conventional capabilities instigated by the equivalent Review of 2010 (*The Economist*, 2015). Crucially, a commitment was made to hold defence spending at NATO’s two percent of GDP target (Maclellan, 2015; Dorman, Uttley, and Wilkinson, 2016). The Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s budget was also held constant in real terms, defying expectations of further cuts to the Diplomatic Service (HM Government, 2015a). Brexit-induced economic headwinds may jeopardise aspects of this recovery in national capabilities. Two percent of GDP still means a smaller pot of money if GDP itself is smaller than it otherwise would have been. Weaker sterling also means diminished purchasing power on international defence markets. SDSR ‘headline’ promises – two new aircraft carriers, the regeneration of a maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) force, a new class of SSBNs, and so forth – are unlikely to be ditched, given the political costs involved in doing so. But areas where quantities can be quietly salami-sliced may be vulnerable: planned growth in the frigate and fast-jet fleets (HM Government, 2015b, p. 31) could be discretely reduced or abandoned, for example.

To be sure, the economic fallout of the 23 June vote has not yet been as bad as many had feared, following the Bank of England’s swift monetary stimulus and as market participants await details of what the Brexit settlement will actually look like (Irwin, 2016; Schomberg, 2016; Snowdon, 2016). Continued UK Single Market *access* – which is still the government’s goal, even with *membership* ruled out – may render the eventual effects muted, for instance, and businesses have been reluctant to incur the costs of relocating and thereby losing access to Britain’s other economic advantages if that proves unnecessary. But the fundamental circle of needing overseas investors to provide the financial account surplus that covers Britain’s yawning current account deficit (Cadman and Tatlow, 2016),[[19]](#endnote-19) needing market access to attract such overseas investors, yet (possibly) needing to make concessions to the remainder of the EU – many Brexiteers’ anathema – to secure such Single Market access remains to be squared (*The Economist*, 2016b). If it cannot be, an economic hard landing could still lie in store – and even if it ultimately can be, the game of scouring the Brexit negotiations for clues to possible outcomes will produce investment-complicating volatility through the medium term.[[20]](#endnote-20) If the government is forced into a litany of *ad hoc* ‘sweetheart’ deals to persuade major foreign investors to remain in Britain, moreover – as may have occurred with Nissan cars in October 2016 (Sims and Cowburn, 2016) – that will risk undermining the stable, rules-based, competitive business environment that has long been a key UK economic strength.

Fourth, Brexit and its uncertainties look set to dominate the political and policy agendas for the foreseeable future (*The Economist*, 2016b). While the ruling Conservative Party moved swiftly to install a new leader and thus prime minister, in keeping with its famed knack for power, thereby averting the worst possible post-referendum political instability scenarios, much remains to be settled (Freedland, 2016b). The Prime Minister has given notice of her negotiating priorities (BBC News, 2017), prioritising ECJ withdrawal and an end to unrestricted labour movement over Single Market membership. Yet at best, negotiating the terms of Brexit, seeking replacement trade relationships, and beginning the process of implementing its domestic ramifications in everything from EU-aligned legislation to agricultural and scientific subsidies will command a major share of state capacity for years to come (Colchester and Gross, 2016). Such government and associated media preoccupation may come at the expense of other valuable areas of foreign and defence policy attention: making the case for a substantial UK contribution to bolstering deterrence on NATO’s eastern flank, say, or fashioning a coherent Middle East policy, or plotting a war-free path between hard-line US and Chinese governments. Tellingly, Britain now has a Foreign Office, an International Trade Department, a ‘Brexit Department’, an International Development Department, a Defence Ministry, plus a Cabinet Office and a Treasury with elements of international remit, several of which have been engaged in bitter bureaucratic turf-wars (Hughes, 2016; Dominiczak, 2016) – hardly a recipe for joined-up foreign policymaking. Just as no academic conference will now be safe from the question, ‘yes, but what does Brexit mean for all of this?’, so too that query will colour every aspect of policymaking. Worse outcomes than mere political distraction remain foreseeable, moreover: the government may prove unable to arrive at a negotiated exit that simultaneously satisfies the disparate constituencies that make up the Brexit lobby in the face of an understandably resistant EU on the Lisbon Treaty’s two-year timeline, say, resulting in a loss of governmental authority that yields a rancorous, crisis-stricken general election.

Fifth, the day-to-day ‘trivia’ of European security cooperation will also become more complicated (Escritt, 2016). Europol’s information exchange databases and the European Arrest Warrant have both proven effective tools of counter-terrorism cooperation, and both are explicitly for EU members. Of course, access to both may yet be negotiated – a common refrain with all facets of Brexit, since we have so little idea what form it may yet take – but, at best, the sustainment of such cooperation will become more complicated.

Sixth, looking further into the future, Britain’s exit from the bloc removes the most substantial obstacle to further EU federalisation. An array of pressures – migrant flows in the absence of functioning state borders, the imbalances created by shared monetary policy in the absence of shared fiscal policy, countering radicalisation and terrorism, energy supply, environmental degradation, and so forth – incentivise some form of ‘United States of Europe’. Pushing against such pressures have been public sentiment – the fact that most Europeans still put national identity ahead of European identity and do not want to see their nation-states subsumed – and, until recently, the UK’s alternative, Thatcher-championed conception of the EU as an economic area rather than a federal political project.[[21]](#endnote-21) Others share Britain’s erstwhile vision, but none have London’s ability to oppose federalisation should Brussels, Berlin, and Paris align on its desirability.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Despite Britain having spent the past half-millennium as an ‘offshore balancer’ seeking to oppose the domination of continental Europe by a single major state (Blagden, 2015), therefore, Brexit increases the possibility of just such an outcome: a continent-spanning federal superpower able to dictate political and economic terms to the UK (Blagden, 2016a). Those terms may yet prove less than benevolent, moreover – Britain’s threat to turn itself into a tax haven (Nienaber, 2017) and closeness to the Trump administration (Fenton, 2017) notwithstanding – given the desire of many in the EU to ensure that Brexit is sufficiently painful for Britain to discourage other countries’ leave campaigners, given that the two-year negotiation window will be hostage to innumerable special interests in all 27 remaining member states, and given the determination even among those well-disposed towards the UK to ensure that exit delivers a less favourable deal than full membership (Henley, Rankin, and Asthana, 2016; Menon, 2016b). Indeed, for a government that so often invokes dangerous uncertainty in its external environment (Porter, 2016c), there has been a striking reticence to even contemplate the failure of Brexit negotiations or prepare for worst-case scenarios (Stone, 2016b; Nixon, 2016). Of course, London retains some potent sources of leverage in the relationship – including its defence and intelligence contributions via NATO, newly salient following Trump’s election (Blunt, 2016; Huggler, 2015), its possible attractions as a corporate headquarters (Nienaber, 2017), and its significance as a European export destination (Heztner, Gibbs, and Greimel, 2016) – and may yet use the desire of all sides to retain amicable western European cooperation to extract a favourable deal. Nonetheless, to observe this relative power imbalance between the negotiating parties – the *asymmetry* in their interdependence – is not to ‘talk Britain down’ (Drury and Burton, 2016); it is simple realism (Portes, 2015). And if reduced European leverage yields increased UK relative dependence on coercively self-interested US or Chinese regimes, that may not be a desirable outcome for Britain either.

Of course, Brexit aside, many other aspects of the EU are also far from healthy (Matthijs, 2017). With the strength of Marine Le Pen’s nationalist movement in France (Samuel, 2016), similar dynamics in Dutch politics (Lynch, 2016), crisis in Italy (Henderson, Palazzo, and Foster, 2016), mounting anti-immigrant sentiment in Germany (Dahlgreen, 2016) and elsewhere, plus enduring economic failings (Stiglitz, 2016) and looming financial risks (Mayer, 2016) in the Eurozone, there are good reasons for Britain to seek reduced dependence on a deeply flawed bloc. Indeed, Brexit in conjunction with these other vulnerabilities could yet prove the shock that leads to the EU’s unravelling (Rodionova, 2016) – a negative or positive outcome, depending on one’s perspective. Nonetheless, deeper EU federalisation remains a plausible alternative (Leach, 2016), and a degree of economic dependence on the Continent is an inescapable consequence of British geography. Furthermore, the remaining EU could seek to move beyond its current vulnerabilities by doubling down on further integration (Jones, 2016), bringing closer the federalised ‘United States of Europe’ that Britain has long opposed – witness the renewed recent drive towards an integrated EU military structure, which the UK government was still opposing even while preparing to leave the bodies that give it veto power over such developments (Barigazzi, 2016).

**Conclusion**

The acrimonious referendum result of 23 June 2016 can be understood as the result of several related material and ideational forces. These include the economic and cultural divisions and dislocations of globalization and the cross-border factor-of-production (especially labour) flows associated with it, systematic failings of public policy and corporate governance, a fierce attachment to representative parliamentary democracy, and powerful conceptions of Britain’s standing and role in the world. More flesh will of course be put on these initial bones of argument by subsequent research as further data becomes available. These processes did not ‘finish’ with the vote of 23 June, moreover: they will continue to operate, shaping both the eventual Brexit settlement and Britons’ satisfaction (or otherwise) with it.

Turning to UK and regional security, the security implications of Brexit must not be overstated, particularly not in the short-to-medium term. The EU did not cause peace in Europe; on the contrary, it was itself able to emerge under the benign security environment created by NATO, nuclear deterrence, and the American military guarantee, all of which remain intact (Mearsheimer, 2001b; Mearsheimer, 2010). Britain is not about to become some isolationist retractor from regional defence commitments, meanwhile, contra much of the punditry community’s hysteria;[[23]](#endnote-23) if anything, Brexit may cause London to double down on European security cooperation under NATO’s aegis (Baczynska, 2016). Indeed, a Europe of powerful, independent nation-states of the kind that Brexit may restore could yet prove a more effective check on external threats than an ever-more-integrated but increasingly weak and ineffectual EU (Grygiel, 2016). And Brexit is not some body-blow to ‘rules-based international order’, because international order has never been truly ‘rules-based’ anyway (Porter, 2016b), even in legalistic Europe – witness the Franco-German breach of the Stability and Growth Pact that paved the way for the Eurozone crisis, and thereby many of the EU’s present woes (Little, 2012).

None of this is to say, however, that the security implications of Brexit will necessarily be trivial either. The EU may not have caused peace in Europe, but it had nonetheless emerged as a useful forum for dialogue and collaboration on security matters. An additional source of tension and discord in European diplomacy will disrupt efforts to fashion effective, coherent solutions to regional and extra-regional strategic challenges: maintaining a united front on sanctions against Russia, say, or stabilising Europe’s Middle Eastern near-abroad. Anything that weighs on UK economic growth, meanwhile – either as a short-term shock or longer term readjustment – will reduce the levels of defence spending that the country is able to sustain. That may have negative implications for Britain’s own precariously over-stretched military posture (Davies, 2011); it could also have consequences for the rump EU that is left behind, given that Britain (along with France, which has economic problems of its own) has been the European country with the combination of appetite, proficiency, and wherewithal to make meaningful contributions to regional and extra-regional defence. The United Kingdom itself could yet cease to be united, meanwhile, if Scottish voters decide that they gain more from the European Union than the British Union. And looking to the longer term, if the EU’s response to its manifold political, economic, and military inadequacies is deeper integration as some form of federal superpower, then Britain may yet find itself in an uncomfortable position of extreme relative weakness, receiving terms from the continental hegemon that it always professed not to want.

Ultimately, with Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty still not yet even invoked at the time of going to press, what ‘Brexit’ will mean – from diplomatic chimera that leaves the substance of the present relationship intact (Stephens, 2016), to hard severance of even Single Market access (Wolf, 2016; Menon, 2016b; Nixon, 2016) – is still shrouded in uncertainty. The British government has still not yet decided what it wants from the negotiations – beyond the recently leaked, albeit easily inferred, desire to both ‘have [our] cake and eat it’ (Rampen, 2016b) – or even begun the official negotiation process itself, let alone settled what it is likely to receive. Britain could also yet be led by a different government, with a different attitude to the 2016 referendum result, by the time the ‘moment’ of Brexit actually arrives, and the final deal will need to be approved by Parliament (BBC News, 2017). Domestic tensions between the quest for unimpeded Single Market access (favouring a ‘soft(er)’ Brexit) and the desire to restrict immigration and avoid budgetary contributions (favouring a ‘hard’ Brexit) will weigh against each other, and be mediated in turn at the international level by external partners’ power and preferences. As a complex system incorporating multiple overlapping spheres of political, social, and economic life, both domestically and internationally, the interaction effects of seeking Britain’s extraction from the EU will be numerous, bitterly contested, and often unexpected. Confident assertions about the positive or negative consequences of Brexit – for security or anything else – should therefore be treated sceptically. As with understanding the causes of the 23 June vote outcome, this is therefore a question that we will only be able to systematically research once concrete data begin to roll in.

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1. **Notes**

   Based on 48.11 percent of voters choosing Remain, on an overall national turnout of 72.2 percent of eligible voters (Electoral Commission, 2016). For discussion of the associated permutations of non-voters’ perspectives on Brexit, see Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley (2016) and Low (2016). Of course, there is a case that those who fail to vote in a democracy have eschewed the chance to have their opinions considered. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Although it is not even clear that invoking the Lisbon Treaty’s Article 50 will also constitute withdrawal from the Single Market – yet more diplomatic and legal wrangling may be required to affect such an outcome on terms anything other than acrimonious unilateral withdrawal (Barrett, 2016). Single Market ‘membership’ versus ‘access’ may now become the key fault-line. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a nuanced treatment, see Qvortrup (2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For the most comprehensive extant survey of Brexit’s implications and outlook at the time of going to press, see Menon et al (2016c). For a valuable analysis of how the UK might actually set about leaving the EU, see Menon et al (2016b). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The production of macro-level evidence that weak recovery from the 2008-9 financial crisis is the primary cause of wage reductions (Wadsworth et. al., 2016) has not shifted the perception on the part of many UK workers that their wages could have recovered more quickly in the absence of an essentially unlimited extra-UK labour supply. Moreover, the broader point here long predates the 2008-9 crisis – the relocation of manufacturing jobs from industrialised to emerging economies dates back to the late Cold War, with the West’s enthusiastic embrace of Deng Xiaoping’s post-1978 Chinese economic opening and the subsequent extension of such globalization across the world following the Soviet Union’s collapse. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For a neat example of one side of the partisan press taking aim at the other over the EU, see Toynbee (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Interestingly, such divisions also hold within London itself, as well as between rich, globalized cities and the rest of England (May, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. In these commentators’ defence, there is more subtlety in their substantive analysis than in the headlines that their editors chose – another symptom of the clickbait age. Banal soundbites about ‘love’ versus ‘hate’ have been similarly vacuous, and may go some way towards explaining the liberal-left’s recent inability to generate persuasive traction (Prendergast, 2016; Brown, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In observing that both Trump and Brexit supporters have a greater preference for order and continuity, for example (Kaufmann, 2016), we need to parse the reasons – educational, financial, cultural, ideational, and so forth – why certain tracts of the country have such proclivities in greater concentrations. Selection biases are at work, of course – those with a disposition towards cosmopolitan, globalized living are more likely to *opt* for residency in London and other major cities, while those without such a disposition are likelier to choose rural or small-town life – but there are complex co-constitutive causal relationships at work, too. Parsing such relationships between social, cultural, and economic change in a way that goes beyond crude ‘either/or’ characterisations to make sense of the recently ascendant anti-globalization coalition, in Britain and elsewhere, will be a key challenge for future scholarship in this area. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ageism that is particularly unjustified if – as seems likely – a majority of the under-30 age group failed to vote in the referendum (Parkinson, 2016). Older age groups fulfilled their civic duty to democracy, even if a majority made a choice that has subsequently left many younger people unhappy. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For voters comparing the 1975 referendum and the EU’s subsequent evolution, see BBC (2005). That said, of course, there was already a federalizing drive at the European level by the 1970s (for example, Schumann, 2003 [1950]; Monnet, 1963), which Britain subsequently sought to resist (Thatcher, 2003 [1988]), and sovereignty was a key fault-line of contestation in the 1975 Common Market referendum just as it was in the 2016 EU referendum (Saunders, 2015; Saunders, 2016). For the democratic deficit as a motivator of at least one influential Leave campaigner, see Gove (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. On the EU’s democratic deficit see, for example, Follesdal and Hix (2006) and Terry (2014). For the counterpoint, see Majone (1998) and Moravcsik (2002). For an example of the sort of undemocratic, federalising elite behaviour that has rankled with European voters, see Waterfield (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Indeed, this is why the observation that the majority of Trump voters were not in fact poor (Henley, 2016) – which has been used to rebut the ‘working-class revolt’ thesis on his rise – is over-simplifying. The remarkable thing is not that wealthy, capital-holding voters (of all colours and genders) backed a Republican candidate, but that a sufficient share of the capital-lacking lower-middle and working classes (whites overwhelmingly amongst them) backed that same candidate – while others from the same economic classes failed to turn out to vote for a widely reviled alternative candidate, Hillary Clinton – to give him a winning electoral coalition. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. The significance of key individuals in causing a political shock of international-systemic importance further demonstrates the value of the recent renewed wave of scholarly attention to the importance of leaders in explaining major foreign policy outcomes (for example: Roth, 2010; Saunders, 2011; Yarhi-Milo, 2014; Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. As recently as 2013, even after the government’s failed attempt to win Parliamentary approval for military intervention in Syria on the back of post-Iraq/-Afghanistan public war weariness, 75 percent of Britons thought the UK should play a major role in the world to promote its economic interests, 65 percent thought the same to promote national security interests, 73 percent thought Britain should be a leading voice in NATO, and 78 percent thought the same of the UN Security Council (YouGov, 2013, pp. 7-8) – although 70 percent *also* thought the same of the EU! [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. This section of the article represents an expanded version of an invited submission to a roundtable on the causes and consequences of Brexit convened by *H-Diplo*’s International Security Studies Forum (Blagden, 2016b). The author is grateful to the ISSF Editorial Board for permission to reuse the material. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The United Kingdom has four constituent nations (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland), fourteen Overseas Territories, and three Crown Dependencies (see HM Government, 2012, for discussion). The UK Head of State, currently Queen Elizabeth II, is also head of state for a further fifteen countries. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. This is publicly available information (Nuclear Information Service, 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Post-Brexit sterling depreciation – a consequence of lower nominal interest rates and reduced demand for sterling-denominated assets – will facilitate such a balance-of-payments correction, of course, but at a price of inflationary pressure and reduced overseas purchasing power. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Small hints by key Brexit negotiation protagonists – such as those of autumn 2016 by Angela Merkel (Martin, 2016), François Hollande (Friar, 2016), Theresa May (Walker, 2016), Boris Johnson (Mortimer, 2016), David Davis (BBC News, 2016d), and Liam Fox (Dunt, 2016) – have all been minutely scrutinised, not only by both sides of the Brexit campaign decrying evidence of broken campaign promises, but also by jittery investors. This has resulted in sustained UK financial market volatility, stability-seeking investors’ anathema (Sky News, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. On Britain’s different vision of the EU, see Merheim-Eyre (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. On Britain’s erstwhile position as one of the EU’s three veto players, see Moravcsik (1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. For example, Klaas and Dirsus (2016). For a critique of the over-use of ‘isolationism’ as a critical charge on both sides of the Atlantic, see Porter (2016a).

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