

Will Brexit become another Munich or Suez?

*Brexit marks a seemingly decisive pivot away from Europe. This decision dominated not by a view of the future, but by a view of the past bears striking resemblance to the geopolitical blunders of Munich and Suez, the consequences of which were the opposite of those intended. **Nicholas Wescott** (SOAS) argues that those historical precedents do not bode well for the future success of the Brexit project.*

It is often only in retrospect that we can see the real impact of events which seem important at the time, but which define an unexpected new direction. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was immediately recognised as a turning point, but the proclaimed 'triumph of the West' has faded as American omnipotence and European hubris has turned into a more complex and volatile multipolar world with increasingly assertive authoritarian governments.

No-one would deny that Brexit is a turning point for Britain, though many have neglected its implications for foreign policy. It impacts our relations not only with Europe but with the whole world, and though we are turning, it is not clear in which direction. The mantra of a 'Global Britain' remains a slogan without a strategy, but the main message appears to be that Brexit marks a decisive pivot away from Europe. Yet it has uncanny similarities to two other turning points in recent British history: Chamberlain's flight to Munich in 1938 and the Suez crisis in 1956. In all three cases, decisions were dominated not by a view of the future, much less a strategy for it, but by a view of the past. In Munich and Suez, the consequences were the opposite of those intended. In the case of Brexit, we wait to see. But the historical precedents do not bode well.



Chamberlain (Public Domain)

Munich 1938

The appeasement of Germany pursued by the Conservative government in the mid-1930s, culminating in Chamberlain's ill-fated trip to Munich and his return with the now infamous 'piece of paper', was intended to avoid a war. Chamberlain himself had been deeply scarred by the First World War, a trauma in which many of his generation were slaughtered in the fields of Flanders. He was determined as Prime Minister to prevent a second such disaster and believed that no effort should be spared to avoid a breakdown in relations with a resurgent Germany that might provoke conflict.

Some argue that Munich merely postponed an inevitable conflict by some 12 months, enabling the government's rearmament efforts to prepare Britain better for war, especially in the air. Others argue that, far from postponing war, it made it more likely by giving Hitler the impression that both Britain and France had no appetite for war and were willing to make almost any concession to avoid it. He, therefore, proceeded with plans to invade Poland. At the time, Winston Churchill was the most prominent and outspoken opponent of appeasement, and history has broadly judged him to be right. If Britain had taken a tougher line in 1938, as Churchill urged, war just might have been avoided – though such conjectural history is always impossible to prove.

Nevertheless, Chamberlain's action at the time was popular. Many British people also dreaded another war, even if some believed it was unavoidable. Had the government chosen to put the question to a referendum, there is little doubt that the public would have backed the Prime Minister.

Of course, once Churchill had ousted Chamberlain, Britain proceeded to win the war – an event that has had an overwhelming influence ever since on the British psyche in general and Euro-scepticism in particular. Churchill, not Chamberlain, became the national hero. But even Churchill admitted that it was a damned near run thing and, like Wellington at Waterloo saved by the arrival of Blucher's Prussians, without US support through Lend-Lease and subsequently as an ally, Britain may not have survived, for all the mobilisation (voluntary or not) of its imperial resources.

So Munich heralded not peace but war, and a war that left Britain more dependent on the US and more fragile in its own empire than before – the exact opposite of what Chamberlain had intended by his flight to Munich.

Suez 1956

The extent of that dependence on the US was graphically illustrated by the Suez crisis. Ironically, Eden – who had finally achieved his lifetime ambition to become Prime Minister in 1955 – treated Nasser's decision to nationalise the Suez Canal as if he were a latter-day Hitler or Mussolini. His decisions were governed by a determination not to repeat the mistakes of appeasement, but also by an outdated view of Britain's empire, already slipping from its grasp, and of its global power. The Asian empire, to which Suez was the umbilical link, had largely gone. But conspiring with the French and Israelis, Eden believed a show of imperial strength could force Nasser from power. He was wrong. Nasser relished the challenge and the US, long sceptical of Britain's continued imperial pretensions, refused to support sterling which crashed, forcing the British to withdraw. Without US support, Britain no longer had the power to pursue an autonomous foreign policy in the Middle East. Focussed on the past, Eden had failed to notice that the world had changed.

There is no greater sin in foreign policy than exaggerating your strength and ignoring your weaknesses. You will inevitably be caught out, as foreign powers are less susceptible to the comfortable illusions that sway voters at home. Eden, for all his years as Foreign Secretary – or perhaps because of them – fell into this trap. Suez revealed starkly to the world, and to the UK Government itself, that the British lion was becoming ragged and losing its teeth. Far from heralding a reassertion of Britain's power as a global player, it precipitated the final end of the empire. Within a decade of Suez, it had effectively vanished, replaced by a Commonwealth of independent states which, whatever their residual affection for Britain, were determined to pursue independent foreign policies.

Eden resigned soon after Suez. His successor, Macmillan, proved an ultra-realist, but one able to take a forward rather than backward look. He undertook a serious strategic review of Britain's place in the world which revealed that the empire already cost more than it was worth and that the only way Britain could continue to project a global role and protect its vital economic interests was by joining the Common Market, which Britain had cold-shouldered during the Fifties. France, concluding after Suez that Britain was an unreliable ally, had accelerated negotiation of the Treaty of Rome to bind itself closer to Germany and its immediate neighbours, and through General de Gaulle's veto excluded Britain for a further decade.

One wonders whether had Eden or Macmillan also held a referendum to ascertain whether the British people *wanted* to dispose of their empire, they would have voted to keep it, imposing impossible costs on the country and condemning Britain to interminable and unwinnable colonial wars, as happened to the Portuguese.

Brexit 2016

Brexit too has been driven not by a vision of the future but by a mythical version of the past. The very slogan, to 'Take *Back* Control' appealed to a past that never existed and ignored a present that gave Britain more control over decisions that affected its national interests than any alternative arrangement (except on immigration, but even that had been contentious before Britain joined the Common Market because of the post-imperial right of Commonwealth citizens to come to the UK). In these circumstances, as with Munich and Suez, Brexit is likely to have unintended consequences that could take Britain in a completely different direction to that intended by its protagonists.

Two factors affect what direction that might be. Firstly, Brexit leaves the UK more deeply divided than ever, having added a Scottish Question to the long-standing Irish Question – as Scotland wants and Northern Ireland already has closer links to the EU than England and Wales, and both seem increasingly willing to leave an English Union to re-join a European one.

Secondly, the government has neither articulated a strategy for Britain's post-Brexit place in the world nor understood how the rest of the world now sees it, a void the long-awaited Integrated Review looks unlikely to fill. The government's vision for a 'Global Britain' has very little flesh on its bare bones, and many of the government's *actions* – to restrict immigration, cut the aid budget, increase defence spending, abandon Erasmus and roll-over almost exactly the same trade deals as it has had while inside the EU – point in a very different direction to that still fuzzy 'vision'. For all its historic soft power, its global positions in the UN Security Council, G7, G20 and NATO, and the Brexiteers bombast about buccaneering and 'dominating the world', the global image of Britain is increasingly of a country divided and distanced from its former friends. Other governments see power as it really is: dependent on the state of the economy, the strength of our forces and the number of our friends. On two out of three counts, Britain is weaker now than it was before. The government can try to hide that from their constituents, but they cannot hide it from their competitors. Other countries will draw their own conclusions, and take advantage of a weaker Britain where they can.

Only a strong dose of realism and a serious forward-looking strategy can restore the national fortunes. Otherwise, this Prime Minister is likely to go down in the Conservative pantheon alongside Chamberlain and Eden rather than beside his beloved Churchill – a man who led his country into the wilderness but never found the Promised Land.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.