

Obstructive and unhelpful: what EU diplomats think of the UK's strategy

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2015/11/25/obstructive-and-unhelpful-what-eu-diplomats-think-of-the-uks-strategy/

25/11/2015

*British demands are testing the patience of our European neighbours, says **Nick Witney**, as the country hitherto regarded as a pragmatic ally has become obstructive and unhelpful.*



What do Britain's EU partners make of the Brexit saga? The picture emerging from [European Council on Foreign Relations'](#) European-wide network of offices and researchers is essentially one of perplexity and frustration. Across Europe, Britain is perceived as already enjoying an extraordinarily privileged position within the EU. The budget rebate means that these days luckless Italy makes a [bigger net contribution](#) to the EU budget than the UK. Britain did not want the euro, so has an opt-out (and crows about how well its economy is doing as a consequence). Ditto [Schengen](#) (so that, the movement of other Europeans excepted, Britain retains full "control of its borders" – whatever the rhetoric to the contrary). Ditto cooperation in the fields of justice and home affairs (where the UK has even been allowed to choose which bits to stick with, and which to reject).

More broadly, too, the whole EU enterprise has developed on British-preferred lines: Britain urged that the Union be hugely enlarged to the east, and it has been; Britain prioritised the single market, and that is what the EU now has; Britain fought for open trading and investment relationships with the wider world, and that is now EU policy. In partners' eyes, the British have their cake and eat it – and yet are still unsatisfied. So to perplexity and frustration is added resentment, in varying degrees – which recent British behaviour has done little to assuage.

The new member states from central and eastern Europe were uniformly well-disposed to the UK when it was the leading advocate of EU enlargement – but have now been almost as uniformly estranged by British determination to block their migrant workers. Britain used to be a leader of European defence; now it is seen as obstructive, persistently blocking the European military and security headquarters in Brussels which everyone else wants, and vetoing development of the European Defence Agency. Furthermore, British refusal to take any part in helping either southern economies stricken by the economic crisis or with the hundreds of thousands of displaced people now washing around Europe has earned it no friends, except perhaps Hungary's Viktor Orbán.

Nonetheless, other EU member states would generally prefer the UK to remain. Many fear the boost an Out vote would give to populist and nationalist forces across the continent, from Eastern Europe to Scandinavia to France. Disintegrative forces, too: if the UK leaves the EU, and Scotland leaves the UK, what chance is there of resisting Catalan, or Flemish, independence? Nor are many member states attracted by the prospect of an EU increasingly dominated by Germany, or the Franco-German pairing, without Britain there to provide balance.

Some have their own, more specific, reasons for hoping that Britain stays. Free-traders such as Germany and Sweden see the UK as a valuable ally in ensuring an outward-facing EU. Italy sees common ground in British ambitions for development of the single market, particularly its digital dimension. France, long suspicious of Britain as a US "Trojan horse" and advocate of dangerous Anglo-Saxon free-market liberalism, can console itself with its recent (albeit unlooked-for) elevation as the US's preferred military partner in Europe, and sees the value of retaining in the EU another nuclear power and fellow permanent member of the UN Security Council.



Federica Mogherini, vice-president of the European Commission, speaks at this year's European Defence Agency conference. Photo: [European External Action Service](#) via a [Flickr Creative Commons licence](#).

Indeed, most of Britain's EU partners are conscious of the damage Brexit would do to European influence in the world. The international perception would be that the EU's economic failure of recent years was being followed by political failure, with further decline and possibly unravelling to follow. The contempt in which Putin – and other authoritarian nationalists from Beijing to Baku to Cairo – already tend to hold the EU would be encouraged and confirmed, and the ability of the remaining 27 to protect their interests and promote their values in a world where liberal democracy is on the retreat would suffer a body blow. (The same, of course, could be said of a post-Brexit UK.) Britain's partners know that the EU would be losing not just any old member state, but one of its star international players – a country with a robust approach on defence and security and close transatlantic links, as well as the capacity and historical inclination to operate on the global stage.

Against that, our partners are also aware that this inclination has not been much in evidence in recent years – certainly not since the first Cameron government came to power in 2010. What the Obama administration has characterised as the UK's excessively "accommodating" attitude to China has dented its reputation for robustness. And wherever our partners might have expected or at least hoped that the British would be engaged, they have been conspicuous by their absence: from French-led efforts to combat lawlessness in the Sahel; to the projected bombing of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces in 2013; and crisis diplomacy, led in the end by the Franco-German couple, following Putin's assaults on Ukraine. Instead, the traditionally "pragmatic" British seem to have been more concerned with conducting a sort of legal guerrilla campaign in Brussels, on the constant hunt for "competence creep".

This has manifested itself in such actions as persistent efforts to clip the wings of the fledgling [European External Action Service](#), by preventing it from speaking on behalf of the member states. Britain has even attempted to challenge the exclusive authority of the Commission, and then of the European Parliament in the ratification process over trade deals – thus complicating the implementation of just those open-market policies which Britain is meant to favour.

There are compensating factors. The competence of British diplomats and officials is widely respected. Britain has also been decisive in holding the line on sanctions against Russia. And this is not the first time that other member states have had to put up with one of their number's monomaniacal pursuit of a national line "of principle", irrespective of any wider consideration – see Cyprus *passim*. But better is expected of the Brits – and their constant refusal to lend a helping hand, as over the refugee crisis, is wearing patience dangerously thin.

A properly committed and engaged UK would be widely welcomed by its EU partners. Especially in foreign and security policy, British leadership would not only be welcomed, but followed. The sad truth is, however, that the departure of the obstructive and unhelpful UK of recent years would, in and of itself, elicit few tears. Any efforts

partners are still ready to make to help Cameron in his “renegotiation” will be made less by warmth towards the British than fear of Brexit’s impact on the cohesion, the balance, and even the sustainability of the remainder of the EU.

Nick Witney is co-director of the European Power programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations, and a senior policy fellow there. He previously served as the first chief executive of the [European Defence Agency](#) in Brussels. He previously worked for the FCO and the Ministry of Defence, where his last job before leaving for Brussels was as the MOD’s director-general of International Security Policy.

This is an extract from the European Council for Foreign Relations’ paper, [Brexit to Nowhere: the foreign policy consequences of ‘out’](#). It does not represent the views of the BrexitVote blog, nor those of the LSE.

- Copyright © 2015 London School of Economics