

Brexit as a Strategic Shift

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Britain's move to leave the European Union has been a topic of political discussion worldwide for more than a year, starting from an extremely polarising referendum campaign in spring 2016 to the latest developments following PM May's official invocation of Art. 50 of the EU Treaty on March 29. A great deal of analyses and forecasts have been formulated: some are already obsolescent, others have been faring better, but overall a great uncertainty looms over the entire question of what kind of outcome Brexit will yield. Will Britain be better off? Will the EU be strengthened? What about the economic implications? What about the "common values" of the European Union?

All these questions and the related answers certainly have their legitimacy, and many offer valuable insights also in relation to practical issues such as the status of EU citizens living in Britain or immigration in general, trade regulations, academia and research, defence, and so on.

However, there is one element of Brexit which appears to be little understood: its historical magnitude. Whatever the reader may think of Brexit, the way it emerged, how it was politically engineered, the opportunity of deciding such matter by means of a referendum, the point is to understand what kind of event Brexit is, and to what kind of historical events it may be compared.

Brexit is a major strategic shift for Britain and the future of Europe, which shall therefore compare with other major strategic shifts in history. This means that its consequences are better understood and judged in a multi-generational time frame. The US coming out of isolationism under F.D. Roosevelt in the 1940s, France's recognition of Algerian independence in 1962, the US recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1972, the Soviets decision to withdraw from Central Europe in the late 1980s, are just four examples of strategic shifts in the past century. Britain has taken this kind of decisions numerous times: signing the *Entente Cordiale* with France in 1904, fighting Germany both in 1914-18 and 1939-45, withdrawing from the Empire afterwards.

For each of these cases sound historical judgements were impossible while events were unfolding, and perhaps even decades thereafter. In all such instances high costs were involved, even catastrophic costs from some. In several of such instances, more or less viable alternatives existed, were actively debated, and produced massive polarisation.

Brexit too will entail very significant costs, both for Britain and for other members of the EU, not to mention the EU itself as an institution, whose future existence is, as indirectly [admitted by the EU Commission](#), quite uncertain. It may also turn out to be a serious strategic mistake (again, history shows numerous examples of such mistakes). It is simply impossible to know at this time.



The life of a nation is punctuated by decisions and strategic shifts. Such moments are inevitable for every collectivity over long periods of time, as much any individual takes life-changing decisions. The consequences of life-changing decisions, of embarking on a new or different course, are largely unpredictable (given the complexity of the setting and the matter) in the long run, but those distant consequences are the reason why such shifts happen in the first place.

Brexit is going to significantly disrupt business-as-usual and the ordinary lives of many people. Analyses focused on how business-as-usual in the short or medium period is going to be disrupted are of course useful and welcome. However, politics (or life, whether collective or individual) is not only about the management of business-as-usual, it is also about grand strategy and risk-taking, as history shows. In the case of the life of a nation, strategy may well transcend not only the particular interests of certain groups, but even of entire generations, as human societies are by definition inter-generational enterprises.

In the past few decades European (and not only European) political culture has changed in the direction of favouring a focus on short-term and business-as-usual management of the present, to the point of censoring strategic thought. This could be attributed to several factors: the short-termist bias inherent to a political system based on electoral cycles which do not extend for more than a few years and require the constant, almost immediate rewarding of the electorate; the still widespread sense of the “end of history” à la Fukuyama with its increasingly problematic modernist underpinnings; the preference for the “low politics” of technical matters coupled with a problem-solving attitude (the basic political mode of the EU) and the systematic avoidance of “high politics”; the fixation for a legal-economic conception of the individual as the primary lenses through which politics is supposed to be studied and even practiced.

It is perhaps not surprising that all this is happening in Britain, possibly the major European country that more than others has retained a core capability for strategic thought.

Brexit is showing the limitations of the prevalent political culture, and more will follow.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog nor of the London School of Economics.

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