

The Lost Art of Diplomacy: David Cameron to Europe's Rescue?

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

By *Max Hänska*

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The British leadership has engaged in much posturing over Jean-Claude Juncker, the *Spitzenkandidat* of the EPP, and favoured candidate for European Commission President, ostensibly out of [concern for Europe's future](#), which, it claims, would be better served by a fresh face. Even if much of what Cameron and his supporters say is true, his strategy is deeply flawed:

Leverage

Cameron has threatened that a Juncker presidency could hasten a British exit, while an alternative may secure it in the EU. Merkel is [known](#) to favour keeping Britain in the EU. Indeed, no one honestly wants to see Britain leave. So Cameron seems to think the threat of a Brexit is his best leverage. No one doubts that the threat is real. But just the same no one believes that Cameron is in control of British political discourse, and could deliver on keeping Britain in the EU. The Tory leadership has been [escalating its rhetoric](#) on Europe and immigration since they took office in a bid to appease its backbenchers. But not even the promise of a referendum has done the trick. If Cameron gets his way on the Commission President, will he really be able to deliver and keep Britain in Europe? It seems Cameron has badly misjudged his leverage – demanding a President of his choosing, and a substantial reworking of the terms of British membership in the EU, all for the vague promise of more favourable odds of retaining Britain in the EU.



Sincerity

Cameron also has a sincerity problem. He says he opposes Juncker because he is the wrong man to lead European reform – purportedly having the [interests of Europe at heart](#). Juncker, the old guard, stands for 'more of the same', he says. He has not explained why the alternatives he proposes would bring fresh wind to the Commission's sails, but that's beside the point. It is abundantly clear that his opposition to Juncker has little to do with an exuberant enthusiasm for European reform, and much more to do with the rhetorical posturing of British electoral politics. And, we may add, an electoral politics in which the government has [lost control](#) of the political discourse to a fringe that acts more like an insurgency than an opposition – having abandoned any pretence of ordinary parliamentary politics in which oppositions seek compromises and craft coalitions, opting rather to use all and any means available to hold government (and the majority) hostage to its demands.

Tactics

Lastly, Cameron's tactics have forced him into a pattern of escalations that leave him with his back to the wall. In negotiation with other European leaders he does not aim to carefully craft alliances, and then find a [compromise](#) that suits him better than none. Instead, he issues a threat and an ultimatum, leaving himself no dignified ladder to climb down when his demands are not met. In fact, Cameron's brash confrontational tactics may have helped close the

door on alternatives to Juncker – Cameron wants to appear tough at home, but can any other European leader really tolerate the appearance of having been bullied into a choice by the British PM? This is cack-handed diplomacy, in which a prime minister feigns concerns that most believe are insincere, makes promises he can't deliver, and issues ultimatums that back him into a corner. To borrow a formulation that Henry Kissinger recent used in the context of Ukraine, this is not a European strategy, it's an excuse for the absence of one.

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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