

[Tim Oliver](#)

## Never mind the Brexit? Britain, Europe, the world and Brexit

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# **Never Mind the Brexit? Britain, Europe, the World and Brexit.**

**Tim Oliver**

London School of Economics

## **Abstract**

Britain's vote to withdraw from the EU came as an unexpected shock to many in the UK, the rest of the EU and around the world. The UK and the remaining EU now face a fraught and potentially lengthy period of negotiations to settle Brexit. How might this change Europe? And how might it change the rest of the world's views of Europe? This article looks at how Brexit could shape worldviews of Europe. It does so firstly by looking at the international and European roles Britain sees for itself and how the rest of Europe views those roles. The article then turns to views of both the UK and the EU from the USA, Russia and China. It argues that neither the UK nor the EU should overlook how external perceptions of Europe, the UK and Brexit matter because they will determine the strategic context in which the Brexit negotiations unfold.

## **Introduction**

Britain's vote to withdraw from the EU came as an unexpected shock to many in the UK, the rest of the EU and around the world. The shock was in part the result of polling that had suggested that Britain would vote to remain a member, but also because the very idea of a member state withdrawing from the EU had long been something of a taboo. European integration, while rarely smooth, had moved in only one direction. Britain's choice to reject this – admittedly by a slim majority of 52 per cent - meant that for the first time the EU was faced with the loss of a member state and in the case of the UK one of its largest. While the potential implications for the UK of such a decision had long been the subject of much discussion and analysis, the implications for the EU, Europe and their place in the world had not.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016 vote triggered complex, fraught and potentially drawn-out Brexit negotiations between the UK and the remaining EU. The negotiations cannot be reduced to UK-EU only. There are 14 different negotiations (with the term 'negotiation' used here in a broad sense) now unfolding which can be divided into three groups, as set

out in the table below (Oliver, 2016a). They can be divided into three groups: internal UK negotiations, UK-EU negotiations and internal EU negotiations. Negotiations between the UK, the EU and the rest of the world can be seen within the three groups. Such negotiations would revolve around how the rest of the world views and responds to Brexit.

This article focuses on the international negotiations now unfolding and is divided into three sections. The first looks at what Brexit could mean for the UK's relations with the EU and its strategic outlook internationally. As we note, how Britain moves forward internationally will depend not only on its own strategic thinking but how others view it post-Brexit. The article then examines what Brexit means for the EU's relations with the UK and the rest of the world. How – or if – Brexit might change the EU and how the world views it is a question many outside of Europe are now addressing. To examine this more closely the article turns to views from the USA, Russia and China. As we note in the conclusion, both the UK and EU are in danger of taking for granted the world's views of Brexit; views that may not be as complimentary as either might assume.

### *United Kingdom*

Negotiations	Participants	Issues
1. UK: Brexit narrative	UK political parties, media, academia.	Defining what the vote by the British people meant.
2. UK: Party politics	Conservative party, Labour party, UKIP, SNP, Liberal Democrats.	Positioning of the parties to manage Brexit.
3. UK: Parliament and the people	MPs, Lords, UK Supreme Court.	Who legally defines Brexit.
4. UK: A united kingdom?	UK Government, Scottish government and parliament, Northern Ireland government and assembly, Mayor of London.	The role of the regions (especially those that voted remain) in negotiating Brexit; Scottish independence; Northern Ireland's peace process; London's place in the

		union; England.
5. UK: Brexit and the World	UK bilateral relations with non-EU world	UK relations with USA, emerging powers such as China, trade agreements, full membership of World Trade Organisation.

*United Kingdom-European Union*

<b>Negotiations</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Issues</b>
6. UK-EU: Article 50	UK, EU 27 heads of government, European Parliament, European Commission, European Court of Justice (ECJ)	Exit agreement for the UK from EU institutions and associated arrangements.
7. UK-EU: Brexit transition	UK, EU 27 heads of government, European Parliament, European Commission, European Court of Justice (ECJ), EEA/EFTA members.	Possible transition arrangement for UK, possibly inside European Economic Area.
8. UK-EU: New relationship	UK, political systems of EU 27, European Parliament, European Commission, ECJ, EEA/EFTA members.	Agreement between UK and EU over new relationship: EEA, EFTA, non-single market membership, free trade deal and others.
9. EU(UK): Article 50, Brexit transition and new relationship.	EU 27 governments and their domestic political structures, European Parliament, European Commission, ECJ, EEA/EFTA members.	Remaining EU member states reach agreement over what to offer the UK and over what timeframe, potentially with member states ratifying agreement individually through

		domestic ratification processes (parliamentary votes, referendums).
10. UK-EU: Foreign, security and defence cooperation.	UK, EU27 (especially France and Germany), NATO members, USA.	How to continue cooperation on international matters.

### *European Union*

<b>Negotiations</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Issues</b>
11. EU(EU): Rebalancing the Union.	EU 27, European Parliament, Commission, ECJ.	The new balance of power within the post-Brexit EU; place of Eurozone in EU; European integration, disintegration or muddling through.
12. EU(Europe): An EU in a multipolar Europe	EU, Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, Lichtenstein, Turkey, Ukraine, non-EU Balkan countries, UK.	The future of the EU's relations with non-EU European countries; EU-EEA/EFTA relations, European geopolitics.
13. EU(World): An EU in a multipolar world.	EU, UK, USA, Russia, Ukraine, China, Turkey, UN, NATO.	EU's place in an emerging multipolar world.
14. EU(Business): business as usual?	EU as a union of 28 member states until UK exit formally effective.	How to let UK and rest of EU continue normal non-Brexit business until UK withdraws.

### **Britain's Brexit**

Britain's reputation as 'an awkward partner' reflects how relations with the rest of the EU have rarely been smooth (George, 1988). It has a history of opposition to EU policies and integration and a domestic political debate that has often been poisonous and where

membership has been viewed in a transactional zero-sum way as opposed to the positive-sum view held elsewhere. Britain's late membership of the EU was hardly an enthusiastic one, more associated with being a necessity of decline than one embraced as a positive way forward.

Britain's awkwardness has, however, hidden a more constructive and engaging European power that has seen in EU membership opportunities for itself, Europe and the wider Western world – not least the transatlantic relationship with the USA (Daddow and Oliver, 2016). Britain's contributions include being a strong proponent of the single market, of pushing for deregulation, strongly supporting successive waves of EU enlargement, and having a good record at upholding EU laws. Despite its controversial rebate, the UK has been one of the largest net contributors to the EU's budget and has pushed for reform of the budget to move it away from *juste retour* for certain national agricultural sectors towards a budget that reflects the modern needs of the EU. UK policy makers and civil society have been keen advocates of EU action on a range of issues from climate change to animal rights. While the arrival of large numbers of EU citizens from Eastern Europe might have caused problems that led to the Brexit vote, it should not be forgotten that unlike other EU member states the UK did not impose restrictions on the free movement of those citizens for the first few years after the 2004 enlargement. Britain might have been both an advocate and an obstacle to EU efforts at foreign, security and defence cooperation, but so too have others – including Germany and France – because of the national sensitivities and realist outlooks involved (Jones, 2016).

This Janus faced approach could only be sustained for so long. While the face of a more positive and engaging UK was rarely seen in UK politics, it was no surprise that the narrative of UK-EU relations became stuck in a negative one-sided story of awkwardness which fed a sense in the UK that it was the odd one out in the EU. A Dutch commentator once noted that the UK's debate about its EU membership suffered from a mentality of 'narcissistic victimisation': a sense that only Britain suffered at the hands of the EU; that only Britain saw the way forward in the world but is thwarted from doing so by the EU; and that only Britain had the experience and *nous* to see the opportunities and dangers at the global level (Korteweg, 2014: 99). Little wonder then that when the EU referendum campaign began the British elite found it difficult to offer much by way of a

positive message about the EU that was believed by the public. David Cameron, who like many other British politicians had scored easy political points by attacking an EU he personally did not think Britain should leave, was reaping what he had sown when the British people voted to leave. This is not to dismiss the EU's own failings from the matter. The EU – or EEC as it was then – the UK joined in 1973 was portrayed as Britain's future and a necessary political and economic union in the context of the Cold War. The EU of 2016 was one that, because of tensions in the Eurozone, Schengen and with Russia, appeared dysfunctional, weak and the past.

Where then might Britain head next in terms of its wider international strategic position? Debate in Britain about Brexit has so far focused on the future of UK-EU trade relations, which given the continued size of that trading link will shape wider relationships post-Brexit. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify five strands of thought that have begun to emerge. First, a 'Switzerland with nukes' approach that would be an isolationist option whereby the UK would retreat from both European and global security commitments, focusing entirely on defence of the British Isles. This might play to domestic audiences seen in the Brexit debate that were hostile to immigration, but fail to tackle the risks the UK faces and would likely be deeply unpopular with allies. Second, a 'pivot' away from Europe whereby the UK would build foreign and security relations with the world beyond Europe, not least with the United States. However, the US itself has struggled to pivot away from Europe, and the UK may lack the necessary networks to do so. Donald Trump's attitudes towards China and other emerging powers may conflict with those the UK wishes to pursue. Third, an EU-UK 'special relationship' where the UK would develop a close security relationship with the remaining EU, possibly as part of the withdrawal deal over a new UK-EU relationship. There is a danger that this would be seen by some in Britain as undermining NATO, and it is unclear if the rest of Europe, let alone a Eurosceptic UK public and government (especially if Brexit negotiations were strained) would embrace such a relationship. Fourth, a 'Global European balancer' which would see a globally orientated Britain with a strong commitment to European security, combining options 2 and 3. Yet it is unclear whether the UK could embrace such a role without risking overstretch. This role might therefore be viewed skeptically by both allies and competitors. Finally, there is an 'Adrift and lost at sea' option, which would also be a 'muddling through' approach where the UK

attempts to cope with events rather than shape them by making any clear but difficult choices.

Which of the above the UK ends up pursuing will depend firstly on which the UK government thinks best positions it to respond to the strategic risks that Britain and its allies are likely to face in the near future. Second, a great deal of how Brexit unfolds will depend on the way in which Britain's allies react to each option (on outside-in perspectives on Europe, see the introduction by Falkner). Do they, or other countries around the world which shape international politics, think any of the above are viable?

### **Europe's Brexit**

As noted above, Britain's decision to leave the EU came as a shock to many elsewhere in Europe. For many years the rest of the EU had listened to British politicians repeatedly warn of or threaten a British withdrawal, often in order to play to Eurosceptic British domestic audiences. British politicians had done so often enough to sound like the little boy who cried wolf in the Aesop fable. But as the fable and now Brexit teaches us, the wolf eventually appeared. The EU (and as quickly became clear the UK government and some prominent Leave campaigners) was caught unaware by the vote, with little actual planning for how to deal with a Brexit. While Article 50 of the EU's treaty – the withdrawal clause – sets out a framework for the withdrawal of a member state, it is untested and intended more of a deterrent than a carefully considered process for managing a complex development.

Brexit negotiations are often portrayed as being 'UK-EU', but as the earlier list of negotiations makes clear that overlooks the internal UK and EU negotiations where the issue of unity will be amongst the most important. The EU side of the negotiations will represent twenty seven member states, the European Parliament and the Commission. Each state has unique domestic political games. As ratification of the Canadian European Trade Agreement showed, it only takes one regional parliament – or a referendum, parliamentary vote or court ruling – to disrupt the process. Looking at how the rest of the EU respond to Brexit highlights how it is not simply about relations with Britain, but about the future of the EU. Views on Brexit will therefore also be about how Brexit might reshape the Union. This will be of concern to new member states such as Romania



or Bulgaria, who fear being left behind by further integration. For those states with few links to Britain, Brexit will be about securing concessions on other matters from those states that do. The biggest overall question the EU will grapple with is whether Brexit adds to forces that will lead to the EU's disintegration or integration (Rosamond, 2016). As shown in the table below, various scenarios for the EU can be mapped out, each of which also takes into account not only the future of UK-EU relations but the future of the Eurozone, Schengen, relations with Russia and the attitude of the USA (Oliver, 2016b).

	<b>Scenario 1: EU is weakened</b>	<b>Scenario 2: EU muddles through</b>	<b>Scenario 3: EU more united</b>
<b>Unity of the EU and defining ideas about Europe as a political space</b>	UK leads the way in EU fragmentation, potentially unravelling EU. Best outcome for EU is a core Eurozone union as one of a series of overlapping organisations in Europe.	Tensions remain over intergovernmental and supranational approaches, but Eurozone as heart of EU is strengthened. EU remains Europe's predominant political organisation.	Without one of its most awkward members integration becomes more likely. EU continues to emerge as the dominant political organisation in Europe.
<b>Balance of Power</b>	Adds to confused leadership with no clear leader; small or large states gain; East/South v's North/West; Eurozone under pressure.	German power enhanced, tensions with France remain, but EU remains generally rudderless.	Clearer leadership for EU institutions, complimented by enhanced power of Germany.
<b>Political economy</b>	More inward looking, protectionist or divided.	Retains strong outward looking agenda thanks to global pressures.	A global economic power pushing its own model.

<b>Security and global relations</b>	EU remains a ‘military worm’. Europe/EU is vulnerable to divide and rule by external powers.	Fragmented military and security relationships, NATO and bilateral links remain key. EU remains central security actor on many new security challenges and major player in economic power. Continues to rely, with difficulties, on civilian power.	EU acts more united with some military power, but never fulfils military potential without UK. NATO remains strong, but potential strong EU dimension. Other global powers continue to develop direct relations with Brussels.
<b>Relations with UK</b>	Difficult, UK plays a role in trying to redraw Europe’s political relationships.	UK a close partner, engaged with but political relations strained by continued mutual dependence.	UK treated as close but junior partner, similar to attitude of US in US-UK relationship.

How then might the EU view the future of UK-EU relations? We can break down the EU’s possible response into five Is: Ideas, Interests, Institutions, International and Individuals (Oliver, 2016c: 697). The deepest tensions will be seen when it comes to balancing ideas and interests. Will the remaining EU prioritise ideas of integration and cooperation – of ‘ever closer union’ – to protect against the potential damage Brexit could do to the ideas of European unity? Eurosceptics frequently point out the EU is a political project. Will it therefore be the ideas behind this project that shape the EU’s response? Or will it be national interests that win out thanks to pressure from the likes of German car manufacturers, Irish farm exporters or consideration of an EU trade deficit with the UK that in 2014 (ONS, 2015) hit a record high of £61.6 billion? This is not to suggest that interests and ideas are mutually exclusive. But which will shape the negotiations most? Institutional limits such as WTO rules and the EU’s own rules limit what the EU can and cannot do to punish the UK or offer it in terms of a new relationship. International pressures may help convince some EU member states to seek

a quick agreement with a country that still packs a punch internationally. We should also not overlook the individuals involved. How will individual leaders such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel or the European Parliament's Brexit negotiator Guy Verhofstadt approach negotiations? A Brexit will not have a uniform effect across the EU, meaning some leaders will take the issue more importantly than others. It will also be these individual leaders who will need to rebuild trust between the UK and the EU. A Brexit would make worse a relationship where trust has been lost thanks to the UK's renegotiation and perceptions elsewhere of UK indifference to crises in the Eurozone, Schengen and over Ukraine.

One area of notable concern for the remaining EU, given the UK's leading role in it, is where Brexit leaves the EU's ambitions in foreign, security and defence. The withdrawal of a permanent UN Security Council member, nuclear power, and leading international donor cannot but have an impact on the EU in these areas. One of the first implications is to add to the list of issues that draw the EU's attention inwards rather than to external ones. As the Dahrendorf Forum's Foresight Exercise noted, Brexit helps make the EU's domestic and institutional challenges the highest priority. One possible outcome the Foresight Exercise (Pfeifer and Sus, 2016) identified was Brexit leading to a 'profound neglect of any coherent foreign policy strategy'. As the article in this special issue by Nathalie Tocci explains in detail, the outcome of the UK's EU referendum overshadowed the meeting of the European Council when the new 'European Global Strategy' was presented by High Representative Frederica Mogherini. Yet as the article in this special issue by Karen Smith notes, the global strategy has become as much about creating a narrative to aid the EU's unity as about the EU's approach to the world. The inward looking concerns of the strategy serve as a reminder of the problems that beset the EU and which Brexit has added to.

Will Brexit at least ease the tensions the EU faces, removing an obstacle that has sometimes blocked cooperation in foreign, security and defence matters? As Pfeifer (2016) has argued, some elsewhere in the EU might well see the removal of a country known for blocking EU defence cooperation as a possible way forward. It was therefore no surprise that the EU's initial response to Brexit in part focused on moving forward with defence cooperation. However, as Pfeifer notes, EU defence cooperation will remain stunted as a result of five factors:

‘Germany’s indecisiveness regarding its military role, strong nationally supported arms industries, nationalistic tendencies among EU Member States, decreasing defence budgets and the parallelism of EU and NATO in the field, make a stronger commitment for EU defence policy among member states unlikely.’

### **Non-EU views of Brexit**

The way Brexit unfolds for both the UK and the EU will depend not only on the domestic responses of both, but also on how several non-European states respond to it. Europe’s three hegemons – Germany, the USA and Russia – will shape the broad political, economic and security context within which Brexit unfolds, with the USA and Russia applying pressure from the outside. The choices of these three – whether to engage, exploit or ignore – will shape the context of European and international politics in which Brexit unfolds. Into this we can also add an emerging world power in the form of China. Its reaction to Brexit gives clues to how Brexit will shape not only Europe and the UK, but also views of both around the world.

#### ***The USA***

US attitudes towards European integration and Britain’s part in it have been difficult to pin down beyond general – but sometimes ambivalent – support for both. The EU is a product of a liberal international order that the US has pursued since 1945. Support for Britain’s involvement in European integration has been supported by various US administrations dating back to the 1960s. Yet both have come with caveats. The creation of a EU that is a strategic competitor in trade and potentially security and politics has presented the USA with a challenger rather than a junior partner. Despite hopes by some US administrations that UK governments would pursue closer relations with their European partners, successive US administrations have also been happy to continue a UK-US ‘special relationship’ that has brought benefits for both sides but which has meant the UK has been able to avoid making any clear choice to commit to the EU. At the same time, the USA has also balanced its commitment to the EU with strong bilateral relations with all EU states, something those states have pursued in return. Allegations that the UK has been a US ‘Trojan Horse’, sent to weaken the EU and make it serve the

USA, deflects attention from the close relations the USA has with every member of the EU (Oliver and Williams, 2016). This balancing act reflected the challenges and daily problems of an increasingly close economic, security and political relationship between the two sides of the North Atlantic. As Burgoon, Trubowitz and Oliver argue in their article in this special issue, while both sides have had their differences they have since the disappearance of the USSR pursued a globalisation agenda prioritising freer movement of goods, capital, services and people. The UK has been a leading proponent of such an agenda within the EU and in transatlantic relations.

The commitment of the USA, EU and UK to this agenda has been under pressure for some time. The election of Donald Trump, the vote for Brexit and growing populist movements throughout the EU point to a growing discontent with this agenda. Where does this leave US views of the UK and the EU? Politics on both sides of the North Atlantic are wrestling with frustrations – notably, but not exclusively, amongst white working class voters – at globalisation, elite politics, austerity, fears about threats to identities (which also touch heavily on race and gender matters) and immigration. Does this present opportunities for cooperation? A great deal hangs on how Donald Trump behaves, something that is extremely difficult to predict given his erratic behaviour and lax attitude towards being consistent in the things he says (Quinn, 2017). That said, we can discern something of a broad worldview that will guide his approach, even if – as has become clear – it is not one shared by everyone in the Republican party or his administration. That worldview is one where the sovereignty of the USA is viewed in strict terms. The best many allies might hope for is a policy of ‘offshore balancing’ whereby the US will remain engaged internationally, but only intervene in cases affecting a narrowly-defined national interest. That may sound no bad thing. But in doing so Trump may lack the subtlety necessary to deliver a stable transition, and could end up aligning the US less with a liberal world order and more with more sovereignty based system akin to the 19th century and one that coincides more closely with a Sino-Russian world view.

That does not necessarily make for a happy future for either the UK or the EU. Instead of finding common purpose, politics in the US, UK and EU could drive forward nationalism and division rather than unity and cooperation. It would mean a USA acting on a very narrow approach of ‘America First’ as opposed to thinking about America vis-

à-vis the general interest, that is disengaged from large multilateral trading agreements such as TTIP or at the WTO, and which is prepared to question long-established alliances such as NATO. For NATO, Brexit will mean only 18 per cent of NATO defence spending will come from EU states.<sup>i</sup> That said, even if the UK is included the amount increases only to 25 per cent with the US representing 72 per cent. In 1990 the US figure was closer to 60 per cent, which was still an imbalance but nowhere near as bad as today.<sup>ii</sup> A US that turns inwards would pose a quandary for a post-Brexit Britain that, as discussed earlier, aims to pursue new global trading and political links and whose security will continue to rely on the stability of Europe and transatlantic links. The US may offer the UK a bilateral trade deal, but that contrasts with Trump's more protectionist stance, raises questions about what the UK can expect when it will be the much smaller partner (and there are no special relationships in trade negotiations), and when Trump's overall position could inflict much larger damage on the wider open global trading system that Britain remains a committed member of.

### ***Russia***

As the article in this special issue by Zubok and Wohlforth point to, geopolitical calculations figure prominently in Russian government and political thinking on international matters. It should come as no surprise then that Britain's withdrawal from the EU is viewed by some in Russia as a sign of the EU's weakness and decline in size and clout. This contrasts with the EU's own outlook which has tended to look beyond the importance of hard power and geopolitics, focusing more on what some have termed a 'post-modern' outlook on international affairs. Recent events have served to remind the EU that traditional thinking on international affairs – about borders, sovereignty and nationalism – remain powerful. Events in Ukraine and Crimea might have caused concerns throughout Europe at the ways by which borders can be redrawn and the implications of this. But within and around the EU itself the implications of redrawing the map are never far away thanks to secessionist movements in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Belgium, Spain and the continued tensions within the Balkans and Turkey. The fragmentation of the UK, for example, would almost certainly see the end of the UK as a nuclear power due to the location of Britain's nuclear forces in Scotland (Dorman, 2014).

While some in Russia might have viewed Brexit through a geopolitical lens, that did not necessarily mean they welcomed it. There has been much debate as to whether Russia would gain or lose from the EU's decline. Brexit would remove from the EU a country that has been amongst the strongest backers of EU sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea. At the same time, Russia remains heavily dependent on a dynamic, prosperous and integrated European market. UK-Russian trading links might be small in comparison with those Russia has elsewhere in Europe, but the financial and services links are substantial. Economic and political chaos in Europe is therefore not necessarily in Russia's interests, and would dash any remaining hopes that Russia's own efforts at economic cooperation through the Eurasian Economic Union could somehow link with those of the EU. Instead, Europe and Russia could be driven apart, with European decline aiding Russia's turn towards Asia.

Looking beyond the possible economic and geopolitical implications, Brexit has helped dampen the EU's normative power in Russia (Gromyko, 2015). The EU's normative power was already strained by problems in the Eurozone and Schengen. For some nationalists in Russia, the EU – and Europe more broadly – had abandoned traditional values such as Christianity, the family, national pride, respect for law and order and instead embraced an uncontrollable and unstable agenda connected to diversity. Russian state media efforts to contrast the EU's uncertainty and malaise with Russia's stability and strength can, of course, be critiqued. But that portrayal also found an audience across the EU, emboldening those in Europe more aligned with Russian views on nationalism, sovereignty and values. Debate in Ukraine has also felt something of this (Getmanchuk, 2015). To those Ukrainians who fought for closer connections with the rest of Europe as opposed to Russia, the EU has been viewed as a source of modernisation and European identity. Brexit casts a shadow over those hopes, weakening both the EU and UK's appeal. Whether Britain will notice this, however, offers a final note of comparison with Russia. Both Britain and Russia are former superpowers that have passed through periods of profound decline. Both will continue to attempt – and sometimes succeed – at 'punching above their weights' internationally. However, they also show the futility of hoping that either will fully come to terms with their reduced status anytime soon.

## *China*

China's views of Brexit can be broken down into economics and strategic relations. In a rare moment of international agreement, China found itself aligned with both Japan and the USA when it stated that it would prefer the UK to remain in the EU. China's prime concern was the economic uncertainty for UK-Chinese relations, the UK economy and that of the rest of the EU. Full-market access to the EU has been one of the positives for China in UK-EU relations. For the UK, playing the role of gateway to the EU's single market was a selling point to China along with Britain's well-regulated, stable and open economy that Chinese investors could rely on. British governments have made increasing efforts to court China, with Chinese investment in a range of infrastructure projects (Heathrow airport, high speed rail projects and Hinkley Point nuclear power station) and across industry making China an ever-present aspect of UK life. The potential for Brexit to change this remains an abiding concern for China, and not simply with regard to the UK. China, like the USA and other large powers, have relations with Europe that are both multilateral ones with the EU and bilateral with the various member states. Chinese-German relations, in particular, have been very close as a result of both being leading industrial and exporting economies. The potential for Brexit to turn the UK and EU inwards has been something that Chinese officials have worried about. Britain, for example, has been a strong supporter of China being granted 'Market Economy Status', something others in the EU have been uncertain about. Meanwhile, the British government has gone to great lengths since the referendum result to make clear that the UK remains an open, international economy. This contrasts with parts of the UK's referendum debate – not least over immigration and globalisation – that will not have passed unnoticed in China. Any future trade negotiations with the UK are likely to run into the thorny issue of immigration and visas, something that has already arisen with regard to UK-India relations. They are also likely to be shaped by whatever deal the UK is able to secure over future relations with the EU.

As the article in this special issue by Rabe and Gippner notes, Chinese and European investment in each other affect the mutual perceptions of each sides power and status in global politics. The UK's referendum showed that China's relations with powers such as the UK cannot be built on trading and investment links alone. Chinese President Xi had put a great deal of effort into developing close relations with the UK, efforts that had led to a range of closer economic links. This has only taken relations so far. Delays and



doubts over the Hinkley Point C nuclear power station – which is to be developed in a deal involving France and China – along with doubts and suspicions about investments by Chinese state owned companies, show the relationship remains dogged by questions of trust. The motives and interest of the UK and China are not necessarily the same, with differences over human rights, rule of law and relations with the USA being sticking points to say nothing of continued historical prejudices on both sides. The same can be said to overhang Chinese-EU relations in a broader sense. Some form of larger strategic partnerships would be needed if relations were to become more stable. Brexit does little to help create the conditions for this because as discussed earlier, Britain’s own strategic outlook is now in flux. For example, closer UK-US relations under President Trump may come with US demands over how far UK-Chinese relations can develop in terms of trade deals and investments and certainly over any attempts to build a strategic partnership.

## **Conclusion**

Writing in 1969, Lord Dahrendorf defined the role of a public intellectual as, ‘to doubt everything that is obvious, to make relative all authority, to ask all those questions that no one else dares to ask’ (Dahrendorf, 1969: 51). Until the morning after the 23 June 2016 referendum, the question of what Brexit might mean for the EU had been one many had shied away from. In part this can be put down to Britain’s politicians repeated threats to leave the EU leaving the rest of the Union somewhat indifferent, akin to the townsfolk in the Aesop fable of the boy who cried wolf. But it also reflected a taboo at contemplating the fragmentation or disintegration of the EU. Ideas and theories of disintegration have figured as a minor area of study in European integration, if they were studied at all. Brexit, along with the problems in the Eurozone and Schengen, remind us that political structures that appear fixed can be thrown into question. The EU might have survived many past crises, with crises playing an important role in moving forward European integration. To imagine that this can only move in one direction, however, is to be myopic. The question of how the EU might disintegrate might be an unsettling one for some who study the EU (and is also one few in the UK – including Eurosceptics – appear to have given much thought to), but it is one that cannot be overlooked. While it remains doubtful that Brexit alone will be responsible for unravelling the EU, what might do so remains largely unexplored.

One way in which the impact of Brexit can be studied is by viewing it from different perspectives whether they be those from within the rest of the EU or from taking an outside-in approach. Neither the UK nor the remaining EU should take for granted the idea that Brexit will improve the position of either of them vis-à-vis each other or in the views of others around the world. As we have seen, the perspectives of others elsewhere in the EU of the UK and the impact of Brexit will be central to defining what new UK-EU relationship emerges and how European politics more broadly develops to cope with it. At the same time, views from the USA, Russia and China remind us that what the UK or the EU thinks Brexit will mean is but one interpretation.

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<sup>i</sup> Figures calculated from NATO (2016).

<sup>ii</sup> Figures calculated from NATO (2012).