

Britain's approach to Brexit is a textbook example of failed strategic thinking



*Prime Minister Theresa May's speech in Florence was intended to move forward stalled Brexit negotiations. But as **Tim Oliver** (LSE/EUI) argues, Britain has found itself running into numerous problems with Brexit because its strategy for exiting the EU has been a textbook example of failed strategic thinking.*

It's said that in the First World War the Germans viewed the British troops and their generals as lions led by donkeys. One hundred years on, to much of the rest of Europe it is Britain's national leaders, bereft of any coherent unified strategy for exiting the EU, who are donkeys misleading a great country.

If things continue as they have been, Britain's approach to Brexit will be studied by generations of strategists as an example of flawed strategic thinking. The rest of Europe and Britain's key allies such as the United States should lament this. As the Henry Jackson Society pointed out in a recent report, Britain remains a country of immense power and potential. It is not a dwarf and Brexit does not doom it to become one. The British people, like the troops of the First World War, will soldier on. But Brexit does pose the biggest political, administrative, and economic challenge Britain has faced in a long time. If it is handled badly, Britain will suffer unnecessary pain and losses. In facing such a challenge, the British people deserve to be led by leaders with a grasp of what it is they want to achieve and an ability to direct Britain towards it.



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Strategy is a balanced combination of ends, ways, and means, which incorporates an assessment of risk and an opponent's likely behaviour. Successful implementation and adaptation of strategy depends on having leaders who are able and willing to react and lead the struggle. Britain's approach to Brexit has not lived up to this definition.

Before we open this up further let us be clear that Brexit is not a simple one-off event. It is a series of overlapping multifaceted, multi-levelled processes, negotiations, and debates involving multiple actors in Britain, the remaining EU, Europe, and the rest of the world. Its wide-ranging nature and complexity make it one of the most important and difficult political issues to define and analyse. Finding a way through it, for all involved, was never going to be easy. As I'll touch on in a future blog post, the EU's own approach has not been without problems. But Britain has so far gone about it in a particularly poor way.

Britain has made the fundamental strategic mistake of not knowing what end it seeks from Brexit

Ends

Britain has made the fundamental strategic mistake of not knowing what end it seeks from Brexit. "Brexit means Brexit" said Theresa May. But Brexit is a process with no clearly defined destination. It's like saying "War means war". War, after all, is a means to an end. Britain's leadership has been divided, unsure, and left shell-shocked by the Leave vote in a referendum in which most of them had campaigned for Remain. But in voting for Leave what the British people wanted Leave to mean – and therefore what end they want the UK government to deliver – has never been entirely settled. It is why British politics since 23 June 2016 has been defined by a battle to define the narrative of Brexit. It was the need for a mandate to define such a narrative that led Theresa May to trigger an unexpected general election. She hoped it would empower her to pursue the Brexit she outlined in January. Instead, the hung parliament that emerged has only confused things further.

That more than a year on from the vote British politicians are still arguing about the nature of a transition deal points to how far there is still to go before Britain knows what it wants from what Theresa May describes as a "deep and special partnership" with the EU. And it has not been just the governing Conservative party that has struggled. Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and other opposition parties have either fudged the issue or offered unrealistic ends as part of electoral manoeuvring rather than an assessment of what is possible or in the national interest. The inability of British politicians to know what they want and whether they can get it has led to calls for the EU to take the initiative by explaining to the UK what its options are.

Britain's negotiators have struggled to grasp the detail because there's so much for them to do

Ways

With an unclear end, the UK has been in no position to assess or prepare the ways to get there. Given that no plan survives first contact, the need to constantly plan and adapt is one of the key requirements of any strategy. As Former U.S. President and U.S. Army General Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, "plans are worthless, but planning is everything". It makes sense, therefore, to task the British civil service with planning for a range of possibilities, including a no-deal scenario. That sounds an ideal way towards a resilient strategy. But the planning only started a year ago, thanks to David Cameron's refusal to contemplate a Leave vote in the run-up to the referendum. Since then, and as noticed by the EU's negotiators, Britain's negotiators have struggled to grasp the detail because there's so much for them to do. This hasn't stopped British Ministers from promising to achieve great things. They ignored that they lacked a way – and the time – to settle Brexit in the two-year timeframe provided by Article 50. They forgot that under-promising and over-delivering is a shining virtue; vice versa, a mortal sin.

Britain's diplomatic means in Europe are not what they once were

Means

With no clear end and inadequate and confused ways, it should come as no surprise that Britain has been unable to prepare, configure, or effectively deploy the means it has available. The means are plentiful: staff, money (not least Britain's budgetary contributions), legal positions, diplomatic support from allies, trade deals, military and security capabilities, the status of UK and EU citizens, Britain's trade relationships with the rest of the EU, the power of the City of London, and so forth. One reason Britain has struggled is because its diplomatic means in Europe are not what they once were. Before the referendum, a great deal of EU business was conducted via Brussels. Large parts of Britain's diplomatic resources throughout the rest of the EU were redirected towards areas of the world outside Europe, especially emerging powers. That now must be rebalanced.

Britain also needs replacements for EU regulators, additional civil servants to undertake new work, new facilities at ports, new IT systems to address changes in how trade is handled, and much more. None of this is impossible and work has begun, but it's still in the early phases. The rest of the EU knows this. Those who compare Brexit negotiations to a poker game overlook how both sides know exactly what the others hand is. Threatening to walk away from the EU when you won't have the means in place to deliver a 'hard Brexit' in a way that doesn't inflict real and lasting damage is a bluff the other side sees straight through.

Assessment of Risk

Britain's assessment of the risks involved in Brexit has been lacking. In triggering Article 50 when she did, Theresa May made time an ally of the EU and increased the risk of Britain not having a settlement in time for an exit it wanted. The British government forgot what the ancient Chinese general Sun Tzu argued in the 5th century BC: 'The victorious strategist only seeks battle after the victory has been won, whereas he who is destined to defeat first fights and afterwards looks for victory'. Having jumped headlong into Article 50 negotiations, Britain has come to realise over the past year that it needs to look for a way to victory.

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Assessment of the EU

Assessment and understanding of the EU, the UK's opponent in Brexit, has been limited. May's speech in Florence was billed as a 're-engagement with Europe'. That will have perked up the ears of the rest of the EU, because, as the outgoing French ambassador in London recently noted, the UK has spent the past year talking to itself about Brexit. Leaders and decision-makers elsewhere in the EU have routinely denounced talk such as 'having your cake and eating it', and done so to the point of ridicule. Yet with donkey-like stubbornness, some British ministers have continued to repeat and, even worse, believe their own rhetoric. Mrs May and the rest of the UK's leadership need to recognize that the EU is changing and that Britain's place in Europe will be shaped by this dynamic, and not only by its own hopes and plans for Brexit. Brexit is but one of several challenges and opportunities confronting the EU, among them the pressures facing the eurozone, Schengen, Russian relations, the future of NATO and ties with the U.S. How the EU responds to these pressures will determine its place in the world and frame its future relationship with Britain.

Does this mean Britain is doomed to lurch from one Brexit crisis to the next, resulting in catastrophic humiliation for Britain? Not necessarily. Britain might have over-reached in the first phase of Brexit negotiations, but it's still too early to evaluate the full significance of Brexit and whether the old phrase holds that you can lose a battle but win the war. That, of course, depends on where Britain and the EU end up in the 2020s in terms of their relations and relative power in the world and in Europe. The rest of the EU has its own weaknesses. Strategies for saving the euro have sometimes been nothing more than glorified exercises in muddling through, with EU decision-makers often making donkeys of themselves. The only strategy that can realistically work is one based on mutual self-interest, where losses are minimised for both sides. However, it remains unclear whether Britain, or the EU, can find ways towards this.

This article gives the views of the author, not the position of LSE Brexit or the London School of Economics. It first appeared on the [Dahrendorf Forum](#).

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