

Britain Returns to Its Past

by George Friedman - January 5, 2021

As of Jan. 1, **Britain has completed the process of leaving the European Union.** The EU has assured all that dire consequences will haunt the British. Certainly, there will be economic consequences for the U.K., but it is hard to imagine that the departure of the second-largest economy in Europe will not have significant consequences for Europe as well. At minimum, the completion of Britain's departure shatters a myth about the European Union. The name "European Union" had become synonymous with "Europe." This was never a true equivalency, as there were European nations excluded from and uninterested in membership like Switzerland and Norway, which chose a non-member relationship. But with Britain on the outside, the sense that the EU speaks for Europe is gone. Britain is a foundational part of Europe, one of Europe's liberators in World War II and, beginning with the Roman invasion of England, Europe's occasional enemy and savior. Britain has been a defining force in Europe, and now it has left the European Union. This will challenge the bloc in many ways, the first being that the EU is no longer interchangeable with Europe. Now there is another Europe: Britain.

Since the referendum, there have been two issues. The first was whether British opponents of Brexit could overthrow the result of the referendum. The second was whether the EU could, without appearing excessively conciliatory to the rest of the European Union. At times these two forces seemed to work together to block Brexit. In the end they failed, although Brussels is likely to continue to seek to impose pain, until the British stop buying Mercedes cars in favor of Lexus. At that point the central power of Europe, Germany, will put an end to punitive measures, and the EU will move on.

The real issue now is Britain defining its place in the world. It is a strange one. There is little warfare in Europe at the moment, and little to fear from European powers militarily. This is an odd situation to be in. Between 1945 and 1991, Britain faced the Soviet threat. From 1914 to 1945, Britain faced the German threat, with a truce in between. Now, what threat there is is distant and theoretical. Britain remains a member of NATO, not really a European entity even if most of its members are European. The United States provides the potential military power to NATO, and Britain is one of the few European nations to possess significant military force, and even global reach, at the core of NATO.

The U.S. was allied in war with Britain in World War I and II, the Cold War, Desert Storm, Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of these wars may not have been wise, but they cemented relations between the militaries. For the continental European countries, shattered by the world wars and terrified by the Cold War, the primary issue is a focus on the economy and the avoidance of conflict. Britain sits across the English Channel, facing a region that has historically drawn it into conflicts but for a millennium failed to invade Britain. Britain's history has been shaped by the need to intervene in Europe due to its fragmentation. What is inconceivable to Europe is a historical reality to Britain.

Britain's problem is that it cannot control the evolution of Europe by itself. In World War II, the United States stripped Britain of its empire, and limited both its force and its reach. The British resented U.S. postwar policy, but they lived with it, Britain being a master of living with the inevitable. It aligned itself with the United States, and on the whole, it worked out well. During the Falklands War, it was U.S. satellite imagery given to Britain that enabled a rapid victory. In recent wars, Americans and the British fought together with an ease that neither had enjoyed with other countries. From military to intelligence operations, the two countries were as closely aligned as sovereign nations can permit themselves. Regardless of how stiff-necked the U.S. was on the empire, the two countries fought a century of wars together against the Germans and in spite of friction with the French or other allies. Recently, the British sent an aircraft carrier to the Western Pacific in support of U.S. operations.

The alliance of the British and Americans goes deeper than this. Together they form part of the Five Eyes, a grouping of five states – the others are Australia, Canada and New Zealand – committed to sharing intelligence. Military cooperation is valuable but not extraordinary. The willingness of these five countries to see the intelligence gathered by any of them is extraordinary. It also follows military cooperation. Canadians alternate with Americans in commanding the North American Aerospace Defense Command. The Australians operate in the same region as China. The New Zealanders with minimal force and far more caution share intelligence. But all five of these countries fought in the world wars and other conflicts.

When asking the question of where Britain is, the following answers arise. First, trade is important, but the North American markets are as large as the EU. Second, Europe is highly unpredictable and frequently volatile, while Britain's presence in NATO keeps it in Europe alongside the United States, and therefore with weight. Finally, the Five Eyes, descendants of Britain who evolved to their own satisfaction, focuses these nations on something that is frequently more important than anything: war and its prevention through intelligence.

The Irish, **Scottish** and Welsh issues are likely to be contained, but for now I make this argument. Britain is no longer the ruler of a global empire. It cannot live with Europe, but it must align with others. The Five Eyes, as an intelligence and military alignment, is already in place and need not be negotiated. The alliance is sufficiently loose that no one is obligated to do more than share intelligence. It is also bound by history. And those five nations can be a force to be reckoned with, as well as a market already shared and readily opened. And each nation has an interest in it.

One must never be too enthusiastic. Friction is the nature of the beast. But this alliance is already in place, and extending it to economics (with many free trade agreements already in place) is the logical next step.

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