

# ➤ A Geostrategic Vision for the UK

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**It is not just Europe that needs a clear and convincing geostrategic vision for the 21st Century. So does the UK.**

The UK spent much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century debating the military choice some perceived between a maritime and imperial strategy, on the one hand, and a European and military strategy on the other. Liddell Hart led those who argued that Britain could stay clear of warfare on the continent of Europe; Michael Howard – in ‘The Continental Commitment’ in 1972 – those who believed that because of our geographical position we could not, important though our links with the rest of the world would always be.

Politically the UK is now once again grappling, as it intermittently has since entering the European Community in 1973, with a comparable version of the same dilemma.

The Conservative government which took us into Europe was clear where it stood. As Alec Douglas-Home argued: ‘It was only for the briefest period in our island’s story that we could afford to stand alone in the world... the only way to preserve our independence for the future is to join a larger grouping... Is it not the truth... that nationalism simply cannot make sense in a world of instant communication?... In the world that is evolving... it is only as part, I believe, of a strong and determined Europe that Britain’s own character, personality and individuality can thrive’.<sup>1</sup>

David Cameron, for his part, made very clear in that in his view, for the UK to leave the EU ‘and become a sort of greater Switzerland’ would be ‘a complete denial of our national interests’.<sup>2</sup> And yet the British National Party, the United Kingdom Independence Party, and a substantial section of the Prime Minister’s own Conservative Parliamentary Party would clearly like to do exactly that.

Not least because the UK’s national influence in the EU is limited, so long as we remain unclear what our national interest is we badly need to thrash this question out and make clear to our European partners exactly where we stand. Ever since the December 2012 European Council they have, not surprisingly, been wondering about the role the United Kingdom envisages for itself in Europe.

For the UK to leave the European Union would be a huge strategic error. There is of course every reason to opt out of particular sectors of EU activity, as and when we conclude that our interests are better served by not joining in, and our partners accept in negotiation that we should not. But to abandon the entire exercise would not just run diametrically counter to large swathes of our history – for centuries we have been profoundly determined that no other country should be allowed to dominate the European continent – it would also cut off, not just our nose to spite our face, but virtually every portion of our anatomy to spite our whole body.

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<sup>1</sup> Alec Douglas-Home Home, *Our European Destiny*, (1971).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Winnett, ‘David Cameron: I’ll never campaign to take us out of Europe’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 18/7/12.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/9410061/David-Cameron-Ill-never-campaign-to-take-us-out-of-Europe.html>.

The simple truth, characteristically well expressed by the Financial Times columnist Philip Stephens, is that the United Kingdom since 1945 has been wrestling incessantly with the fact of shrinking global influence. The identification of a British foreign policy fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is long overdue.<sup>3</sup>

To maximise our influence in the world, we need to be brutally realistic about the choices we make. The notion that the UK in 2012 can somehow build relationships on its own with the new emerging powers productive enough to compensate for the influence we would lose if we left the European Union – what the Economist's Bagehot column called the 'Cutty Sark vision for Britain'<sup>4</sup> – is palpable nonsense. The UK, after all, still exports more to Ireland than to all four BRICs put together. In 2011 that grouping took just seven percent of British exports; the EU, by contrast, accounted for over 50 percent. China and Brazil, India and Turkey and many other countries will invariably take the UK much more seriously if they know that we carry real weight both in Washington and in the European Union. And the weight we have in the United States also depends, in no small measure, on the contribution the UK makes to EU foreign policy.

As we stand, neither the United Kingdom's position in the EU nor its standing in Washington seem as self-evidently secure as they once did. The beginning of wisdom must be to see that without either, let alone both, the UK's foreign policy would be very seriously weakened. The twin relationships with the EU and with the United States are both essential anchors for the foreign policy we now need. Once outside the EU, the UK would find itself increasingly marginalised in Washington – and in Beijing and elsewhere. Of course we can and should exploit as many global networks as we possibly can, but the UK will be stronger in all of them if it retains its position at the heart of the foreign policy of the European Union. This, it is worth noting, does not require membership of the euro, any more than retaining a strong position with the United States requires playing the poodle in Washington.

The key point to grasp, particularly in relation to foreign policy, is that membership of the EU is an influence multiplier – in both political and military affairs and economic policy.

In 1950, the UK still produced seven percent of world output; by 2010 that figure had declined to three percent and by 2030 it is likely to have fallen to two percent. Yet the EU's share as a whole is 30 percent, and is expected to remain there. The EU has an economic weight in the world which the UK on its own could only dream of. The magnetism of the EU for foreign direct investment – the EU is the largest recipient of FDI in the world – means, according to the OECD and the Bank of England, that a British withdrawal would cut inward FDI by over a third.<sup>5</sup> The EU has enormous clout in world trade talks: the 2010 EU Free Trade Agreement with South Korea, for instance, has virtually eradicated all tariff barriers for EU exporters, and is bringing half a billion pounds of benefits a year to British business. The twenty leaders of British business who wrote to the Daily Telegraph on 20 December 2011 argued that if the UK did not remain in the European Union more than three million British jobs would be put at risk.<sup>6</sup>

EU membership also brings the UK opportunities and influence extending far beyond the economic sphere. The more closely one addresses the UK's key strategic imperative – the whole question of how best to maximise the UK's global influence and authority, in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century world in which so many of the main problems cross national borders – the clearer it becomes that as an EU member state the UK exercises far greater influence internationally than it could on its own. Increased trade, a healthy environment, progress in the fight against crime and terrorism, and access to energy and raw materials are all best secured – and European values best defended and promoted – by cooperation at the EU level.

3 Philip Stephens, 'British foreign policy should be realist', *Financial Times*, 20/9/12.

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/edf5a3d6-0261-11e2-b41f-00144feabdc0.html#axzz27Zk24zfz>

4 'Cutty Sark Britain', *The Economist*, 12/4/12. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/bagehot/2012/04/britain-and-eu>.

5 Nigel Pain and Garry Young, 'The macroeconomic impact of UK withdrawal from the EU', *Economic Modelling*, 21(3), (2004), 387-408.

6 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/8966516/it-is-vital-that-the-Government-remains-at-the-heart-of-Europe-in-order-to-protect-the-single-market.html>

Those who have tried to project British influence in the world since 1945 conclude – by a large majority – that in the foreign policy field in general the option of independent action is a mirage; that with increasing globalisation has come inescapable interdependence; and that real sovereignty is not the ability to say No – as Norway and Switzerland to some extent still can – but the power to maximise, sometimes by pooling sovereignty, our national strength and capacity in the world, as we have done for a long time in NATO.

So if one is looking for the best strategic orientation for the UK's foreign policy, with a view to promoting and protecting our key interests, where will we find the maximum of assurance? Where does the greatest opportunity beckon?

Harold Macmillan, writing in his diary in June 1960, wondered if we would be 'caught between a hostile (or at least less and less friendly) America and a boastful but powerful 'Empire of Charlemagne' – now under French, but later bound to come under German control'.<sup>7</sup> At much the same time, Jo Grimond warned in the House of Commons that if the UK was not very careful it would end up with no special relationship either with Europe or with America.

My own conclusion is that the UK should always aim both to be as close as possible to the United States and to exercise as much leadership as possible in the EU. Our interests, in other words, lie in an Atlanticist EU. Yet whilst the transatlantic links are hugely important, as Michael Heseltine among others has routinely pointed out, we will certainly not defend our key interests effectively by floating off into the Atlantic.

To turn away from that goal now, seeking solace in the simplicity and doctrinal purity of isolation, would be singularly perverse. We should instead see the battle for power and influence in Europe as the modern version of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century's Great Game in Asia. And we should realise that in this competition the United Kingdom possesses very substantial advantages.

We have the English language – increasingly dominant in Brussels. The EU, much to French chagrin, has since 2004 become more transatlantic in its mindset than ever before. The UK still probably has the best EU policy coordination system in Europe. And though we have important differences with today's dominant Germany, to a great extent the UK shares with the Germans attitudes both to transatlantic relations and free trade.

The United Kingdom has a long history since 1945 of getting Europe wrong, of being complacently dismissive of any new European 'initiative'. Percy Cradock, for many years Margaret Thatcher's foreign policy adviser, wrote in 1997 of what had in his view been a story of 'mistaken assessments and missed opportunities... a depressing chronicle of delayed awakening to reality, of belated arrival in institutions fashioned by others, of repinings, second and third thoughts, divided counsels and qualified enthusiasms, and a general confusion of policy... designed to achieve maximum pain and minimum influence'.

The right way forward for the UK in relation to Europe is surely not self-satisfied insular impotence, but full engagement; not complacency, but energetic commitment; not the illusory dreamland of past glories, but an absolute determination to do all we can to be a major part of the leadership of Europe.

None of this is out of sentiment – but is rather because that what the national interest dictates. The UK has compelling reasons to ensure that its influence in the counsels of our own continent is as great as it possibly can be. It is in fact rather clear that our national interest is best served when Europe as a whole does well, which curiously enough is more likely to happen if the UK, to the largest extent possible in the domestic political conditions of the day, is involved in it and committed to it. While the UK's ability to act globally on its own has waned since 1945, its interests have not ceased to be global. For hard economic and political reasons, what happens in the rest of the world matters greatly to the UK.

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<sup>7</sup> Alistair Horne, *Macmillan 1957-1986*, (1989), 256.

The United Kingdom is on any analysis better placed to influence what happens in the world because it belongs to the EU, a polity comprising one-fourteenth of the world's population, almost a quarter of global GDP, and a fifth of world trade. At the United Nations, EU member states are two of the Security Council P5, fund 38 percent of the regular budget, more than two-fifths of the peacekeeping operations, and about half of all UN funds and programmes.

If the UK left the EU that would not only endanger our economy but would also undermine our political relationship with the United States and reduce our influence in many international forums. If we want to maximise our prosperity, trade and employment rate, if we want our own continent and the world to be safer and greener, if we want to be as influential as possible in world affairs, there is simply no option but for the UK to be an active and leading member of the EU, thereby – along with our continuing determination to remain close to the United States – giving UK foreign policy the most solid possible foundation. ■